



# ***Agnès Varda amidst Images Sensuous Theory and Strategies of Resistance in Feminist Cinema***

PAULINA KWIATKOWSKA  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

## **Abstract**

Sensuous theory has enriched the way in which we now analyze the multisensory film image as well as the embodied experience of the film viewer. Questions about the corporeality and sensuousness of the director, however, are addressed much less frequently from this perspective. Yet it is precisely this aspect that strikes me as particularly interesting, as it allows us to revisit the issue of the creative strategies employed by women in the cinema, and to pose questions about the meaning and status of the sensuous involvement of the female director in the production of her film. Does her corporeality, her physiological and sensory experience affect how the character are created, how the world is depicted, or, more significantly, the very matter of the film image? Can this involvement also become a conscious tactic of resistance against the dominant narrative and visual structures of "male cinema"? Taking these questions as my point of departure, I focus on the film of Agnès Varda *The Beaches of Agnès* (*Les plages d'Agnès*, 2008), which may be regarded as a statement that is just as personal and self-referential as it is possible to universalize. Varda uses the film as a way to examine her own life and art in the context of the history of cinema in the latter half of the 20th century, paying particular attention to the French New Wave, auteur cinema, independent film, and politically and socially engaged cinema. In *The Beaches of Agnès Varda* reiterates questions about her own status as a female director, accentuating the corporeal, sensuous, and affective connections with the film image, filmed objects, people, and places, the film crew, and, ultimately, the cinema as such.

## **Keywords:**

[Agnès Varda](#), [Laura U. Marks](#), [Vivian Sobchack](#), [female film directors](#), [women's cinema](#), [feminist film theory](#), [sensuous theory](#), [auteur cinema](#), [French New Wave](#).

Sensuous theory has enriched the way in which we now analyze the multisensory film image as well as the embodied experience of the film viewer. Questions about the corporeality and sensuousness of the director, however, are addressed much less frequently from this perspective. Yet it is precisely this aspect that strikes me as particularly interesting, as it allows us to revisit the issue of the creative strategies employed by women in the cinema, and to pose questions about the meaning and status of the sensuous involvement of the female director in the production of her film. Taking these questions as my point of departure, I focus on the film of Agnès Varda *The Beaches of Agnès* (*Les plages d'Agnès*, 2008). Varda uses the film as a way to examine her own life and art in the context of the history of cinema in the latter half of the 20th century and to analyze her own status as a female director, accentuating the corporeal, sensuous, and affective connections with the cinema as such.

Sensuous theory – a perspective developed intensively over the past two decades by female scholars such as Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, Linda Williams, and Martine Beugnet, a salient fact in the context of this discussion – is a response to the crisis of oculo-centric theories, which rely on the conviction that, in the process of perceiving the film image, the dominant sense is that of sight. Setting aside their relevant differences, both psychoanalytic film theory and apparatus theory emphasized the viewer's entanglement in the visual, symbolic, and ideological structures constructed by cinema. The spectator is perceived as fundamentally passive and subservient to cinematic scopical regimes that are seen as nullifying or suspending any individual – particularly sensual and affective – ways of interacting with the film image. Moreover, sensuous theory can also be regarded as a critical yet subtle attempt to test the feminist film theory

of the 1970s, a substantial part of which was built – in the early writings of Laura Mulvey, for example – around the problematic status of the gaze in cinema and the fetishistic and voyeuristic perceptual schemes it provoked.

In place of these scopical categories, sensuous theory calls for us to consider the multisensory status of both the cinema as a medium and the film image, as well as the perception of the viewer her – or himself. From this perspective, the image is there not just to be viewed, and the viewer is not merely exposed to overpowering visual (and auditory) stimuli. The interests of sensuous theory thus revolve around the bodies of both the film and the viewer; the sense that emerges as the most interesting and worthy of appreciation is that of touch. Laura U. Marks employs in this context the notion of haptic visuality, which is founded on the premise that even if the film image – with the notable exception of certain experimental films – remains essentially beyond the physical touch of the viewer, it is still possible to convey haptic sensations via the image, and, furthermore, that certain types of images can make the spectators's eyes function synesthetically, in a sense: not just as a visual organ, but as a tactile one (Marks, 2000). This is by no means an attempt to replace the dominance of one sense with that of another; rather, the point is to appreciate their coexistence in the viewer's sensual perception of the image. In this theory, looking is presented as an experience, while the experienced – or multisensorially perceived – image is depicted as dense, complex, and affecting different senses simultaneously. Specifying and elaborating the nature of this expanded cinematic experience, Vivian Sobchack writes: "[...] we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 63). It is

important therefore to consider more than just the particular sensibilities of the viewer, who, after all, may experience varying sensitivity to a range of sensory stimuli. We must also constantly account for the cultural and historical conditioning of our perceptive apparatus. The experience of the cinema is thus as subjective as it is intersubjective, and the film image is not just ontologically multisensorial, it is also entangled in a web of socio-cultural and ideological relations.

What is more, the scholars mentioned above have paid particular attention to the peculiar nature of the female spectator, posing questions about the way sexual and gender differences as well as the social and cultural context affect a person's perception of a film, and about the sensuous viewing strategies (including subversive and emancipatory ones) chosen and adopted by women in the cinema. Yet it seems that the shift towards greater reflection on the status of the image and the spectator has drawn attention away from questions about the status of the filmmaker, the male or female director. It is true that, in reconstructing the central premises of sensuous theory, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener observe that "the intersubjective communication in the cinema between spectator, film and film-maker is predicated upon and enabled by shared structures of embodied experience that permits the perception of experience and the experience of perception in the first place" (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 117). Yet one can hardly resist the impression that, in the scholars' subsequent discussion as well as in Sobchack and Marks, the relevance of the final element of this three-sided relationship is somewhat diminished. Of course, the analyses proposed by Sobchack and Marks typically account for the position of the director, but they do so from the creative more than the corporeal angle. This position is usually considered inasmuch as it directly affects the form of the

film image and, by extension, the relationship with the viewer. There are still some significant questions to pose concerning the corporeality and sensuousness of the director, especially concerning the meaning and status of the sensuous involvement of the female director in the production of her film. Does her corporeality, her physiological and sensory experience affect how the character are created, how the world is depicted, or, more significantly, the very matter of the film image? Can this involvement also become a conscious tactic of resistance against the dominant narrative and visual structures of "male cinema"? Does it permit her to more fully express herself and specify her own position vis-à-vis a particular film and the history of cinema in general? And, finally, is the perception of these films by the female viewer dependent on a perceptible and definable exchange of sensory stimuli, on some particular corporeal involvement that can be considered at once bonding and empowering?

Examining the category of *auteurship* in film from the perspective of sensuous theory might allow us to overcome, or at least somewhat mitigate, the impasse in which *auteur* theory finds itself, while also providing an opportunity to reconsider the strategies of "women's cinema" and "feminist cinema." Despite the enormous and enduring popularity of the *auteur* as a category among film critics and audiences at large, it has undoubtedly been in serious crisis since the turn of the 1960s and 70s. The ostensible neutrality (or even naturalness) of *auteurship*, along with its inherent individualism and idealism, have all been the subject of criticism from a number of perspectives, from psychoanalytic film theory, apparatus theory, semiotics, and postmodern theories to film genre theory and feminist theory itself; it is this final case that seems most interesting and unapparent.

In his 2001 book *Le cinéma d'auteur, une vieille lune?*, René Prédal briefly yet astutely

points out a certain crucial paradox in feminist theory (and practice) in cinema: “the pioneering field of Women’s Studies in the late 1960s only began to speak up for female *auteurs* when the concept of the *auteur* found itself in crisis” (Prédal, 2007, p. 39). The initial paradox in this case is that it is necessary to deconstruct or even expose the category of the *auteur* as strictly tied to modernist notions of the exceptional and dominant position of the artist, and as associated with a male-centric cultural paradigm, while concurrently reinforcing and specifying the position of women in the realm of art (including film art) and considering the creative strategies that would be most appropriate for them. The consequences of this observation are explained with great precision by Ginette Vincendeau, who likewise frames them as a paradox in the direct context of French women’s cinema: “Given that the model for the *auteur* is still the individual genius, or at least the artist driven by ‘internal necessity’ towards self-expression, this has had the paradoxical result of pushing French women directors into heightened individualism on the one hand and alignment with male ‘colleagues’ on the other” (Vincendeau, 1987, p. 9).<sup>1</sup> Thus, when she produces a film

as a woman, the director risks either reinforcing the individualistic model associated with modernist and avant-garde cinema, or acquiescing to the strategies and positions imposed by mainstream cinema, with its resources and narrative schemes. In either circumstance, the “female perspective” or “women’s *auteurship*” may be blurred or intercepted by film production models that are strongly anchored in the history of cinema.

It is my assumption, however, that sensuous theory provides the tools that allow the issue of female directorial strategies to be examined from yet another angle, one that avoids reintroducing the entire complex of meanings and notions associated with *auteur* cinema. At the same time, it does so without rejecting the achievements of narratology, which has, in a way, undermined the status of the author, relegating him or her to the position of just one of the literary or visual text’s many narrative instances. And, finally, it avoids the use of the quasi-universal but essentially highly problematic category of “women’s cinema.” Focusing on the corporeal, multisensory creative process allows us to reconcile the subjective and intersubjective perspectives. While *auteur* theory grants privileged status to the *auteur* within the cultural distribution model and presents individualism as a non-negotiable value in and of itself, sensuous theory allows us to focus on the deeply intimate process of interacting with images and, through them, with the viewers. Naturally, what we encounter here is a different appreciation of the individual or private; this individualism, however, is one that is developed and multidimensionally negotiated, simultaneously constructed and deconstructed in the process of creation, rather than granted and assumed as a sort of ready-made template. By analyzing the practices of female directors through the lens of sensuous theory, we can also observe how they problematize their own *auteurship*

and how they critically analyze the narrative structures of their own films, resisting any sort of ready generalization.

An excellent example of the use of sensuous theory, among other theories, to analyze the creative strategies of female directors is the book *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras*, by Cybelle H. McFadden, which discusses the films of Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Dominique Cabrera, Sophie Calle, and Maiwenn. The scholar precisely lays out the purpose of her work in the introduction where she declares that her aim was to show that the practices of self-representation and reflexivity are crucial for French female filmmakers, since they create a different representational space that allows filmmakers to craft film bodies and to establish a new conceptual framework of seeing, perceiving, and being. “[...] they each create a cinematic female body heretofore unseen. Once the visibility of the female filmmaker occurs, then claims to authority may be more easily gained, since her known presence calls for recognition of a wider range of speaking and looking positions. Moreover, if a certain materiality of the body suggests dependence on artistic intervention, then the need for women’s widespread claim to artistic authority is more pressing than we imagined” (McFadden, 2014, pp. 28–29). We discover that the strategies of resistance proposed by female filmmakers are intended to do more than just inscribe their work into the theoretical and historical framework of the dominant cinematic discourse, to place the directors somewhere along its margins or boundaries, but to effect a radical reorganization or shifting of the framework and to reject the logic of the privileged center and eccentric (“independent”) periphery. This end can be reached, according to the author, through such means as accounting for corporeality and sensuality in the creative process, proposing a new relationship to the film image, as well as the

redefinition, in a cinematic context, of such categories as autobiography, self-portrait, and self-representation.

Taking as my point of departure the conclusions presented by McFadden, I wish to focus on the work of Agnès Varda, specifically on a single film in her oeuvre, namely, the 2008 picture *The Beaches of Agnès*, which seems characteristic of the processes that are of interest to me here. In terms of both its content and form – its use of narrative methods, editing techniques, and authorial commentary, its complex autobiographical and self-representation strategies, and the multisensory imagery it employs – the film may be regarded as the culmination of Varda’s entire creative path, as a statement that is just as personal and self-referential as it is possible to universalize in the context of film history. Varda uses the film as a way to examine her own life (private and professional – these two levels are intentionally intertwined) and art (not just her films) in the context of the history of cinema in the latter half of the 20th century, paying particular attention to the French New Wave, *auteur* cinema, independent film, and politically and socially engaged cinema. More importantly, though, in *The Beaches of Agnès* Varda reiterates questions that resurface throughout her work: questions about her own status as a female director, accentuating the corporeal, sensuous, and affective connections with the film image, filmed objects, people, and places, the film crew, and, ultimately, the cinema as such.

In one sequence in *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda reminisces about one of her most acclaimed films, *Vagabond (Sans toit ni loi, 1985)*, and at once about the events that provided important context for the movie and the filmmaker’s personal life, namely, the turbulent and effective protests staged by French women in the mid-1970s in their struggle for the right to abortion. The director’s voice-over

1 Tellingly, Laura U. Marks also notices the risks stemming from individualism, including those that affect women’s practices in the broad field of avant-garde cinema. In the introduction to her book *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, she observes that while her theory of representation may eventually be used to examine various areas of cinema, her departing position is to concentrate on intercultural cinema. She explains her motivations thusly: “A related difference between intercultural cinema and other kinds of experimental and mainstream cinema is that it stresses the *social* character of embodied experience: the body is a source not just of individual but of cultural memory. Consequently, my discussion of embodiment and sense perception is not wholly applicable to works in the individualistic tradition of avant-garde cinema. For the same reason, it cannot be imported wholesale to describe commercial cinema” (Marks, 2000, p. xiii).

commentary, which touches upon the deeper reasons for the protests as well as her own motivations, is paired with scenes in which the main character appears to share Varda's emotions: "I tried to be a joyful feminist, but I was very angry." This statement could be seen as a very succinct and astute observation on Varda's involvement in feminism, which she has consistently problematized directly in her own work and interviews, and for which she has drawn frequent criticism. Varda describes herself as a feminist who has been involved in the struggle for women's rights since her early youth, someone who is conscious of the social, cultural, and economic status of women, but who intentionally follows her intuition, sometimes contrary to the slogans and methods of action adopted by second-wave feminism. For this reason her work, particularly that of the 1970s, has elicited noticeably mixed responses from feminists, depending on the interpretation of each new film or other creative endeavor. Varda in one interview sums up her ambiguous, historically fluctuating position in the field of feminist cinema, observing that she often felt like a ping-pong ball being knocked back and forth by supporters and opponents of the women's movement (Quart, 1986–1987, p. 6).

While Varda's status as a feminist filmmaker might still be a matter of contention, one can hardly question the fact that her work offers a conscious and multidimensional examination of the problematic status of the woman as director and director as woman. Her public statements and films consistently demonstrate that these two aspects and social roles remain, in her experience, tightly and often painfully intertwined. What is more, neither role can be defined in terms of an abstract or universal category, as a set of ready-made norms and standard operating procedures that must simply be accepted. Each is deeply embodied and lies at the heart of any attempt

at self-definition and self-determination. In an interview given in 1975, Varda states: "It's difficult to find one's identity as woman: in one's social dealings, in one's private life and in one's body. This search for identity has a meaning for a filmmaker: I try to film as a woman" (Varda, 2014, p. 72). Later in the same interview, she explains: "For me, to be a woman is first of all to have the body of a woman. A body which isn't cut up into a bunch of more or less exciting pieces, a body which isn't limited to the so-called erogenous zones (as classified by men), a body of refined zones..." (Varda, 2014, p. 74). In place of the general and nebulous category of "women's cinema," Varda proposes one which she calls "woman's cinema," which would have to be tightly linked to the experience of the self as a woman and the experience of one's own body as a woman's body. This is a vivid illustration of the dynamic tension between radical individualism (there's no such thing as a cinema shared by all women) and the deliberate emphasis of community bonds (the individual body of the woman is always a field of battle among external expectations, the subjective experience of one's own sensuousness and physicality and some general "woman's bodily condition").

The matter of being a female filmmaker is obviously tied to the problem of *auteurship*. Varda is forced not only to define herself through the person she is as a female director, but also through her choice of authorial strategies, which, in turn, are grounded in the context in which she debuted, that is, in the milieu of the French New Wave at the turn of the 1950s and 60s, which remained unquestioningly attached to the politics of authorship. Delphine Bénétzet, in her book devoted to the cinema of Agnès Varda, describes her struggles in this field as "performing authorship," emphasizing that every effort made by the filmmaker to define her status as a film

*auteur* is openly subversive in nature (Bénétzet, 2014, pp. 60–68). *The Beaches of Agnès* provides examples of the ostensibly contradictory techniques Varda uses to simultaneously reinforce and undermine the position of the *auteur*. We see this intriguing oscillation in the very opening sequence of the film. Varda begins by addressing the viewers directly: "I'm playing the role of a little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative, telling her life story", then distances herself from her own role as the director, stressing that she is first and foremost a character of her own invention, one as fictional ("I'm playing the role of a little old lady") as she is real ("telling her life story"). Yet she shatters this construct in the next sentence when she adds, "Others who intrigue me, motivate me, make me ask questions, disconcert me, fascinate me." The semblance of subjectivity put on for the purpose of the film at once disperses into intersubjectivity, with the visual layer of the film underscoring the event. We initially see Varda walking alone on a beach, only to be joined a moment later by the film crew, whom she addresses, introducing each name and face to the viewers. In a subsequent shot we see her again, filmed from behind, as she sits in a director's chair with the name "Agnès V." written on it in bold white lettering. Performing authorship, in this case, involves assuming certain roles (that of an old lady, a director, an actress in her own film) and defining them in a manner that is deliberately incomplete; Varda is the author, but only when she is accompanied by other people, who not only participate in making the film with her, but also create her as a filmmaker. Even the lettering on the chair appears to be more than just an afterthought: her last name is replaced with an initial (it's worth noting that only her first name is mentioned in the title), which prevents us from fully identifying her and is more of a conventional symbol indicating her role on the film set.

Varda skilfully plays with the notions of *auteurial* genius throughout her work, and this film is no exception; she emphasizes in interviews and in one of the scenes in *The Beaches of Agnès* that she embarked on her journey into the film world as a complete amateur and that, unlike the entire generation of cinephiles who formed the New Wave, she knew nothing about the cinema and had literally seen no more than ten films. One naturally gets the impression that these pronouncements reveal a hint of coyness (is it not the ultimate testament to her genius that, as a person wholly unfamiliar with the history of cinema, Varda made the very film that launched the New Wave, namely *La Pointe Courte* from 1954?) and subtle sarcasm leveled at the masters of *auteur* cinema. Delphine Bénétzet mentions another subversive strategy employed by the filmmaker: the use of cartoonized alter-egos in her film projects and performances. Recently these surrogate figures have even surpassed the boundaries of her artistic practice; Varda, who received a honorary Oscar as a first woman film director in history and whose film *Faces Places* (co-directed with the French street artist JR) was nominated for the Academy Award for best documentary, had life-size photographic cut-outs made for the nomination announcement gala. JR and the attending journalists had their pictures taken with the figure. This amusing and ostensibly innocuous gesture revealed once again the ambiguity of performing authorship; Varda managed simultaneously to distance herself from this utterly *auteurial* distinction (curtly dismissing it in one interview: "I'm outdated, so they really don't know what to do with me") and to plant herself (or, rather, one of her alter-egos) in the center of the film world's attention.

These few examples are sufficient to show that, in Varda's case, her struggle with authorship often assumes a very corporeal form, relating directly to her experience of the

body and its place in the visual and narrative structures of her films as well as the real world. Corporeality resurfaces in her work in many ways and at many levels. Even the category of *cinécriture* (cinematic writing) that is so central to Varda's film theory is defined by the filmmaker as "not illustrating a screenplay, not adopting a novel, not getting the gags of a good play, not any of this. I have fought so much since I started, since *La Pointe Courte*, for something that comes from emotion, from visual emotion, sound emotion, feeling, and finding a shape for that, and a shape which has to do with cinema and nothing else" (Quart, 1986–1987, p. 4). In her search for the appropriate form of cinematic expression for emotions, in forging sensuous experiences into film images, Varda forms through her films a particularly intense relationship with the viewers – a bond that is not exclusively or primarily intellectual, but rather one that is almost physical. Bénézet points out specific techniques that serve to reinforce that corporeal bond: the direct gaze into the camera, an offscreen voice or intertitles and the bodies of the people on screen (Bénézet, 2014, p. 123). Later, in discussing the short 1984 film *7p., cuis., s. de b., ... à saisir*, she writes: "In the film as a whole, Varda refuses to separate body and mind and interpellates her audience through emotions and sensations. In all the scenes where we face the body in its variety of shapes and states, as it is, for instance, hurting, thinking, moving, loving, the director reminds us of cinema's materiality and she demonstrates its potential to jolt us into thinking" (p. 135).

To put Bénézet's observations in general terms, we might say that in Varda's work corporeality is a medium through which she simultaneously creates herself as a director and a woman and forges a strong bond with both the film image (in the sense of a body of film) and with the bodies of the spectators. It is possible to list many examples of films that

illustrate how Varda problematizes the body as both the subject and the matter of film; this is proven perhaps most fully and most heart-breakingly in the 1991 film *Jacquot de Nantes*, which she dedicated to her dying husband, Jacques Demy. However, my focus here will be the movies that demonstrate how Varda adjusted to, learned, and constructed her own body in her films.

In the 1975 film *Daguerréotypes*, Varda, at the time a young mother, resolves to take a closer look at her immediate environment and the people around her, the inhabitants of Rue Daguerre in Paris, where she has lived and kept an office since the mid 1950s. She explains in one interview the process of producing the film, making references to corporeal categories as well as her own emotional and physical experiences: "So this time there was no question of going anywhere. I had one year to complete the project. I was a bit stuck at home. So I told myself that I was a good example of women's creativity – always a bit stuck and suffocated by home and motherhood. So I wondered what could come of these constraints. Could I manage to restart my creativity from within these limitations? Ultimately this didn't strike me as so very different from dealing with other kinds of limitations, such as the constraints of making a commissioned film. [...] This time I would come face to face with a limitation that must be confronted by many other women. [...] So I set out from this idea, from this fact that most women are stuck at home. And I attached myself to my hearth. I imagined a new umbilical cord. I had a special eighty-meter electric cable attached to the electric box in my house. I decided I would allow myself that much space to shoot *Daguerréotypes*. I could go no further than the end of my cable. I would find everything I needed within that distance and never venture further. That gave my film a special meaning for me in addition to its documentary

aspect" (Varda, 2014, p. 65). Once again, we see how Varda treads a fine line between the personal, strongly intimate experience and the experience of maternity shared by many women. We see how she negotiates between being a woman and a filmmaker, each time emphasizing the entire bodily and sensuous equipment with which this role has outfitted her. And finally, as Katherine Ince points out: "Varda's use of an electrical cable to measure out the maximum distance her camera could travel points wittily to the centrality of her own maternal body to her film-making, but just as importantly, emphasizes the materiality and materialization of filmic space" (Ince, 2013, p. 611).

Yet the film that is truly groundbreaking in terms of the present context is the two-part project titled *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000) and *The Gleaners and I: Two Years Later* (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse... deux ans après*, 2002), in which Varda portrays individuals who, for reasons ranging from individual passion to the difficult circumstances in their lives, have turned to gathering. In the course of making the first film, the director realizes that she, too, is a *glaneuse* – a collector of things and images, of people and their stories. At the same time, she is compelled to face her own body – an aging body, as she repeatedly points out – as both a subject of the film and the content of the image. In one interview, Varda admits she feared the inevitable narcissism that comes with turning the camera on oneself, but also felt like she wanted to be alone with herself in doing so. She adds: "And I was speaking to myself, like taking notes, filming myself speaking to the little camera and there was narration I'd improvised when I was filming my hand with one hand. And I felt a little pleasure of being the filmer and the filmed, I mean how could I say that one hand could film the other one. But like explaining our whole life like we want to be part of

it, we want to be the subject but we want to be the object, we want everything. And I felt every pleasure. Filming one hand filming the other one, it closes a kind of circle" (Varda, 2014, p. 189). Being at once the filming subject and filmed object enabled Varda to more fully feel her own corporeality – an experience from which she derived new sensual pleasure. Yet the deliberate filming of oneself always leads back to questions about the relationship between the author and her own work, an issue the filmmaker so interestingly explores in *The Beaches of Agnès*.

The history of film abounds with directors appearing in their own films. Perhaps the most frequently analyzed example is that of Alfred Hitchcock, who would famously step in front of the camera for a single shot in his films, a custom that later inspired many New Wave filmmakers. But this practice can also take much more elaborate forms, to the extent that it begins to encroach upon the diegesis of the film, forming an unexpected link between the fictional film world and reality. Magdalena Podsiadło, in her book about autobiographic strategies in film, points out that such techniques are never neutral or apparent, and, crucially, that they make it impossible to unambiguously determine the ultimate status of the work. Only one example of this corporeal link between the filmmaker and his/her filmic oeuvre is his/her appearance in the film's diegesis which makes it possible to leave an embodied trace of oneself in the film. "It is worth noting, however, that this presence is illusory, as it, too, is subject to 'textification' [...]. Regardless of whether the figure of the director is inscribed into the diegesis of the film or actors are used in his stead, the filmmaker is still absent. The author becomes, in the picture, a figure of his own self. Entangled in a web of references to other signs, his meaning can no longer be controlled" (Podsiadło, 2013, p. 71). *The Beaches of Agnès* can be viewed in this

context as just such a web: a tangled system of signs and references in whose mobile and elusive center the embodied and sensuous figure of the female filmmaker is constantly at play.

Agnès Varda likes to describe the genre of her films, which are in fact difficult to classify within any familiar categories, as “subjective documentaries” (Smith, 2005, p. 94). But she speaks about *The Beaches of Agnès* in different terms: “I see it as an Unidentified Flying Object, because it doesn’t belong to documentary really, even though I speak about real people, and it’s not a fiction film because it’s my life. And it’s not action, it’s not totally fantastical, it’s not a thriller. It’s a film that comes out of me. As a cinematic object, that’s the way I see it” (Varda, 2014, p. 195). This particular project is thus self-referential not merely because it tells the director’s life story (anyway, as viewers we have no way to determine whether we’re being shown her “true life” or a deliberately constructed “[true] story about her life”), but, more importantly, because it visualizes an “unidentified cinematic object” being born of the director’s body.

Within in this dense, collage-like project comprising multiple quotations, captured and collected images, overlapping voices and instances of sensuous excitement, there can be identified several repeated formal techniques that broaden the array of methods used to problematize the body in cinema. Varda is conscious of the constant tension between bodies and image, a tension that can never be reduced to unidirectional representation. In once scene we see Varda at a flea market – surrounded by dishes, sewing machines, and numerous other objects that happen to evoke constant associations with her films – where she finds boxes full of movie cards, two of which features herself and Demy. Holding them in her hand, she says: “Before we were cinema cards with cardboard heads, we were flesh and blood beings. Lovers, like Magritte’s.”

The scene cuts and we see a kind of cinematic staging (a live painting) of René Magritte’s painting *The Lovers* (*Les Amants*, 1928). But unlike the original, this image depicts the lovers naked and in full, with only their heads covered in canvas. We thus see how Varda moves from her most intimate memories to cinematic and painterly visual clichés, making ever more references and using ostensibly simple formal techniques to expose the process, in its whole complexity, of the body becoming an image. But what is always at stake, what constantly remains the central issue, is cinema.

This mechanism is perhaps more fully revealed in another sequence, when Varda approaches what we might assume to be the most difficult moment in her intimate and creative story: the death of her husband. The film *Jacquot de Nantes*, mentioned previously, is in fact analyzed in *The Beaches of Agnès*; its collage-like structure comprises reenactments of scenes from Demy’s youth, excerpts of his films, and, finally, the most heartbreaking shots in which we see his dying body. Commenting on these scenes, Varda says: “In this difficult time, this hard road he was on, all I could do was stay by his side, be as close to him as possible. As a filmmaker: my only option was to film him in extreme close up: his skin, his eye, his hair like a landscape, his hands, his spots. I needed to do this, take these images of him, of his very matter. Jacques dying, but Jacques still alive.” What is characteristic here is her obligation to be at once a wife who stands by her husband and a filmmaker who stands by her preferred means of expression. It’s not just in her off-camera commentary that she underscores the need for particular formal solutions. *The Beaches of Agnès* becomes an opportunity to augment her earlier project, to add new layers to it. In the next scene, Varda talks about Demy’s death – we see her tightly wrapped from head to toe in a white costume (as if the death of her husband had somehow

deprived her of her corporeality – so powerfully and sensuously reconstructed in the Magritte painting – or suspended it for the period of mourning, symbolized by the white fabric), sitting with her back to the camera, on a black chair, at a black table, in front of a black wall. Her outfit becomes a screen onto which a moving picture of the sea is projected. She switches on a radio. The words fall silent, and sounds join the image filmed with a static camera – in this short shot, which may be seen as the perfect cinematic epitaph, the intimate experience is combined with the language of art in a deeply sensual yet strictly filmic manner.

*The Beaches of Agnès* is also a film in which Varda consistently reminds us that the sensuous experience in the cinema hinges on more than just the filmmaker’s entanglement in her own recollections and images, but also relies on her friends and family, the film crew, and the viewers. We encounter the crew in the film’s opening scenes, when, together with Varda, they arrange mirrors of various sizes on the beach, reflecting images of individual people, the director herself, and the sea. Here the mirrors – I return to this subject later – become symbols of the proliferation of images, at once reminding us of the image’s indirect status in cinema. It is also by way of the mirror that Varda draws the viewers into her project in a later scene. She recalls the many old frames she found in her Paris home, which she had bought in a state of utter disrepair; one of them was square shaped, with a round opening, and she would often use it for pictures, eventually putting a mirror in it. The film features shots of the mirror being held in front of Varda’s face by a crew member, obscuring it while reflecting the operator and her camera. The frame of the picture/mirror becomes a film frame. We hear Varda’s voice: “If you want to look at the spectators, you have to look into the camera. I look at the camera constantly.”

Once again, a straightforward technique produces a highly complex and unexpected effect: Varda isn’t looking at the camera, after all, but she has the spectators look into it, thus entangling them in the structure of catoptric and filmic reflections.

This scene can also provoke questions about the strategies of reflexivity and self-representation that Cybelle H. McFadden examines in her book. Throughout the film, Varda employs a number of practices that aim to deconstruct the unstable, though not necessarily incoherent, image of herself, and to find cinematic equivalents of her own recollections, emotions, and sensations. In the early scenes on the beach at Sète, for example, we participate in what might even be described as visual-performance rituals. In the sand Varda writes “Arlette,” her birth name which she changed at the age of eighteen; the waves wash away the fleeting inscription in the sand. In the next shots Varda arranges childhood photos (visual material) on the sand while recreating a scene (performance) in which young girls, dressed in the bathing suits seen in the photographs, play florists, selling paper flowers – a game greatly enjoyed by little Arlette/Agnès. Varda approaches and asks them (and the viewers, in equal measure): “I don’t know what it means to recreate a scene like this. Do we relive the moment? For me it’s cinema, it’s a game.” Here, cinema can be seen as simultaneously the practice of collecting, reconstructing, and creating images that nevertheless retain their strictly corporeal, memorial, and sensuous ties to the filmmaker. Katherine Ince points out yet another technique, one that draws the director’s body directly into this performative game: “The most frequent and striking example of symbolic embodiment in *The Beaches of Agnès*, however, is the humorous but entirely knowing device of walking backwards, which Varda does first on the beach at Sète, again on the Pont des Arts, and later in several more

of the film's locations. This bodily mime of the process of remembering is Varda's personal contribution to the multiple 'living' installations that feature in her film" (Ince, 2013, p. 608). In Varda's picture even the process of recollection, one that would seem so immaterial, so radically internalized, is expressed by capturing in the film image the corporeality of the body in motion – a reverse motion evoking the processes of memory.

Varda's entire film can therefore be regarded not as a cinematic autobiography, which inevitable brings to mind narrative strategies, but as a cinematic self-portrait, central to which are visual strategies that are geared towards expressing the materiality of the body rather than recounting a life story. This interpretation is proposed by Tadeusz Lubelski, whose analysis of *The Beaches of Agnès* distinguishes three mechanisms used to construct this self-portrait: performance (including, along with the scenes listed above, ones in which a young actress playing Varda accompanies her on screen), reportage (when Varda pauses her authorial techniques and commentary to film her friends and family, capturing a supposedly unscripted reality), and intertextual references (particularly in the form of commented upon and deconstructed quotations from her own films and those of other directors, as well as photographs and paintings) (Lubelski, 2011, pp. 33–41). One might get the impression that assigning *The Beaches of Agnès* to the category of self-portrait strengthens the figure of the *auteur*, placing her at the center of the film's visual, performative, and narrative structures. In keeping with the thesis formulated above, however, Varda's use of a powerful sensuous and corporeal charge in the film allows her to challenge the logic of center versus periphery and to conceive of the *auteur* in different terms. This is most fully apparent in the opening and closing scenes of the film, which I examine as I approach to my conclusions.

The aforementioned opening scene depicting Varda and her crew arranging mirrors on the beach can be interpreted as a sort of making-of documentary, a straightforward reference to the title of the film, or a clear introduction of spaces that are of particular importance to the director. "This time, to talk about myself, I thought: If we opened people up, we'd find landscapes. If we opened me up, we'd find beaches," Varda says at the very onset. It seems, however, that what is key to this short (and at times unapologetically maudlin) scene is its reflection on the image, captured in the image itself. The beach simultaneously serves as a kind of internal and external space, and resurfaces as such throughout the film and the director's statements. The image is defined in this scene as reality redoubled or proliferated without disrupting the external or internal worlds, instead portraying their mutual permeation, overlapping, and cohabitation. The ontology of the image (not just the photographic or cinematic, but any image) relies on the category of reflection, but Varda evidently broadens our understanding of the concept. A reflection (depicted in the prologue to the film as a mirror image) is more than just a faithful reproduction and cannot be enclosed in some separate space, "beside" or "in front of" reality. Image-reflections are within reality itself and become a particular means of intervening in it – an intervention that is radically subjective and embodied. Varda shows how the perspective model supposedly adopted by cinema can be deconstructed from within the image itself. For the film image, three-dimensional space is not a challenge, but its natural habitat.

In Varda's depiction, the film image is an immanent part of reality, and thus our perception of the image cannot be limited to sight; it must be perceived through various senses. In this sense, the image is inevitably more than a prison for the body or its poor

representation; bodies and images co-populate reality together, coexisting and interacting with each other in complex ways. In the final scenes of *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda elaborates her ongoing reflections on the topic of the film image, addressing the question of the essence of cinema. We see the filmmaker in a shack or hut made of film stock. She is seated in the center atop a stack of film cans, surrounded on all sides by a sort of curtain of film strips cut to equal length. Sunlight filters through the color film, giving us fleeting glances of the images captured on individual frames. Varda says: "This shack has a story. Once upon a time two good and beautiful actors played in a film which turned out to be a flop. The gleaner that I am, I salvaged the abandoned prints of the film and unrolled the reels. And the two good and beautiful actors became walls and surfaces, bathed in light." The two actors are Catherine Deneuve and Michel Piccoli, who appeared in Varda's 1966 film *Les Créatures*. The movie was in fact a bomb, but the filmmaker salvages the failed images containing the enchanted bodies of the "good and beautiful actors," extracting them from the darkness and bringing them back to life. This ritual involving the liberation of film bodies by once again shining light through the images that bind them gives Varda an opportunity to ultimately face the question: "What is cinema?" "Light coming from somewhere captured by images more or less – dark or colorful. In here, it feels like I live in cinema, cinema is my home. I think I've always lived in it." The cinema is described directly as a space of experience, both bodily and sensuous, as an environment in which life intensifies, not a distancing representation of that life.

Varda elaborates her definition of cinema in one of her interviews: "This is what cinema is all about. Images, sound, whatever, are what we use to construct a way which is cinema,

which is supposed to produce effects, not only in our eyes and ears, but in our 'mental' movie theater in which image and sound already are there. There is a kind of on-going movie all the time, in which the movie that we see comes in and mixes, and the perception of all these images and sound proposed to us in a typical film narration piles up in our memory with other images, other associations of images, other films, but other mental images that we have, they preexist. So a new image in a film titillates or excites another mental image already there or emotions that we have, so when you propose something to watch and hear, it goes, it works" (Quart, 1986–1987, p. 7). Like *The Beaches of Agnès*, this statement seems surprisingly consonant with the central Bergsonian formula that opens the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*: "Here I am in the presence of images" (Bergson, 1929, p. 1). The entire universe, all of matter, is a collection of images that mutually influence and react to each other, and which we perceive when we use our senses – and do not perceive when these senses are not used. Bergson in his concept of matter overcomes the limitations of idealism and realism in one fell swoop, demonstrating that the image is more than mere "representation" to the idealist and less than a "thing" to the realist; it is precisely mid-way. Being in the cinema is therefore one of the ways of being in the world, a way of thinking about the world, perhaps even the fullest and most perfect way of doing so, as it involves at once memory and perception, sensuous and bodily sensations. These two scenes from *The Beaches of Agnès* depict the film image as contiguous, viscous, simultaneously overpowering and fragmented, dispersed and fleeting; meanwhile, the cinema as a place and experience is at once closed and open, isolating and liberating, material and spectral, condemning the spectator to loneliness and facilitating encounters.

But the scene in the film stock shack is not the final one: after the film credits end, we see a sequence depicting a birthday party held at the home of Agnès Varda, who receives eighty brooms from her guests. The final shot portrays the filmmaker seated on a chair, holding what initially appears to be a picture of the brooms. The footage is edited to produce a *mise en abyme* effect, an image of infinite depth; we see Varda in the frame, sitting amidst brooms and holding a frame depicting an image of Varda holding a frame... The picture deepens while simultaneously receding, and the director says the final sentence: "It all happened yesterday and it's already the past. A sensation combined instantly with the image, which will remain. While I live I remember." Varda's films, and particularly *The Beaches of Agnès*, are a space in which "sensations combine instantly with the image," and are extended and reinforced by that image. This could be the most precisely articulated sensuous film theory in practice.

The final sentence uttered in the film introduces one last, thoroughly corporeal theme: death. Cybelle H. McFadden also points out the threat to the body that is death, and the fact that the film image can somehow mitigate that threat. At the same time, she argues that *The Beaches of Agnès* "establishes Varda as a key figure in French cinema, since the female cinematic body that emerges at the end of the film has gained artistic authority; this film inscribes Varda into the French film canon in a deeper way than merely referencing her as the precursor to the New Wave. [...] The film itself and the female cinematic body it creates eulogize Varda's artistic creation in a way that preserves her body of work – ensuring that her artistic corpus will live on after her human body ultimately ceases to be" (McFadden, 2014, pp. 35–36). Performing authorship by forming sensuous and corporeal bonds with the image reveals itself to be the ultimate

gesture undermining not just the fundamental category of modernist cinema, but the entire logic underlying the history of cinema. At one point in *The Beaches of Agnès*, during the discussion of Varda's relationship with New Wave filmmakers, there appears a photographic collage that is a variation on an image that is strongly anchored in art history, in which Magritte's painting *I Do Not See the [Woman] Hidden in the Forest* (*Je ne vois pas [une femme] cachée dans la forêt*, 1929) is shown surrounded by pictures of prominent Surrealist artists. In Varda's film, it is she who appears in the center ("La Varda," we are told by the distorted off-camera voice of Chris Marker), surrounded by smaller photographs of the leading figures of the New Wave. I see the woman hidden (revealed) amidst the images. 👁

**Paulina Kwiatkowska**, PhD – Assistant Professor at the Institute of Polish Culture (University of Warsaw), Head of the Section for Film and Visual Culture and editor-in-chief of the academic journal „Pleograph”. She specializes in visual and film studies, her field of interest is especially film theory in a broad cultural context. In 2011 she published her book “Somatografia. Ciało w obrazie filmowym” [“Somatography. The Body in the Film Image”; Russian translation 2014]. She is also co-editor and co-author of the scientific monographs: “Nie chcę spać sam. Kino Tsai Ming-Lianga” [“I don't want to sleep alone. Cinema of Tsai Ming-Liang”, 2009], “Spojrzenie Antonioniego” [“Antonioni's Gaze”, 2015], “Sztuka w kinie dokumentalnym” [“Art in Documentary Film”, 2016], “Kultura wizualna w Polsce. Fragmenty” [“Visual Culture in Poland: Extracts”, 2017], “Kultura wizualna w Polsce. Spojrzenia” [“Visual Culture in Poland: Glances”, 2017] and “Nowa Kinofilia: przestrzeń i afekty” [“New Cinephilia: Spaces and Affects”, 2018]. She was a fellow at the Bogliasco Foundation for Arts and Humanities (Spring 2016) and Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Spring 2018).

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## **Agnès Varda pośród obrazów. Zmysłowa teoria filmu a strategie oporu w kinie feministycznym**

### **Abstrakt**

Zmysłowa teoria filmu wzbogaciła sposób, w jaki analizuje się dziś z jednej strony wielozmysłowy obraz filmowy, a z drugiej ucieleśnione doświadczenie widza kinowego. Z tej perspektywy rzadziej natomiast pyta się o cielesność i zmysłowość reżysera/reżyserki. Tymczasem to właśnie ten aspekt wydaje się szczególnie interesujący, ponieważ pozwala powrócić do kwestii związanych z kobiecymi strategiami twórczymi w kinie i postawić pytania o sens i status zmysłowego zaangażowania reżyserki w realizację filmu. Czy jej cielesność, doświadczenia fizjologiczne i sensoryczne wpływają na konstrukcję bohaterek, świata przedstawionego, a przede wszystkim samą materię obrazu filmowego? Czy takie zaangażowanie może stać się również świadomą taktyką oporu przeciwko dominującym strukturom narracyjnym i wizualnym „męskiego kina”? Wychodząc od tych pytań, koncentruję się na filmie Agnès Vardy z 2008 roku *Plaże Agnès (Les plages d'Agnès)*, który można uznać za wypowiedź tyleż osobistą i autotematyczną, co dającą się uniwersalizować. Za pomocą tego filmu Varda przygląda się swojemu życiu i twórczości w kontekście historii kina drugiej połowy XX wieku ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem francuskiej Nowej Fali, kina autorskiego, kina kobiet, kina niezależnego i kina politycznego i społecznie zaangażowanego. Varda stawia pytania dotyczące własnego statusu jako kobiety reżyserki, akcentując cielesne, zmysłowe i afektywne związki z obrazem filmowym, filmowanymi obiektami, ludźmi i miejscami, ekipą filmową i wreszcie kinem jako takim.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

Agnès Varda, Laura U. Marks, Vivian Sobchack, reżyserki filmowe, kino kobiet, feministyczna teoria kina, zmysłowa teoria kina, kino autorskie, francuska Nowa Fala.