

The Wild Palms in a New Wave: Adaptive Gleaning and the Birth of the *Nouvelle Vague*

LAUREN DU GRAF*

Abstract This article explores an overlooked aspect of Agnès Varda's pioneering *La Pointe Courte* (1954)—its function as a literary adaptation. *La Pointe Courte* was significant to the French New Wave not only in its use of American literary modernist narrative strategies but in its execution of a new model of adaptive poetics that brazenly flouted expectations of fidelity to a literary source. *La Pointe Courte*'s adaptation of *The Wild Palms* by William Faulkner—a central literary reference for French film critics after the Second World War—supplied an important, but often uncredited, blueprint for directors like Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard, whose films modelled on literary modernist prose and abstracted, deliberately unfaithful filmic adaptations would be more readily recognized by critics for their originality. Varda's analogical literary adaptation anticipated shifts in cinematic style that would echo throughout later works by directors affiliated with the *Nouvelle Vague*, including Godard and Resnais. This article seeks to revise how we understand the *Nouvelle Vague*'s origins, which, as Geneviève Sellier has argued, has all too often been told from the perspective of the masculine singular.

Keywords *Adaptation, Faulkner, Varda, Nouvelle Vague, feminism, film studies.*

'When I started my first film, there were three women directors in France', the filmmaker Agnès Varda told Sheila Heti in an interview for *The Believer* in 2009. 'Their films were OK, but I was different. It's like when you start to jump and you put the pole very high—you have to jump *very* high. I thought, I have to use cinema as a language'.

The film Varda describes is her seminal cinematic debut, *La Pointe Courte*. On the first day of shooting in August 1954, the then-25-year-old Varda had worked as a photographer, but had no background in filmmaking.¹ Her confident, narratively adventuresome effort borrowed a modernist, contrapuntal storytelling strategy from William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* (1939) to illustrate the divergent lives of visitors and residents of Sète, a fishing village in the south of France where Varda first lived as a young woman during the Nazi occupation.

In promotional materials, *La Pointe Courte* was touted as a literary effort; the "'ESSAI-CINEMA" d'AGNES VARDA', as one poster proclaimed ('*La Pointe Courte* au Studio Parnasse')², gesturing towards the exploratory, experimental writings of Montaigne as well as the film's fusion of text and image. Although *La Pointe Courte* was not commercially distributed due to financing challenges³, on the advice of André Bazin (whom Varda met through the film's editor, Alain Resnais), it was screened before a number of influential writers and dedicated cinephiles at the 1955 Cannes Film Festival, as

**Department of English, Goucher College. Email: laurendugraf@gmail.com*

well as influential Parisian *ciné-clubs* including the Cinéma du Panthéon and Cinéma Studio Parnasse. Bazin's enthusiasm for the film, which he would express on the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Le Parisien libéré*, assured Varda of a slot on a then-embryonic roster of female cinéastes.⁴

La Pointe Courte made Varda into a founder of a film style that would come to be known as the *nouvelle vague* (new wave), although her relation to the new wave has often been described in provisional, liminal terms: she has been characterized as an outsider to the postwar film culture that nurtured the new wave, as a member of a Left Bank offshoot, and even the *nouvelle vague's* grandmother.^{5,6} Nevertheless, recent historical revisions by scholars such as Richard Neupert, Kristen Conway, and Ginette Vincendeau have helped to clarify *La Pointe Courte's* central importance to the film movement's origins.

Building on this body of scholarship, this article seeks to elucidate an overlooked aspect of the film's originality and influence: its function as a literary adaptation. As I will argue, *La Pointe Courte* was significant to the French new wave not only in its use of the American literary modernism of William Faulkner but also in its execution of a new model of adaptive poetics that brazenly flouted expectations of fidelity to a literary source. *La Pointe Courte's* adaptation of *The Wild Palms* by Faulkner—a central literary figure for French film critics after the Second World War—supplied an important, but often uncredited, blueprint for directors like Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard, whose films modelled on literary modernist prose and abstracted, aggressively unfaithful filmic adaptations would be more readily recognized by critics for their originality. Varda's analogical⁷ literary adaptation anticipated shifts in cinematic style that would echo throughout later works by directors affiliated with the *nouvelle vague*, including Godard and Resnais.

Over several decades of giving interviews, Varda has repeatedly stated that Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* was the film's central narrative inspiration.⁸ Nevertheless, the aesthetic and historical implications of this intertextual connection have yet to be sufficiently considered. Even in an excellent 2015 biography of Agnès Varda, Kelley Conway suggests that Varda's reference to Faulkner and Brecht 'situate her first film not so much in postwar French cinephilia, but instead in the broader currents of mid-century modernism' (15). By contrast, I argue that Varda's adaptation of *The Wild Palms* situated her precisely in the midst of ongoing debates in postwar French film culture, which positioned Faulkner as a central touchstone.

Critics at male-dominated film journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* helped set the tone for subsequent histories of the new wave through their endorsement, or erasure, of certain films and filmmakers. The film journals responsible for articulating the significance of the French new wave cinema wrote from the perspective of the masculine singular; writes Genevieve Sellier, 'The "I" of the cinephilic journals is the uncomplicated expression of a masculine subjectivity that considers itself universal' (29). Departing from Sellier's insight, this article will examine how *Cahiers* critics attributed certain cinematic innovations to Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour* when such innovations had already surfaced in Varda's *La Pointe Courte*. Thus, this article acknowledges the pioneering significance of Varda's impure Faulknerian adaptation where it has been omitted by critics and historians. In so doing, this article adds to the growing

critical examination of the overwhelmingly male construction of the new wave, continuing the work of revealing and repairing the androcentrism inherent to the film movement's founding narratives.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS

Prior to *La Pointe Courte*, Varda had seen few films and had neither written any film criticism nor attended screenings at *ciné-clubs*. Nevertheless, her aesthetic training was as formidable as that of the young critics writing for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In 1946, she began attending the École du Louvre, where she would study art history and photography for four years. She also studied literature and psychology at the Sorbonne, and in 1948, she took classes from philosophy professor Gaston Bachelard who, according to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, taught Varda to 'study writers not by the stories they told, but by the material things they mentioned' (221). While studying under Bachelard, she found work as a photographer at the Théâtre National Populaire under Jean Vilar, the famed stage director and Festival d'Avignon founder responsible for bringing the theories of Brecht to France (Kline xxi). Varda's photographic work would catch the eye of Roland Barthes who complimented her Studio Harcourt portraits in *Mythologies* (18).

By her own admission, Varda was an outsider to postwar film culture; she is adamant that she had read no film criticism prior to making her first film. Nevertheless, by modelling *La Pointe Courte's* narrative after Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, she landed on two topics that were hotly discussed by French critics and intellectuals at mid-century. First, *La Pointe Courte* suited the French intellectual preoccupation with American literary modernism, a genre whose emblematic figurehead in France was Faulkner. Second, the film plugged into ongoing debates over whether or not the filmic adaptation of literature constituted creative, original artistry—debates that were at the heart of film critics' efforts to define motion-picture directors as on par with, not subordinate to, authors of literature and philosophy.

In order to understand *La Pointe Courte's* groundbreaking significance, one must first grasp the importance of Faulkner to the intellectual milieu in which postwar French film criticism came of age. The story of why Faulkner matters to the beginning of the *nouvelle vague* is, in part, a story of the centrality of American modernist literature to French intellectual discourse in the middle of the twentieth century. French writers affiliated with existentialism, including André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, touted American modernist authors as advancing a formal revolution in letters which held the promise of renovating tired French narrative traditions. None represented the promise of American literary modernism more vividly than Faulkner, whose *Sanctuary* first appeared in French translation in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (*NRF*) in 1933, accompanied by a preface written by André Malraux.

A few years later, in 1936, Sartre's first article in the *NRF* appeared: a work of literary criticism about William Faulkner's *Sartoris*. As Sartre's reputation grew, he continued to write about Faulkner and other twentieth-century American authors, both in occasional essays and in his longer philosophical works, including *Being and Nothingness*.⁹ Sartre praised the 'technical revolution' of fiction by Dos Passos: '[Dos Passos] has shown that one might describe a collective event by juxtaposing twenty individual and unrelated stories. These revelations permitted us to conceive and write novels which are to

the classic works of Flaubert and Zola what the non-Euclidian geometry is to the old geometry of Euclid' (116).

American literature—particularly modernist works written after World War I—became even more provocative in France after 1941. That year, the United States entered World War II, and the “Liste Otto” (a long list of banned books, named for Otto Abetz, Hitler’s ambassador to Vichy France) was expanded to include American literature. Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company bookstore and lending library, which had been a reliable pipeline for the latest in American literature since it opened in 1919, was forced to shutter its doors. The dark violence of American literature—from Richard Wright’s *Bigger Thomas* to Faulkner’s *Temple Drake*—seemed to fit the times. As Sartre wrote after the war, ‘All around us clouds were gathering. There was war in Spain; the concentration camps were multiplying in Germany, in Austria, in Czechoslovakia. War was menacing everywhere. Nevertheless analysis—analysis à la Proust, à la James—remained our only literary method, our favorite procedure. But could it take into account the brutal death of a Jew in Auschwitz, the bombardment of Madrid by the planes of Franco?’ (*The Atlantic Monthly* 117).

While Vichy bans made American literature harder to obtain, the ban also had the unintended effect of boosting its cult value, intertwining the circulation, and reading of works by American writers with the causes of freedom and the resistance. Jean-Paul Sartre would describe in the *Atlantic Monthly* how a black market for American modernist literature emerged on Saint-Germain-des-Prés during the occupation. ‘The headquarters was the Café de Flore, where poor students resold at a profit books which they found in the bookstalls along the Seine’, recalled Sartre in 1946. ‘The reading of novels by Faulkner and Hemingway became for some a symbol of resistance’. After the war, novels published in translation in the Gallimard series *Du monde entier*, new editions of special American issues of resistance journals like *Fontaine* and *l’Arbalète* and essays written by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir all testified to the power of the American modernist novel to offer an example through which French intellectuals could rethink France’s shifting postwar cultural identity.¹

The French critical discourse on the American novel heavily inflected the work of film critics; like countless other French intellectuals at mid-century, many postwar cinephiles closely followed the work of Sartre and other existentialist writers. By the late 1940s and 1950s, French film critics regularly cited the names of writers such as Faulkner, Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and William Saroyan as a way to appraise innovations in cinematic style, acting, and directing. André Bazin, along with his *Esprit* colleague Claude-Edmonde Magny and fellow *L’Écran français* writer Astruc, was among the earliest critics to describe the cinema in terms of the American novel,¹⁰ deploying writers’ names as a rhetorical trope to validate aesthetically innovative cinematic actors, directors, and films.¹¹ Bazin, for instance, used American literature to explain the revolutionary genius of Orson Welles (‘We had to wait for Orson Welles to show what the cinema of the American novel would be’, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* 49) and the acting of Humphrey Bogart (‘Bogart is perhaps, in the cinema, the first illustration of “the age of the American novel”’, ‘Mort d’Humphrey Bogart’), as well as the aesthetic of post-Liberation Italian cinema (‘simply the equivalent on film of the American novel’, ‘An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism’). Like Bazin, Astruc promoted literary modernism as an example of the potential of the

seventh art—a medium that was capable of expressing ideas on par with literature. This argument, which bore distinct Sartrean echoes, was exemplified by Astruc's celebrated 1948 essay on the birth of the *caméra-stylo*. 'From today onwards', wrote Astruc, 'it will be possible for the cinema to produce works which are equivalent, in their profundity and meaning to the novels of Faulkner ...' (5). To Astruc, literary modernists like Faulkner pointed the way towards a cinematic *nouvelle avant-garde*—a pugnacious rebranding of the term away from the older *avant-garde* of the 1920s. By the late 1940s, citing the names of American authors like Faulkner and Dos Passos had become a critical commonplace as film critics strained to describe evolutions in cinematic style.

The names of Faulkner and other American literary modernists continued to circulate on the pages of film journals like *Cahiers du cinéma* throughout the 1950s. Perhaps no *Cahiers* critic referenced Faulkner as frequently as Godard, who mentioned Faulkner in at least four separate *Cahiers du cinéma* articles in 1958,¹² the year before he began shooting his first feature-length film, *À bout de souffle*, a film that memorably featured Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Patricia (Jean Seberg) in bed discussing Faulkner and *The Wild Palms*.¹³

LA POINTE COURTE'S ADAPTIVE POETICS

Four years before *À bout de souffle*, Varda had already made her own Faulkner-inspired film, one which had abstractly transposed the experimental narrative structure of *The Wild Palms* into moving image.¹⁴ Like the literary and film scenes, the world of French theatre (where Varda was working at the time) had been influenced by the currents of existentialism and American literature. Faulkner's novels had already made their way to the French stage through Jean-Louis Barrault's 1935 adaptation of *As I Lay Dying* (*Autour d'une mère*), and Albert Camus would soon make his own stage adaptation of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* in 1956. Although Varda does not remember exactly where she first encountered the work of Faulkner, she remembers that his novels were known to 'sophisticated readers' and intellectuals of the time (Varda, personal interview).

The Wild Palms consists of two short novellas told in alternating chapters which, at first glance, appear to be unrelated. One story ('Old Man') depicts a convict who finds himself an unwitting fugitive after being carried away by the waters of the Mississippi river during a flood. Another story ('Wild Palms') portrays Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Harry Wilbourne, a couple who abandon their ordinary lives as a housewife and a medical intern in New Orleans to pursue a life on the road and on the margins of society, moving across the country on a whim, tragically intent on suffering for love, whatever the cost. Despite the apparent disconnection between *The Wild Palms*' alternating chapters, the braided storylines unfold as a singular narrative through contrapuntal juxtaposition, with each chapter illuminating the other through contrast. This contrapuntal narrative captivated Varda, who was compelled to decode its structure through multiple rereadings:

I remember very well that with thinking I was very clever, I said, very well, I'm going to read chapter 1, 3, 5, and 7. And then I'll read 2, 4, 6, and 8 to reach each storyline straight through. Yes, it's fascinating, but still, there's a reason for his artistic choice, and I reread it again in order, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6... What I understood was that if there was no connection between these two stories, the juxtaposition of the two was critical, creating an effect of osmosis... I said to myself, hey, if I can read a book like this, why not try to find an equivalent form of cinema? (Conway 136)

Varda found ‘an equivalent form of cinema’ by gleaning *The Wild Palms*’ alternating two-story structure for use in *La Pointe Courte*. *La Pointe Courte* alternates between two plotlines as a way to get at ‘the persistence of something in your mind ... a phenomenon of osmosis, or mysterious threads, or how our memory plays with what is suggested ...’ (Varda, personal interview). It toggles between roughly five episodes about the villagers and five about the couple—the same number of chapters as in Faulkner’s novel. And like Faulkner’s novel, *La Pointe Courte* uses the point-counterpoint chapter structure as one element of a broader formal and thematic strategy of contrast and juxtaposition.¹⁵

Unlike earlier attempts to bring the American literary South to the big screen (e.g. *The Southerner* and *La Putain Respectueuse*), Varda did not set her Faulkner-inspired film in the South, but rather in a small fishing village in the South of France. Nor did *La Pointe Courte* attempt to faithfully adapt Faulknerian prose, as did the American adaptation of the Mississippi author’s 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust* (dir. Clarence Brown, 1949). Instead, *La Pointe Courte* adapted *The Wild Palms* architextually,¹⁶ using the structure of Faulkner’s novel as a vehicle for telling an unrelated story in an unrelated cultural context. In so doing, *La Pointe Courte* forged a new path as a cinematic adaptation, staying true to the spirit of Faulkner’s interweaving chapters and antithetical poetics rather than true to the letter of *The Wild Palms*’s ‘Old Man’ and ‘Wild Palms’ plotlines.

La Pointe Courte strayed far from Faulkner’s American milieu, instead portraying Varda’s ‘own little postage stamp of native soil’ of Sète, France, where she and her family hid during the Second World War and returned every summer for fifteen years thereafter (Varda, ‘Agnès Varda on *La Pointe courte*’). Like the Mississippi Gulf, Sète is coastal and culturally diverse, its Mediterranean location making it a magnet for a host of languages (including French, Italian, Catalan, languages of the Maghreb, and local patois). *The Wild Palms*, too, contains a diverse range of voices, including those of the *bourgeois-bohème* couple Charlotte and Harry, a Mississippi convict, a French-speaking alligator hunter, and Polish miners. Varda’s film makes similar use of Sète’s linguistic diversity, juxtaposing the sometimes crude vernacular of *La Pointe Courte* residents (played by actual residents of the fishing village) against the refined Parisian speech of the film’s female protagonist (referred to only as ‘elle’), played by theatre actress Silvia Monfort. Varda based some of the film’s dialogue on transcriptions of expressions she had heard uttered by villagers during her visits to Sète and had intended to include their patois in the film. Nevertheless, because Varda could not afford to record sound, voiceover sound was later dubbed in by Parisian actors who, in a Southern accent, did their best to match Varda’s transcription of what the local resident actors had said during filming. While some of the local linguistic particularity was lost in the *doublage*, some of the sayings survived, including the humorous expression for having passed a certain point in life: ‘nous avons chié la moitié de notre merde’ or ‘we have crapped out half of our shit’ (Varda, ‘Agnès Varda on *La Pointe courte*’).

Like Faulkner’s novel, Varda’s film deploys an antithetical poetics of structural and thematic contrast to achieve an extended meditation on contrast, paradox, and irrationality both in the natural world and in human behaviour. Retaining the *The Wild Palms*’ juxtaposition of social worlds, *La Pointe Courte* counterposes the private, inward world of a self-involved couple and the public lives of the villagers struggling to fish

in local waters and drink clean water. The social diversity of Varda's *La Pointe Courte* resumes the thematic preoccupations of French cinema from decades past, particularly the Popular Front social cinema exemplified by the upstairs–downstairs world of Renoir's *La Règle du jeu*. Nevertheless, unlike the films of Renoir (which Varda claims not to have seen before making her first film), *La Pointe Courte* all but abandons the Aristotelian conceit that the socially disparate lives must be connected through a unified action. Rather, Varda deploys Faulkner's doubled structure to oscillate between the divergent social worlds of *La Pointe Courte*, with only a thin membrane of narrative tissue to connect them.

In both Varda's film and Faulkner's novel, the elements—including wind, water, and sun—figure as recurrent motifs in their investigation of the contradictory and often volatile temperament of nature, both environmental and human. Varda's visual style comprises an inextricable component of the film's portrayal of nature's paradoxes. For instance, the harsh midday Mediterranean sun in Sète allows Varda to illustrate a high-contrast landscape of sun and shadow. As Varda has noted, the landscape of the village of *La Pointe Courte* itself is naturally characterized by visual contrast: because of its peninsular geography, one side often remains in the sun, while the other is in shadows (Varda, 'Agnès Varda on *La Pointe courte*'). Numerous shots of billowing fabrics and waving grasses draw attention to the famous mistral of the *midi*, the strong wind that can be felt throughout Southern France; much of the film's action unfolds on the 'Quai du Mistral'. While the mistral is a source of fresh breeze, clearing the air of dust and creating the light windblown landscape favoured by painters from Cezanne to Matisse, it is also harsh and relentless, blowing at speeds in excess of 90 miles per hour.

Faulkner's novel, too, is thematically preoccupied with wind; the title, *The Wild Palms*, indexes the significance of gusty weather. At first glance, the title *The Wild Palms* may evoke positive connotations—relaxation, tropical fronds, and freedom. In the context of the novel, however, the wildness of the palms is associated with the violent winds around the Mississippi gulf area; the whistling, sibilant noise consumes Wilbourne as life crashes in on him and he begins to lose touch with reality. Wilbourne's perception of the sound of the palms ('the threshing of the invisible palms, the wild dry sound of them', 248) becomes acute when he is in the beachfront cabins with Charlotte, the mercurial female protagonist, as she is haemorrhaging blood after a botched abortion. As Wilbourne continues to lose touch with reality in prison, the sound of the 'wild frenzied palms' grows louder (265).

Like wind, water figures in the film and the novel as an antithetical element—both life-giving and fatal. In *La Pointe Courte*, water offers a picturesque motif that flows between the disparate stories of the couple and the villagers. Nevertheless, the waters of the village are also deadly. The villagers depend on a nearby lagoon for fishing, but they are not legally permitted to fish in their own waters, which have not yet passed inspection by the state health department. There is no running water in the houses—it had been connected at one point, but was shut off, presumably due to the presence of bacteria in the local water source. Water is an omnipresent element in *La Pointe Courte*, yet it is also limited and inaccessible.

The motif of water as a contradictory element—a site of death and birth—recurs throughout *The Wild Palms*. Charlotte loves being in the water and tells Wilbourne of her desire to die there, foreshadowing her eventual death in a rented seaside cabin

on the Mississippi gulf coast. In the ‘Old Man’ chapters, water functions an agent of liberation, temporarily freeing the captive from prison. Further, it is the site of birth; a woman, rescued by the captive from the flood, gives birth to a baby on the banks of a river. But the Mississippi floodwaters are also deadly, awash in animal carcasses caught in furious tides and endangering the captive’s life.

The Wild Palms and *La Pointe Courte* juxtapose the survival stories of poor and working-class people against the stories of a romantic couple in crisis. Both works depict people on the opposite side of the law; in *The Wild Palms*, a Mississippi convict becomes an unwitting escapee in the midst of a violent flood, and in *La Pointe Courte*, working-class fishermen must evade the scrutiny of state health inspectors in order to fish in their waters. As a counterpoint to these survival narratives, both *The Wild Palms* and *La Pointe Courte* also include stories of couples struggling to stay in love despite the gravity of time and the torpor of mundane, quotidian living. The female protagonists of *The Wild Palms* and *La Pointe Courte* are idealists who worry about the insidious threats to their romantic relationships posed by inauthentic love and easy happiness.

In *The Wild Palms*, Charlotte’s philosophy on the tormented struggle to keep love alive echoes as a refrain throughout the novel. Says Charlotte: ‘love and suffering are the same thing and [...] the value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it and anytime you get it cheap you have cheated yourself’ (41). Later in the novel, Charlotte adds forebodingly:

They say love dies between two people. That’s wrong. It doesn’t die. It just leaves you, goes away, if you are not good enough, worthy enough. It doesn’t die; you’re the one that dies. It’s like the ocean: if you’re no good, if you begin to make a bad smell in it, it just spews you up somewhere to die. (71)

‘Elle’, the female protagonist of *La Pointe Courte*, utters similar truisms about the dangers of habitual love and unquestioned happiness. She challenges her husband’s constant optimism (‘Being happy at all costs got us here’, she tells him) and questions whether their love is authentic (‘Do we really love each other, or do we live together out of habit?’). Indeed, a number of descriptions of Charlotte reverberate in Varda’s portrayal of a woman who has grown cynical about love. For example, Charlotte’s eyes are described as containing a ‘profound and distracted blaze of objectless hatred in the strange woman’s eyes’ (11)—a description that resonates in *La Pointe Courte*’s female protagonist, whose eyes reflect a similar distant and vague distress, particularly towards the beginning of the film.

Varda also translated *The Wild Palms*’ narrative and thematic contrast into a language of visual contrast. In *La Pointe Courte*, framing and intra-image composition bring into focus the incongruent emotional lives of the couple; in one frame their faces are juxtaposed, a shot that simultaneously highlights their divergent gazes and, as Kelley Conway has noted, evokes the cubism of Picasso (15). In another frame, their distance is emphasized by their blocking on opposite sides of a fence (Figure 1a and b).

The optical contrast between the couple in *La Pointe Courte* is further emphasized by wardrobe choices. The tailored and glamorous physical presence of the female protagonist stands in stark contrast to the humble, natural environment of *La Pointe Courte*. Her heels are hardly suitable for the rough and unpaved path from the train station to her significant other’s humble familial dwelling. The contrast is further illustrated through colour composition; her dark suit stands out against her partner’s humble white cotton tunic and espadrilles and the light, sunbleached setting (Figure 2a and b).



Figure 1a. *La pointe courte*, Ciné-Tamaris, Agnès Varda. Stills from *La Pointe Courte* illustrating Varda's visual language of contrast and intra-image juxtapositions.



Figure 1b.

Elle's tailored dress also contrasts with the humble smocks and aprons worn by women of the village, whose labour Varda dignifies by tightly framing a woman's hands as they struggle against the wind to pull clothespins off the laundry line. This image echoes a scene in *The Wild Palms*: 'he could distinguish the color of the garments flapping in the morning sea-wind and watched later a tiny figure which he knew to be a woman taking the garments from the line, believing he could distinguish the gesture with which she put the clothes pins one by one into her mouth' (264) (Figure 3).¹⁷

As I have shown, *La Pointe Courte* echoes many narrative aspects of *The Wild Palms*—including the novel's antithetical poetics, themes of romantic idealism and social difference, the motif of elemental contrast, as well as other images. Nevertheless, the equivalence ends at narrative structure, theme, image, and motif; Varda's film does not attempt to cinematically transpose any aspect of *The Wild Palms*' storyline. As the film is disinterested in one-to-one correspondence with a literary source, the adaptive poetics



Figure 2a. *La pointe courte*, Ciné-Tamaris, Agnès Varda. Stills from *La Pointe Courte*. The film's contrapuntal storylines emphasize social and class differences within the village, further highlighted by dramatic contrasts in wardrobe.



Figure 2b. *La pointe courte*, Ciné-Tamaris, Agnès Varda. Stills from *La Pointe Courte*. The film's contrapuntal storylines emphasize social and class differences within the village, further highlighted by dramatic contrasts in wardrobe.

of *La Pointe Courte* can hardly be understood through the heuristic of fidelity. Rather, *La Pointe Courte* appropriated the architecture of *The Wild Palms* while discarding its contents.

'HIROSHIMA NOTRE AMOUR'

Just as critical discussions involving American literary modernism were unfolding, debates flourished over the artistic merits of cinematic adaptation, or as they were known at the time, the *querelle de l'adaptation*. In essays like 'In Defense of Mixed Cinema', Bazin made the case for adaptation—or as he called it, *cinéma impur*—as a creative and artistically generative practice. Truffaut, however, in his January 1954 essay 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema', espoused a much harsher view of adaptation, particularly the 'tradition of quality' which gave precedence to the prestige of the literary original—usually French realist novels by authors like Balzac and Zola—over the artistic creativity of cinematic invention.



Figure 3. *La pointe courte*, Ciné-Tamaris, Agnès Varda. Still from *La Pointe Courte*. A close-up of hands removing laundry highlights both the wind and the labour of women in the village.

Shooting for *La Pointe Courte* began in the midst of these *nouvelle vague*-defining adaptation debates, just seven months after the publication of ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’. Varda claims to have been unfamiliar with these debates as they played out on the pages of French film journals, yet her deeply literary, radically open intertextual approach to adaptation offered an inadvertent, yet direct rejoinder to the debates. Unlike films like Jean Renoir’s *The Southerner*, which had attempted to depict Faulkner’s Southern milieu,¹⁸ Varda’s Faulknerian adaptation succeeded through its infidelity to the original, extracting Faulkner’s narrative method and repurposing it to tell the stories of a fishing village in Southern France. Varda had reinvented modernist literary strategies for the big screen, and in so doing, had beaten other filmmakers who would be later affiliated with the *Nouvelle vague* to the punch. At the same time, *La Pointe Courte* had enlarged the field of cinematic adaptation, aggressively betraying the authority of a literary source in order to suit her original artistic vision. Thus, *La Pointe Courte* offered a confident, clear rebuttal to Truffaut’s characterization of cinematic adaptation as a derivative art form. Varda’s film instead illustrated what Bazin had so passionately argued in “In Defense of Mixed Cinema”—that an adaptation meant far more than one-to-one equivalence with a literary source, but rather was an autonomous and original poetic act.

While Bazin fêted the accomplishment of *La Pointe Courte*, the younger generation of *Cahiers du cinéma* writers gave Varda’s film a cooler reception. Varda recalled first meeting the young *Cahiers* critics at the Paris premiere of *La Pointe Courte*:

Chabrol, Truffaut, Rohmer (who had a different name then), Brialy, Doniol-Valcroze, and Godard were there that evening. They quoted thousands of films and suggested all sorts of things to Resnais, they all talked fast, chatted brightly, and sat everywhere including on the bed. I seemed to be there by mistake, feeling small, ignorant and the only woman among the guys from *Cahiers*. (quoted in Neupert 63)

As Conway points out, Truffaut, who had not yet released a film of his own, wrote a critique of *La Pointe Courte* that was ‘oddly malicious’; Truffaut criticized Varda’s direction of actors as ‘uncertain’, her cinematography as ‘a little too framed’, and even made fun of her appearance, comparing her looks to those of the film’s male lead, Philippe Noiret (quoted in Conway 25).

The coolness of the younger generation of *Cahiers* critics to Varda's film was perhaps no more obvious than in 1959, when the journal held a roundtable discussion¹⁹ to convey the groundbreaking achievement of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), the debut feature-length film by Alain Resnais, who had worked as an editor on *La Pointe Courte*. The discussion, published as an 18-page article titled "Hiroshima Notre Amour," opened with a reference to American literature:

Rohmer: I think everyone will agree with me if I start by saying that *Hiroshima* is a film about which you can say everything.

Godard: So let's start by saying that it's literature.

Rohmer: And a kind of literature that is a little dubious, in so far as it imitates the American school that was so fashionable in Paris after 1945. ('Hiroshima, notre amour', 59)

In the discussion, the *Cahiers* critics described *Hiroshima* as unlike any other film in the history of cinema; Godard described the film as 'totally devoid of any cinematic references. You can describe *Hiroshima* as Faulkner plus Stravinsky, but you can't identify it as such and such a film-maker plus such and such another'. The critics at the roundtable touted *Hiroshima* as the first film to translate the psychologically splintered and discordant modernist aesthetic previously achieved only through other media—from Picasso's *Guernica* to the music of Stravinsky and the literature of Faulkner—into sound cinema. Said Rohmer:

There has not yet been any profoundly modern cinema that attempts to do what cubism did in painting and the American novel in literature, in other words a kind of reconstitution of reality out of a kind of splintering which could have seemed quite arbitrary to the uninitiated. And on this basis one could explain ... the fact that Faulkner or Dos Passos may have been the inspiration, even if it was by way of Marguerite Duras. (quoted in Hillier 61)

Rohmer's statement that there had not been any 'profoundly modern cinema that attempts to do what ... cubism did in painting and the American novel [did] in literature' glaringly excludes Varda's *La Pointe Courte*—a film for which, as Varda recalled, Rohmer had attended the premiere. Instead, Rohmer points to the innovation of Resnais' collaboration with the *Nouveau Roman* author Duras, while highlighting how Duras' work derives from the American novel.²⁰ Later in the roundtable, Godard would also describe *Hiroshima mon amour* as 'Simone de Beauvoir that works' (Hillier 63). Taken altogether, the devaluation of Varda's *La Pointe Courte*, dismissal of Duras as derivative, and characterization of Beauvoir's writing as unsuccessful reek of the androcentrism and casual bias against women that was intrinsic to *Cahiers du cinéma* during that era, as well as French New wave cinema in general. Indeed, the dismissal of female artists and writers at this "Hiroshima Mon Amour" roundtable bolsters Sellier's claim that the *Nouvelle vague* was, in part, 'a reaction of young, bourgeois men worried about acceding to the status of the artist and to the privileges traditionally attached to that status, in the face of the destabilizing emergence of the women of their generation into the realm of cultural production' (18).

At least one Young Turk acknowledged *La Pointe Courte*'s significance in the discussion: Jean-Luc Godard. The year before, Godard had favourably reviewed Varda's short travel films *Du côté de la Côte* and *O Saisons, ô châteaux* in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, calling Varda

‘the most extraordinary little person in the French cinema today’ (*Godard on Godard* 104). Although Godard asserted that Varda’s film has inspired Resnais, *La Pointe Courte* disappeared from the roundtable shortly after Godard introduced it to the discussion:

Godard: There is one film that must have given Alain Resnais something to think about, and what’s more, he edited it: *La Pointe courte*.

Rivette: Obviously. But I don’t think it’s being false to Agnès Varda to say that by virtue of the fact that Resnais edited *La Pointe courte* his editing itself contained a reflection on what Agnès Varda had intended. To a certain degree *Agnèsvarda* becomes a fragment of Alain Resnais, and *Chrismarker* too. (*Godard on Godard* 66)

The *Cahiers* critics’ roundtable on *Hiroshima mon amour* is a case study in the way Varda’s groundbreaking film was passed over by the *Nouvelle vague*’s first historians: the self-mythologizing, exclusively male critic filmmakers who constituted the bulk of their membership. Consider the claims that Resnais’ film was the first of its kind—from Godard’s claim that *Hiroshima* is a film without cinematic reference, to Rohmer’s claim that *Hiroshima* was the first film to attempt what the American modernist novel had accomplished in literature. It is troubling, but perhaps not unsurprising, that none of the critics at the roundtable credited Varda’s *La Pointe Courte* with being the first to successfully translate Faulknerian modernism to the big screen. It is also striking how many of the characteristics that the *Cahiers* critics assign to *Hiroshima*—the film’s lack of cinematic reference, its evocation of the visual language of Picasso, its ‘dialectical unity’—were central elements of *La Pointe Courte*.

Further, it was only after working as an editor on *La Pointe Courte* that Resnais began enlisting writers associated with the Nouveau Roman, such as Jean Cayrol, Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet, to work on his subsequent projects, including not only *Hiroshima* but also *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), *L’Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and *Muriel* (1963). We can see echoes of *La Pointe Courte* in *Hiroshima*’s interweaving of the private world of love and subjective memory juxtaposed with the documentary-like portrayal of the collective memory of war. We may even notice that, like *La Pointe Courte*, the female and male protagonists of *Hiroshima mon amour* are not given names and are referred to only as ‘elle’ and ‘lui’.

La Pointe Courte’s analogical adaptation of *The Wild Palms* would also echo in the work of Godard, who would go on to cite *The Wild Palms* in *À bout de souffle* (1960) and *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle* (1967). As Rick Warner has pointed out, while Godard was averse to traditional, faithful adaptive methods, he became ‘among the most prolific “adapters” in cinema’, albeit mainly using source material as ‘pretexts for formal experiments’ (Warner 196). Godard has continued to reference Faulkner throughout his six-decade oeuvre, including in the most recent of his cinematic efforts, *Film Socialisme* (2010) and *Adieu au Langage* (2014) (Du Graf), flouting adaptive conventions by neglecting to cite his sources and leaving opaque the connections between the referenced Faulknerian texts and the subject matter of his films. Godard even adopted a contrapuntal narrative strategy similar to that of *La Pointe courte* in *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), a film that juxtaposed documentary rehearsal footage of the Rolling Stones with staged representations of revolutionary texts and imagery from the 1960s.

When I interviewed Varda in the summer of 2013, I mentioned to her that Godard had continued to cite Faulkner in his recent films. Varda quickly replied, ‘Yes, but they’re just citations’. I was surprised by the sharpness of her response, but I also understood it. To Varda, Faulkner had been more than a name to cite. The author’s novel had provided a narrative structure, one which she innovatively gleaned and repurposed and one that would definitively shape her poetic voice in the years to come.²¹ Varda’s position as an outsider—as a stranger to French *ciné-clubs* and film journals, as a photographer, and as a woman—has meant that she is often cast in a secondary or tangential role to the *Nouvelle vague*. Nevertheless, her outsider status made her unconstrained by the baggage of cinematic conventions, enabling her to translate the modernist montage of Faulkner onscreen without the expectations of adaptive fidelity. To retrace the history of Varda’s impure Faulknerian adaptation is to understand that Varda is not the *Nouvelle vague*’s grandmother, but one of its chief architects.

NOTES

¹ When I made my first film, *La Pointe Courte* in 1954, I knew nothing about the rules. I wasn’t like Truffaut and Godard, watching movies all the time. In fact, I had only seen five movies in my entire life ... Yet they still call me the grandmother of the *nouvelle vague*’ (Interview with Gordon Gow, 1970, quoted in Kline 42).

² Truffaut also noted that the film was promoted as an essay in his review of the film for *Arts* in 1956. See Truffaut, ‘La Pointe Courte d’Agnès Varda’.

³ At the time Varda created her production company, she lacked the capital necessary to register with the *Centre National de la Cinématographie* as a feature filmmaker, making later efforts to commercially distribute the film impossible (Bastide quoted in Conway 23).

⁴ Wrote Bazin: ‘C’est une oeuvre dont nous aurons certainement à reparler longuement, mais dont nous pouvons dire déjà en cette occasion qu’elle illustre bien la notion d’avant-garde telle que nous cherchions à la définir au temps d’Objectif 49’ (‘It is a work which we will certainly be discussing for a long time, but of which we can already say on this occasion that it well illustrates the notion of the avant-garde that we were trying to define at the time of Objectif 49’) (Bazin, ‘Agnes et Roberto’).

⁵ Varda’s position as an outsider to the *Nouvelle vague* is a narrative that Varda has, at times, helped to perpetuate. Neupert suggests in *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* that Varda ‘has never been comfortable with being included within the New wave, much less the Left Bank Group’ (330). Nevertheless, in a personal interview with Varda in 2013, Varda told me that it was a classification that she accepted. Varda also came to embrace the designation of the *Nouvelle vague*’s grandmother for its comic absurdity; she was just three years older than Godard and five years older than Truffaut when *La Pointe Courte* was first released.

⁶ As Neupert writes, ‘Varda would always have a tangential relation to the *Cahiers* critics; her more literary and modernist film practice and her shift into documentary shorts for the next eight years placed her more in the camp known as the “Left Bank Group ...”’ (63).

⁷ ‘Analogical adaptation’ here refers to analogy as defined in Geoffrey Wagner’s three categories of adaptation: ‘a completely different work of art which is a substantial departure from the original’ (quoted in Cartmell and Whelehan 5).

⁸ In the decades since *La Pointe Courte*’s release, Varda has repeatedly highlighted the influence of the Faulknerian narrative. Examples of Varda’s mentioning of *The Wild Palms*’ influence on *La Pointe Courte* include a 1962 interview in *Positif* with Pierre Uytterhoeven (Kline 3); a 1965 interview with Jean-André Fieschi and Claude Ollier in *Cahiers du cinéma* (Kline 23); and a 1986 interview with Barbara Quart (Kline 131). In addition, Varda discusses the influence of the book on her film in a filmed interview included as Bonus Material in the 2008 Criterion Collection DVD release of *La Pointe Courte*.

⁹ In *Being and Nothingness*, for example, Sartre praises Faulkner’s depiction of Joe Christmas in *Light in August* as the ultimate depiction of ‘the power of the victim’s look at his torturers’ (526).

¹⁰ For analysis of Magny’s discussion of the modern American novel’s relationship to the vernacular modernism of film, see Nieland.

¹¹ Indeed, in 1945, before he was widely known as a film critic, Astruc wrote a mostly encomiastic review for *Confluences* of the resistance journal *l’Arbalète*’s special American literature, which included writing by

writers such as Henry Miller, Richard Wright, Damon Runyon, Erskine Caldwell, Zora Neal Hurston, and William Saroyan. He described the issue as ‘the discovery of a world’ (‘La découverte d’un monde’) and remarked that the issue conveyed the notion that being ‘American’ was as much a question of style as it was of national identity. (‘parce que l’Américain, c’est d’abord un style’) (*Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo* 112).

¹² See, for example, ‘Malraux mauvais français?’ in *Cahiers du cinéma* 83 (May 1958), trans. ‘Malraux a Discredit to France’ (*Godard on Godard* 75); ‘Bergmanorama’ in *Cahiers* 85 (July 1958) (*Godard on Godard* 76); and ‘Travail à la chaîne,’ also in *Cahiers* 85, trans. as ‘The Long Hot Summer’ (*Godard on Godard* 88–89); and ‘Ailleurs’ (on *Une Vie*) in *Cahiers* 89 (November 1958) (*Godard on Godard* 96).

¹³ For an insightful discussion of the intertextual connections between *The Wild Palms* and *A Bout de Souffle*, see Kodat.

¹⁴ While known among French intellectuals during the late 1930s and 1940s, Faulkner rose to even greater prominence after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950. *Les Palmiers Sauvages*, Maurice-Edgar Coindreau’s translation of *The Wild Palms* (1939), was the first new novel by Faulkner to appear in France after his Nobel. Coindreau’s translation of the novel appeared first in 1951 in *Les Temps Modernes*, with an edition appearing the following year in Gallimard’s ‘Du Monde Entier’ series.

¹⁵ As scholars such as Bruce Kawin have noted, such an approach bore a protocinematic quality; *The Wild Palms*’ interweaving plots evoked the structural logic of parallel editing, while the dynamic juxtaposition between the two storylines educed the principles of Soviet montage, a structural allusion that bears out in the novel’s reference to Sergei Eisenstein. Indeed, the cinematic narrative strategy was signalled within the very text of *The Wild Palms*; Faulkner deploys the phrase ‘Eisensteinian Dante’ to describe the surreal hell of the Utah mines, a phrase that evokes two artists whose works are, like the contrapuntal plots of *The Wild Palms*, multilayered and architectonic, and highly visual.

¹⁶ My use of the term architextuality refers to Gérard Genette’s category of transtextuality, as referenced in Cartmell and Whelehan 74.

¹⁷ Varda’s close-up of the village woman’s hands anticipates the preoccupation with women’s work that would continue in Varda’s later films; indeed, she would memorably reflect on her life and work through a close-up of her own age-spotted hands in *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000).

¹⁸ While some French directors had attempted to translate the themes of American modernist literature onscreen, these efforts had fallen short of critical expectations. Jean Renoir’s *The Southerner* (1945), for instance—a film based on George Sessions Perry’s *Hold Autumn in Your Hand* (1941), for which Faulkner served as an uncredited film consultant—received tepid to hostile reviews from French critics, even after taking top honors at the Venice Film Festival in 1946. Even Bazin, a steadfast Renoir supporter, admitted in his review of the film that Renoir appeared to be ‘very ill at ease when faced with this material naturally foreign to his genius’. Georges Sadoul was less kind, dismissing Renoir in *Les Lettres Françaises* as a ‘French tourist in the United States’ (*Ambivalent Americanism* 54–98).

¹⁹ The critics included Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Jean-Luc Godard, Pierre Kast, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer.

²⁰ For a discussion of the *Nouveau Roman* and *Nouvelle vague*’s parallel engagement of American literary modernism, see Ostrowska 52–53.

²¹ Although *La Pointe Courte* was Varda’s only film to explicitly draw on Faulknerian narrative strategies, many techniques that Varda first developed in this film would recur throughout her oeuvre. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis writes in *To Desire Differently*, ‘[I]t is interesting to note just how important a structuring matrix this first film has proven to be, for it sets into place a number of textual mechanisms and preoccupations that recur throughout all of Varda’s work—recur, in fact, to such an extent that even her most recent work is entirely informed by these concerns’. As evidence, Flitterman-Lewis cites Varda’s continued interest in making films with a strong sense of place, where the place could be interpreted to be part of the narrative itself—consider, for example, the incorporation of Paris and Parc Montsouris in *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), and the Hollywood of *Lions Love* (1969), Sausalito of *Uncle Yanco* (1967), and Rue Daguerre of *Daguerréotypes* (1976). Varda would also continue to use contrapuntal narrative strategies in her later films. In *L’Opera Mouffe* (1958), for example, Varda contrasts the private world of pregnancy with the public world of the market on Rue Mouffetard, juxtaposing tightly composed surrealist images with the documentary realism of street scenes.

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