



## King's Research Portal

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Horner, K. A. (2017). Varda's Chiasmic Hand: Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse (2000), Les plages d'Agnès (2008) and Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective relation. *Mise au Point*, 9 | 2017. <http://map.revues.org/2342>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Varda's Chiasmic Hand: *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000), *Les plages d'Agnès* (2008) and Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective relation

**Kierran Horner**

### **Introduction:**

This article argues that there is an alliance between Agnès Varda's digital films, *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) and *Les plages d'Agnès* (2008), and the chiasmic overlap as it occurs in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. This fusion, which I will show occurs through the camera and the intersubjective relation represented by Varda's own hands, leads to the spectator's contemplation of the death of the Other.

### **Death and the chiasm in Merleau-Ponty's thought:**

The relation between subject and Other in Merleau-Ponty's work forms an overlap that he defines as a *chiasm* or flesh. For him, in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), there is a reversibility between the subject and the Other that incorporates both as individuals within the same world: the chiasmic relation.<sup>1</sup> Whilst entwined, however, the subject and the Other remain separate entities, like strands of rope. Through analyses of Varda's films, I extend this notion of *chiasm* to the idea of an overlapping between life and death. Death is for Merleau-Ponty a constant presence, and he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) that one lives in an 'atmosphere of death in general, and there is a kind of essence of death always on the horizon of my thinking'.<sup>2</sup> Death is a perpetual presence, if only in thought, and this immediate accessibility to death through life, I argue, is also a chiasmic relation. In Varda's digital films, *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) and *Les plages d'Agnès* (2008), this

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 424.

reversibility between life and death occurs in parallel to that of the intersubjective relation. The chiasmic relation is, simply, the overlap between dialectical pairings, and the intersubjective liaison is the primary example of this. Philosophy scholar Cathryn Vasseleu summarises the intersubjective relationship and the inherent divergence between pairings, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the intertwining, the chiasm or ‘flesh’:

flesh defines a position which is both subject (a subjective reality) and object (objectifiable to others), and also simultaneously a subjectivity which is internally divergent with itself. In other words, flesh expresses the inscription of difference within the same.<sup>3</sup>

Flesh or the *chiasm*, as defined here, is simply Merleau-Ponty’s term for the subject and the Other as entwined yet simultaneously divergent.<sup>4</sup> The *chiasm* is the overlapping, or intertwining, that occurs between pairings that simultaneously maintain independence, such as seeing and seen, but which can, as I will show in discussion of Varda’s *Les Glaneurs*, enter into a most intimate proximity.

There is also in the intersubjective relation, the *chiasm*, an inevitable presence of death. This presence is emphasised by philosophy scholar, Jack Reynolds:

If absolute alterity is but a synonym of death and inconceivable to humanity, then what needs to be considered, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the paradoxical way in which self and other are intertwined while simultaneously divergent.<sup>5</sup>

This connection between subject and Other, the overlap, denies the extremity of

---

<sup>3</sup> Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 130-155.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Reynolds, ‘Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and the Alterity of the Other’, in *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 6:1 (2002), pp. 63-78 (p. 67).

the absolute unknown and of death. The Other, and death, are not, however, enveloped in the subjective experience, but remain distinct entities in Merleau-Ponty's thought. Death is, in fact, drawn into a closer proximity with life in this relation. According to scholar Stephen Priest, in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, '[c]onsciousness of life is the *root* of consciousness of death and consciousness of death is the *root* of consciousness of life'.<sup>6</sup> Life and death are linked in a reversible relation. For Merleau-Ponty, death is not an incomprehensible alterity and the relationship with the Other provides an 'authentic awareness of death'.<sup>7</sup> The chiasmic relation with the Other, the subject overlapping with, but remaining separate to, the Other, parallels the consciousness of death from within life. Death is the obverse of life, as the Other is the obverse of the subject and each is considered with each other in a reversibility. Inherent to the concept of the intersubjective relation, and especially its reversibility, are the ideas of vision, seeing and the gaze. Commenting on this reversibility between dialectical pairings, philosophy scholar, Beata Stawarska asserts that seeing can 'always reverse into being seen'.<sup>8</sup> There is reciprocity between dialectical pairings as the body is simultaneously sentient and sensible. A gaze between the subject and the Other is not unilateral, but myriad: 'the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen'.<sup>9</sup> In Merleau-Ponty's thought the subject and the Other are in a reciprocal relationship through the gaze and there is an imminent reversibility between them. In extending this notion of the chiasmic gaze to film analysis, the camera mediates in interrelations between the spectator and the image. In Varda's films the gaze of the spectator frequently falls specifically on images signifying the director's own mortality, for the spectator, the death of the Other. In Merleau-

---

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Hegel's Existentialism', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. by Hubert L Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), pp. 63-70 (p. 68).

<sup>8</sup> Beata Stawarska, 'From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity', in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. by Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006), pp. 91-106 (p. 93).

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139.

Ponty's thought, the intersubjective relation understood through the gaze, also engages with a presence of death.

In 'Hegel's Existentialism' he writes that within the gaze between subject and the Other 'each consciousness seeks the death of the other which it feels dispossesses it of its constitutive nothingness'.<sup>10</sup> In the intersubjective gaze, each of the subject and the Other seek out one another's death as a distraction from their own inherent mortality. This consideration of the death of the Other then empowers both the subject and the Other as they contemplate one another. Death, then, is an integral element of the gaze upon the Other and, perversely, the death of the Other has an emollient effect on the subject's consideration of their own nothingness, or death. Varda's use of the camera, the digital camera, I argue, reflects Merleau-Ponty's conception of perception: the 'one sole image in which we are both involved'.<sup>11</sup> The camera represents the single image through which the Other and the subject interact. The notion of *chiasm* between dialectic pairings is apparent in the relation between life and death for some of Merleau-Ponty's commentators. Other critics such as philosophy scholar, Suzanne Laba Cataldi are more cautious of uncomplicated acceptance of the reversibility between life and death, warning against the idea that death can cross into life:

For while we do, or may, perceive life crossed, or crossing over into death, we are not so cognizant of the ways in which we may perceive death, crossed or crossing over into life. Thus we might be led to believe that the boundary between life and death is not chiasmically reversible, and that Merleau-Ponty's provocative contention that all perceptions are is simply wrong.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst it is relatively simple to consider the passage from life into death, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Hegel's Existentialism', p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Laba Cataldi, 'Embodying Perceptions of Death: Emotional Apprehension and Reversibilities of Flesh', in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 190.

reverse journey is, commonly, inconceivable. The hesitation to consider a truly equal chiasmic relation between life and death is countered by Cataldi herself when she contemplates the death of a relation and specifically touching their hand as a sign of respect and parting.<sup>13</sup> I will work through similar questions as to the exact reciprocity of the chiasmic overlap of life and death with emphasis on the hand as a point of contact between the two and the intersubjective relation in my analysis of Varda's *Les Glaneurs*.

As I have shown, Merleau-Ponty considers death a constant presence to life 'on the horizon of my thinking'.<sup>14</sup> Whilst one cannot experience one's own death in thought, the thought process opens a perspective of the world in which mortality, or at least its contemplation, exists. To consider death is to contrast it with life, not to divide one from the other but to see them in a symbiotic relation in which one is the obverse of the other. Philosophy scholar, Bryan A. Smyth summarises this overlapping of life and death in Merleau-Ponty's thought: 'Death is a vital part of life-as-such, for it is precisely through it that life-as-such gains self-consciousness'.<sup>15</sup> Further, this experience of exposure to death, for Smyth, draws one out of oneself 'in a way that elicits productive involvement'.<sup>16</sup> This involvement, the drawing out of the self, represents a relation with death that is comparable to the relation with the Other. Indeed Merleau-Ponty considers the parallel between the idea of the constant presence of death with that of the relation with the Other when he writes that 'my life has a social atmosphere just as it has a flavour of mortality'.<sup>17</sup> The coexistence of the subject and Other and life and death are interwoven in Merleau-Ponty's thought. This coexistence is apparent, I will now show, in the Varda's digital films, *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* and *Les plages d'Agnès*.

---

<sup>13</sup> Cataldi, 2000, pp. 192-196.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p 424.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan A. Smyth, *Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology and the Realization of Philosophy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Smyth, 2014, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p 425.

## **The digital camera: death in binary bits in *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* and *Les plages d’Agnès***

In an interview discussing *Les Glaneurs* with the film critic Chris Darke, Varda said that ‘the DV camera and the Avid are tools [she] use[d] to get closer to people more easily and to shoot on [her] own’.<sup>18</sup> For Varda, the digital camera extends the possibility to discover more detail about her subjects and offers greater independence. This notion of advances in the development of filming apparatus liberating the filmmaker is not exclusive to new, digital cameras of course. In an earlier interview with film critic Melissa Anderson, Varda compares digital cameras with the handheld, analogue models released in the 1950s:

I had the feeling that this is the camera that would bring me back to the early short films I made in 1957 and 1958. I felt free at that time. With the new digital camera, I felt I could film myself, get involved as a filmmaker.<sup>19</sup>

The DV camera allows Varda the same freedoms as the mobile, 35mm cameras that she used for films such as *L’Opéra Mouffe* (1958) and *O saisons, ô châteaux* (1958). As with *L’Opéra Mouffe*, in *Les Glaneurs* the freedoms afforded by the new camera correspond with the study of transformations within Varda’s own body: in the earlier film, it is her pregnancy that dominates her thoughts and in the later one, ageing. Beauvoir, writing of the ageing process later in her own life, comments that for the aged person ‘death is no longer a general, abstract fate: it is a personal event that is near at hand’.<sup>20</sup> Death casts a shadow over the thoughts of the elderly. I argue that the cameras Varda chooses are key to depicting these concerns. Further, Varda celebrates the digital camera

---

<sup>18</sup> Chris Darke, ‘Refuseniks’, *Sight and Sound*, 11:1 (January 2001), pp. 30-33 (p. 32).

<sup>19</sup> Melissa Anderson, ‘The Modest Gesture of the Filmmaker – an Interview with Agnès Varda’, in *Cineaste* 26:4, pp. 24-27 (p. 24).

<sup>20</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. by Patrick O’Brian (Middlesex and New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 490.

in *Les Glaneurs*, drawing attention to its presence. In an initial scene of *Les Glaneurs*, she says in voiceover that ‘these new small cameras, they are digital and fantastic. Their effects are stroboscopic’ over a close-up shot of her left eye and the side of her face, pixelated in a slow dissolve from one shot to the next. Varda continues in voiceover ‘narcissistic’, as she holds a mirror up to the camera, ‘and even hyper-realistic’, yet in the mirror where there should be a reflection of the camera, there is a drawing of a face. Playfully, Varda emphasizes the camera’s presence through its absence as the spectator considers its disappearance from the image. Also, this final *trompe l’oeil* illuminates the camera’s capacity to manipulate the image, which is, importantly, Varda’s own, her own body, as subject of the images she is creating.

Continuing this pairing of the camera and her own body as subjects of the film, in the next sequence, Varda shoots the Instruction Booklet for the digital camera before a slow-motion sweep across a room settles on her reclining on a sofa, cutting to close-ups of her face. These shots also meld together through slow dissolves, creating an effect like a cracked mirror, each image leaving traces in its successor.<sup>21</sup> This segment, pertinently for later discussion, ends with a close-up shot of Varda’s hand. Her body is a presence in the film that is highlighted by the camera. Later in the film, the camera’s agency, its independence, is particularly prominent and there is a further correlation between its presence and the filming of Varda’s own hand. In one scene, Varda forgets to turn the camera off or put the lens-cap on as she walks through a field. The camera points downwards and continues filming, capturing the bobbing lens-cap against the agrarian backdrop. These images display, I argue, what Jean Epstein refers to as the camera’s ‘partial mechanical brain registering visual and auditory stimuli’, capturing them in ‘its own way in space and

---

<sup>21</sup> This effect is similar to her photographic self-portrait, *Autoportrait Morcele* (2009), in which Varda’s image is broken up into shards as different aspects of her bespectacled face are repeated in different mirrors.

time'.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the lens-cap, protruding from a point behind the camera's lens echoes the form of Varda's hand in other shots as it is filmed entering the frame from behind the camera-lens. The filmed hand is an outlier from the rest of her body and metonymical, a representative of the whole that is not seen and remains un-filmed 'off-camera'. The lens-cap also indicates the camera's own presence, the camera that films itself (the lens cap) in the same way that Varda films herself (her hand). The DV camera gives Varda the freedom to film when and what she wants and allows her to get closer to her subjects, here herself, but also has its own agency and presence within the frame. The flexibility offered by the camera allows Varda the intimacy of filming her subjects, her own hands, up close and in particular shots her hands serve a dual role. The filmmaker describes the liberation to film herself, and specifically her hand, to Darke: 'One hand filmed and the other hand was the subject'.<sup>23</sup> In *Glaneurs*, and *Les Plages d'Agnès* as I argue, Varda fulfils a dialectical role which is as subject filming and Other filmed, which, by means of the camera chiasmically mediating between these positions, creates an intersubjective relation. There is a critical connection here between the camera as embodied perceiver and Varda's dual function as filmmaker and subject of the image. These scenes not only highlight the presence and consequence of the camera, but also raise questions about the body as an image within the film. That Varda records her own body as a woman, further complicates this inquiry, raising questions addressed by scholars such as Delphine Bénézet, Mireille Rosello and Kelley Conway.<sup>24</sup> French scholar, Bénézet argues that Varda's engagement with the corporeal 'constitutes a decisive contribution to feminism'.<sup>25</sup> I agree, and argue that

---

<sup>22</sup> Jean Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, trans. by Christophe Wall-Romana (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Darke, 2001, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Delphine Bénézet, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Wallflower Press, 2014); Mireille Rosello, 'Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*: Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady', *Studies in French Cinema* 1:1 (2000), pp. 29 – 36; Kelley Conway, *Agnès Varda* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Bénézet, 2014, p. 10.

Varda's cinema engages in a feminist rhetoric of subject and Other positioning, as well as with representations of the (mortal) female body.

Writing on Varda's presentation of mortality, her own maturing body, in *Les Glaneurs*, feminist scholar Rosello argues:

An entire segment of the documentary focuses on Varda herself, or more exactly on her body, on her ageing body. The commentary makes frequent allusions to the fact that she is now old, that death is around the corner.<sup>26</sup>

Death is regularly referenced throughout *Les Glaneurs* and, for Rosello, these sections of the film that address death directly are, as she writes later in her article, 'parenthetical'.<sup>27</sup> The passages of the film that pertain to Varda's own death, her ageing are indeed shot by *her* on *her* digital camera, separating them from the rest of her film, which is shot by a skeleton crew. I argue that these scenes of Varda's ageing body do, however, overlap with those of the *glaneurs* of the title, exactly because of the theme of gleaning: Varda films decaying crops and potatoes and the mold on the ceiling of her home as well as her own hands, all of which are gleaned images of deterioration. Varda makes a direct link between the gleaning of crops such as wheat and the gleaning of images in the scene in which she films Jules Breton's painting, *La Glaneuse* (1877). This sequence occurs just before the scenes described above and begins the emphasis on the ideas of the presence of the camera *within* the image and as creator of the image that persist throughout the film. Varda introduces the painting with her narration over a close-up of the canvas, then cuts to a long-shot in which she stands next to the portrait mimicking the pose of Breton's titular *glaneuse*, with a wheat-sheaf slung over her right shoulder. An edit focuses in on Varda in the same position but in medium shot. She then drops the sheaf behind her and raises a digital camera to her eye and directs her camera to meet the camera filming her, a meeting of gazes, eye to eye, as in the credit-sequence of *Saluts*

---

<sup>26</sup> Rosello, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Rosello, 2000, p. 33.

*les Cubains*. The presentation of the camera in this sequence draws attention to its presence in the hands of the *female* filmmaker, *la glaneuse*. Varda authority, Kelley Conway considers that this scene ‘insists on the fact of female authorship in cinema’ and ‘refuses the association of femininity with conventional beauty as well as the association of old age and infirmity’.<sup>28</sup> Varda references her own role as filmmaker, questions conventional ideas of the creative austerity of old age and traditional (patriarchal) representations of femininity and, in particular, the female body. This notion is particularly pertinent when considering some feminist scholars assertions that Merleau-Ponty’s constitution of the feminine body in his work is part of such a patriarchal tradition.

In particular, for philosopher, Michèle Le Dœuff in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty’s early conception of the body as it was viewed was that of a female as created by a masculine gaze:

He was speaking of the visible body in general, perceived by a normal subject; however, it becomes clear that this visible body is a woman’s body, seen and redrawn by the gaze of a man, who before long will move unhesitatingly from gaze to gesture! Not only is the subject necessarily male, the visible body that of woman, but also the gaze (of a man directed at a woman) can remake what it sees, to accentuate what he finds erogenous. A form of visual violence is normalized here in all its generality. On principle and as a general procedure, the (masculine) gaze re-creates the visible body of a (feminine) other precisely as it wishes.<sup>29</sup>

The body viewed as represented in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a female form constructed by (heterosexual) male desire, the sexualising and othering male gaze. The male subject creates a desired Other through a visual violence. Merleau-Ponty, then, continues the convention of the female body as beautiful,

---

<sup>28</sup> Conway, 2015, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, translated by Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 79.

desired and sexualised that Varda seeks to deconstruct in her images. The focus here is on the gaze, the subjective gaze that others the body seen. For Irigaray, however, Merleau-Ponty rejects the subject/Other dualism, but does not eliminate a hierarchical structure of power between the looker and the looked upon:

Although he dismisses the subject and the object, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless retains this polarity: seer/visible, which presupposes, here in particular, that the visible, still invisible in its resting place, would have vision and could give it to or take it away from the seer.<sup>30</sup>

Within vision, within the structure of the subject gazing upon an object (the Other for instance) – even with Merleau-Ponty’s construct of the relation that maintains that the seer is seen and vice versa – the original subject retains control. Yet these criticisms of Merleau-Ponty – that he preserves the notion of the desiring, masculine gaze of the subject upon a sexualised feminine Other or that he composes a polarity between visual positions that upholds the hierarchy of conventional, gendered subject-Other relations – can each be reconsidered in reference to his late thesis of the chiasm.

Indeed, Holland asserts that the text in which Merleau-Ponty develops the idea of the chiasmus, *The Visible and the Invisible* ‘is a sort of feminism’.<sup>31</sup> The idea of the chiasm attempts, at least, to reconsider the positions of the feminine and masculine in so far as it reconsiders the conventional positions of subject and Other. Philosophy scholar, Sara Heinämaa concludes that ultimately ‘maleness and femaleness are, in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, two variations of our basic way of relating to the world’.<sup>32</sup> Maleness and femaleness are simply

---

<sup>30</sup> Luce Irigaray, ‘The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining–The Chiasm”’, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy J. Holland, ‘In a Different Ch[I]asm: A Feminist Rereading of Merleau-Ponty on Sexuality’, *Rereading Merleau-Ponty*, ed by Lawrence Has and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 315-337 (p. 329).

<sup>32</sup> Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003), p. 68.

different perceptions of the world that overlap in a chiasmic relation. Inevitably, other critics of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy disagree with such positions as Holland's and Heinämaa's. For instance, Stawarska believes Merleau-Ponty's attempts to represent every aspect of embodiment in the chiasm fail and that his terms of universal categories neglect the 'gender-specific experience of the body'.<sup>33</sup> The chiasm is homogenizing, creating an 'a-gender' neutrality in its scope. In counterpoint, philosophy scholar Dorothea Olkowski writes that Irigaray's critique of the chiasm locates gendered negative and positive poles within Merleau-Ponty's key concept. Olkowski argues that Irigaray embraces the idea of the chiasmus, but considers that within it 'positive and negative poles always divide themselves between the two sexes'.<sup>34</sup> As I have shown, in Merleau-Ponty's model of the chiasm, dialectical pairings overlap but remain separate. In this separation, Irigaray finds the potential, still, for a hierarchy between male and female. In an essay about sexual difference and desire she writes that the gendered division of these positive and negative poles occurs 'instead of creating a chiasmus or double loop in which we can move out towards the other and back to itself'.<sup>35</sup> The polarity of negative and positive becomes a duality, creating gender difference and denying the potential of an equivalent, chiasmic, intersubjective relation. In a parallel but less critical reading, Beauvoir's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's idea of embodiment recognises the overlap: 'bridging the gap between individual existents; it makes itself manifest in analogous organisms'.<sup>36</sup> For Beauvoir the analogy Merleau-Ponty constructs 'does not establish a rigorous universality'.<sup>37</sup> The chiasmic overlap highlights difference, instead of homogenising. Each of these

---

<sup>33</sup> Stawarska 2006, p. 92.

<sup>34</sup> Dorothea Olkowski, 'Introduction: The Situated Subject', in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. by Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006), pp. 1-24 (p. 5).

<sup>35</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Sexual Difference', in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Cambridge Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), pp. 118 – 130 (p. 121).

<sup>36</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Picador Classics, 1988), p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, 1988, p. 78.

interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's idea of chiasmic relations between the sexes are relevant to my argument here and are themselves tested by analysis of Varda's key digital films.

In the scenes of *Les Glaneurs* I have discussed above, Varda is the filmmaker/camera operator *and* the subject of the camera's gaze. This twin role within a single self, body, necessitates a reconsideration of some feminist readings of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The relation between Varda off-screen, as creator, and on-screen as object of the gaze, I argue, is chiasmic *and* non-hierarchical. Varda's own body is the object in the image and it is the same body that picks up the digital camera to film its self in many scenes. In the sequences of *Les Glaneurs* already described one is aware of the co-presence of a subject and Other. This co-presence, the social relation, tacitly speaks to Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm, especially the idea that Others are 'my twins or the flesh of my flesh'.<sup>38</sup> This concept is quite literal in Varda's film, as she represents her person as subject and Other, twins within her body. Further, for Sarah Cooper, the filmmaker's 'otherness to herself is not confused with the otherness of those she films'.<sup>39</sup> Varda acknowledges the difference between her own Otherness and that of the other subjects of her film. Although in a chiasmic relation, Varda's Otherness, her subjectivity *and* the Otherness of those she films all overlap. Additionally, I argue that it is the camera that, in the scenes analysed above, provides the capacity for this embodied chiasmic relation, the connection between the Other and the subject in the self. The highlighting of the camera as active agent, integral to the bond between Other and subject, creates for Varda the chiasmus or double loop in which to move out towards the Other and back to her self. The camera forms a loop with the Other and subject, which would otherwise be a polarity. This chiasmic encounter is best exemplified

---

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), p.89.

through the scenes in which Varda films her own hands, some of which I have previously detailed, that are a key element of the self-portraiture in the film.

Throughout *Les Glaneurs* Varda makes frequent reference to, and regularly films, her hands. When she discovers heart-shaped potatoes in a pile of the tubers discarded from a local harvest, she again makes reference to the separate roles her hands play in the film: ‘Immediately I began filming perilously with one hand. My other hand gleaning heart-shaped potatoes’. One hand films the other as subject. Furthermore, after the scene in which she shoots the camera’s Instruction Booklet and combs her hair, she begins a monologue, a partially authentic rail against mortality: ‘No, it’s not O rage, it’s not O despair, Old age, my enemy, it might even be Old age, my friend, but still, my hair and my hands keep telling me that the end is near’. The body is the site and the indicator of ageing for Beauvoir also, as she writes that we experience old age ‘in our bodies’.<sup>40</sup> The above scene in *Les Glaneurs*, tellingly, ends with a close-up of Varda’s hand. Additionally, during the sequence in which Varda places her hand over a postcard representing a Rembrandt self-portrait as she repeats that ‘this is my project to film with one hand my other hand’. Film scholar, Laura Rascaroli analyses this scene as one of self-portraiture, noting the reference to the Rembrandt canvas.<sup>41</sup> However, there is, I argue, more to this composition than Varda’s self-conscious creation of images of her person. There is an interaction here between subject and Other, that in Merleau-Ponty’s thought is the self as simultaneously one and the other within the gaze.<sup>42</sup> The gaze here is mediated by the camera, which is another presence within the perception of the image. Varda as subject looks upon and films her own hand as Other, but the camera acts as chiasm between the two. French film expert, Jenny Chamarette has asserted that in this scene ‘the camera and [Varda’s] body form

---

<sup>40</sup> Beauvoir, 1972, p. 335.

<sup>41</sup> Laura Rascaroli ‘The Self-portrait Film: Michelangelo’s Last Gaze’, *The Cinema and Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. by Alisa Lebow (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p. 68.

a liminal bond'.<sup>43</sup> Recognising the dual role that Varda performs in the film, Chamarette continues that the hand's presence as filmed object 'hovers at the liminal in-betweenness of Varda-as-subject and Varda-as-filmmaker'.<sup>44</sup> The hand, in this scene at least, sits between the two positions Varda fulfils: filmmaker and subject of the film. Chamarette links this overlapping to the chiasm and the connection between the hand and camera, but does not extend this to, as I do, a relation between the subject and Other in Merleau-Ponty.

In a prominent passage on embodied perception in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes that:

with my left hand, I feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place.<sup>45</sup>

Each hand remains separate in their function, although combined in their joint touching. There is in this overlying an element of the chiasm, the overlapping of a pairing that nonetheless remains separate. Discussing this touching of hands, Reynolds argues that it 'represents the body's capacity to occupy the position of both perceiving object and subject of perception'.<sup>46</sup> The body can simultaneously occupy the position of the viewer and the viewed, the subject and the object. Commenting further on his example of an embodied perception, the two hands touching, Merleau-Ponty continues:

When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the rôles of 'touching' and being 'touched'.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> Chamarette, 2012, p. 119.

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 105.

<sup>46</sup> Jack Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press: 2004), p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 106.

Here Merleau-Ponty argues that the hands ‘alternate’ between the two roles available to them and in the literal flesh of each hand as they overlap and meet occurs a chiasmic bond in which entities remain separate. I extend this notion here to Varda’s position as both subject, as filmmaker, and Other, the object of her film, but also to a chiasmic link, through the camera, between life and death. Writing on Merleau-Ponty’s notions of the chiasm and death, Cataldi considers the chiasmic link between life and death occurring through the hands of the living self and a passed loved one. For Cataldi living and dead ‘hands are both perceptible, as objects; they “overlap” in this regard. They are both caught up in the same fabric or skin – the same *flesh* of perceptibility’.<sup>48</sup> The flesh, or chiasm, the overlap between life and death is perceptible when a live hand comes into contact with a dead one. Further, Cataldi argues that this contact is ‘almost as if our own live hand momentarily “crosses over” to a (living) sensation of its own extinction’.<sup>49</sup> This contact with the dead brings an awareness of mortality to the living subject. In the scenes from *Les Glaneurs* referenced above in which Varda films her hand, there is an overlap between her two hands made possible by the camera as the chiasm.

This overlap also leads to Varda’s acceptance of her own mortality, which is represented by her filmed and aged hand, the Other. There is a bond between body and camera, as Chamarette writes, but instead of Varda’s filmed hand existing in a liminal space between Varda-as-Other and Varda-as-subject, I argue that the camera performs the chiasmic role between them. In these images, pairings overlap but remain separate. Not only does this occur between the two positions of subject and Other, but also between those of life and death. As I have shown, the hand being filmed is aged, it is a fragment of Varda’s older body, a metonym of her mortality. Whereas the hand that films brings life,

---

<sup>48</sup> Cataldi, 2000, p. 192.

<sup>49</sup> Cataldi, 2000, p. 193.

creates new images. This is the hand that composes what Varda terms *cinécriture*. Put simply, *cinécriture* is the process of making a film, but for the director that process is comprehensive. In conversation with screenwriter Andrea Meyer, Varda defines *cinécriture* as everything from choosing the subject and the locations of a film, to choosing the publicity material and the poster: ‘it’s a handmade work of film-making – that I really believe. And I call that cine-writing’.<sup>50</sup> Varda writes herself that *cinécriture* is to cinema, what style is to writing.<sup>51</sup> *Cinécriture* is the emotion, the feeling and the shape of a film.<sup>52</sup> For Varda, each of these acts is a hand-crafted aspect of making a film. I argue that the DV camera aids the *cinécriture*, the *auteur*-ship of the film. Of the scene in *Les Glaneurs* in which Varda replaces the wheat-sheaf with her digital camera Conway argues that ‘Varda shows us her ageing body, but then moves on, demonstrating the pleasures of new technology and the value of turning one’s gaze outward’.<sup>53</sup> Varda shows both her ageing body and the camera, the technology that invites creativity. Her body represents ageing and mortality and the camera life, a prophylactic against death. This latter idea is evident in the ways in which Varda films Jacques Demy in *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), the camera hovering over his body at an almost epidermic level. In *Les Plages d’Agnès*, Varda describes her intention in these scenes as wanting to capture ‘his very matter. Jacques dying, but Jacques still alive’. The desire to depict the body as it transitions between life and death speaks to the camera’s potential to create images that outlive their objects and the surface that hides depth. In *Les Glaneurs*, the camera acts as the chiasm between Varda’s two hands, the one symbolising death and the other life. In these images, Varda represents both her self as Other, the object of the camera’s and the filmmaker’s

---

<sup>50</sup> Andrea Meyer, ‘Gleaning the Passion of Agnès Varda’, in *Agnès Varda: Interviews*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), pp. 198-202 (p. 201).

<sup>51</sup> Agnès Varda, *Agnès par Agnès* (Editions Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris: 1994), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara Quart, ‘Agnès Varda: A Conversation’, in *Agnès Varda: Interviews*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), pp. 126-138 (p. 127).

<sup>53</sup> Conway, 2015, p. 78.

gaze and as the subject, the filmmaker. As I have shown, for Merleau-Ponty, the experience that enacts an authentic awareness of death is the experience of contact with another, ‘since under his gaze I am only an object just as he is merely a piece of the world under my own’.<sup>54</sup> Through the camera, literally and metaphorically, Varda’s gaze falls upon herself as dying Other and, through the chiasm, the loop back towards her self, she is also the living, creative subject.

Varda also regularly turns the camera back on the spectator in her films, whether directly in the wheat-sheaf scene of *Les Glaneurs* or reflected in a mirror such as in *Les Glaneurs* and *Les Plages*. Film scholar, Cecilia Sayad has written of the scenes of *Les Glaneurs* in which Varda turns a mirror to camera, reflecting its image in the glass, as a substituting of the image of Varda for that of the apparatus.<sup>55</sup> Developing her thesis, Sayad continues:

Here Varda uses the mirror to throw her own gaze, represented by the camera, back at us – in other words, to return the gaze. As the director openly states, this camera stands also for the spectator: again, to look into the lens is to look at the audience. If camera equals viewer, the reflected camera also confronts the spectators with their own image.<sup>56</sup>

In turning the camera onto the spectator in the reflection of the mirror Varda recommends them to contemplate their own image. The camera is, with reference to the apparatus theory of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry in the 1970s, the point of identification for the spectator. Metz, in his text *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, first published in French in 1977, considers that ‘primary identification of the spectator revolves around the camera itself, as Jean-Louis Baudry has shown’.<sup>57</sup> For Metz, the camera is the key link for the

---

<sup>54</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> Cecilia Sayad, *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 53.

<sup>56</sup> Sayad, 2013, p. 53.

<sup>57</sup> Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzetti (London: MacMillan Press, 1983), p. 51 and p. 97.

spectator to the world of the film that s/he perceives in the image. Baudry, as Metz observes, also emphasises the spectator's association with the camera. The camera is for him central to the process of filmmaking and the key point of identification for the film spectator.<sup>58</sup>

As I have shown, in *Les Glaneurs* Varda also turns one camera towards another camera, meeting the gaze of the lens. The camera is an extension of the spectator and the filmmaker, but also an independent agent (as in the scene in which it films the lens-cap) and liberates Varda to film her ageing body. The camera provides the chiasmic relation between Varda as filmmaker and object of the film – her dual role as Other and subject – and between Varda as she occupies each of these positions and the spectator. Furthermore, it is her mortality that she represents in these films, her ageing and especially in *Les Plages*, her reminiscence of the past, her life that primarily flows behind her as she gazes back over it. Varda presents the death of the Other to her self as filmmaker and to the spectator, engaging them with these images and asking them to contemplate their own life and death as well. By presenting her hand in *Les Glaneurs*, Varda comments on the processes of creation and ageing, the production of the artistic images of the film and her mortality. In placing her body into the images, Varda alludes to the creative process, the filming of the images of her other hand, the dialogue between herself as ageing subject and the spectator who is called upon to recognise her mortality and their own. For Beugnet, Varda 'describes ageing as a process she has happily come to terms with'.<sup>59</sup> The filmmaker accepts her mortality, the overlapping of death and life. The implication in turning the camera onto the spectator is then that they too should accept the presence of death in life. I have discovered this element in Varda's digital films, in particular *Les Glaneurs*, through a consideration of the

---

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', trans. by Alan Williams, in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, (Winter, 1974-1975), pp. 39-47 (p. 41 and p. 46).

<sup>59</sup> Martine Beugnet, 'Encoding loss: Corporeality and (im)materiality in the age of the digital', *Studies in French Cinema* 12:3 (2012), pp. 257 – 271 (p. 262).

chiasmic relation between subject and Other with a particular focus on the body presented in the films, Varda's own. Of the subjective and objective in Varda's films, Bénézet writes that Varda 'had found a perfect balance between the objective and the subjective, two supposedly opposite tendencies of cinema'.<sup>60</sup> Such a balance between presumed contraries, which is I argue an overlapping, is reflected in Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm that inhabits the core of this article. That Varda films her own ageing body, one hand filming and the other filmed, speaks to the co-existence of subjective and objective experiences and interrogates notions of femaleness and maleness, especially of feminine beauty speculated by a male gaze, through an acceptance of mortality. Varda's rejection of the confines of a femininity as it is imposed by a patriarchal society are similar to the ways in which Merleau-Ponty postulates maleness and femaleness as solely aspects of a single entity, according to Heinämaa. Maleness and femaleness are overlapping aspects that perceive the world, instead of dualistic roles. Varda questions traditional, patriarchal positions ascribed to the feminine that establish and sustain subject and Other duality. As I have shown, this questioning of conventional feminine appearance emerges through the presentation of Varda's ageing and mortal body. The creative process that is the obverse aspect of the ageing hand in the image also queries this combination. Through the liberty afforded by the digital camera, Varda is able to more intimately engage with her subject, her own death, and in doing so invites the spectator to contemplate their own.

---

<sup>60</sup> Bénézet, 2014, p. 120.

## **Bibliography:**

Anderson, Melissa, 'The Modest Gesture of the Filmmaker – an Interview with Agnès Varda', *Cineaste* 26:4, pp. 24-27.

Baudry, Jean-Louis, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', trans. by Alan Williams, in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, (Winter, 1974-1975), pp. 39-47.

Beauvoir, Simone de, *Old Age*, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (Middlesex and New York: Penguin, 1972).

Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex* (London: Picador Classics, 1988).

Bénézet, Delphine, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Wallflower Press, 2014).

Beugnet, Martine, 'Encoding loss: Corporeality and (im)materiality in the age of the digital', *Studies in French Cinema* 12:3 (2012), pp. 257 – 271.

Cataldi, Suzanne Laba, 'Embodying Perceptions of Death: Emotional Apprehension and Reversibilities of Flesh', in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000).

Chamarette, Jenny, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Conway, Kelley, *Agnès Varda* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

Cooper, Sarah, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006).

Darke, Chris, 'Refuseniks', *Sight and Sound*, 11:1 (January 2001), pp. 30-33.

Dœuff, Michèle Le, *The Sex of Knowing*, translated by Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

Epstein, Jean, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, trans. by Christophe Wall-Romana (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014).

Heinämaa, Sara, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003).

Holland, Nancy J., 'In a Different Ch[I]asm: A Feminist Rereading of Merleau-Ponty on Sexuality', *Rereading Merleau-Ponty*, ed by Lawrence Has and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 315-337.

Irigaray, Luce, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993).

Irigaray, Luce 'Sexual Difference', in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Cambridge Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), pp. 118 – 130.

King, Homa, 'Matter, Time, and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 24 (2007), pp. 421 – 429.

Kline, T. Jefferson, ed., *Agnès Varda: Interviews* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. by Hubert L Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

Metz, Christian, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (London: MacMillan Press, 1983).

Olkowski, Dorothea and Gail Weiss, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006).

Priest, Stephen, *Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

Rascaroli, Laura, 'The Self-portrait Film: Michelangelo's Last Gaze', *The Cinema and Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. by Alisa Lebow (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012).

Reynolds, Jack, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press: 2004).

Reynolds, Jack, 'Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and the Alterity of the Other', in *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 6:1 (2002), pp. 63-78.

Rosello, Mireille, 'Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*: Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady', *Studies in French Cinema* 1:1 (2000), pp. 29 – 36.

Sayad, Cecilia, *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

Smyth, Bryan A., *Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology and the Realization of Philosophy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Varda, Agnès, *Agnès par Agnès* (Editions Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris: 1994).

Vasseleu, Cathryn, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).