Gesture and the *cinéaste*:
Akerman/Agamben, Varda/Warburg

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Summary

This thesis offers an adjunct to recent theories of the haptic contingent upon proximity by considering how embodied engagement might take place at a distance. Developing a broad definition of gesture as a motion away from the (carnal or camera) body that is nonetheless always attached to it, the thesis seeks a state of in-betweenness unmediated by touch. Two chapters explore this gesture-as-bodily-extension as an analytical approach to art. Each focuses on an insistently individual artist, according each a different theoretical approach in order both to do justice to that individuality and to test fully the potential and limits of the gestural approach in question. The first chapter focuses on the writings and films of the écrivain-cinéaste, Chantal Akerman, whose gesturality, equal parts literary and cinematic, is explored through Giorgio Agamben’s similarly language-based thoughts on gesture, the moving image and repetition. Charting a three-stage gesture of (displaced) demonstration (proximal, medial and distal) that finds its linguistic correlate in a triad of slippery shifters (là, là-bas and ça), it examines how, and why, the artist, in a relentless process of ressassement informed by atrocities always one step away from first-hand experience, translates these to page and screen as the story of ‘la petite chose à côté’. The second chapter centres on the photographs, films and installation work of the artiste-cinéaste, Agnès Varda, using an approach developed from selected writings by the German art historian, Aby Warburg, the majority translated into English for the first time. As with Akerman, Varda’s work insists upon a spectatorship premised on distance, but it also demands complicity. Defining the viewing experience not as the still contemplation of moving images but as the active contemplation of still ones, the chapter explores the relation between onlooker and image by harnessing Warburg’s vision of a gesture encoded in the artwork that may be triggered anew through mobile, engaged and bodily spectatorship from afar; a vision underpinned by his concepts of the animated accessory (bewegtes Beiwerk), the memory-image (Erinnerungsbild) and the in-between space of artistic encounter (Zwischenraum). Ultimately, this thesis asks, and answers, two questions. What can theories of gesture contribute to a close analysis of artists whose work demands distance? And do these highly individual artists exceed the scope of theory – and in so doing, expand it?
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Introduction

This is a thesis motivated by a qualm: in the wake of recent sensory theory favouring film’s ability to evoke hapticity and recall the tactile, how, I found myself asking, do we account for the spatial separation between spectator and screen – or, indeed, camera and subject – that the cinematic encounter necessarily entails? How might we envisage intimate interactions with on-screen subjects and objects beyond the scope of touch, and how do we allow for an embodied engagement that the film-object fosters, even from afar? Without wishing to jettison the haptic wholesale, then, I yearned for a corporeal complement: a bridge between camera and subject, proscenium-based spectator and filmic projection, that would establish an in-betweenness contingent upon separation, enabling sensory engagement at a distance.

This I was to find in the realm of gesture.

My introduction aims to do a number of things. It expands on the qualm outlined above, introducing the subjects of this thesis, Chantal Akerman and Agnès Varda, to explain why their work corroborates it. It then assesses the viability of the gestural as an adjunct to the haptic. Noting the difficulty of approaching these defiantly individual artists through a comparative framework of gesture – or, indeed, comparatively tout court – the introduction proffers a broad definition of gesture dependent on both corporeality and distance. From this, it situates the thesis, theoretically and critically, and plots a structure whereby each artist is examined through a theorist of the gestural attuned to her unique working methods.

The limits of the haptic

First, a closer look at the haptic, a term whose critical abundance within film studies in recent years owes much to the writings of Laura U. Marks. For the purposes of concision, and given that my aim is to complement the haptic, not to dissect or disavow it, I shall concentrate on Marks’ concept of ‘haptic visuality’, which she first introduces in 2000 in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. 
The impact of Marks’ first book cannot be overstated. It has justifiably established itself as a key work in the domain of film studies. In it, she interweaves concepts from a range of disciplines and theorists, including Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Vivian Sobchack (to name but a few), to put forward her own notion of haptic visuality that, in turn, has inspired a critical literature of its own. Without wishing to provide a detailed list at this juncture (a targeted search of Google Books alone yields a sobering 875 results), we might cite Martine Beugnet’s volume on recent French cinema, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, which states early on its debt to Marks’ conceptualisation of haptic visuality (2007: 3), and Jennifer M. Barker’s *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, which draws on Marks’ (erotic) vision of film as a surface to be experienced up close in a chapter on skin (2009: 35ff.). Indeed, haptic visuality has been embraced so warmly by cinema theorists as to have merited a standalone entry in the recent *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (Kuhn and Westwell 2012: 201).

Haptic visuality takes centre-stage from Marks’ third chapter onwards as a means of unfolding a corpus of ‘intercultural’ films – a term that she does ‘not intend […] to bear a great deal of conceptual weight’, but that ‘suggests movement between one culture and another’ (2000: 6). Exploring the primacy of touch in intercultural cinema as a sense that opens up an alternative channel for sensory recall in the face of memorial gaps, haptic visuality comes to the fore as a means of addressing the ‘difficulty of remembering the loved one, be it a person or a homeland’ (ibid.: 193, emphasis in original).

Having established her cinematic corpus, how does Marks define this haptic visuality? First, she posits it as a reaction against Western ocularcentrism: the privileging of sight. Activating other of the five senses through film can, Marks contends, overcome the breach between self and other. Although noting the necessity of vision as a means of finding our way in the world, her appraisal of it as ‘a distance sense’ (ibid.: 148) implies that authentic interactions between cinematic subjects and objects are only ever possible, as it were, up close. Thus, Marks argues for a haptic visuality that ‘draws upon the mimetic knowledge that does not posit a gulf between subject and object, or the spectator and the world of a film’ (ibid.: 151). This

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1 Search for the exact phrase, ‘haptic visuality’, performed on 12 March, 2015, via books.google.com.
engenders a cinematic encounter that takes place, as Marks puts it, between ‘my sensorium and the film’s sensorium’ (ibid.: 153). Immediately, Marks’ focus on extreme proximity emerges. Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* (1988), she observes, ‘begins with still images so close as to be unrecognizable’ (ibid.: 154), offering further examples before deciding that such works ‘appeal to embodied memory by bringing vision as close as possible to the image; by converting image to touch’ (ibid.: 159). Thus, in an oft-cited passage, we learn that, in haptic visuality, ‘the eyes themselves function like organs of touch’ (ibid.: 162). It permits us to ‘move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth’; it is ‘more inclined to graze than to gaze’ (ibid.). While purely ocular perception would be distracted by an imperfect surface, haptic looking contrives to intensify the viewer’s involvement with the image-as-texture even as the material that bears it slowly disintegrates. Thus, as the artefacts that plague ageing film and video stock accumulate, so ‘film and video become more haptic as they die’ (ibid.); an effect that may be emulated through techniques that wilfully degrade the medium.

A haptic visuality ‘predicated on closeness’, Marks asserts, ‘muddies intersubjective boundaries’ (ibid.: 188) as self and other engage via the (tactile) surface – the skin – of the film. She returns to the issue in 2002 with *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, in which haptic criticism is characterised as mimetic (i.e. ‘it presses up to the object and takes its shape. Mimesis is a form of representation based on getting close enough to the other thing to become it’ [2002: xiii]). Marks insists on an emotional engagement that once more we are to presume cannot be found in contemplation from afar, and again, we find a defiantly subjective plea for an analytical form that ‘cannot achieve the distance from its object required for disinterested, cool-headed assessment, nor does it want to’ (ibid.: xv). Again, too, she does not dismiss ocular vision altogether (‘the haptic must return to the optical’, she asserts, if we are to navigate the world [2002: xvi]), yet at the same time, she cannot conceive of intimacy without a concomitant measure of palpable proximity. Although ‘to lose all distance to the world is to die a material death’, she is adamant that ‘[t]o maintain optical distance is to die the death of abstraction’ (ibid.).

Yet why, I ask myself, must any blurring of the relationship between subject and object depend so absolutely on touch and proximity? Must distance equate to abstraction and a loss of intimacy? Might we not, by inserting a gap, equally make
provision for a mutual *betweenness* that links (profilmic or proscenium-based) perceiver and perceived – a bridge across which an embodied relation can be enacted without requiring an emulation or activation of tactility?

I am not alone in questioning Marks’ implicit demand for proximity. Laura McMahon’s study on touch and cinema, conceptualised through Jean-Luc Nancy, similarly raises questions as to the limits of haptic theory’s applicability to the medium when we account for the distance upon which viewing (or filming) is contingent. As she sees it, ‘cinema offers a privileged space for understanding touch as a figure of withdrawal, discontinuity and separation rather than under its more traditional guise as a marker of immediacy, continuity and presence’ (2012: 2). However, where McMahon’s critique engages with Marks’ vision of film as a sensible surface, and thus deals with questions of exteriority and interiority mediated by skin, my analysis moves away from the palpable altogether to make provision for a corporeal engagement – and for new kinds of interconnectedness derived from in-betweenness – beyond touch and from afar.

Nor am I unique in positing gesturality as a counterpoint to hapticity. Naomi Segal claims that gesture is touch – and that the latter need not be haptic. Drawing on three films to set up ‘two versions of the caress that are the opposite of haptic, in that they avoid grasping, gripping or any other kind of acquisition’ (2015: 96), she thus seeks to move away from Marks through what she terms the ‘caressive gesture’ (ibid.: 97). As noted above, however, I choose to set aside tactility. Gesture, in my definition, can preface or succeed touch, but never coincides with it. I contend that any activation of the tactile in the course of a gesture is to be interpreted as an *interruption* of that gesture, whereby the arc of movement is halted by the coming-into-contact with another and, thus truncated, is transformed into touch. Hence, the analysis that follows leaves behind the tactile in order to focus on distance, on the gap between self and other, and on the notion of (uninterrupted) in-betweenness that this makes possible.

To establish the basis for this move away from contact and closeness, I turn to my subjects. Here, I examine their relation to tactility and proximity – a relation that in each case, I argue, supports a radical rethinking of embodied engagement via the gesture.
Critics have repeatedly sought to recruit both Akerman and Varda to the haptic canon. I suggest that the tactility to which they lay claim proves dangerously slippery. Hence, when Marion Schmid singles out the Super-8 footage that launches Akerman’s *La Captive* (2000), noting how its surface artefacts lend it ‘a tenderly tactile quality’ (2010: 155), the immediacy of that footage is negated as the camera cuts back to reveal the projector and we swiftly resituate it as a film-within-a-film (Figure 1). Distance is even doubly underscored as Simon (Stanislas Merhar), struggling to lip-read an (inaudible) on-screen dialogue, moves towards the screen. Rather than achieve the co-presence he craves, his approaching body blocks the light, partially obliterating the image as he watches Ariane (Sylvie Testud), his object of desire, walk *away* from him.

![Figure 1: The denial of tactility in *La Captive*](image)

In her chapter on the same film, Emma Wilson acknowledges the ambivalence of the tactile throughout, observing how clothing is used to proffer a tantalising (visual) promise of hapticity that is always (materially) withheld as Ariane’s ‘body and its tactile surface are at once displayed and disavowed’ (2002: 65). The effect is not limited to clothing, however. Ariane constantly eludes Simon through her insubstantiality, foreshadowing her definitive disappearance in the film’s final moments. Where he initially lusts after a projection, Simon ends up chasing a wraith. A potential sighting of Ariane, one of many *sosies*, dissolves into darkness (Figure 2).

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2 Multiple screenshots are read row by row, from left to right. Unless otherwise specified, all images from the films used here are taken from the sources indicated in the filmography.
Figure 2: Ariane’s *sosie* disappears, leaving Simon chasing shadows

A walk in the park with the real thing, meanwhile, is mitigated as the camera shifts to show only their shadows on the grass ahead (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A walk in the park: Ariane and Simon dematerialised

Additionally, while critics are keen to claim Akerman’s oeuvre as haptic, many do not clarify quite *how* they envisage it addressing the tactile in particular. Barker’s piece on the phenomenological occupancy of urban spaces in Akerman’s 1977 paean to New York, *News from home*, refers to her ‘tactile inhabitation’ of the city (2003: 56) without elucidating further. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster proposes that viewing *Les Années 80* (1983) entails ‘a negotiation across our own haptic zones’
Although she incorporates bodily motion into her tight-knit discussion of the ‘performance of gender and sprezzatura’ (ibid.: 136), it remains unclear why, or how, this relates more specifically to the sense of touch. Giuliana Bruno offers an overview of Akerman’s installations that deems them ‘not simply visual but synaesthetically tactile’, whereby ‘Akerman haptically takes us into a world of images’ (2012: 20). To engage this tactility, we would assume proximity to be a given. Contrary to expectations, the same paragraph goes on to emphasise instead the distanced, uncooperative position of the camera, allied with the onlooker through the first-person plural; a camera ‘which often refuses to move with the characters and rolls independently, remaining steady in time, we cannot pry’ (ibid.). Malcolm Turvey offers a comparably conflicted argument, again in a review of Akerman’s gallery-based art in which he, too, describes a haptic spectatorship counter-intuitively premised on distance:

These films impart an almost tactile sense of what it is like to observe, from a respectful distance, the people and places they record and the concrete sights and sounds one would experience in doing so. (2008: para. 5 of 10)

There is something about Akerman’s images – distanced, insubstantial, almost aloof – that proves fundamentally antithetical to touch.

The same, I believe, applies to Varda. Critical voices equating her occasional close-ups with the sense of touch have been legion. Matt Brennan sees in Varda’s films ‘the texture of the haptic’ (2011: para. 7 of 27), and particular attention has been drawn to her close-ups of skin. Kate Ince singles out the images of Varda’s hands in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) to argue for a ‘carnal cinécriture’ (2013: 613). Domietta Torlasco, meanwhile, believes that such images ‘affirm vision as a kind of touch, a “palpation with the look”’ (2011: 400); a conviction shared by Sylwia D. Chrostowska, who sees the film as a meditation on ‘tactile contact and prehensility’ (2007: 128). In a chapter that draws on Barker, Wilson describes the ‘dermal’ images, found in *Jacquot de Nantes* (1990) and revisited in *Les Plages d’Agnès* (2008), of Varda’s dying partner, Jacques Demy, shot in extreme close-up on a beach on the

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3 Titles are given in full in the first citation and abbreviated as appropriate thereafter (e.g. here: *Les Glaneurs*).
island of Noirmoutier. She contends that, to capture them, ‘the camera grazes the
surface of Demy’s body’ (2012: 29), recalling Marks’ definition of a haptic eye ‘more
inclined to graze than to gaze’ (2000: 162). Once more, however, this is to overlook
the degree to which Varda’s surfaces ultimately elude us. When she films Demy, her
camera may relentlessly reveal his every blemish and crevice, but it emphatically does
not (and cannot) touch them. Instead, it traces the contours of this faltering body as a
landscape, thereby reinserting a sense of optical distance as that body is re-presented
as a natural topography that might be recorded and revisited (Figure 4). ‘J’ai filmé sa
peau comme un paysage, ses cheveux comme un buisson’, Varda notes in interview
(Decock and Varda 1993: 957). When she reprises the images in Les Plages, she adds
a voiceover that plays on the double meaning of ‘plan’ as both camera-shot and map.
Despite aspiring openly to closeness – ‘d’être au plus près de lui, au plus près serré’ –
she acknowledges that the camera, up close but not in contact with Demy, was
primarily mapping his materiality. ‘Hé bien, je n’avais pas d’autre solution comme
cinéaste que de filmer de très près sa peau, son oeil, ses cheveux comme un paysage’,
Varda remarks, wistfully. ‘J’avais besoin de faire ça, des plans de lui, de la matière
même de lui.’

Figure 4: From close-up to landscape: rescaling our relation to the body in Jacquot de
Nantes

Intense proximity becomes an echo of nature and is effectively reversed, the body
transformed into the outlines of a vast environment that diminishes the scale, and thus
proximity, of the viewing subject in relation to Demy, ‘comme s’il était un énorme
paysage et qu’on s’y promène’ (Varda, Prédal and Piazzo 1992: 14). Harking back to
the images of her gnarled hands in Les Glaneurs, Varda envisions the encounter as
effecting a change of perspective that is also a shift away from hapticity. ‘I literally bumped into my hand [...]’, Varda remembers, ‘and suddenly the skin of my hand became a landscape’ (Barnet and Jordan 2011: 191). In mapping the surface signs of her own mortality, Varda transforms them, reclaiming them from morbidity: old, yes, but also a ‘beautiful landscape’ (Simon 2009: para. 15 of 31). Life recedes and, reasserting itself on a scale that exceeds us, also eludes touch.

This is not to say that Akerman and Varda are not drawn to the manual aspects of their profession. Akerman summarises the process of editing her films as ‘un travail d’artisan’ (Devanne 2003: para. 7 of 113), while the gallery space, too, proves entirely conducive to ‘un travail artisanal, presque manuel’ (Brenez 2011: 22). In fact, she concludes, the expanded cinema of her installation art ‘n’est plus que du bricolage pur’ (Vermeersch, Zaoui and Zilberfarb 2007: para. 33 of 41). Varda, meanwhile, harbours an evident affection for hands. As she films her ageing extremities in Les Glaneurs, her wry voiceover intercedes: ‘C’est ça mon projet, filmer d’une main mon autre main’. Her 2007 film-interview with Anne Huet and Alain Bergala, Du coq à l’âne: des mains et des objets, meanwhile, excludes the interlocutors’ faces entirely in favour of their hands as they discuss the artisanal creative process behind Varda’s short films. In interview, she justifies the focus succinctly: ‘Je suis très manuelle’ (Bonnaud 2000: para. 4 of 4). Having abandoned her art history degree at the École du Louvre with two objectives in mind – ‘faire un voyage en solitaire avant 20 ans et choisir un métier manuel’ (Varda 1994b: 25) – Varda describes her longstanding Paris home (and headquarters) in rue Daguerre as a veritable cottage-industry of creation ‘à la main’, in which a ‘système artisanal de cinéma’ unfolds (Breton with Andréani, de Kermadec et al. 1984: 54). Yet neither a predilection for filming hands (explored further in Chapter 2), nor an appreciation of the hands-on, hand-made quality of cinematic images is synonymous with a wish to foster a haptic relation between spectator and screen.

Despite their fondness for the manual, these artists keep their images resolutely out of reach. Even the occasional close-up does not equate to a partiality for proximity. Although attesting to a desire to focus on ‘la petite chose à côté’ (Godard 1980: 13) – of which more in Chapter 1 – Akerman, it transpires, is also a firm believer in maintaining ‘la bonne distance’ from her filmic subjects, which she deems equally important for fiction films and documentaries (2004: 89). And when it comes
to the act of spectatorship, excessive proximity compromises visual acuity. ‘Si les gens ont le nez trop collé sur ce qu’on leur montre’, she insists, ‘ils ne voient rien’ (Higuinen 2002: 26). Thus, we find a reluctance to resort to the close-up. As Dinitia Smith points out, Akerman’s films consist mainly of protracted shots ‘with the camera fixed in one place, at a medium distance from the subject’ (1998: para. 1 of 41). The technique can be traced back to Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), as Sami Frey’s documentary footage of the shoot reveals in Autour de Jeanne Dielman (1975/2004). Akerman wonders aloud whether to zoom in on a detail of the kitchen set. Delphine Seyrig responds, with a note of amused exasperation in her voice, ‘Mais tu n’as jamais des détails, c’est toujours des plans’. The preference for the ‘plan’ stems, in part, from a conviction that to present a body in close-up is to deny it its integrity. Hence, Akerman’s camera refuses to encroach upon its subjects. ‘It was the only way to shoot that film’ Akerman informs Janet Bergstrom in a 1977 Camera Obscura interview following the release of Jeanne Dielman, ‘to avoid cutting the woman into a hundred pieces, to avoid cutting the action in a hundred places, to look carefully and to be respectful’ (cited in Martin and Akerman 1979: 42).

Varda appears still more averse to proximity, despite her interest in the detail of ‘une chose minuscule’ (Varda, Floret, Nave et al. 1992: 16), discussed in Chapter 2. In her first feature, La Pointe courte (1954), close-ups are a rarity, as critics have confirmed (Smith, A. 1998: 65; Curot 1991a: 96); a conscious ploy, Varda explains, to ensure that ‘le spectateur garde ses distances’ (cited in Breton with Andréani, de Kermadec et al. 1984: 56). Even when filming her neighbours in Daguerreotypes (1975), she refuses to intrude, preferring to avoid the anxious aesthetic of those documentaries ‘où le zoom paraît avoir la maladie de Parkinson’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 41). Her rejection of the zoom – ‘une atrocité’ (ibid.: 42) – persists. Underscoring the deliberate paucity of close-ups in Sans toit ni loi (1985), she reminds us that ‘[i]l n’y en a que quatre ou cinq dans tout le film, ce qui est rarissime’ (Decock and Varda 1988: 383). As with Akerman, the ‘bonne distance’ is key. In interview, Varda avers that she reshot a sequence of Sans toit in order to redress a perceived spatial imbalance amounting to just a few centimetres between the camera and her protagonists, ‘[p]arce que je ne peux pas m’empêcher de croire que c’est très important et que la façon dont on se place, à quelle distance...’ (Wera 1986: 10).
Interviewed in the wake of her 1975 ‘ciné-tract’, Réponse de femmes: notre corps, notre sexe, she establishes the ethics underpinning this distaste for extreme proximity. Varda explicates her practice (again shared with Akerman) of filming her subjects in their entirety so as to allow them ‘[u]n corps qui ne soit pas découpé en morceaux’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 48) – a principle she reiterates a quarter of a century later in Marie Mandy’s documentary, Filmer le désir – Voyage à travers le cinéma des femmes (2000). Even today, the sight of a photographic zoom lens is enough to trigger an outburst. One photographer who ventures too close for comfort is despatched with gusto: ‘You have a telephoto! Why do you need to be so close? It’s like a gun!’ (Heti 2009: para. 1 of 82).

In this resistance to proximity, this desire for distance so evident in the work of these two artists, I find more than sufficient grounds for questioning the applicability of a framework of haptic visuality. Gesture, I contend, offers a compelling alternative. As a motion away from the (camera or carnal) body that is simultaneously always attached to it, gesture, I argue, accommodates a possibility of corporeal engagement that is not contingent upon touch, and as such, resonates powerfully with my subjects.

**A gestural alternative**

In interview and in her writings, Akerman underscores her debt to a gesture that, while conflicted, offers a glimmer of a much sought-after authenticity when channelled through the medium of film:

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j’ai parfois l’impression d’une gesticulation désespérée. Encore un film et encore un film et un autre et toute cette énergie dépensée, d’une façon d’être dans le réel. (Akerman 2004: 11)
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Noting her frequent appearances in her earlier films, Akerman tells us that her body, with its broad, awkward gestures bordering on the burlesque, ‘is very important in a movie, it says something by itself; it has the weight of the Real’ (Akerman and
Lebovici 2012: 98). What is more, in her explicit linking of cinema and gesture, she suggests a fruitful interdependence, whereby the former liberates the latter:

Quand on fait du cinéma, c’est aussi ça. Une sorte de bulle. […] On se lève plus facilement comme si les gestes quotidiens sortaient de leur quotidienneté, et devenaient moins pénibles. (Akerman 2004: 108)

Thus, even before a film-project takes shape on set, we find that her notes d’intention abound with gestural references. Even the earliest outline for Jeanne Dielman (still tentatively entitled Elle vogue vers l’Amérique) refers to the protagonist’s ‘gestes […] précis, automatiques’ (1982c: 73). The ‘propos’ for La Galerie, which was to evolve into Golden Eighties (1985), announces its intention to foreground ‘les gestes stéréotypés qui régissent les rapports entre clients et vendeuses’ (1982d: 117). Meanwhile, the note d’intention for Le Manoir, a proposed (but unrealised) dramatisation of two novels by Isaac Bashevis Singer, introduces us to the male protagonist by means of his soothing matutinal movements: ‘des gestes calmes et réguliers, sans vraie grâce, mais avec une sorte de force tranquille et lourde’ (1987: 8).

As for those films that did make the transition from propos to screen, Akerman’s almost obsessive attention to the detail of gesture has been documented. Dinitia Smith relates how every one of Jeanne Dielman’s movements was scrupulously stipulated in the stage directions of the final screenplay (1998: para. 29 of 41) – directions that Tacita Dean tells us were followed to the letter during the shoot, for which ‘every gesture and especially every pause […] had been worked out beforehand, even down to Jeanne distractedly playing with sugar lumps on her Formica tabletop’ (1999: para. 7 of 15). These descriptions of Akerman’s gestural precision tally with cinematographer Babette Mangolte’s memory of filming, which consisted mainly of ‘préparer les gestes’.5

As well as cataloguing the stultifying routines, minutely scheduled activities and banal, everyday motions that set the tone of Jeanne Dielman (see Rehberg 2012: 53; Margulies 1996: 26; McMahon 1995: 141; Aubenas 1982: 59), critics have

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4 The capital ‘R’ of ‘Real’ has presumably been added by the interviewer, Élisabeth Lebovici.
5 From an interview with Mangolte included on the DVD of Les Rendez-vous d’Anna.
equally underlined the key role that gesture plays in the remainder of her opus. In Cinéma 2: L’image-temps, Deleuze reflects on Akerman’s ability, through the unwavering scrutiny of routine or clichéd motions, to outline the exceptional; this he terms the ‘gestus féminin’ (1985: 255). Ivone Margulies, in a piece on La Captive, notes how, in a film in which much is left unspoken, ‘Akerman overuses gesture rather than speech’ (2006: para. 2 of 35). Toute une nuit (1982), with its myriad fleeting encounters, is described by Frédéric Sojcher as a study of ‘la gestuelle des couples qui se rencontrent ou se quittent’ (1999: 152), and by Catherine Fowler as an exploration of a ‘fascination with gesture’ (2003: 84). The critical literature has also emphasised the almost mechanical precision of Akerman’s mise-en-scène, with its countless, oft-repeated motions, and Mathias Lavin is not alone in remarking ‘à quel point ce cinéma entretient de similitude avec l’élément chorégraphique’ (2003: 16). Akerman’s gesture-saturated films have thus frequently been interpreted as exercises in choreography, balletic in their scheduled concatenations of comings and goings, particularly in the case of Toute une nuit (Coureau 2013: 219; Soucy 2006: 5; Pursley 2005: 1192; Fowler 2003: 85; Philippon 1982b: 26), Jeanne Dielman (Smith, D. 1998: para. 27 of 41; Margulies 1996: 76), Les Rendez-vous d’Anna (Soucy 2006: 5; Decock 1982: 40) and Golden Eighties (Schmid 2010: 79). Akerman concurs. Her fascination with dance and the performative extends well beyond Un jour Pina a demandé (1983), in which Akerman’s camera tracks Pina Bausch’s Tanztheater for five weeks on tour. Of Jeanne Dielman, she confirms that it ‘was about gesture. And choreography’ (Adams 2010: para. 34 of 71). When a Cahiers du cinéma interviewer comments on the prevalence of choreography in contemporary film, Akerman responds that ‘La Galerie, ça va être ça, vous allez voir. Jeanne Dielman, c’était déjà ça’ (Philippon 1982a: 20), while already referring to the former film’s ‘mouvements des corps et des coeurs, ballet des personnages’ in her note d’intention (1982d: 118).

Varda’s oeuvre is similarly gesture-rich, from the ‘daguerréotypes vibrantes’ in which ‘un geste s’ébauche’ of Daguerréotypes (Varda 1994b: 143) to the ‘geste modeste du glaneur’ in Les Glaneurs (Anderson 2001: 25). The latter even comes with a rap, voiced in part by the artist, paying measured tribute to the recuperative gesture around which the film is crafted:
Si le glanage est d’un autre âge,
le geste est inchangé dans notre société
qui mange à satiété
glaneurs agricoles ou urbains
il se baissent pour ramasser

les gestes seront les mêmes
les restes seront leurs gains… (Rap du récup’, *Les Glaneurs*)

Referring to the filming of *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1987), Varda explains how she would seek out ‘les mouvements, les gestes’ (1994b: 192). Her choreographic impulse rivals Akerman’s. When filming *Sans toit*, she would take aside her actresses in order to ‘travailler avec elles chaque geste’ (Wera 1986: 8) and ensure that Sandrine Bonnaire’s incarnation of its itinerant protagonist, Mona, embodied ‘une façon de vivre chaque pas, chaque geste’ (Varda 1994b: 159). *Le Bonheur* (1964), whose ‘basic gestures’ of housework have been insightfully analysed by Rebecca DeRoo (2008: 200), is obsessively alert to the movements of its female protagonists who not only share a physical resemblance, ‘elles ont presque les mêmes gestes’ (Varda 1994b: 67). Hence, Varda describes the film as:

un exposé minutieux, presque maniaque, des images et des clichés d’un certain bonheur, c’est le geste et la fonction du geste jusqu’à ce que sa signification éclate. (Varda and Amiel 1975: 49)

Gesture evidently underpins Varda’s working methods. Indeed, her description of *Daguerréotypes* posits bodily motion as raw cinematic material, as editable as an image, when she defines this film-portrait of her neighbours as ‘le montage que j’ai fait de leurs gestes’ (ibid.: 44). As *Les Plages* reveals, this foregrounding of gesture can be traced back to a photograph. In a 1948 portrait of Jean Vilar at the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP), Varda’s camera documents a regal sweep of the hand that, captured mid-motion, is a blur (Figure 5). Varda explains how her initial displeasure at the indistinct imprint generated by this ‘geste de l’abandon’ was to evolve into a preference: ‘J’étais tout-à-fait honteuse à cause de cette main floue. J’avais cette idée
de la tyrannie du net et j’ai cru que l’image était complètement loupée. Depuis, j’aime les flous, surtout au premier plan’. There is, in this dynamic loss of detail induced by the gesture, something that escapes formal tyranny. Its inclusion in the image, we surmise, allows that image to be something more than that which is depicted. The gesture, never captured entirely, beckons towards a freedom beyond the frame.

Figure 5: ‘Les flous au premier plan’: the untrammelled gesture in Les Plages

Varda’s foregrounding of the gestural has been documented in the critical literature. Claudia Gorbman underlines ‘the sheer fascination with visual composition and gesture’ she finds throughout her films (2010: para. 11 of 18). Others have suggested that Varda’s gestures are part of a broader cinematic tactic designed to link objects and people across time (and Chapter 2 will examine the transtemporal quality of her art in greater depth). With regard to Les Glaneurs, Bernard Benoliel identifies ‘ce don d’associer, relier, monter du passé et du présent, montrer la filiation entre un geste ancestral et un geste d’aujourd’hui’ (2000: 62), while Isabelle McNeill contends that the (ambivalent) gesture of gleaning at its heart is key to a film that ‘functions as a mobile monument, recalling the past yet constantly reinscribed in a changing context’ (2010: 79). Positif’s Grégory Valence echoes the sentiment in a review of Varda’s 2007 installation hosted in the Paris Panthéon as part of its Hommage aux Justes de France: a multi-screen projection combined with photographs commemorating those who, at considerable risk to themselves, sheltered Jews during the Second World War (Figure 6). The motion and palettes of the two short films that flank the central, unifying projection of a tree, Valence observes, evoke ‘des gestes dont on n’oublie pas qu’ils ont aussi lieu aujourd’hui’, concluding that the essence of the exhibition is this notion of transferability, that the actions of the past still resonate in the present (2007: 66).
In view of these artists’ evident affinity with the gestural, coupled with their distaste for excessive proximity, I find ample justification for examining their work from a theoretical perspective that favours gesture while making provision for distance. I start, then, with a broad definition. As an adjunct to the haptic, I envision the gesture as an extension of the sensorium in its indivisibility from the (carnal or camera) body. It differs from the haptic, however, in its dependence on distance. Gesture, I propose, is a ‘pointing-away’ from the self. It indicates away from the body without ever being detached from it. At the same time, gesture is a ‘pointing-towards’ the world. It indicates towards the other without seeking physical contact. In brief, gesture neither separates nor touches. As such, I posit, it constitutes a motion that delineates a space that, because shared, is one of in-betweenness. Leaving surfaces undisturbed, gesture nonetheless bridges the bodies of here and there, subject and object, self and other, offering encounter, and even elision, where we might otherwise see opposition.

The outline of a gestural approach is in place. The following explains why I have chosen not to elaborate it as a comparative framework that would consider Akerman and Varda side by side. This decision to favour a singular approach over a collective and comparative one, I argue, is determined not by choice, but by necessity.
The limits of comparativity

Rien n’est simple, et quand je dis quelque chose, j’ai aussi envie de dire le contraire. (Akerman, in Brenez 2011: 13)

Il m’est naturel d’aller de-ci, de-là, de dire quelque chose puis le contraire, et de me sentir moins piégée parce que je ne choisis pas une seule version des choses. (Varda 1994b: 183)

Given the relatively small size of the French filmmaking community, Akerman and Varda are inevitably acquainted. Indeed, Akerman has openly acknowledged her regard for the older artist. ‘Avec Agnès, nous sommes parfois dans la compétition’, she concedes in interview, ‘mais Agnès est capable de moments de grande générosité envers les femmes’ (Brenez 2011: 24). Varda, meanwhile, speaking at a ‘Women in Motion’ event at the 68th Cannes Film Festival, accords first place to Akerman in her enumeration of ‘des femmes qui dans l’écriture, ont fait faire des progrès au cinéma’ (Varda and Ratane 2015: para. 10 of 12). The pair was even to coincide at the 36th Cannes Film Festival in 1983, when their films, Les Années 80 and Ulysse (1982), were screened back-to-back in the Un Certain Regard sidebar (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Akerman and Varda coincide at Cannes

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However, although they are contemporaries, and despite a number of clear affinities (manifest in the preceding sections), Akerman and Varda do not lend themselves willingly to a comparative study. As the quotations that preface this section suggest, they are prone to a certain contrariness. And as I demonstrate in the following, both strongly resist the classification upon which a comparative approach depends. Let me test this ‘incomparability’ further with regard to the two categories most frequently applied to them: national identity and gender. In so doing, I submit, we establish the terms for an alternative: a critical method based not on mutuality, but on difference.

Both Akerman and Varda are French-speaking Belgians now based in Paris. Each has familial ties to a non-Francophone country: Akerman’s parents were Polish-born (and Jewish); Varda’s father was of Greek origin. Critics have been keen to situate them. McFadden claims both that Akerman can ‘easily be grouped with French directors’ and that ‘a strong case can be made for reading her as a Belgian filmmaker’ (2014: 77). Fowler concurs with the latter in her chapter staking a heartfelt claim to Akerman’s ‘Belgianicity’ (2003: 77). Varda is equally subject to occasional attempts to pin her down to one or both of Belgium and France, the most memorable coming courtesy of Sophie Mayer, who dubs her a ‘Left Bank Smurfette’ (2009: para. 7 of 8). Yet with the exception of a shared affinity with the Belgian Surrealist, René Magritte (of which more in the following chapters), both artists largely resist geographical classification. Nor do their familial origins translate into a broader sense of belonging.

Akerman insists on her condition of enduring non-attachment: ‘je ne suis attachée à la terre que là où sont mes pieds’, she asserts (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 36). Her affiliation with her Francophone ‘homelands’, adopted and acquired, is, she emphasises, purely linguistic. ‘La seule chose qui me rattaché encore à la France et la Belgique, c’est la langue. Le français est ma langue’ (Elliott 2012: 33). Her inherited identity, meanwhile, though essential to her endeavours (as we shall see in Chapter 1), leaves her equally adrift. Having been brought up with little contact with the Jewish community beyond early childhood, her relation to it is that of an outsider (Akerman 2004: 23). Furthermore, simply being Jewish, Akerman contends, is to exist in a permanent state of rootlessness. ‘Wherever we go’, she

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7 Cybelle H. McFadden’s comparative study of recent Francophone film, for example, includes chapters on both Akerman and Varda. Her introduction defines them as ‘French female filmmakers’ (2014: 1) and clarifies her focus as ‘the female body’ (ibid.: 10), thus establishing from the outset that her analyses of authorship, embodiment and self-portraiture will be filtered through the overarching categories of nationality and gender.
affirms, ‘we are in exile. Even in Israel, we are in exile’ (Adams 2010: para. 7 of 71). Hence, during a visit to Tel Aviv in Là-bas (2006), she is to spend all but a few seconds of the film’s runtime off-screen and sequestered in a shuttered room, sharing her occluded vision of her neighbours with us in a series of long, static shots (Figure 8).

For Varda, meanwhile, Belgium is a place very much of the past. While half-heartedly excavating her childhood in Les Plages, she revisits the erstwhile family home. ‘Le jardin est bien là,’ she concludes, ‘mais pas l’émotion’. As to Varda’s Greek ancestry, there are critics who judge it foundational to her oeuvre (e.g. Bastide 1991b: 71; Revault d’Allonnes 1985: 5). Yet despite directing Nausicaa (1970), a reflection on Greek politics whose original print has been lost, Varda underlines that it is equally the story of ‘[u]ne jeune fille de père grec mais disparu’ (1994b: 120), echoing her own experience of growing up with ‘un certain manque de racines parce que notre père grec ne nous a rien raconté de son pays, de sa famille’ (Tranchant 2008: para. 6 of 12). Her grasp of the language is minimal, and when she documents a visit to a paternal relative in California in her 1969 short, Uncle Yanco, the interlocutors’ multilingual greetings are hesitant and heavily accented. Moreover, this ‘first’ encounter is clearly staged – repeatedly – and evidence of this staging accentuated by its over-visible inclusion. Multiple retakes are interspersed with conspicuous (and possibly identical) shots of a clapboard (Figure 9). We can even decipher the lettering on the latter (‘SOUND: SILENT’), indicating that the scene has been subject to further, sonic manipulation, post-production. The sincerity of the reunion is deliberately called into question through relentless retakes and non-synchronous, staccato speech in a short that is ultimately more about filmmaking than family.
Akerman and Varda similarly defy classification along gender lines. While acknowledging the potential for biological difference according to sex (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 36), Akerman refuses to accept that identity is dictated by it. Following the release of *La Folie Almayer* (2011), she tells a (male) interviewer that ‘I don’t believe in biological determinism. You can be more a woman than me’ (Guillén 2011: para. 49 of 62), and in her most recent written work, the autobiographical *Ma mère rit*, conceives of her own gender as rather undefined and highly personal, ‘un genre bien à moi’ (2013: 57). Specifically, she resists gender as the basis for constructing a group identity. Consequently, when she does argue in favour of a female language, it is with the proviso that it ‘ne serait d’ailleurs pas le même pour toutes les femmes’ (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 36). There must always be space for the singular, and for a position of non-conformity.

Some critics have claimed Akerman as politically feminist (Jacobs 2012: 81; Jamshaid 2012: para. 1 of 16; Sojcher 1999: 141), despite her insistence that she has never made a film ‘par esprit militant’ (Philippon 1982a: 22). Once more, she responds robustly, with an assertion of singularity. ‘I’m not making women’s films’, she announces in 1979. ‘I’m making Chantal Akerman’s films’ (Martin and Akerman 1979: 28). Two decades later, she reiterates the sentiment: ‘When people ask me if I am a feminist film maker, I reply I am a woman and I also make films’ (Wood 2001: para. 6 of 10). Akerman traces the attributions of calculated feminism back to one film in particular, *Jeanne Dielman*, protesting again that ‘je n’ai pas voulu réaliser un
film féministe, j’ai juste voulu faire Jeanne Dielman’ (Elliott 2012: 33). Yet, while Akerman is reluctant to take a stand when urged to prove a (group) principle, she rails against perceived injustices unsolicited. Thus, she defends her refusal to participate in mass protests targeting the lack of female representation at Cannes (ibid.: 32), while in the same interview volunteering information about her own marginalisation as a woman, in a tone described as aggrieved:

Au fait, vous avez vu la liste des 100 meilleurs films de Sight & Sound? Il n’y a pas Agnès [Varda], pas Marguerite [Duras], pas… je ne sais pas qui. [Dépitée] Je suis la seule femme. La seule. (ibid.: 33)

Akerman refuses to be emblematic of womanhood or a political movement, while at the same time leaving free a space of singularity in which she might be a woman on her own terms and by her own definition.

Varda, too, has been subjected to strenuous efforts to place – and politicise – her according to her gender. She has not escaped casual sexism, particularly early on in her career as the ‘seule fille parmi les garçons des Cahiers [du cinéma]’ (Varda 1994b: 13). It is difficult to read François Truffaut’s assessment of Varda’s 1957 short, Ô saisons, ô châteaux – representative of ‘l’apport au cinéma de quelques femmes dotées de certaines qualités qu’un homme ne saurait posséder sans rougir’ (1958: 42) – without blushing in turn. Charles Ford, meanwhile, magnanimously classifies her ‘parmi les femmes capables de lutter à armes égales avec les cinéastes-hommes’ (1972: 112), before following up with the crushing conclusion that ‘[e]lle a la chance d’être la femme de Jacques Demy, cinéaste à succès’ (ibid.: 115). Reason enough, we might assume, for Varda to embrace feminism wholeheartedly. Yet despite her stated desire to ‘filmer en femme’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 46), her vehement assertions of feminism (Varda and Ratane 2015: para. 8 of 12; Quart and Varda 1986-87: 6; Varda and Amiel 1975: 39, 50) and her filmic forays into female identity,8 Varda occupies an uneasy position in the movement. Like Akerman, she

8 E.g. Réponse de femmes, commissioned by Antenne 2 to mark International Women’s Year; L’Une chante l’autre pas (1976), a pro-abortion ‘musical féministe’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 52); and Varda’s portrait of the projected identity borne by Paris’ female caryatids, ‘ces rêves de femmes de pierre’, in Les Dites Cariatides (1984). We might also include, by analogy, Varda’s 1968 documentary short depicting the struggles of the revolutionary African-American organisation, Black Panthers, in which she detects ‘une belle équivalence en les Femmes’ (Varda 1994b: 95).
rejects biological determinism, believing that ‘Il a mise en scène n’est pas plus difficile pour une femme que pour un homme’ (Bastide 2009: 18). Yet she equally discerns fundamental differences between the sexes; ‘je ne crois pas qu’il faut prôner que nous sommes pareils’, she declares in interview (Racine 1986: 29). Particularly when discussing marital relations, Varda allows glimpses of a personal vision of gender roles that is both conventional and potentially incompatible with organised emancipation. Thus, ‘Il n’y a pas de mouvement féministe sans ce risque de perdre l’homme ou l’idée du couple aussi’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 50).

Varda concedes that her version of feminism has polarised opinion. ‘Some radical feminists hated my work, some feminists loved it – I was like a ping-pong ball’, she observes, wryly (Quart and Varda 1986-87: 6). The ambivalence is perhaps unsurprising in view of her unapologetic admiration for the manual chores traditionally performed by women, which she equates with her own hands-on working methods. Waxing lyrical about ‘le mot tricot qui est un mot de femme parce que les femmes font des travaux où il faut du temps’ (Delvaux 1991: 55), Varda doubtless raises a few hackles among those keen to disown such activities as the product of patriarchy. And then there is her (perhaps mercifully) brief excursion into television advertising: an all-singing, all-dancing recruitment campaign, Réunion de vente Tupperware (1971), whose exclusively female target audience and unreconstituted remit – ‘un métier bien payé… sans spéciales études’ – seem destined to raise still more (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Varda’s infamous 1971 Tupperware advert
Stating unequivocally that she is ‘pas du tout théoricienne du féminisme’ (Breton with Andréani, de Kermadec et al. 1984: 54), Varda, too, prizes personal conviction over mass conscription. Hence, although happy to state that ‘[c]haque femme fait partie du mouvement’, she swiftly adds a disclaimer: ‘chacune à sa façon…’ (1994b: 108).

In pursuing a comparison we thus reach an impasse: although they undoubtedly share a number of qualities and concerns, these artists explicitly refuse the categorisation required to contrast them. Indeed, if they are comparable at all, it is in their mutual and wilful *denial* of classification. There is consensus among critics that Akerman is not readily pigeonholed (Elliott 2012: 32; Schmid 2010: 2; Brenez 2011: 32; White 2008: 416; Shaviro 2007: 12; Lalanne 2004: para. 10 of 10; Mayne 1990: 133; Martin and Akerman 1979: 35). Akerman agrees – ‘Je ne sais pas me situer’ (Dubroux, Giraux and Skorecki 1977: 36) – and is dismissive of the formulaic categories to which some would consign her:


At the heart of this distaste, as we have seen, is not only an inability, but also a disinclination to belong. Instead, Akerman strives for individuality as an alternative to conformity that, adeptly channelled, offers insights that resonate beyond her person. In interview following the release of *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, she explains her position. ‘Je n’ai pas essayé de trouver un compromis entre moi et les autres, je me suis imaginé que plus je serais particulière, plus j’atteindrais le général’ (1982b: 17).

Similarly, critics have emphasised the difficulty of compartmentalising Varda (Bénézet 2014: 3; Prédal 1991: 13). Even an early review of *La Pointe courte* predicted that it would ‘trouve[r] difficilement place dans l’histoire actuelle du cinéma’ (Raynaud 1955: 45). Retrospectively, it is seen as being in advance of its time (Vincendeau 2008: para. 8 of 8; Mayne 1990: 201; Ford 1972: 111). Delightedly (if ambiguously) confirming that ‘j’annonçais la Nouvelle Vague comme une
Varda has been diligent in fostering these claims to foresight. Detecting a recent trend for street-art documentaries, she points out that she got there first when she filmed the murals of Los Angeles in *Mur murs* (1980). ‘Trente ans après, ça déferle, les expos sur les graffitis!’ she exclaims, triumphantly (Fitoussi 2012: para. 14 of 32). Positioning herself at the vanguard, Varda stands alone by her own definition. Communal endeavours are evidently not her forte. ‘J’ai à tout jamais détesté les lignes des partis’, she admits (1994b: 107).

Where Akerman refuses to belong, Varda refuses to conform. In the following, I shall respect this individuality by examining the work of each artist not comparatively, but on its own terms and within a framework of gesture tailored to respond to its rich idiosyncrasies. To do otherwise, I believe, would be to subject (or worse still, subjugate) these artists to the very process of normalisation they so evidently abhor. First, however, I must resolve a difficulty. With subjects as stubbornly averse to classification as Akerman and Varda, how best might I refer to them, collectively and individually?

A note on nomenclature (plural and singular)

In keeping with my decision to approach my subjects on their own terms, I describe them collectively not as filmmakers, but as artists. I do so for want of a better word. Again, the complexity of adequately classifying Akerman and Varda in turn makes any choice of collective noun a challenging one. While my primary interest is in film, I have – as I elucidate in the chapters that follow – found it impossible to do justice to either without acknowledging that their moving-image work is indivisible from literature, in Akerman’s case, and from photography and installation art, in Varda’s. Collectively, then, I shall refer to them as artists; individually, I shall favour a descriptor that more precisely reflects their specific creative output.

Although Akerman’s film-work has often been characterised as painterly,10 and apt as the comparison appears given her proclivity for framed landscapes, figures and interiors, she explicitly distances herself from such analogies. Even her recent

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9 The proverb states that a single swallow does not herald the start of spring (‘une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps’). It is impossible to tell whether Varda is playfully corrupting the original in order to emphasise her uniqueness still further, or has simply misremembered the saying.

progression to the gallery space, she tells us, was made ‘[s]ans vraiment te prendre pour une artiste. À cause du mot artiste’ (2004: 10), addressing herself in a second-person singular that further accentuates the distance between herself and the visual artist. As we shall see in Chapter 1, her status as a second-generation Holocaust survivor who identifies as Jewish informs her reticence: through the Second Commandment that expressly forbids the production and adulation of images; and through the intangible, invisible legacy of her painter-grandmother who died in Auschwitz and whose ‘toiles […] ont été volées’ (Brenez 2011: 13). What is left, amidst the rubble of unseen and unseeable images, are *words*. The chapter thus explores Akerman’s stated fascination with writing, taking its lead from Aurore Clément (2004: 183) and Marion Schmid (2013: para. 1 of 18) to position her not as a filmmaker or an image-maker, *per se*, but as an ‘écrivain-cinéaste’.

Varda, conversely, is no writer. Her films are born of a proprietary ‘cinécriture’ (examined in depth in Chapter 2), driven by image and imagination, not text. Varda does not merely identify with the role of a visual artist, she *demands* it, and has done so throughout a career encompassing photography, film and installation art. Even though public recognition of her status has come belatedly in the wake of her gallery installations (‘J’ai commencé à être artiste officiellement à 75 ans’, she states drily in interview [Loret 2012: para. 11 of 11]), her assertions of artistry can be traced back several decades. ‘Je réclame le privilège d’être une artiste’, she informs *France-Nouvelle* in 1978 (Jan 1978: para. 5 of 6). ‘Je veux revendiquer le statut d’artiste’, she announces, in a 1982 interview with *Jeune cinéma* (1982: 9). Her autobiographical book, *Varda par Agnès*, invokes her mother to describe a vocation dating back to childhood. ‘Parmi ses cinq enfants’, she writes, ‘je suis la seule *artiste*, mot amusant et désuet mais le seul pour nommer ceux dont le ressort et le travail sont l’imaginaire même’ (1994b: 10, emphasis in original). Philippe Piguet notes that her plea for artistic recognition continues, and ‘elle revendique aujourd’hui ne pas être seulement cinéaste mais “artiste cinéaste”’ (2011: 22). Indeed, the 2012 box set of her complete works, *Tout(e) Varda*, comes with a loose DVD containing an extra entitled *Les trois vies d’Agnès* that traces her career trajectory chronologically from ‘Agnès photographe’ through ‘Agnès cinéaste’ to ‘Agnès artiste’ (Figure 11). Consequently, Chapter 2 borrows from Piguet to refer to Varda not merely as a filmmaker, but as an ‘artiste-cinéaste’.
Some might deem this approach auteurist. As I am responding to the singularity of my subjects rather than their signature, however, I term it individualist. I conceptualise gesture accordingly.

An individualist approach through gesture

In view of my subjects’ penchant for distance and evident interest in gesture, I opt to approach them through the latter. I have thus far offered a general definition of the term. Conceived as an adjunct to the haptic, this gesture accounts for distance. Without recourse to tactility, it is nonetheless indivisible from the body, acting as the agent of in-betweenness to bridge self and world. It is time to move from the general to the specific. Guided by the insistent individuality of both Akerman and Varda, I progress from this broad definition to select an analytical framework for each artist that more adequately caters for an attitude of startling singularity.

While it would be unrealistic to attempt to provide an exhaustive list of gestural methods here, it is helpful to situate my own position alongside those delineated in Carrie Noland’s introduction to her co-edited volume, *Migrations of*

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The background image of Varda suspended mid-air has not, one suspects, been selected arbitrarily. It is borrowed from *Quelques femmes bulles* (1976), a made-for-television ‘spectacle de variétés’ shot as an addendum to *L’Une chante l’autre pas*, in which Varda assumes different guises to perform a variety of professions.
In it, she seeks out the source of the word and considers how its theoretical application has evolved across a variety of disciplines:

Derived from the Latin verb *gerere*, to carry, act, or do, gesture may be conceived in multiple and sometimes conflicting ways: as movement intimately and exclusively related to the body and its expressiveness (phenomenology); as conventionalized movement belonging to a system of signification imposed by culture upon the body (semiotics, linguistics, and rhetoric); as movement situated within operating chains responsible for producing knowledge, culture, and even types of consciousness (anthropology, paleontology, and Marxism); and as movement that is not exclusively related to the body but generated instead by any apparatus – including the body understood as apparatus – capable of being displaced in space (deconstruction and new media studies). (2008: xi, emphasis in original)

Seeking out a gesture that indicates outwards while always remaining attached to the body, my approach seems firmly phenomenological. However, in assessing gesture’s ability to delineate a space of *in-betweenness* that implicates both a performing and a viewing or filming body, unfolded in Chapter 1 and to a still greater degree in Chapter 2, Noland infers that I am also a deconstructionist. In my interest in the relationship between gesture and language, espoused in Chapter 1, meanwhile, I intrude equally upon the field of grammatology. The reason for these overlaps is simple. In respecting my subjects’ refusal to be categorised, I have chosen a method that is determined from the inside – namely, shaped by the subjects themselves – rather than from the outside – i.e. inserted into pre-existing theoretical frames of reference. I therefore claim a *hybrid* approach to gesture that is led by my subjects, not my theorists. Each of my chapters is consequently designed to do two things: to return to primary sources in order to elaborate a theory of gesture *attuned to my subject*; and to study that subject closely in order to *test the applicability and limits* of each theory. In this way, I demonstrate not only that gesture offers a valuable adjunct to theories of embodied spectatorship premised on a hapticity that cannot fully account for distance, but also that an analysis centring on gesture fosters a dialogue between theory and artwork, in
which the latter takes the lead. In the last instance, my thesis proposes, a gestural framework does not corral art; it is shaped, tested and, at times, outstripped by it.

**Agamben and Warburg: revisiting the source via the subject**

My subjects are Akerman and Varda. I have chosen them because I admire their work, and because my readings of it suggest that there remain large swathes of uncharted terrain to explore within it. Part of the original contribution that this thesis makes to the field, then, resides in its close readings/viewings of these artists’ respective oeuvres that shed new light on their unique preoccupations and practices. My theorists are the philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, and the art historian, Aby Warburg. As my chapters will make manifest, I have chosen them because their ideas suit my subjects. I should clarify at this juncture, however, that I am not the first to attend to these thinkers’ writings on gesture – or through cinema. Nor, for that matter, am I the first to bring them into contact with these particular artists. Let me summarise briefly what has gone before in order to demonstrate just how my own analyses will differ from those that precede them.

Agamben’s writing on gesture has informed a number of critical approaches to film-art in recent years – and, on occasion, to my subjects. McNeill’s volume on the moving image, for example, includes an appraisal of Varda’s *Les Glaneurs* that centres on the ‘ambivalent gesture’ of the gleaners, drawing on Agamben’s ‘Notes on Gesture’ to ascertain how the film ‘attempts to redeem the gesture from its destiny’ (2010: 79). Her focus, however, is on memory, and this excursion into gesture is limited to this film, and enfolded into a broader discussion of tradition and destiny.

Jenny Chamarette’s article on interactions within the installation space looks at both Akerman and Varda (2013a: 45), and similarly draws on Agamben’s ‘Notes on Gesture’. Her notion of a ‘space between’ (ibid.: 46), however, is one shaped by intermediality and intersubjectivity, and centred on the proximity of spectator to

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12 Chamarette also dedicates individual chapters to Akerman and Varda’s films and installations in *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema*. While her chapter on Akerman examines ‘burlesque gestures’ (2012: 143), her chapter on Varda explores the latter’s ‘subjective relationality’ without explicit recourse to gesture (ibid.: 107). Moreover, although the book works closely with Agamben, it is not his gestural – or, indeed, cinematic – writing that receives attention, but his *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999e) and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Nor are his ideas applied specifically to Akerman or Varda, but rather to Philippe Grandrieux.
artwork, defined as ‘the migration of gesture, of movement, from screen to the spaces
of its exhibition, via the bodies of viewers’ (ibid.: 49). The body here acts as an
intermediary. My own analysis, on the contrary, centres on the inherent in-
betweenness of gesture, focusing instead on the body as interlocutor. My interest is in
the gap-between, the space across which bodies are in dialogue, always dual, always
both viewer and viewed, subject and object. My objective is to investigate the degree
to which gesture depends upon, maps and bridges the physical distance between such
bodies. Further, while I attend to Varda’s installations as a key part of her trajectory
as artiste-cinéaste in Chapter 2, my focus on the written word in my first chapter on
Akerman as écrivain-cinéaste, coupled with the word limit for this thesis, do not
permit of an extensive examination of Akerman’s gallery work and the bodily
relations it solicits.

Agamben’s thoughts on cinema more broadly have inspired a volume of
essays, Cinema and Agamben, edited by Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Grønstad.
Although individual chapters do unfold the gestural – chief among them Libby
Saxton’s piece on the ‘gestures of work’ in Jean-Luc Godard’s Passion (2014: 55-70)
– it is clear from the volume’s subtitle (Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image), as
well as the essays themselves, that gesture is subsumed within a broader appraisal of
Agamben’s ethical and political relation to the cinema. The same might be said of
Elizabeth Cowie’s contribution to the Journal for Cultural Research’s recent special
issue on gesture, which weighs the temporal and ethical implications of Agamben’s
writings on cinema, whereby bodily motion equates to ‘an action of bearing
responsibility’ (2015: 87). My own readings of Agamben will, conversely, clearly
emphasize the gestural above the ethical.

One might cite, in addition, Erin Brannigan’s fascinating study of ‘dancefilm’
in her book of the same name. A chapter on ‘gesture-dance’ (2011: 62ff.) draws on
Agamben’s vision of a ‘gestural crisis’ (ibid.: 74). However, where I argue that
Agamben’s thoughts on gesture are profoundly rooted in language, Brannigan
explicitly disavows this link in her decision to follow Béla Balázs, thereby
‘distinguishing the gestural language of cinema from an understanding of gesture as a
companion to speech’ (ibid.: 63). Furthermore, she delineates her focus as ‘the
cinematic staging of the body’ (ibid.: 99). Gesture is thus very much limited to the
visible, on-screen body-in-motion, while my subjects demand that I also account for
the invisible and the off-screen. Crucially, I see gesture not merely as the movements executed by (or latent within) the bodies on view, but also as those that emanate from the viewing (carnal or camera) body – and from bodies, too, whose presence has been effaced.

Warburg has similarly been explored in the cinematic context, albeit to a lesser degree. Lesley Stern weaves Warburg into a chapter on gesture in Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s 1995 film, Good Men, Good Women (2008: 185). Both Patrick ffrench and Oliver Mayer have published articles on Chris Marker’s photo-montage film-work that explicitly cite Warburg, in particular his Mnemosyne project (discussed further in Chapter 2). Philippe-Alain Michaud, meanwhile, proffers a detailed survey of the gestural origins of early cinema in Aby Warburg et l’image en mouvement. What we should not overlook, however, is that such analyses derive their Warburgian framework from a secondary source, occasionally through Agamben (e.g. Saxton 2014: 58; Stern 2008: 200; ffrench 2005: 34), but overwhelmingly through Georges Didi-Huberman’s L’Image survivante: histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg, an impressively hefty tome, published in 2002, that offers a detailed genealogical and psychoanalytical interpretation of the art historian’s life and work. When Stern’s article applies Warburg’s ‘pathos formulae’ of gesture to the moving image, it does so through the intermediaries of Didi-Huberman (2008: 194; 197; 201) and Michaud (ibid.: 200; 201). ffrench’s article on Marker’s 1962 La Jetée similarly invokes Warburg at one remove – through Didi-Huberman (2005: 33) and Agamben, whose ‘Notes on Gesture’ additionally receives brief attention (ibid.: 34). Nor does Mayer’s scrutiny of Marker’s broader ‘audiovisual archive’ (2011: 1) approach Warburg from the source; instead, it cites a range of scholars on the subject, among them Michaud. The latter’s book, meanwhile, bears the mark of his mentor beyond its many citations: it comes with a preface by Didi-Huberman (Michaud 2012: 16-29).

It is with similar reservations that I approach Cristian Borges and Samuel de Jesús’ article on the interrelations that Varda establishes between painting, photography and film. Their Warburgian take on ‘la récurrence de gestes dans l’image’ (2009: 63) is insightful; yet again, however, it is filtered through Didi-Huberman (ibid.: 64). While I draw on the latter in Chapter 2 (particularly his

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13 Agamben worked at the Warburg Institute in London from 1974-1975 and pays homage to the art historian in a piece included in Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy (1999b: 89ff.).
invaluable tracing of the literary genealogy of a number of Warburg’s thoughts), my main focus is on Warburg’s primary texts. Translating key passages from his fragmentary life-work into English for the first time, I construct a new critical method through gesture that derives from the source, not the subsidiary.

To map my move from a general definition of gesture to a specific gestural approach shaped by the artwork, I end this introduction with a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

**Thesis structure**

In line with my subjects’ refusal of classification, I dedicate them a chapter apiece. In each, a detailed gestural framework derived in large part from primary sources is constructed from the ground up as befits the artist in question.

Chapter 1 examines Akerman through Agamben. Seeking a method informed by Akerman, I start with the philosopher’s ‘Notes on Gesture’. Tracing his (often sparsely defined) terms through his writings more generally, the chapter establishes what Agamben means by gesture; how this relates to his thoughts on the cinema, on repetition and, above all, on language; and why this responds particularly to Akerman’s opus. Identifying a profound interdependency between word and image in her work, and tying this to Agamben’s conceptualisation of the demonstrative with regard to gesture and language, I trace Akerman’s gestural arc through three phases – proximal, medial and distal – to explore her oeuvre while testing Agamben to the limits.

Chapter 2 focuses on Varda via Warburg. Pinpointing a number of shared affinities, I move away from previous readings of Warburg through the notion of ‘survival’, as championed by Didi-Huberman, to isolate and analyse three key concepts: the animated accessory; the memory-image; and the in-between space of artistic encounter. Drawing on Warburg’s writings, most of them translated into English from the original German for the first time, I consider the extent to which a fragmentary art-historical approach which conceives of an active, transtemporal reanimation of the still, often through collage and coupled with a merging of subject and object, tallies with Varda’s own fondness for the fragment, her engagement with
immobile images, her proprietary attitude towards montage and her pervading desire for spectatorial complicity – and where she, too, may exceed Warburg.

The scene has been set, the apparatus is in place; and so I turn to Chantal Akerman.
Chapter 1 – ‘C’est sur ce rien que je travaille’: displacing the demonstrative in Chantal Akerman

This thesis tests gesture’s ability to exceed the haptic without a concomitant loss of emotional – and embodied – engagement. It posits that gesture, as a pointing-away from the self and a pointing-towards the other, is always necessarily sited in the body while allowing for a distance unaccounted for by the tactile. In this chapter, I turn to Giorgio Agamben and the work of Chantal Akerman to examine further this idea of a corporeal pointing-away and an ethereal pointing-towards. Bringing the two into contact, I find, proves highly fruitful and mutually revealing.

As my introduction makes clear, the theories explored in this thesis are shaped by my subjects. My fundamental aim is thus not to analyse Agamben but to illuminate Akerman. I consider how her oeuvre can inform a study centred on the gesture and derived from Agamben, and how it might exceed it to establish an expanded gestural approach to (film-)art applicable well beyond the scope of my singular subject. I extract and unfold Agamben’s conceptualisation of gesture while taking into account his thoughts on cinema, as well as elements of his writings on language, potentiality and repetition, as relevant. In their focus on the linguistic correlates of gesture, which finds its counterpart in Akerman’s fascination with the textual that is foundational to her moving images, these writings serve primarily as a point of entry into Akerman’s gestures, literary and cinematic. Consequently, before turning my attention to Agamben, I justify my choice of subject.

Positing Akerman as an écrivain-cinéaste, I shed new light on her relationship with the written word and the way in which it particularly informs her images. For the purposes of concision, I only briefly acknowledge her significant body of installation art, focusing primarily on her autobiographical texts (Ma mère rit, 2013; Chantal Akerman: autoportrait en cinéaste, 2004, and Une famille à Bruxelles, 1998), selected (screen)plays (Hall de nuit, 1992; Golden Eighties, 1984; and Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, 1978) and sequences from the majority of her films, both fictional and documentary. I study in particular (and necessary) detail her interest in the novelesque

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14 For an exploration of bodies and gesture in Akerman’s installations, see Chamarette 2013a and 2013b.
15 Henceforth Autoportrait.
and her use of citation to access personal stories and collective histories that are always already inscribed in her images. I attend, too, to her stated difficulty with both writing and image-making by evaluating briefly two texts – the first by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the second by Emmanuel Levinas – that she cites time and again as key influences.

This is followed by a discussion of the specific relevance of Agamben’s writings to Akerman’s literary and filmic practices. Analysing succinctly the genealogy of Agamben’s thoughts on gesture to isolate an underlying fascination with the concept of (linguistic and literary) demonstration, the chapter notes how each centres on a notion of irredeemable dispossession: a gesture that is rendered dysfunctional and is thus denied, and a language that supplants the voice to act as a ‘placeholder of nothing’ (1991a: 5) – a phrase that resonates strongly with Akerman’s own experiences of loss, translated to page and screen. Pursuing the demonstrative link between gesture and language, I draw on Agamben’s work on the grammatical concept of deixis. Noting the relative lack of a spatial dimension to the act of demonstration in Agamben’s focus on the pronominal form (a lack that he explicitly acknowledges), I broaden his deictic framework through the specific sub-category of place-deixis, first elaborated by the philologist, Karl Brugmann. Thereby positing an expanded schema that accounts for a demonstrative displacement in equal parts pronominal and adverbial, the chapter borrows Brugmann’s terminology to map out a three-stage investigation of Akerman’s gestural arc that moves between proximal and distal via the medial. Drawing on Agamben’s thoughts on (filmic) repetition, it studies those elements of Akerman’s written and filmic output to which she returns repeatedly in a relentless process of ‘ressassement’ (Akerman 2003b: 13) that seeks a point of exhaustion in meaning, opening up a space beyond the spoken and the seen to enable an embodied engagement with that which is missing – Agamben’s ‘nothing’ (1991a: 5); Akerman’s ‘rien’ (2004: 13). Thus determining the latter’s obsessive concern (in writing and transposed to film) with three slippery shifters – the adverbs, ‘là’ and ‘là-bas’, and the demonstrative pronoun, ‘ça’ – each of these linguistic (and locational) stand-ins is attributed to a stage of the gestural arc: proximal, medial and distal, respectively. To clarify my vocabulary before proceeding, I shall, throughout this chapter, refer collectively to là, là-bas and ça as demonstrative shifters: ‘demonstrative’ because they are inherent to the pointing-away and pointing-towards that underpin my conceptualisation of gesture; and
‘shifters’ in the linguistic sense of the term, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘[a] word whose referent can only be understood from its context’.16

In Akerman’s opus, a certain equivalence emerges between word and image in their – repeated – ability to point to what is not written, what is not shown. Her ambivalent (and obsessive) mode of indication is further expanded through close readings of her work designed to test her unique relation to demonstration – and displacement. Despite the tripartite division of demonstration that I have chosen, this part of the chapter is divided into two sections. The first addresses Akerman’s là and là-bas – the first a space of survival, the second a site of suspension. These demonstrative shifters, serving as ‘placeholders of nothing’, point progressively away from the self, yet their origins in personal (hi)stories are never entirely severed. The second section explores Akerman’s demonstrative shifter that points towards the other: the ça. I contend that we are dealing with a process not of alienation, but evacuation, whereby that which exceeds representation – the rien – is replaced. Here, I excavate rich resonances between writing and eating, particularly in their manifestations as breakdown and disorder. Herein, I suggest, lies the key to restituting materiality to that which cannot be rendered in words, images or first-hand experience. In brief, I investigate how Akerman interrogates the ‘unrenderable’ ça through an alternative narrative, the story of ‘la petite chose à côté’ (Godard 1980: 13), whereby seemingly insignificant foodstuffs exceed their alimentary function to act as an index of the other, the elsewhere and the unspoken (and again, I emphasise that my use of the term ‘index’ in this chapter is designed explicitly to evoke the gestural acts of pointing, indication and demonstration that form its critical focus).

Finally, the chapter looks at what occurs once the full arc of the gesture has been drawn to determine how a process of apparent distanciation might nonetheless be generative of meaning, and embodied meaning at that. How does Akerman, through her incessant repetitions and slippery shifters, facilitate a return to the proximal through a gesture that embodies while eschewing the proximity upon which tactile engagement depends? How does she reconcile a pre-imposed distanciation from lived experience with embodied experience to create a demonstrable and demonstrative link between them? How does she, through her repetitive excess,
perhaps also exceed Agamben by charting a gesture that comes full-circle to reunite self and other – a gesture that he has deemed all but lost?

**Akerman as ‘écrivain-cinéaste’**

As stated in my introduction, this chapter refers to Akerman not merely as a filmmaker, but as an ‘écrivain-cinéaste’ (Schmid 2013: para. 1 of 18; Clément 2004: 183). It is my belief that Akerman’s work is, far more than hitherto acknowledged, deeply indebted to the word – the spoken/written, but equally, too, the uniterated and unutterable – and that this is translated to the visual domain as the seen, but also as the unseeable. Thus, Akerman informs a rather perplexed Jean-Luc Godard, before collating images for a shoot, she writes: ‘Je décris ce que je vois dans la tête plutôt que de prendre des photos’ (Godard 1980: 7). At the same time, she concedes that her relation to both text and image is deeply problematic. Writing is a daunting undertaking for one who views her literary skills as woefully lacking (Rosen 2004: para. 38 of 56); representation similarly fraught in light of prohibitive Jewish scripture (Akerman 2004: 29). I thus also consider how she turns to the writing of others to resolve these difficulties so that she might, in turn, give free rein to personal (hi)stories that themselves pose a challenge to representation, be it verbal or visual.

I start with Akerman’s affinity, repeatedly asserted and enduring, with literature.

**The lure of literature**

Akerman tells us that she was drawn to the cinema after watching Godard’s *Pierrot le fou* (1965) in her mid-teens, when she first discerned an equivalence between the moving image and the written word. ‘I realised then that cinema was a language, as strong and fulfilling an experience as literature’, she states (cited in Petrie 1992: 67), and the two have been closely aligned in her oeuvre from the outset. Ivone Margulies has noted the oddly literary quality of Akerman’s film-work, which she ascribes to the inclusion of ‘information that might be necessary on the stage, or in a book, but is redundant in film’ (1996: 55). Marion Schmid similarly detects a debt to the written medium in the way that ‘Akerman “textualises” speech, as if to remind her audiences
of their grounding in the written text of the film script or other such underlying texts that have generated the filmic world’ (2013: para. 9 of 18).

Akerman is adamant: ‘Pour faire du cinéma il faut passer par l’écriture’ (Elliott 2012: 33), and there is certainly evidence to support the claim that her fiction films owe much to the scripts that precede them. In her review of Jeanne Dielman, Dinitia Smith tells us that ‘every gesture […] was meticulously laid out in a 90-page script that, Ms. Akerman said, read “like a novel”’ (1998: para. 29 of 41). ‘Everything was written in the script already’, Akerman agrees (Adams 2010: para. 31 of 71), to such an extent that Delphine Seyrig, playing the part of Jeanne, reportedly ‘complained that there was so much detail she didn’t have to invent anything’ (Lim 2009: 12). We glimpse the latter’s frustration in Sami Frey’s footage of the shoot, Autour de Jeanne Dielman. Discussing an upcoming scene with Akerman, Seyrig reveals her inability to interpret the role with her customary freedom. ‘Si tout n’était pas si décrit…’ she says, her voice trailing off.

There is also evidence that literature more generally proves alluring to Akerman, who feels ‘terriblement attirée par le romanesque’ (1982e: 145). Early on in life, she was to cherish it above film, and even today, it takes precedence. ‘Le livre avait et a sans doute toujours plus d’importance pour moi que le cinéma’, her Autoportrait confides (2004: 29). The fascination is mirrored in her films. Two are adaptations of novels – La Captive is based on Marcel Proust’s La Prisonnière (1923); La Folie Almayer on Joseph Conrad’s Almayer’s Folly: A Story of an Eastern River (1895). Others cite source-texts beyond their respective screenplays. In Nuit et jour (1991), Julie (Guilaine Londez) – whose partner tells her, ‘Tu parles comme un livre’ – carries around a copy of François Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel screenplays (Figure 12), at one point reading aloud a passage from Baisers volés: ‘Et puis… je ne suis pas une apparition. Je suis une femme… Ce qui est tout le contraire’ (Truffaut 1987: 249); a citation left unattributed in the film. Meanwhile, in Portrait d’une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles (1994), Akerman’s contribution to a series of one-hour (TV) films about adolescence, Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge, protagonist Michèle (Circé Lethem) recites an (unidentified) extract from Søren Kierkegaard’s diary. Even in La Captive, already an adaptation, Ariane (Sylvie

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17 I make the distinction deliberately. Akerman insists that her documentaries are unscripted (MacDonald 2005: 273).
18 I deduce its origin from a very similar passage included in Sylviane Agacinski’s study of Kierkegaard (1977: 235). She attributes it to his ‘Journal’, albeit without divulging her precise source.
Testud) quotes a book she has read that day. Again uncredited, the passage is lifted practically verbatim from Agustina Izquierdo’s 1992 novel, *Un souvenir indécent*.  

Despite paying tribute to the literary genre, Akerman is not particularly scrupulous in specifying her sources. I suggest that this is not a deliberately obscurantist ploy. Akerman is not interested in literary analysis or the specifics of citation. Instead, she reads for resonance, harnessing literature as a source of self-discovery. Her relationship to it is, on occasion, deeply personal – even familial. The novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer, notably *The Manor* (1967) and *The Estate* (1969), were to move her profoundly. ‘[J]’avais l’impression qu’il parlait de moi, de ma famille, de mon histoire, […] qu’il établissait avec moi un rapport tellement intime qu’il n’était possible qu’avec moi, moi seule’, she enthuses in her statement of intent for a film version (1982e: 143). Although the latter never saw the light of day, the novels were to inflect Akerman’s 1988 *Histoires d’Amérique: Food, Family and Philosophy* (Vermeersch, Zaoui and Zilberfarb 2007: para. 25 of 41). More often than not, however, her literary encounters leave her with little more than useful snippets. ‘Quand ça ne va pas, je lis plein de romans’, we learn, yet the immersion in third-party accounts proves unfulfilling – ‘ça ne me sert à rien’ – with the exception of a handful of disjointed phrases gleaned from her reading: ‘Je note ce genre de phrase […] et ça me sert plus que le récit lui-même’ (Delavaud 1981: VI). Literature, for this écrivain-cinéaste, serves as a sounding board to gain insight into the self, and as a springboard, of sorts, to propel her own work forwards. As her voiceover to *Là-bas* reveals, concerted efforts to understand ‘des livres très compliqués sur les juifs’ prove

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19 Ariane’s citation (‘Le hasard, le désir, la peur et la mort laissent les hommes et les femmes face-à-face, les laissent seuls’) is actually an amalgam of two lines of dialogue (Izquierdo 1992: 25) between the novel’s first-person narrator, Blas, and Elena Berrocal, a woman whose sexual satisfaction, dependent on ritual, precludes that of her partner. Given the curious overlaps with Ariane and Simon’s ritualistic and eminently frustrated relationship in *La Captive*, one might hazard that Akerman’s film is as much an adaptation of Izquierdo as it is of Proust.
largely unsuccessful; however, she does sense an underlying rapport with her subject matter: ‘Parfois je comprends, ou je pressens quelque chose. Quelque chose qui est déjà là en moi mais que je n’arrive pas à exprimer’. Literature enables Akerman to engage with the history that she carries within her and cannot express. Her citations and adaptations are thus highly chimeric: they bear the trace of a source-text, but are equally inscribed with her own unspoken narratives. ‘For me, cinema is about personal stories’, Akerman has said (cited in Petrie 1992: 67), and these stories are never far from the surface of her films.

**Literary hybrids, personal stories**

Akerman’s adaptations thus prove resolutely hybrid and extremely personal. Proust, whom Akerman has read from an early age (Wood 2001: para. 2 of 10), engenders in her an almost maternal tenderness, and she refers to his literary alter-ego as ‘[m]on petit Marcel, comme s’il était l’enfant que je n’ai pas eu’ (2004: 20). Admiration and affection do not, however, culminate in a film unquestioningly faithful to its source. With *La Captive*, Akerman freely admits, she ‘did not try to stick to the text’ (cited in Beugnet and Schmid 2002: 159). Critics agree that it is not a straightforward adaptation (Schmid 2010: 150; Silverman 2007: 461), and Stéphane Delorme emphasises Akerman’s own insistence that ‘l’adaptation n’est pas une traduction, mais un montage’ (2000: 21). Once again, her inspiration from Proust derives from his ‘personal story’, which, inevitably, throws up traces of her own. In interview, she repeatedly cites a kiss that Marcel gives his grandmother, which can never engage with more than ‘the exterior’ (Rosen 2004: para. 48 of 56), for ‘two people can never totally merge’ (James 2001: 21). On each occasion, Akerman defines her film as an exploration of this impenetrable exteriority. As so often in her corpus, as we shall see as this chapter progresses, this provides a bridge to the inaccessible world of her mother. Proust becomes a medium through which this world might be navigated. Marcel, Akerman concludes, ‘voulait que sa mère lui lise des histoires. Moi je voulais connaître l’histoire de ma mère’ (2004: 20).²⁰

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Literary references thus largely serve to unveil aspects of Akerman’s own life and obsessions; a phenomenon of which Akerman is well aware, even if realisation does, on occasion, dawn belatedly. *Sud* (1999) came about ‘à cause [de] ou grâce à [William] Faulkner et à [James] Baldwin dans Harlem Quartet’ (Devanne 2003: para. 103 of 113), yet the American South described in the latter, its turns of phrase and eerie calm, extend far beyond the confines of the novel. ‘Combien de phrases de ce livre m’étaient familières’, observes Akerman. ‘Je les avais déjà entendues à la maison à Bruxelles’ (2004: 122). The ‘silence of the South’ (MacDonald 2005: 265), meanwhile, unavoidably recalls ‘le silence du camp’ (Akerman 2004: 122); the concentration camps of World War II which her mother survived, but which claimed the lives of close family members, including her maternal grandmother. The same applies to *D’Est* (1993), a documentary of a trans-European journey to Russia that Akerman’s *note d’intention* acknowledges as at least partly literary in origin, inflected by ‘les paysages infinis et les bouleaux de Pasternak, les larmes et le thé de Tchékhov, le bien dans le mal de Dostoïevski’ (2003a: 8). In retrospect, however, its slow pans, patient queues and wordless individual portraits summon up ‘[d]e vieilles images d’évacuation’, once again ineluctably evoking her family history of persecution (2004: 102). Akerman’s personal stories, often accessed through literature, thus permeate her films. At the same time, they point insistently to the broader and collective horrors of history. As Akerman affirms, ‘plus je serais particulière, plus j’atteindrais le général’ (1982b: 17), and even if the surface of her films is nominally given over to another, the specifics of one narrative merely veil, temporarily, the all-pervasive matter of the Holocaust.

I use the word ‘matter’ advisedly. In the following, I examine how, in keeping with my definition of Akerman as an *écrivain-cinéaste*, the written underscores her images to excavate (and indicate) a *material* trace of the past. As we shall see, the literary object and family history converge in the physical form of her grandmother’s diary, which features repeatedly in her texts and visual work. First, however, I look to her cinematic images to investigate this presence of the literary as an echo of personal stories pointing to the broader sweep of history. Akerman describes them as images that are ‘déjà […] inscrites’ (Godard 1980: 11). Following her lead, I refer to them as ‘pre-inscribed’.
In interview with Godard, Akerman outlines a cinematic vision in which textual and visual are always intertwined. Hence, she explains, she constantly attends to ‘l’image inscrite et celles que j’aimerais inscrire’ (ibid.). We have seen how, when D’Est took form, it revealed an abundance of strangely familiar images: ‘ces images-là, je les connaissais déjà’, Akerman realises. ‘Elles étaient là en moi’ (2004: 142). Akerman’s voiceover to Là-bas provides further insight into the source of these innate, inscribed images when she tells us that ‘l’étoile jaune, je n’y échappe pas, je suis avec elle, elle est inscrite en moi’. Just as an image may carry, encoded within it, the narrative of history, so too, Akerman suggests, can this narrative be etched onto a canvas made of living matter and thus briefly share in its materiality. In Sud, in which Akerman traces the lynching of a black man in Texas, the landscape seems inscribed with messages from the past (Figure 13). Hence, Akerman relates, the murder ‘taints everything in the movie, so that when you see a tree, you might think that that tree could have been used fifty or seventy years ago to lynch somebody’; an analogy that she immediately ties to the historical reminders ingrained in D’Est’s endless queues in Moscow train stations, which ‘remind you – or at least remind me – of images of the Second World War, and especially of the concentration camps’ (MacDonald 2005: 260, emphasis in original).
The device that Akerman uses to allow these inscriptions to emerge is *protraction*. Reflecting on her unwavering shot of a tree in *Sud*, Akerman concludes that duration is of the essence in investing it with memories of past atrocities: ‘If you show a tree for two seconds, this layer won’t be there – there will just be a tree. It’s time that establishes that, too, I think’ (Rosen 2004: para. 32 of 56).

Deciphering the pre-inscribed is evidently a laborious process. It pales, however, in comparison to the actual act of inscription. Writing, as we shall see, is an arduous undertaking for Akerman, and her relationship with language, however intimate, is a troubled one, on screen and off.

*A difficulty with writing: minor literature*

While Akerman would have liked to dedicate herself to literature, she admits to struggling with language. Cinema represents a compromise. ‘Si je fais du cinéma, c’est parce que je n’ai pas osé faire le pari de l’écriture’, Akerman concedes in her televisual self-portrait, *Cinéma, de notre temps: Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1997), reprising a phrase from *Lettre d’une cinéaste* (1984). Critics have aptly described the first segment of *Je tu il elle* as a ‘hesitation about writing’ (Foster 2003a: 4) and ‘a staging of a difficulty with writing’ (Turim 2003: 13). The protagonist (played by Akerman) inscribes endless pages that we are given no opportunity to read. Ceremonially laid out on the floor, they are a mere visual, more carpet-tile than literary creation (Figure 14).

![Figure 14: Literature… or litter? Writing objectified in Je tu il elle](image)

Writer’s block, too, is repeatedly thematised on screen (Figure 15). Jeanne Dielman, pen in hand, attempts to compose a letter to her sister but finds herself lost for words. In Portrait d’une jeune fille, the otherwise (preternaturally) articulate Michèle, while happy to parrot Kierkegaard, struggles to produce texts of her own. Playing truant, she forges an increasingly absurd series of parental sick-notes. They culminate in the death of the author(s):


Figure 15: Writer’s block in Jeanne Dielman and Portrait d’une jeune fille

Professional writers fare little better (Figure 16). In L’Homme à la valise (1983), Akerman embodies a protagonist whose attempts to work at her typewriter are constantly stymied by an unwelcome houseguest. Every day, La Captive’s valetudinarian protagonist, Simon, locks himself inside his apartment to study his books. When he sits down to write, however, the page in front of him remains stubbornly pristine. Similarly, in Demain on déménage (2004), Charlotte (Sylvie Testud) is commissioned to churn out soft porn, but finds the narratives she types into her laptop reduced to a list of surreal snippets stolen from conversations half-overheard and estate-agent small talk. ‘Regarde autour de toi. Tout est érotique’, her mother, Catherine (Aurore Clément), advises – but there is little stimulation to be had from scenarios as mundane as ‘les plombs sautent’, while the only affair in sight is the
oft-mentioned ‘terrible affaire des doubles rideaux’, invoking not clandestine shenanigans, but a French manufacturer of wholesale home furnishings.\textsuperscript{22}

Figure 16: Unproductive authors in \textit{L’Homme à la valise}, \textit{La Captive} and \textit{Demain on déménage}

A career as a writer is no guarantee of literary output. By the same token, we might surmise that Akerman’s professed love of literature is no proof of an ability to write. She is certainly dismissive of her skills, claiming that ‘my language is very poor; I have a very restricted vocabulary’ (Rosen 2004: para. 38 of 56). Even the opening sentence of Akerman’s latest book, \textit{Ma mère rit}, testifies to her perceived insufficiency – ‘J’ai écrit tout ça et maintenant je n’aime pas ce que j’ai écrit’ (2013: 9) – and her abortive attempts at authorship are chronicled throughout (ibid.: 14; 62; 72; 95). Ironically, the outcome of these recurrent assertions of the impossibility of writing is the volume of text that we hold in our hands. In the light of this neurotic

\textsuperscript{22} See www.affairedesdoublesrideaux.com.
relation to her own literature, it is only fitting that Akerman’s writing should also be characterised by – and as – disorder. I shall examine in due course the link we might draw between narrative chaos and a disruption of appetite. First, however, I ask myself: why, if Akerman struggles so painfully with linguistic self-expression, does she rate the written word so highly?

The answer, unsurprisingly, may lie in a book. Specifically, Akerman finds both consolation and insight in Deleuze and Guattari’s essay, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*. Published in 1975, it informs her oeuvre, post-*Jeanne Dielman*. As the critical literature observes, Akerman detects a kinship with its underlying principle of deterritorialisation (Schmid 2010: 6; Fowler 2003: 82; Bergstrom 1999: 277; Margulies 1996: 16). I argue that the attraction lies, equally, in its focus on ‘minor’ writing, which Akerman transposes to her moving images. ‘C’est bien ça que je faisais au cinéma’, she maintains. ‘Et ça commençait d’abord par de l’écriture. […] Littérature mineure donne-t-elle cinéma mineur?’ (2004: 80).

Let me determine what Deleuze and Guattari mean by ‘littérature mineure’, and why it might appeal to Akerman. They define three characteristics of a literature, which, they note, ‘n’est pas celle d’une langue mineure, plutôt celle qu’une minorité fait dans une langue majeure’ (1975: 29). In Franz Kafka’s case, this refers to the non-standard and now all-but defunct German used mainly by the Jewish community in Prague (*Prager Deutsch*) that has little in common with the dominant Czech language. The first characteristic is that ‘la langue y est affectée d’un fort coefficient de déterritorialisation’ (ibid.). Deleuze and Guattari explore Kafka’s definition of the literary dilemma faced by the city’s minority Jewish population:

> l’impasse qui barre aux juifs de Prague l’accès à l’écriture, et fait de leur littérature quelque chose d’impossible: impossibilité de ne pas écrire, impossibilité d’écrire en allemand, impossibilité d’écrire autrement. Impossibilité de ne pas écrire, parce que la conscience nationale, incertaine ou opprimée, passe nécessairement par la littérature. (ibid.: 29-30)

The impossibility (yet necessity) of writing in a language that is always at some distance from the norm, contingent upon membership of a minority group: how can we overlook the parallels with Akerman?
The second characteristic, Deleuze and Guattari continue, ‘c’est que tout y est politique’ (ibid.: 30). While the literature of the majority possesses sufficient social capital to accommodate individual experience (e.g. family matters), they contend that minor literature’s space is constrained, and thus ‘chaque affaire individuelle est immédiatement branchée sur la politique. L’affaire individuelle devient donc d’autant plus nécessaire, indispensable, grossie au microscope, qu’une tout autre histoire s’agite en elle’ (ibid.). Here, individual experience carries a history beyond its singular scope. Again, we find a powerful resonance with Akerman’s ‘personal stories’ and the burden of history that they bear.

The impossibility of apolitical individuality immediately induces minor literature’s third trait, namely that ‘tout prend une valeur collective’, precisely because ‘les conditions ne sont pas données d’une énonciation individuée, qui […] pourrait être séparée de l’énonciation collective’ (ibid.: 31, emphasis in original). This generates a fascinating potential for collective expression within a condition of isolation: ‘c’est la littérature qui produit une solidarité active’, Deleuze and Guattari infer, by which token ‘si l’écrivain est en marge ou à l’écart de sa communauté fragile, cette situation le met d’autant plus en mesure d’exprimer une autre communauté potentielle, de forger les moyens d’une autre conscience et d’une autre sensibilité’ (ibid.: 31-32). Given the degree to which her personal stories repeatedly evoke collective history, and her assertion that ‘plus je serais particulière, plus j’atteindrais le général’ (1982b: 17), we begin to see why Akerman finds the concept of minor literature so particularly appealing – and applicable. Indeed, she specifically references it in an introductory footnote to the screenplay for Les Rendez-vous d’Anna to elucidate Anna’s encounters with individuals ‘avec leurs petites affaires, petites affaires collectives, immédiatement liées aux grandes affaires collectives, immédiatement liées aux affaires commerciales, économiques, juridiques, immédiatement liées à la politique’ (1978: 19).

A paucity of expression pertaining to personal stories is thus reconceptualised, via Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘littérature mineure’, as a means of accessing collective histories. Akerman then translates these to the screen. Yet the process of visualisation, we must concede, is no less problematic, for Akerman is equally plagued with a difficulty with showing.
A difficulty with showing: the ‘face-à-face’

L’image est idolâtre dans un monde idolâtre. Dans un livre, on n’est pas idolâtre, même si on peut idolâtrer des personnages. Je crois au livre.

(Akerman, in Brenez 2011: 26)

It is Akerman’s Jewish background that makes the production of images problematic: ‘la religion juive, c’est une religion qui interdit l’image’ (Brenez 2011: 20). She cites the Second Commandment from Exodus 20, 3-6, ‘Tu ne feras pas d’image’ (2004: 29), noting how, as a filmmaker, she is inevitably ‘dans la transgression’ (1982a: 38). She overcomes it through a formalism that owes much to a specific ethics of encounter and which, I propose, repositions her filmic output as an extension of the literary. I turn to Levinas’ concept of the face-à-face, filtered through Akerman’s unique, if selective, understanding of it.

Although hazy on the details of Levinas’ philosophy of the face (she attended his seminars at the École normale israélite orientale [ENIO] in Paris but tells us that ‘je n’ai pas pris de notes et j’ai tout oublié’ [Brenez 2011: 25]), Akerman adopts its essentials: ‘En face, ça amène moins d’idolâtrie dans ce monde idolâtre. En face. Dans un face-à-face. Levinas parle de ça’ (2004: 29). Frontal shots have become a hallmark of her films (Figure 17), and she repeatedly credits Levinas with shaping this head-on approach to her cinematic subjects (Akerman and Lebovici 2012: 97; Rosen 2004: para. 48 of 56; Akerman 2004: 30; Devanne 2003: para. 99 of 113).

While Levinas’ philosophy largely exceeds the scope of this chapter (as do its promising intersections with the Agambenian ethics that will similarly be subjected to limited scrutiny here), and although my gestural framework of analysis will not stem from the face-à-face, I nonetheless consider it imperative to visit the latter as a means of illuminating Akerman’s profound indebtedness, in her adherence to a Levinasian

23 For a Levinasian approach to documentary film, see Cooper 2010 and 2006. See also the special issue of Film-Philosophy, ‘The Occluded Relation: Levinas and Cinema’, which includes an analysis of Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 Shoah (Saxton 2007: 1-14), but also examines works of fiction, with subjects ranging from Catherine Breillat (Downing 2007: 49-65), the Dardenne brothers (Cooper 2007: 66-87) and Andrei Tarkovsky (Rainsford 2007: 122-43), to the ‘action film’ genre (Celeste 2007: 15-36) and F. W. Murnau’s 1922 Nosferatu (Davis 2007: 37-48). To expand upon Agamben’s assertion that ‘[b]ecause it is centrally located in the gesture, not the image, cinema essentially ranks with ethics’ (1993: 154), meanwhile, we might turn to Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Gramstad’s co-edited volume, Cinema and Agamben, which encompasses an essay by the philosopher (2014: 19-25) and a wealth of related articles.
ethics of frontalità, to literature, and to shed new light on a number of her (cinematic) formalist choices, which in turn prove pivotal to my argument that her gestures are always based in language. The following draws on Levinas’ 1961 Totalité et infini: essai sur l’extériorité to determine why the face-à-face has so profoundly marked her.

First and foremost, the face-à-face is a non-possessive relation: a notion paramount to Akerman. Regarding the other (autrui) head-on, Levinas reasons, permits an engagement with that other as both an absolute equal and an utterly separate being. Irreducible, the face of the other ‘se refuse à la possession’ (1961: 172). What is more, Levinas links the face-à-face to language; first through ‘la prière qui devient rite et liturgie’ (ibid.: 177) – and we shall observe presently just how strongly the latter colours Akerman’s politics of measured repetition – and more generally through a frontality that shares the ‘caractère raisonnable […] du langage’ (ibid.), for ‘l’essence du langage est la relation avec Autrui’ (ibid.: 182). In a statement that tallies with Akerman’s preference for literature because of its non-allegiance to the pictorial and, by extension, to idolatry, Levinas determines that the epiphany of the face can be aligned with a ‘parole prophétique’ (ibid.: 256), but that ‘[l]a parole se refuse à la vision, parce que le parlant ne délivre pas de soi que des images, mais est personnellement présent dans sa parole, absolument extérieur à toute image qu’il laisserait’ (ibid.: 273). At the same time, he draws a line between language and truth that Akerman must equally have found compelling. Returning to ‘le langage qui ne se produit que dans le face-à-face’, he concludes that it begets education, which is ‘une façon pour la vérité de se produire telle, qu’elle ne soit pas mon oeuvre, que je ne puisse pas la tenir de mon intériorité’ (ibid.: 271). Through the face-à-face, we might access a truth that, embedded in the other, bears neither artifice nor subjective intent.

Fascinatingly, then, the face-à-face seems, in its indivisibility from ‘parole’, to elude the image. It makes no allowances for the ‘intermédiaire d’aucune image dans sa nudité’ (ibid.: 174), and refuses ‘toute “prise de vue” extérieure’ (ibid.: 281) – from which Akerman likely derives her interpretation of the face-à-face as an ethical alternative to the transgressive act of image-making. It permits her to engage with her subject as an equal, without attempting to possess it, rendering the image secondary to an encounter that respects the exteriority of the other (‘Parce que présence de l’extériorité, le visage ne devient jamais image’ [ibid.: 273] – presumably even when filmed).
Figure 17: Akerman’s filmic face-à-face, from *La Chambre* to *La Folie Almayer*
We can imagine, in this context, how warmly Akerman would embrace a definition of ‘un face-à-face qui n’est plus entièrement vision, mais va plus loin que la vision’ (ibid.: 266).

Levinas’ *face-à-face* offers us a relation of absolute non-possession that harnesses the linguistic to neutralise the acquisitive (and by extension idolatrous) nature of the image. In light of this, it is no wonder that Akerman accords the written word a level of trust that she does not lavish upon the image: due to its autonomy from idolatry, she confides, ‘j’ai plus de croyance dans le livre que dans l’image’ (Brenez 2011: 26). In her *note d’intention* for the (unmade) documentary, *Du Moyen-Orient*, Akerman confirms her vision of the literary, encapsulated in the image of the book, as an alternative to the concept of possession (dependent largely on acts of forceful expropriation). ‘[L]a terre qu’on possède est toujours signe de barbarie et de sang’, she contends, whereas ‘la terre qu’on traverse et qu’on ne prend pas fait penser au livre’ (2004: 141). A book is approached in the spirit not of conquest, but of fleeting occupation, and is thus equated with the light-footed and temporary presence of the nomad (typified by *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*’s protagonist, whose itinerancy ensures that ‘elle n’est pas dans la possession’ [1982b: 17]). Consequently, the literary is also the ethical in that it equips Akerman to produce images that, because they spring from text, are neither idolatrous nor intrusive. They do not *detract* from their subjects.

Akerman thus appears to find an equivalence between frontal images and the books she cherishes. In interview, she recollects stumbling across pages of notes she had taken prior to making *Toute une nuit* (1982). Here, she characterises the written word as the agent of the *face-à-face*:

de chaque côté de la page, quatre phrases se font face. Quatre phrases, très denses, sans explications, hors de tout contexte, ouvertes et fermées à la fois, sortes de séquences irradiantes, sèches, tendues; brutes. Face à face, elles s’ajoutent, se renforcent par ce qui les sépare, leur rupture même, et multiplient les possibilités d’imaginaire, rupture qui dans le film est devenue coupe. (1982a: 37)
Facing one another, the four phrases’ meanings multiply richly (‘s’ajoutent, se renforcent’), while their linguistic attributes not only fuel the imagination, but lay the foundation for the image yet to take shape (‘rupture qui dans le film est devenue coupe’). Filming frontally with a camera that is always ‘horizontalement tendu’ (2004: 130) aligns the image with the inscription – simultaneously construing it as non-idolatrous and charging it with literature’s potential for activating the imagination. The face-à-face consequently permits, in the eye of the beholder, a proliferation of alternative and empathic projections sourced outside the image on display yet without threatening its integrity. Akerman uses the lateral image to overwrite the literal one. ‘Les images littérales finissent par ne plus émouvoir; il faut passer par un autre chemin, pour que les gens en face puissent exister et ressentir, dans un vrai face à face avec les images’, she insists, explaining her avoidance of footage of the murder around which Sud revolves. ‘C’est pour cela que je filme souvent de façon très frontale’ (Brenez 2011: 20-21).

There is evidently much more to explore in the overlaps between the Levinasian face-à-face and Akerman’s strikingly egalitarian attitude towards her spectators (‘je fais des films non pour que les spectateurs se retrouvent à ma place, mais pour que chacun puisse y trouver sa place propre, à côté de la mienne, ou ailleurs’ [Vermeersch, Zaoui and Zilberfarb 2007: para. 13 of 41]). My intention here, however, is simply to illustrate how Akerman harnesses the face-à-face to counteract a difficulty with representation – and that, once again, literature and language play a decisive part in enabling her to do so.

We have determined the crucial role of language, even in Akerman’s approach to image-making. Now, I examine how Agamben’s thoughts on gesture, which I ascertain are comparably rooted in the linguistic domain, map onto an écrivain-cinéaste whose personal stories continually point away from the self and towards the unspoken and unseen.

**Akerman and Agamben: gesture and language**

Although Agamben does not explicitly define the gesture, his writings imply that it is a motion indivisible from the (written and spoken) word. ‘Gesture’, he writes in his essay on Max Kommerell, ‘is not an absolutely nonlinguistic element, but rather,
something closely tied to language’ (1999a: 77). Moreover, he argues in his ‘Notes on Gesture’, it is profoundly compatible with film: ‘Gesture rather than the image is the cinematic element’ he observes, and ‘cinema leads images back into the realm of the gesture’ (1993: 153). In this link that allies bodily motion with word and moving image, Agamben establishes a connection, too, between language and cinema in which gesture serves as the common denominator. At the same time, as the following elucidates, this gesture entails a process of dispossession and displacement that is equally transposed to the linguistic and cinematic terrains.

**Gesture as an index of displacement**

In ‘Notes on Gesture’, Agamben contends that modern society, no longer master of its movements, has mislaid its gestures. He attributes the loss in part to a progressive normalisation of dysfunction contingent upon overexposure, in the late nineteenth century, to visual records of the neurologically afflicted produced by the medical practitioners, Georges Gilles de la Tourette and Jean-Martin Charcot, and the chronophotographer, Eadweard Muybridge. Their images, widely disseminated, catalogue ‘a staggering proliferation of tics, involuntary spasms and mannerisms that can be defined only as a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere’ (1993: 150). When the initial interest in these images subsides, the records of disorder all but disappear, at which stage, Agamben concludes, ‘ataxy, tics and dystonia had, in the course of time, become the norm, and […] beyond a certain point everyone had lost control of their gestures’ (ibid.: 151).

This explanation is only part of the equation, however. Agamben’s belief in the breakdown of bodily motion can be contextualised to a greater degree by reading ‘Notes on Gesture’ alongside his subsequent and altogether more expansive discussion of Kommerell. While there are significant overlaps between the two essays, the latter more explicitly ties the erasure of gesture to a loss not of physical coordination, but of language. We learn that Kommerell, in his analysis of the German Romantic writer, Jean Paul, concluded that, in transposing meaning away from the sphere of the visible to the unseen, Jean Paul’s work marked the moment at which the bourgeoisie lost control of its symbols and ‘fell victim to interiority’ (1999a: 83). In such a situation, Agamben claims, ‘men from whom all authenticity
has been taken’ (ibid.) become obsessed with the gesture, which they see as synonymous with the decipherability and destinies denied them. From this, we deduce that gesture equates to the ability to exteriorise and manage the symbolic as a means of rendering it both readable and liveable; ‘the communication of a potential to be communicated’ (1993: 155).

Despite its communicative potential, gesture is not, in itself, meaning. It is its bearer, or placeholder, ‘because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as a pure potential for mediation’ (ibid.: 156). Gesture is consequently much like language in that, as a pure medium or means rather than an end, it provides the support necessary for expression from which signification can be derived: thus, ‘there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting’ (ibid.: 154). At the same time, however, Agamben underscores that the gesture, in acting as a placeholder for meaning, necessarily prevents that space from being occupied by meaning. Hence, ‘in its essence gesture is always a gesture of a non-making of sense in language’ (ibid.: 156) and ‘gesture is always the gesture of being at a loss in language’ (1999a: 78). The word that he settles upon to describe this co-option of the space of expression is the ‘gag’ – an analogy from ‘Notes on Gesture’ (1993: 156) that recurs almost verbatim in his essay on Kommerell to explain that he is referring to the ‘literal sense of the word, which indicates first of all something put in someone’s mouth to keep him from speaking and, then, the actor’s improvisation to make up for an impossibility of speaking’ (1999a: 78).

Agamben’s gesture, therefore, though a motion in search of authenticity, is not equivalent to meaning, but rather to that placeholder of meaning, language. At the same time, it is tied to silence and the stifling of speech; aligned with the gag, it ‘displays language itself, being-in-language itself, as a giant memory lapse, as an incurable speech defect’ (1993: 156). Here, we might borrow the terminology of Agamben’s ‘On Potentiality’ to conclude that gesture, in both supporting and supplanting language, is characterised not merely by potentiality, but equally by its impotentiality. In choosing not to do or express that of which it is capable, the gesture asserts its freedom, for ‘[t]o be free is, in the sense that we have seen, to be capable of one’s own impotentiality, to be in relation to one’s own privation’ (1999c: 183, 24 N.B. Agamben employs the English ‘gag’ in this strict sense of the term both in the French-language ‘Notes sur le geste’ that appeared in the first issue of Serge Daney’s cinema journal, Trafic (1991b: 34), and in the (original) Italian version, ‘Note sul gesto’, published five years later in Mezzi senza fine: Note sulla politica (1996: 53).
emphasis in original). Thus positing gesture as an enabling force through its ability to outline that which might (or might not) be, we might better comprehend Agamben’s notion of ‘the freeing of the image in the gesture’ (1993: 153). Even in moments of stillness and absence – the frozen pose of a still life, for example – gesture is always evocative of latent (cinematic) motion, like ‘frames of a lost film’ (ibid.).

Gestural impotentiality here equates to the ability to open up the latency of an image always on the brink of cinematic motion, but also evokes, in its close link to language, the tacit power of a silence that achieves weight through absence. Hence, Agamben tells us, ‘what is at issue in gesture is not so much a prelinguistic content as, so to speak, the other side of language, the muteness inherent in humankind’s very capacity for language, its speechless dwelling in language. And the more human beings have language, the stronger the unsayable weighs them down’ (1999a: 78). To map the gesture as a ‘speechless dwelling in language’, I turn to Agamben’s Language and Death: The Place of Negativity. First, I find an affinity with Agamben’s later statement that gesture is the proof of humanity’s ‘being-in-language’ (1993: 156), notably in his examination of the role of pronouns, which, ‘before they designate real objects, indicate precisely that language takes place’ (1991a: 25, emphasis in original). Thus, these pronouns, too, occupy the space of expression, underscoring and substituting rather than signifying.

Agamben here focuses specifically on the demonstrative, which he has already deemed inseparable from ‘[t]he problem of being’ (ibid.: 16) and posited as ‘the original nucleus of a fracture in the plane of language between showing and saying, indication and signification’ (ibid.: 18, emphasis in original). In order to indicate, Agamben postulates, drawing on a schema put forward by medieval grammars deriving from the Greek notion of deixis, or indication, a pronoun requires ‘particular enactments known as the demonstratio and the relatio’ (ibid.: 21). Thus, a pronoun in a specific context that appears to point nowhere is as meaningless as a pronoun that points somewhere but in an undefined context. Both are, according to the medieval grammarian, Charles Thurot, ‘null and void’ because they ‘posit nothing certain and determinate’ (cited in ibid.: 22); signs empty unless filled by an initiation of discourse that endorses ‘the passage from langue to parole’ (ibid.: 24).

25 As the introduction notes, there are deliberate shades here of Aby Warburg, whose influence Agamben acknowledges in an essay in Potentialities (1999b: 89ff.), to which further reference will be made in Chapter 2.
Yet the placement of the pronoun within discourse, Agamben continues, equally serves to attenuate meaning even when furnished with attributes of *demonstratio* and *relatio*. Just as an enactment of gesture flags up the latter’s status as a placeholder for language and thus stifles dialogue, so too the pronoun, however adequately equipped and embedded in discourse, is always symptomatic of a language stripped of its originary, authentic quality. The voice as pure, animal sound is reconfigured as ‘Voice’ – the translation of sound into speech – which, Agamben concludes, ‘discloses the place of language, but in such a way that this place is always already captured in negativity’ (ibid.: 35). The demonstrative pronoun is entirely dependent upon this Voice that enables speech but denies (authentic) meaning, for “‘Taking-the-This’ and ‘Being-the-there’ are possible only through the experience of the Voice, that is, the experience of the taking place of language in the removal of the voice’ (ibid.: 36-37). In short, deixis – the indication at the heart of both the gesture and the pronoun – cannot take place unless the originary is removed and replaced with language. Inherent in this is the notion that significance may only be derived tacitly, through the deliberate stifling of language that is also a denial of the passage from *langue* to *parole*; a witholding of a linguistic and (through its affiliation with language, elucidated above) gestural ‘placeholder’ that leaves us with the empty but, because uniterated and inactive, utterly (im)potential, ‘nothing’. Implicit, again, is the contention that significance may only ever be sited in nothingness: the ‘unsayable’ and the unuttered.26

There is much here that resonates with Akerman’s work. There is her enduring awareness that meaning – in the form of lived and communicated personal histories – has been withheld through a gap in language that stands in for unspeakable atrocities, echoing Agamben’s contention that ‘the more human beings have language, the stronger the unsayable weighs them down’ (1999a: 78). As the child of Holocaust survivors, Akerman grew up in a family in which words were either omitted or coded, so that ‘ce silence est là pour recouvrir les paroles qui ne sont pas sorties, ou des

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26 To consolidate this link between nothingness and potentiality/impotentiality, it is helpful to cite Agamben’s essay on contingency illustrated through Herman Melville’s 1853 short story, *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. Melville’s titular protagonist exerts untold influence on those around him through passive non-compliance. Bartleby, Agamben concludes, is a blank and, as such, a site of limitless possibility: ‘the most implacable vindication of the Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality’ (ibid.: 243-54). He is also, in his limitless potentiality as ‘Nothing’, a source of impotentiality, defined as ‘[t]he “potential not to” […]’, which transforms every potentiality in itself into an impotentiality’ (ibid.: 245).
paroles qui sortent pour en cacher d’autres’ (2004: 30). This silence is to prove a crucial source of inspiration. Denied a first-hand involvement that would produce memories of her own, she feels an immense need to furnish and people these silences through imagination. Yet, in view of the absences that underlie her endeavour, her work is always at one remove from the real: it proffers a gesture of support rather than one of enactment, as Agamben says.

There are clear compatibilities, too, with Agamben’s equation of language with a ‘gag’, which I shall revisit later on to consider Akerman’s compulsive filling of the mouth with food that is at some remove from the latter’s traditional associations with sustenance. First, however, I re-evaluate Agamben’s statement that ‘[a]n era that has lost its gestures is […] obsessed with them’ (1993: 151) to explore how Akerman confronts a void in personal memory by means of a relentless return to demonstrative gestures, both linguistic and filmic. At the same time, I expand Agamben’s deictic focus beyond the pronominal to capture a displacement that, in accounting for broader, locational shifts, is equally adverbial. Charting a process of obsessive repetition that Akerman terms *ressassement*, I examine her opus to identify those linguistic and visual indicators that appear – repeatedly – not to ‘mean’. In conjunction with Agamben, I then test the potential of an expanded framework of deixis to construct an alternative, three-stage analysis of Akerman’s cinematic gesture; a gesture consistently underpinned by language through a troubling triad of demonstrative shifters: là, là-bas and ça.

**Gesture as repetition**

What is repetition? There are four great thinkers of repetition in modernity: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gilles Deleuze. All four have shown us that repetition is not the return of the identical; it is not the same as such that returns. The force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was. […] Here lies the proximity of repetition and memory. Memory cannot give us back what was, as such: that would be hell. Instead, memory restores possibility to the past. (Agamben, ‘Difference and Repetition’, 2002: 315-16)
Akerman, as noted above, is an écrivain-cinéaste obsessed with refiguring silence as substance, saying of her mother’s untold nightmares, ‘je les imagine et les cauchemars et le passé. Je les réinvente’ (2004: 13). She yearns to fill the gaps in a memory that, although inherited, is often left unuttered by the first generation, and cannot be experienced first-hand by the second. ‘Un enfant avec une histoire pleine de trous, ne peut que se réinventer une mémoire’, she concludes (ibid.: 30). She is subject to what Marianne Hirsch eloquently calls ‘postmemory’, a term applied to the children of Holocaust survivors and defined thus:

postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. […] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (1997: 22-23)

Postmemory as experienced by second-generation survivors entails a ‘particular mixture of mourning and re-creation’ (ibid.: 251). Akerman’s interviews and writings teem with the prefix ‘re-’ as she constantly – and consciously – addresses the question of how to ‘se remémorer quelque chose qu’on n’a pas vécu’ (2004: 42). At the same time, she acknowledges that memory reconstructed can never be (conventionally) authentic, and that ‘l’autobiographie dans tout ça ne peut qu’être réinventée’ (ibid.: 30). Thus, Akerman’s film-images, as illustrated earlier, often seek to redress a memorial lack more obliquely, not restaging but establishing repeated resonances with a past unremembered because unlived. After completing Sud, Akerman relates how:

le film que je viens de tourner dans le Sud des États-Unis me semble bien faire écho tant au film D’Est qu’aux obsessions qu’il a mises en relief: l’Histoire, la grande et la petite, la peur, les charniers, la haine de l’autre, de soi, et aussi l’éblouissement de la beauté. (2003b: 13)
In her search for such echoes, Akerman’s resonant repetitions evolve into what I term, following the écrivain-cinéaste’s lead, an obsessive policy of ressassement galvanised by the desire to recall what cannot be relived.27 In his article on Toute une nuit, Alain Philippon suggests that ‘Akerman fait de la répétition la structure même de son film’ (1982b: 26). Akerman’s propos for Sud intimates that the principle applies more broadly. In it, she outlines her vision of ‘des impressions fugitives, mais qui se répètent’ and emphasises the revelatory nature of these repetitions, stating that ‘c’est seulement parce que ce qu’on voit se répète que tout d’un coup cela prend sens’ (2003b: 14). It is my intention, in the following, to examine Akerman’s use of repetition more closely in order to determine how, in Agamben’s words, it both ‘is not the return of the identical’ and ‘restores possibility to the past’ (2002: 315-16).

Rhythm and (lost) ritual: psalmodic repetitions

Critics observe a strongly ritualistic quality to Akerman’s repetitions. Some interpret the measured motions of her on-screen protagonists as a form of liturgical gesturality, from the deft domesticity of Jeanne Dielman (Schmid 2010: 36; MacDonald 2005: 258) to the manic movements of Je tu il elle (Mayne 1990: 127). Akerman’s rhythmic dialogues, written and filmic, meanwhile, have been characterised as psalmodic (Cooke 2004: 220; Margulies 2003: 69) and prayer-like (Schmid 2010: 3; Bouquet 1995: 45).

The effect of Akerman’s rhythmic repetitions is entirely intentional. Discussing dialogue in Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, Akerman explains that she wanted it to sound ‘comme une psalmodie’ (Champetier 1978: 54). She attributes the urge to a brief period of her childhood during which she attended a Jewish school: ‘Je crois définitivement que ces rythmes-là, ont influencé certains de mes dialogues. Ou monologues psalmodies’ (Akerman 2004: 24). Akerman’s cadences reverberate with the rhythms of her familial past:

27 We might discern a parallel with what Nicholas Chare, in an article on Shoah, calls ‘reiterative gestures’, in which a wordless motion, executed multiple times throughout, serves as a ‘visible utterance’ that repeatedly evokes Holocaust atrocities (2015: 32). Although comparisons have been drawn between Lanzmann and Akerman, stylistic similarities are, according to the latter, coincidental. ‘I’ve never seen Shoah’, she confides. ‘I’ve been afraid to see it, so I don’t think Lanzmann has had any influence on me’ (MacDonald 2005: 265).
Je l’ai déjà dit: les rythmes dans les monologues sont l’écho pour moi de l’écoute que j’ai eue des conversations dans ma famille juive, où ce qui est dit […] n’est pas le plus important, où ce qui compte, c’est la mélopée, quelque chose qui a à voir avec la prière sans doute, mais aussi avec la jouissance de la parole dans un rythme. (1982a: 38)

Analogue to the spoken words designed to mask the unutterable in the family home – ‘des paroles qui sortent pour en cacher d’autres’ (Akerman 2004: 30) – and the foreign language of Jewish litany, barely understood but reassuring, rhythm provides a profound resonance that far outstrips its meaning. ‘Ce qui m’intéresse dans les dialogues’, admits Akerman, ‘c’est que ça fasse bla, bla, bla à l’infini, que ça fasse rond avec un rythme’ (Champetier 1978: 54).

Akerman is forthcoming, too, about the bond between gestural repetition and ritual. ‘Jeanne Dielman, c’est sur le rituel’, she states succinctly (Vermeersch, Zaoui and Zilberfarb 2007: para. 32 of 41). She confirms that the analogy extends to other of her films. Her statement of intent for Golden Eighties, still provisionally entitled La Galerie, announces her desire to render a ritualistic means of communication unique to the commerce-driven universe of the shopping centre and dependent on gesture. She wants to explore ‘le jargon, les gestes stéréotypés qui régissent les rapports entre clients et vendeuses, rituel immuable et quasi magique’ – pre-fabricated postures and phrases ‘qui deviennent drôles, émouvantes, à force d’être répétées’ (1982d: 117).

As the latter example suggests, an excess of the verbal, however rhythmic (or amusing, or affecting), also masks the originary. We are back in the territory of Agamben’s ‘placeholder’ (1991a: 5), in which significance cedes to a stand-in for discourse. Consider the monologue by Julie’s night-time lover, Joseph (François Négret) in Nuit et jour. Part homage to, part indictment of the self-absorbed idealism of Nouvelle Vague protagonists, it is a rapid-fire enumeration of picture-postcard images of Paris and painfully trite truisms (all uttered in front of a lowering sculpture of France’s iconic Marianne) that, even as it gathers pace, loses meaning. It is utterly disposable.

J’aime les colonnes Morris et les panneaux illuminés. J’aime les pharmacies où il y a plein de sortes de brosses à dents. J’aime les magasins Nicolas quand le marchand vous donne des conseils. J’aime les épiceries où on trouve des
pistaches ou des rouleaux de printemps. J’aime la bière chinoise et le riz gluant. J’aime les grandes brasseries sauf celles près des gares parce que je ne supporte pas les départs. J’aime la station de Strasbourg Saint-Denis même si on s’y sent triste. J’aime le nom des rues, j’aime pas les affiches électorales. J’aime la Place de la République parce qu’on y trouve toujours des cigarettes…

We should never forget that Akerman’s liturgies point not merely to ritual, but to a loss of ritual. Revisiting the minutely executed motions of Jeanne Dielman, she laments that ‘personne ne voit que c’est un film sur la perte, sur la nostalgie du rituel perdu’ (2004: 24), and, more specifically still, ‘un film sur le rituel juif perdu’ (Brenez 2011: 23-24). Following her grandfather’s death, Akerman’s parents stopped sending her to a Jewish school, and she lost touch with its religious practices. ‘Avec mon grand-père avait disparu le rituel’, Akerman concludes (2004: 23). As Lynne Cooke remarks, the relentless routines of Une famille à Bruxelles, Akerman’s novella of family life (and death), are symptomatic of mourning, ‘un processus semblable à la répétition et au travail qui surgit dans l’acte de deuil’ (2004: 220). While ritualistic reiteration plays a primordial role in Akerman’s opus, we should acknowledge, too, its implicit link to disavowal and dispossession.

At the same time, Akerman justifies her protracted scrutiny of these evacuated, ritualistic gestures as a means of accessing something altogether weightier, something other. ‘Parfois je pousse les choses jusqu’à ce que ce soit énervant’, she admits. ‘Certains plans ont besoin d’être dans la contemplation et d’autres ont besoin de devenir insupportable[s] pour passer à un autre’ (Devanne 2003: para. 59 of 113). Chains of events, accumulating through a litany of linguistic and gestural repetitions, have the potential to accelerate, thus evolving into chain reactions. In Je tu il elle, a psalmodic voiceover (‘Et je me suis couchée sur mon matelas, et je me suis relevée pour me déshabiller. Et nue, je me suis recouchée’) accompanies an increasingly frantic production of words and consumption of sugar, but always with a mismatch between what we hear and what we see. The viewing experience is transformed from an anticipation of entertainment to an attitude of endurance as time – increasingly immeasurable as the protagonist stops enumerating the days – morphs into duration.

The effect here is cumulative. Akerman shows a predilection for accretion, accumulation and, above all, addition. The conjunction ‘and’ is particularly present.
Cumulative conjunctions: repetition as gain

As Akerman’s early collaborator, Éric de Kuyper, observes:

*Assertion et addition* (la réitération du *et*) sont étalés tout au long du discours filmique. Une évidence, qui bien sûr n’est là que pour nous suggérer le contraire. Car, rien de moins additif que ce cinéma-là, où au contraire tout semble promouvoir l’économie et la soustraction. (1982: 119, emphasis in original)

Akerman’s repeated conjunctions, de Kuyper asserts, are in fact proof of her minimalism: her additions are empty. Margulies agrees, describing a letter read aloud by the mother in *Jeanne Dielman* as an ‘unending series of “and, and, and” that propels the film as pure accumulation’ (1996: 98). *Autour de Jeanne Dielman* confirms that the effect was deliberate: Akerman corrects Seyrig’s intonation, insisting on a monotone that exclusively emphasises the conjunctions: ‘Et j’étais très occupée. Et puis on ne voit plus le temps passer. Et voilà maintenant que je me rends compte que c’est déjà l’hiver…’.

Just as this emphatic accumulation of ‘ands’ points to little of substance beyond itself, critics have been swift to signal Akerman’s comparable fondness for interminable lists (e.g. Beghin 2003: 25; Margulies 1996: 198). *Ma mère rit* accords an incongruously prominent place to these empty enumerations in the shape of the shopping list. Akerman’s visits to her mother revolve around them: ‘Je reviens la voir et dis si on faisait une liste. Pensons déjà à la liste. La liste c’est pour les courses. Tous les jours il faut faire les courses’ (2013: 180). They are deemed important (‘Faisons la liste des courses’) but are not so much accretions of meaning as indices of forgetfulness (‘On a oublié quelque chose dans la liste, ajoute, mais je ne sais plus ce que c’est, j’ai oublié’ [ibid.: 62]).

And yet, Akerman’s additions are not always empty or banal. Always beckoning towards more, the ‘and’ is equally a promise of plenitude, if not of futurity. *Une famille à Bruxelles* starts with ‘Et puis’ (1998: 7). Our entry into the narrative is thus immediately defined as an interruption, and we are left wondering what we have missed. In relocating the perimeters of the story beyond our reach through the initial
‘and’, the narrative establishes itself as more than we can glean merely from these pages.

Taken to excess, the liturgical ‘et’, meanwhile, serves a rhythmic purpose which, by conjuring up the ceremonial, achieves a plangency that is unrelated to content. Recounting the endless shots of suburban streets that make up News from home, Akerman implies their import through a resounding sequence of conjunctions: ‘Et tout ce temps passé s’additionne et crée quelque chose, et dans ce quelque chose, parfois un peu de vérité’ (2004: 32). The litany of ritualistic repetition provides a rhythmic concatenation that is somehow more than the sum of its parts. Echoing Agamben’s ‘return as the possibility of what was’ (2002: 315-16), significance, in Akerman’s case, can emerge through insistence rather than presence. Take, for example, Akerman’s short, Pour Febe Elisabeth Velasquez (1991). Her subject cannot be materially present: the eponymous trades unionist from El Salvador was murdered on 31 October, 1989. Akerman’s film constitutes her contribution to an Amnesty International series entitled Contre l’oubli. Prefaced with a photograph of the woman who can no longer speak for herself (Figure 18), rhythm takes precedence over language. The film’s liturgical monologue, voiced by Catherine Deneuve as she slowly approaches the camera along a Paris street, pays solemn tribute, through its ceaseless and sonorous repetitions, to a disappearance, even as its lines rhyme alternately through a future tense that suggests survival:

Elle. Febe Elisabeth Velasquez, elle a osé penser, elle a osé être, elle a osé sourire. Elle a été, elle n’est plus, elle a été, elle n’est plus. Ils t’ont laissée là étendue dans les décombres avec neuf autres. Neuf autres. Ton sourire n’est plus que dans les coeurs de ceux qui t’ont aimée, t’aiment et t’aimeront.
Elle. Febe Elisabeth Velasquez, elle a osé penser, elle a osé être, elle a osé sourire.
Son sourire n’est plus. Febe, que dans les coeurs de ceux qui l’ont aimée, l’aiment et l’aimeront.
Insistent repetition, it seems, can compensate for material annihilation – and it is this that underpins Akerman’s gesture that is always based on a repetition that, *through repetition*, eventually exceeds itself. It is through excess that, as Agamben says, ‘repetition is not the return of the identical; it is not the same as such that returns’ (2002: 315). And Akerman’s repetitions, as we shall see, are profoundly gestural, allied with her cinematic bodies, on-screen and beyond.

_Gaining through loss: repetition that is ‘not the return of the identical’_

Tout d’un coup, cela devient différent. Hors de la répétition.
Même si j’aime ça parfois la répétition et que j’en ai besoin, besoin de la filmer cette répétition. […]
Surtout depuis que je ne crois plus en Dieu, surtout depuis la mort de mon grand-père. Surtout après que la répétition ait perdu de sa sublimation dans la perte du rituel. (Akerman 2004: 134)

In the wake of lost ritual, Akerman’s statement proposes, repetition’s power of sublimation (defined by *Le Petit Robert* as an ‘[a]ction de purifier, de transformer en
élevant’) wanes. 28 Although impure, however, repetition is simultaneously necessary. Bearing in mind Agamben’s conviction that repetition ‘is not the same as such that returns’ (2002: 315), I shall consider those aspects of Akerman’s repetitions that, following an irretrievable loss, give rise to something other than the ‘return of the identical’ (ibid.). It is my contention that, just as her images come pre-inscribed with vestiges of a past that she cannot experience first-hand, so, too, do her repetitions evoke a lost materiality locked in the interstices of the everyday.

Akerman’s films make manifest the impossibility of achieving reproduction through gestural repetition. In *Letters home* (1986), although the *mise-en-scène* must be attributed to Françoise Merle, Akerman’s frontal camera position is still very much her own, recording the manic toing and froing of Sylvia Plath (Coralie Seyrig) as her mother, Aurelia (Delphine Seyrig), looks on. Inevitably, however, there are small differences – brief hesitations, more prolonged intakes of breath – as the motion is relentlessly replayed (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Repetition, but not the return of the identical, in *Letters home*

Locational repetitions, too, are fraught with differences dependent on the ebb and flows of the everyday. The solidity of architecture and landscape is constantly subject to the ephemerality of the commuting crowds that inhabit them briefly, as well as to variations in ambient lighting. As night cedes to day, a Moscow metro station in *D’Est* is unchanged but not identical (Figure 20). The same temporal and demographic modulation of architectural immutability affects the multiple pedestrian crossings in *News from home*’s vibrant New York setting (Figure 21).

Repetition, taken to excess and thus revelatory of difference, generates a productive breakdown in Akerman’s work; moments of hiatus during which we might glimpse a presence beyond insistence. These moments abound. Take, for example, the stutter in Jeanne Dielman’s metronomic evening ritual on day two. An unwelcome delay has been introduced into her domestic itinerary, and dinner is eaten later than usual. When an alarm sounds and the time comes to take their evening constitutional, her son Sylvain (Jan Decorte) wonders aloud, ‘Et si on n’y allait pas ce soir?’ After a slight, uneasy pause, the promenade continues as planned. In Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, the titular protagonist (Aurore Clément) meets her lover, Daniel (Jean-Pierre Cassel), in Paris. They settle into what is evidently a well-established routine – which
Anna proposes breaking. ‘Si on ne bougeait pas?’ she suggests, in lieu of going out that evening. In these moments of hiatus that interrupt entrenched repetitions, we encounter a trace of something other than that which is being reasserted. Akerman’s incursions upon ritual constitute a breach with realism and routine – and are contingent upon loss. And yet, she senses that this loss is not entirely irretrievable. There are remainders and reminders yet to be found. Discussing these rituals with Godard, she surmises that ‘je les ai perdus sans les avoir tout à fait perdus quand même. Il y a des tas de choses qui restent, par rapport justement au quotidien’ (Godard 1980: 12). Buried within the everyday are the remnants of a past that Akerman finds both compelling and terrifying, and with which she yearns to connect. But how to extract them?

I suggest that she counters the loss of the repetitive with an excess of repetition – and that this is what she means when she refers to ressassement. In *Cha par Cha*, she outlines her attempts to escape the repetitions that have dogged her over the years. They consist of multiple repetitions… of ‘répétition’. ‘[C]’est magnifique cette lutte’ she enthuses, ‘échapper à la répétition, répétition femme, répétition juive de la deuxième génération, répétition de femme et de musique de burlesque et de comédie musicale’. Like the daily details that exceed their scale and significance in *Jeanne Dielman* through disproportionate scrutiny (and critics accentuate the subcutaneous suspense with which Akerman’s quotidien is suffused), the repetition becomes excessive by repeating itself. We even wonder whether we have interpreted the word correctly. Is this a process of perfection, we ask ourselves, looking to a second meaning of ‘répétition’ in French. Is Akerman simply rehearsing something? Repetition, as ressassement, becomes productive even as it is restorative.

‘Ressassement’: regenerative repetition

*Ressassement* has its origins in a repetition taken to extremes. Didier Coureau underlines the importance of the term (2013: 205), though chooses not to elucidate further. Stéphane Bouquet is more forthcoming: he views ressassement as the (liberating) flip-side of (confining) repetition, a ‘mode de conservation, de préservation de l’être, comme protection contre le nouveau’ (1995: 45). I prefer to

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29 See Steven Shaviro on *Golden Eighties* (2007: 17); Narboni on *Je tu il elle* (1977: 9); and various others on her work more generally (Searle 2008: para. 7 of 11; Margulies 2006: para. 30 of 35; Sojcher 1999: 143; Margulies 1996: 41; Tarantino 1995: 51).
follow Schmid who, more than any other, has called attention to a policy of ressassement that infuses Akerman’s oeuvre. Schmid equates it with a process of ‘turning over’ (2010: 13), of ‘brooding’ (ibid.: 123) and rumination (2013: para. 13 of 18). The connotations of excessive contemplation (and mastication) that these verbs contain are utterly apt. The following considers how Akerman applies this principle of ressassement, which, in line with Schmid, I define more precisely as the ceaseless chewing-over of the same things, beyond the point of exhaustion.

The opening page of Akerman’s Autoportrait immediately posits her as ‘quelqu’un qui ressasse’ (2004: 9). The compulsion to ‘repeat repeatedly’ itself may be traced back to a denial of repetition inherent in the veil of silence her parents cast over the past when Akerman was a child: ‘il n’y a rien à ressasser, disait mon père, il n’y a rien à dire, disait ma mère’ (ibid.: 12-13). Small wonder that Akerman, so keen to retrieve the vestiges of a life lost through the effacement of ritual, should conclude that ressassement was, in fact, the key to everything. Undeterred by her parents’ desire to stifle her attempts at reinvention, Akerman determines that the answer must therefore lie in the ‘nothing’ that can be said and repeated: ‘Et c’est sur ce rien que je travaille’ (ibid.: 13).

Language and film provide the ideal means through which to explore memory via ressassement. Agamben emphasises the potential of repetition to unlock unspeakable memories, seeing in Hannah Arendt’s description of the concentration camps as ‘everything is possible’ proof that, ‘in this extreme sense […] repetition restores possibility’ (2002: 316). Strongly evocative of Akerman’s ressassement, he aligns this ‘extreme’ repetition with memory, ‘which can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real’, drawing a direct analogy with the moving image, for ‘[d]oesn’t cinema always do just that, transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real?’ (ibid.).

Expanding Margulies’ hypothesis that significance lies in ‘whatever does not quite repeat itself in her repetitions’ (1996: 212), I pursue Akerman’s ressassement to its point of exhaustion through the idea of the rien as key to significance. This I achieve by examining what this ‘nothing’ might equate to in linguistic and visual terms. I contend that taking a repetition beyond its limit yields a return, via the corporeal, to the rien; the abject silence at the heart of ressassement. For, as Akerman’s note d’intention for Sud makes clear, her repetitions are designed subtly to modulate our response to her work with each reiteration:
Given this degree of repetition, it seems odd that Janet Bergstrom should conclude that ‘[w]hat is striking about the many interviews Akerman has given over the past 30 years is not the autobiographical element per se, but rather how few of the events from her past she has spoken about repeatedly’ (2003: 99, my emphasis). Akerman’s opus, after all, overflows with linguistic and visual recurrences, many pertaining to personal (hi)stories. I start by identifying the linguistic ressassements that best characterise the output, written and filmic, of an écrivain-cinéaste who, as I have shown, has consistently claimed that her recourse to the cinematic can be attributed to a lack of confidence with language, but who simultaneously sees text as the basis for creation. I turn to her repeated use of demonstrative shifters.

We have seen that Agamben traces existential uncertainty back to a deictic displacement through demonstrative pronouns that flag up ‘a fracture in the plane of language between showing and saying’ (1991a: 18). In the following, I expand the focus beyond the pronominal to encompass the three shifters that Akerman returns to time and again – the adverbs, là and là-bas, and the demonstrative pronoun, ça – and which I shall consider through Agamben in combination with the grammatological concept of place-deixis and its three categories of relation to the origo or deictic centre.

**Place-deixis: bringing distance (and displacement) into the demonstrative**

In 1904, Brugmann published *Die Demonstrativpronomina der indogermanischen Sprachen* [*The Demonstrative Pronouns of the Indo-Germanic Languages*], which divided the field of deixis into a series of categories and subsets. In order to relate Akerman’s demonstrative shifters to her filmic gestures, I shall concentrate here on the category he labels ‘place-deixis’, which pertains to the spatial location of a given
object relative to the subject. Brugmann’s deictic subset, I suggest, offers a fertile adjunct to Agamben’s notion of deixis elaborated in *Language and Death* that, while requiring ‘particular enactments known as the *demonstratio* and the *relatio*’ in order to instigate the motion of indication (1991a: 21), is nonetheless dependent on a language that, subsuming the originary voice, shifts the deictic centre by one degree as experience evolves into the ‘experience of the taking place of language’ (ibid.: 37). Place-deixis, in incorporating a spatial dimension (absent from Agamben)\(^{30}\) that makes provision for varying degrees of *distance* between self and other, thus allows for the conceptualisation of a demonstrative contingent upon *displacement*. And while Brugmann’s focus is placed squarely on the *Demonstrativpronomina*, the spatial remit of place-deixis nonetheless permits us to accommodate shifters beyond the pronominal. These, I contend, include Akerman’s slippery demonstrative pronoun, çà, while equally embracing her ominous *adverbs* of displacement, là and là-bas. As the following makes manifest, this expansion of deixis beyond the pronominal to cater for distance and displacement is crucial to an analysis of an opus so profoundly driven by issues of unspeakability and invisibility and by personal (hi)stories that, because inherited, are always occupied belatedly and experienced at one generational remove.

Within his spatially expanded mode of deixis, Brugmann distinguishes three locational sub-forms: proximal, medial and distal, also designated as *ich-deixis*, *du-deixis* and *jener-deixis* [I-deixis, you-deixis and yonder-deixis] (summarised in Fillmore 1966: 221). As a rule, the proximal pertains to what is located closest to the point of origin – a ‘here’ or ‘this’; the distal is its precise opposite – i.e. a ‘there’ or ‘that’; while the medial is an in-between that entails a degree of co-participation between here and there, this and that.

With regard to this central point of origin, I should clarify that in the grammatical framework of deixis, processes of demonstration have their axis in what is now known as the *origo*: the body around which the linguistic gesture revolves. While implicit in Brugmann’s writings, the term was not coined until 1934, by Karl Bühler, in *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* [*Theory of Language. The Representational Function of Language*]. Ellen Fricke explains that

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\(^{30}\) In *Language and Death*, Agamben suggests that this issue – how to locate indication and discourse by means of a language that, as he sees it, can only serve to *displace* – has yet to be settled. Upon asking: ‘How is it possible that discourse takes *place* or is configured, that is, as something that can be indicated?’, his conclusion suggests an ongoing scholarly dilemma: ‘Modern linguistics, which goes so far as to confirm the indexical nature of the shifter, leaves this problem unresolved’ (1991a: 32, emphasis in original).
‘according to Bühler, “deictic words” or “pointing words” are characterized by the fact that they are only interpretable by recourse to an origo’ (2003: 71). Furthermore, she explains, the origo – signifying ‘source’ or ‘origin’ in Latin – need not equate to the speaker, as Bühler makes allowances for its displacement (ibid.: 73). Key, however, is that some point of origin must always be traceable. The origo is thus the deictic centre, yet is not always a fixed subject. In Akerman, I shall establish that this origo is not only consistently displaced; it is even, on occasion, misplaced. Her works are full of floating personal pronouns. Orphaned and ambivalent, they establish an identitary uncertainty that relocates the deictic centre away from the self, sometimes even to an ‘other’. Already, in this expansion of Agamben’s deixis to encompass the spatial, there are signs that the premise of my introduction – that theories might not only be shaped, but outstripped by art – will be borne out as this chapter proceeds. Before jumping to conclusions, however, I turn my attention to Akerman’s origo, half-orphan, half-other.

**Shifting the origo – repeatedly**

In Akerman’s work, mother-daughter relations are particularly prone to an indeterminacy both personal and linguistic; a fusion of filial and parental first-person singulars that the écrivain-cinéaste attributes to a fundamental inability to achieve ‘la transition vers l’âge adulte’ (2004: 62). It is an inability that she acknowledges has its perils as she speculates, in Ma mère rit, that ‘ma mère et moi étions trop liées et que ce lien-là m’avait été fatal’ (2013: 89). Here we find an origo under threat from heredity. The pronominal elisions have not gone unremarked in the critical literature. Schmid, referring to Une famille à Bruxelles, has described beautifully ‘the double occupancy of the “je”’ (2013: para. 14 of 18). Nor has the undertow of identitary instability, even of danger, been ignored. Experiencing a reading of Une famille à Bruxelles as part of Akerman’s 1998 installation, Self Portrait/Autobiography: A Work in Progress, Alisa Lebow is also struck by its vacillating personal pronouns that create ‘a slippage perilously unmarked’ (2003: 47). Margulies concludes that News from home’s first and second persons singular are similarly ‘precariously rooted’ (1996: 151). The pronominal confusion is not exclusive to maternal and filial interactions, however. Consider, for example, the oscillation between the autobiographical first person and the biographical third person in Cha par Cha during
the écrivain-cinéaste’s monologue delivered straight to camera, suggesting at best a fluctuating relationship with the origo. Again, the phenomenon has attracted critical attention: Je tu il elle’s difficult-to-place titular subjects in particular have sent Jean Narboni grasping for an alternative pronominal form drawn from Deleuze’s fourth-person singular (1977: 10-11), followed by Turim in her search for portraiture amidst occluded personal pronouncements (2003: 25), and Mayne, who sees the film’s reformulation of pronominal identity as a device enabling the position of the female subject to be rewritten in accordance with alternative manifestations of desire (1990: 135).

In the following, I investigate Akerman’s treatment, linguistic and cinematic, of the proximal, medial and distal to determine how demonstration is affected when the origo is displaced – and displaced repeatedly. To return to Agamben’s terminology, I examine what happens when a gesture is divorced from relatio yet retains demonstratio. My analysis is divided into two sections exploring the acts of demonstration embedded in Akerman’s slippery shifters. The first, focusing on là and là-bas – her proximal and medial ‘placeholders of nothing’, respectively – considers how Akerman sets up a gesture that points away from the self. The second scrutinises her exceedingly distal ça that, indicating towards the other, serves to lend (fleeting) materiality to the rien that obsesses her.

A pointing-away from the self: placeholders of nothing

‘Là’: the proximal

In Brugmann’s place-deixis, the proximal is aligned with the ‘I’ and the ‘here’. In Akerman’s case, however, personal pronouns are, as we have seen, unusually (inter)changeable, and the adverb, ‘here’, is similarly fraught. In fact, ‘ici’ barely surfaces. Akerman’s first book, Une famille à Bruxelles, is hardly a weighty tome; it is striking, nonetheless, that it contrives to avoid the word altogether in its 90 or so pages. Instead, the ‘here’ of ici is converted into a là. Although a common device in French, the quasi-exclusion of ici and the preponderance of là are intrusive, creating a form of presence dependent on distance and absence that matches perfectly the novella’s obsessive focus on ‘de la famille proche qui vit loin’ (1998: 10). Despite the
book’s intimate subject matter (it documents the decline and death of Akerman’s father and is written mainly in the first person), the là repeatedly intervenes to render its relations strange. Just as the occupancy of the ‘je’ is tenuous, switching disorrientatingly between mother and daughter throughout, the là is similarly allied with estrangement and self-effacement. As the mother recounts her long marriage to Jacques Akerman, their intimacy is anonymised even as the là precludes a clear sense of time and place. ‘Quand il vivait il était là et moi aussi j’étais là avec lui’, she confides, ‘on nous appelait Monsieur et Madame Untel’ (ibid.: 23-24).

In Language and Death, Agamben highlights the elusive quality of the là by introducing a new angle on Heidegger’s Dasein. Citing a letter from the philosopher to Jean Beaufret, he indicates that the term may have been subject to serious misinterpretation, as Heidegger himself explains that ‘Da-sein does not signify here I am, so much as, if I may express myself in what is perhaps impossible French, être-le-là’ (1991a: 4). For Agamben, this new positioning of the ‘there’ in relation to, indeed integral to, the human body – as a ‘Being-the-there’ (ibid.: 5) opens up an elsewhere akin to death and ‘the source from which a radical and threatening negativity emerges’ (ibid.). In short, the ‘there’ becomes something not unlike the site of the rien that so preoccupies Akerman: it becomes the ‘placeholder of nothing’ (ibid.). This là, a ‘there-that-substitutes-for-here’, recurs constantly throughout Akerman’s texts and films. It provides the position for the silence that defined her childhood, ‘ce silence [qui] est là pour recouvrir les paroles’ (2004: 30). It is the path she projects for herself at the very start of her Autoportrait when she wonders, resignedly, ‘[f]aut-il encore en passer par là?’ (ibid.: 9). It offers a space of presence in the present that is characterised not by settlement and stability, but by impermanence and a possibility of loss. Akerman adopts it to reflect a state of being that goes hand-in-hand with one of non-belonging: ‘je ne suis attachée à la terre que là où sont mes pieds’, she affirms (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 36). It evokes transience. In Toute une nuit, an eclectic assembly of ephemeral encounters that Akerman describes as a film about fragments (Brenez 2011: 17; Akerman 1982f: 179; Philippon 1982a: 20), it is one of only a handful of words uttered throughout, emerging in two non-committal ‘C’est là’ and one enthusiastic ‘Tu es là, tu es là!’ By extension, it is linked to foreignness. A short exchange in La Captive encapsulates a relationship always at odds. When Ariane assures Simon that ‘je suis là avec toi maintenant’, he concludes that ‘[o]n est comme des étrangers parfois’.
 Là presents itself as a borderline form of the ‘here’. Lacking the immediacy of ici – what we might term the here-and-now – it slips sideways into the ‘here-and-there’. Eerily, it calls forth a place that straddles being and non-being. In *Ma mère rit*, the là is used as a stand-in for the hospital in which Akerman’s mother lies in a state halfway between life and death. ‘Là il n’y a que deux choses’, states Akerman, ‘la vie ou pas’ (2013: 24).

A space of survival

Yet the ambivalence of the là is not to be interpreted as a negation of being as such. After all, we learn, Akerman’s mother recovers. What is more, là is the closest approximation to home that the ever-rootless Akerman encounters. Hankering for refuge from her mother’s incessant demands, she feels a need ‘d’être là chez moi et seule’ (ibid.: 167). And when she barricades herself into her rented Tel Aviv apartment in *là-bas*, she discovers, in this nomadic space, reading accounts of exile, ‘[q]uelque chose qui est déjà là en moi’. This ‘here-and-there’, as noted above, offers a place of survival. In cinematic terms, it is posited as the ideal location, as regards place and distance, for a (frontal) gaze seeking present truth in a past that defies representation. Hence, Akerman places her camera ‘là, en face, aussi longtemps qu’il sera nécessaire et la vérité adviendra’ (2004: 30); a frank exchange made possible simply because ‘vous êtes là ce jour-là à la bonne distance’ (ibid.: 89).

Let me consider further how Akerman contrives, repeatedly, to displace the ici in favour of a là, and how, in combination with her camera, this là might enable a visual engagement with the unlived and unremembered past, and in so doing provide a space of survival in the present.

Là = ici + ailleurs

It is rare to encounter an ici in Akerman unless it is affiliated to another or otherwise mitigated. In her writing, it is mainly associated with her mother – ‘Viens un peu ici, viens’, Natalia urges Chantal in *Ma mère rit* (2013: 40) – and almost always emerges in short bursts of *style indirect libre*. During the mother’s convalescence in a Mexican hospital, we learn that ‘[i]ci elle n’est sortie que trois fois. Elle dit cela comme un reproche’ and ‘[i]ci elle n’est plus maître de sa vie’ (ibid.: 94). In addition to being relegated to reported speech, the ici is equally attenuated through the addition of
distance or uncertainty. When Akerman tells a taxi driver, ‘laissez-moi ici’ (ibid.: 56), it is because she has not reached her destination swiftly enough; ici, in this case, is still at some remove from home. In the concluding voiceover to De l’autre côté (2002), meanwhile, Akerman cites the (American) landlady who last saw David’s mother, an illegal (Mexican) immigrant who has vanished without trace. ‘[E]lle a habité ici, elle est partie’, she says, immediately transferring the locus of ici to the past. It subsequently becomes a site of erasure, as the landlady recounts that she may have once glimpsed her former tenant, ‘pas loin d’ici […] mais quand je suis arrivée à cet endroit, il n’y avait plus personne’. Ici, displaced, is always on the brink of a disappearance. It is a proximal constantly negated, allied with an elsewhere; an ailleurs that proves curiously pervasive. Listing the cities that Anna might visit (and revisit) in Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, Akerman makes the elsewhere her final destination: ‘Bruxelles, Paris, Bruxelles, Jérusalem, New York, Paris, Bruxelles, Paris. Et ailleurs’ (2004: 81). Even Akerman’s latest feature, La Folie Almayer, steadfastly refuses to pin itself down to a precise time or location, furnishing us instead with an intertitle that situates us ‘avant, ailleurs’ (Figure 22).

Figure 22: An intertitle beyond the here-and-now in La Folie Almayer

As de Kuyper astutely remarks, in Akerman’s work ‘il ne s’agit pas seulement d’être ici et là, mais en même temps aussi: ailleurs’, tracing the contours of what he calls ‘le tiers intermédiaire et neutre’ (Akerman and de Kuyper 1980: 38). The elsewhere, we conclude, offers Akerman a tantalising intermediary: situated between ici and là, it offers an attractively non-exclusive extension to the ‘here’. In her propos
for *Du Moyen-Orient*, then, Akerman states her desire to portray ‘cet ailleurs sans tomber dans l’exotisme qui annule l’autre’ (2004: 141).

Filming ‘elsewhere’ can equally circumvent the dilemma of direct representation. Defending her choice of Monteverdi as a musical accompaniment to the final scene of *De l’autre côté*, despite its incongruence with the setting (a Los Angeles freeway) and lack of relation to the film’s other principal location (Mexico), Akerman argues that it is designed to render the sequence more universal by suggesting that ‘ça pourrait être aussi ailleurs’ (Devanne 2003: para. 45 of 113). We might discern a parallel with the ethics of non-possession that, as this chapter will demonstrate in due course, prompt her to train her camera on ‘la petite chose à côté’ (Godard 1980: 13). Should she be required to make a film on Israel, Akerman says, she would head instead to ‘Afghanistan ou ailleurs’ (Vermeersch, Zaoui and Zilberfarb 2007: para. 6 of 41). Yet even when no ethical choice is required, she displays a distinct preference for the elsewhere. When contemplating the neutral act of writing, for example, which can be carried out ‘ici ou ailleurs’ with impunity, Akerman concludes that ‘ailleurs c’est toujours mieux’ (2013: 26).

Neither here nor there, this *ailleurs* offers an extension to *ici* that is also an analogue to the displaced proximity of the *là*. An *ici* in Akerman’s short, *J’ai faim, j’ai froid* (1984),31 surfaces briefly as the unnamed protagonists (the taller of the two is played by Pascale Salkin; her ever-hungry companion by Maria de Medeiros) search for a café in which to sing (Figure 23). Their trajectory, however, rapidly degenerates into a ‘pas ici’ en route to an *ailleurs*. Flitting between locations, the two converse:

- Viens, on va chanter là.
- Non, pas ici.
- Où ça alors?
- Ailleurs.

- Si on chantait là?
- Non, pas ici.
- Où alors?
- Ailleurs.

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31 Akerman’s contribution to the portmanteau film, *Paris vu par... 20 ans après*. 
Thanks to the adverbial *ressasement* of the almost incantatory dialogue, when the pair does finally track down a suitable locale and starts to sing, the feeling is less one of an arrival, a *telos* accomplished, than of an entry into the ‘elsewhere’. This displacement of the proximal away from *ici* via the *ailleurs* is encapsulated in their eventual song, a wordless concatenation of ‘la la la’ that could equally be heard – and read – as ‘là là là’.

Figure 23: *J’ai faim, j’ai froid*: an *ici* and *ailleurs* culminating in a *là*

Akerman’s play, *Hall de nuit*, is set in an urban hotel (location withheld) one summer (date unspecified). No one, be they staff member or guest, really belongs; presence is temporary and transitional. Throughout, the ‘here’ is consistently paired with an ‘elsewhere’ or a ‘far away’ to give us ‘ici ou ailleurs’ (1992: 15), the more protracted ‘ici dans ce pays et dans les autres aussi d’ailleurs’ (ibid.: 20), ‘ailleurs qu’ici’ (ibid.: 34) and two ‘loin d’ici’ in rapid succession (ibid.: 35). As the play comes to an end, there is a linguistic shift, too, away from the increasingly notional *ici* to the familiar but absent territory of the *là*. Teufik, the Maghrebin hotel porter around whom all of the ‘heres’ have circulated to date, finds his hopes of integration shattered as hotel guest Sophie firmly relegates him to a place redolent of elsewhere:
Vous êtes là. Tout à fait là’ (ibid.: 45). Not that her fate is any different: two pages later, we discover that she, too, is ‘toujours là. Juste là’ (ibid.: 47). The exilic undertones will re-emerge in Ma mère rit, in which the ici, when not (reportedly) spoken by the mother, is a translation – from Spanish – of a tenuous state of being. As Natalia Akerman languishes in a Mexican hospital, her family questions whether she will die there. ‘Ici peut-être pas, a dit le docteur en espagnol’ (2013: 83).

As in Agamben’s rendition of Heidegger, being is reduced to a state of being-the-there, a literal Dasein, whereby the ici cedes to a là always at one remove from the body. Furthermore, the displacement of the ‘here’ to the substitutive and distanced ‘there’ relocates the deictic centre away from the ‘I’. In Akerman, the origo is always an other and an ailleurs, a proximal in the process of being evacuated from the subject. Indeed, là is often used in a manner that disquietingly evokes death whilst emphasising its bodily dimensions. Akerman’s Autoportrait, for example, harnesses là to establish disconcerting connections between alimentation and mortality, most notably when she pays tribute to those who sustained her during her career and are now gone. Rather eerily, her homage is not presented in chronological order. In each case, distant history overtakes the more recent event so that the death precedes the act of sustenance. After telling us that Alain Dehan ‘n’est plus là non plus’, Akerman remembers that ‘[i]l n’avait pas d’argent, pourtant il me nourrissait’ (2004: 154). Two pages later, she moves on to Jacques Ledoux who ‘[l]ui non plus n’est plus là’ (ibid.: 156), before reminiscing about their restaurant trips, so that memories take the form of menus rather than interactions: ‘Je me souviens des soles et de foie à la vénitienne’ (ibid.: 158). Death is displaced, as is so often the case with the unspeakable in Akerman, by the là that relegates the here to the there, the body not gone entirely but deferred. Unnervingly, then, the reversal of chronology both taints the food with the knowledge of impending death and suggests that these suspended bodies are still intimately associated with matters of the flesh. The tactic extends to the filmic ‘body’.

In an early interview, Akerman defines what sets her apart from more political filmmakers, concluding that ‘[t]hey have a skeleton, an idea and then they put on flesh: I have in the first place the flesh, the skeleton appears later’ (cited in Margulies 1996: 42). Her small corpus of prose, too, picks out the skeletal from the comestible: in Une famille à Bruxelles, an autobiographical account of a father’s death that reduces his widow to skin and bones (1998: 33), food ‘réchauffe les os’ (ibid.: 12). And there is something truly perturbing about the expression that recurs as an
indicator of poor appetite, ‘manger avec de longues dents’ (ibid.: 54: 78); something that, lodged among the book’s parade of premature deaths, speaks more of receding gums and exposed bone, of getting ‘long in the tooth’, than of fleshiness and good health. The displacement of the deictic centre is also a shift towards death.

I shall return to the theme of disorderly appetites presently. First, I attend further to this evacuation of the proximal through a displacement of the origo evocative of death. I turn to the journal, written in 1920 by Akerman’s grandmother, Sidonie Ehrenberg, on the cusp of an adulthood to be cut cruelly short in Auschwitz. Critics have emphasised its importance. Griselda Pollock’s definition of the diary as the ‘key to everything’ (2008: 64) is confirmed by Akerman’s assertion, in interview with Nicole Brenez, that ‘tout vient du journal de ma grand-mère maternelle’ (Brenez 2011: 15). In Akerman’s work, this journal is to become a palimpsestic point of return (as Coureau has remarked, this is a ‘un texte sur lequel sont venues se greffer d’autres écritures’ [2005: 162]), and it is a deictic centre that resounds with privation, dispossession and the unspoken. Its force is almost talismanic. Akerman’s Autoportrait tells us that it is passed down from mother to daughter ‘à la place de parler’ (2004: 65). The grandmother’s words, pre-dating the Holocaust, become a stand-in for what the mother judges unspeakable about the experience of incarceration. And yet, the words of the diary are imperfect in two ways. First, they are in Polish, a language that Akerman cannot speak and the mother can transcribe only with difficulty. Second, they are unsigned; a fact that profoundly perturbs the mother who believes that ‘un livre, une peinture, un film sont de quelqu’un, quelqu’une. C’est signé’ (ibid.: 67). Natalia Akerman opts to sign by proxy, and composes a new page, in French, dedicated to her ‘chère maman’ and bearing her own name. Akerman and her sister respond in kind, adding a further signature and note addressed to a ‘chère maman’ (ibid.: 72) whose identity, in the space of three pages, has moved across a generation (Figure 24). The diary is thus both a repository of the unspoken that evokes an authorial lack, and a conduit for intergenerational communication that allows the unspeakable to be translated, from Polish to French, from mother to daughter, if not directly then at least horizontally. It has become a displaced origo, painfully proximal, but always là, a generational remove from the here-and-now of first-person authorship.
My eye is ineluctably drawn to the self-portrait that appears on the first page of this journal (Figure 25).

Prefacing a document of some intimacy that Sidonie refers to as ‘mon seul Confident’ (ibid.: 68), the portrait is remarkable not for its artistry, but because it was painted by a woman from a religious background that neither favoured female emancipation nor

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33 Image from ibid.: 54.
condoned visual representation (ibid.: 54). I wish to examine how this (already rather transgressive) image of the là – the transposed self-identity – fares following a second relocation, this time to film.

The missing image

The journal serves as the centrepiece to Akerman’s 2004 installation, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (Figure 26). Background images of Akerman and her mother conversing are fronted by a semi-transparent screen bearing smaller-scale projections of diary excerpts, additions included.34

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34 For a more comprehensive summary and analysis of the exhibition, see Bruno 2012: 23, 30-34; and Lavin 2010: 87.

35 Image, top, sourced from the Camden Arts Centre website (www.camdenartscentre.org/whats-on/view/chantal-akerman#5).
It also features in two of Akerman’s films: the fictional *Demain on déménage* and the made-for-television documentary, *Cha par Cha*. In the former, the journal plays a pivotal role as the object that brings mother and daughter together in what is clearly a highly autobiographical moment of *rapport* that Schmid justly calls the ‘filmic epicentre’ (2010: 167). As Catherine gingerly turns its pages, she translates the text from the original Polish for her daughter, Charlotte (Figure 27).

![Figure 27: The diary transposed: fiction meets autobiography in *Demain on déménage*](image)

‘Je suis une femme’, it commences.

Comme je suis une femme, je ne peux pas dire tout ce que je sens, mes souvenirs, mes secrets et mes pensées à haute voix. Moi je peux juste souffrir en silence. Je peux juste dire sur mes feuilles et je suis certaine que personne pourra le lire.
The text and ensuing conversation are very similar to those transcribed in Akerman’s *Autoportrait* (2004: 68-71). The image on the page, however, is never entirely visible in the film. Catherine offers a running commentary on its beauty – ‘Regarde un peu ce visage; il est magnifique!’ – yet we are offered no cuts or close-ups. Our view of this epitome of loveliness is limited to a glimpse of a portrait partially obscured by Catherine’s hand, its proportions marred by the oblique angle of the camera, its details swallowed up by the unwavering distance between onlooker and page. The image may be an immediate presence for the two protagonists; for the viewer, however, it is an object of demonstration that is permanently positioned nearby but out-of-reach, as a ‘here’ that can only ever be a proximal là.

This sense of a significance gestured towards yet withheld from view recurs in the second, earlier film that explicitly references the journal, *Cha par Cha*. The *écritain-cinéaste* paraphrases the grandmother’s writings even as she attempts to craft her own autobiography: ‘Dans son journal, elle a écrit, elle n’avait pas 18 ans, elle a écrit en polonais, qu’elle ne peut confier ses pensées les plus secrètes qu’à ce journal parce qu’elle est une femme’. Here, we learn more about the maternal grandmother’s artistic ability. Not only are the diary and its accompanying image entirely absent, however; so, too, is all trace of Sidonie’s artistry: her paintings have been lost (‘elles ont disparu dans la tourmente’). Akerman recollects how, as a child, she was fascinated by the idea of these canvases, known to her only by dint of their dimensions as ‘de très grandes toiles’. Their established place in family lore contrasts with their absence and, by extension, their absolute immateriality. Obsessed with the notion of the young woman who dared to create graven images, the child inevitably wants to know what these paintings depicted:

\[\text{Un autre jour j’ai quand même demandé: mais qu’est-ce qu’il y avait sur ces très grandes toiles? Je ne me souviens pas très bien, j’étais petite. Ce dont je me souviens, c’était qu’il y avait des femmes sur ces toiles. Des visages, des visages qui me voyaient, a dit ma mère. Et c’est tout.}\]

The statement is revealing on two levels. First, there is a swift switch from the ‘je’ of the child to the ‘je’ of the mother – a recurring trait, as we have seen, and accompanied by none of the linguistic flags associated with the introduction of reported speech – that once again underscores the identitary oscillation at the heart of
the *origo*. And secondly, the image of the lost grandmother, withheld from view, becomes an index of multiple, large-scale images of absent faces that are still further removed, their materiality denied by an irreversible loss. The missing-yet-proximal image of Sidonie becomes the conduit for an entirely inaccessible form of *là* embedded in imperfect memory. The missing image gestures towards an image of the missing.

**The image of the missing**

I am reminded here of Deleuze’s conviction, in *Cinéma 2*, that the political power of filmmakers such as Alain Resnais, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub lies in their ability to ‘montrer comment le peuple, c’est ce qui manque’ (1985: 281). This capacity to harness the image to underline the unseen and then to position significance within this space of absence has a devastating impact on questions of genealogy and traceability, for ‘[s]i le peuple manque, s’il n’y a plus conscience, évolution, révolution, c’est le schéma du renversement qui devient lui-même impossible’ (ibid.: 286). The image of the missing conjured up by a proximal-but-absent image becomes the index of an irretrievable history. The concept – recalling Agamben’s evocation of gesture as a ‘speechless dwelling in language’ (1999a: 78) – chimes compellingly with Akerman’s lifelong yearning to engage with the unspeakable and unlived experience of loss and with her desire to read, as Cyril Beghin puts it, ‘dans un hors-champ non localisable, quelque part au-dessus ou entre les images, son récit’ (2004: 218). The premise is intriguing. It suggests that Akerman’s ‘hors-champ’, the object of her demonstrative *là*, is not so much relegated to the off-screen space as to the interstices of the image. This in turn intimates that she seeks what is not visible, what is missing, *within* the visible itself. We are back in the realm of the pre-inscribed: the images haunted not by ethereal, but material traces of what was, and what might have been, ‘l’image inscrite et celles que j’aimerais inscrire’ (Godard 1980: 11).

Let me illustrate the above by juxtaposing two images from *De l’autre côté*, Akerman’s film-essay on illegal immigration across the Mexico-U.S. border (Figure 28). To the left, a dust-clouded image of the Sonoran Desert throws up a line of silhouettes in motion. The camera surveys them impassively. For a moment, these writhing shapes look like people stumbling across the horizon, their fate mirrored in the sign in the foreground that reads ‘DEAD END’. The camera holds its fixed gaze
for just under two minutes. Slowly but surely, we realise that we are looking at a line of trees. Human exodus and wind-swept landscape intertwine, recalling D’Est and its ‘vieilles images d’évacuation’ (2004: 102). The impression is underscored by the later image on the right. The only archive material to feature in Akerman’s opus, it is borrowed from police helicopter surveillance footage tracing the passage of illegals caught in the crosshairs of a heat-seeking camera trained on them like a rifle, leeching the colour from their bodies. The composition of this swaying line of phantasmal figures eerily matches that used in Akerman’s earlier image of the trees bordering the desert. The two combine to offer haunting outlines of ‘le peuple qui manque’.

Figure 28: Refiguring the missing as material trace in De l’autre côté

Akerman’s approach is thus a palimpsestic one, whereby the image’s flat surface is re-envisioned as an accumulation of layers, a site of multiple (hi)stories and emotional possibilities over- and underlying the actual. I wish to suggest that this (dis)placement of the object of the là within the medium is the second phase in her deictic gesture. It heralds a shift to the medial and is encapsulated in the modified demonstrative, là-bas.

‘ Là-bas’: the medial

Akerman’s writings contain far fewer instances of là than of là-bas, which, as its suffix suggests, is an altogether baser form of distanciation. As another example of those linguistic surrogates that Agamben deems ‘the source from which a radical and
threatening negativity emerges’ (1991a: 5), là-bas differs from the là in that it is entirely divorced from the proximal. Là-bas can never hope to stand in for ici. And while là occurs only sporadically in Une famille à Bruxelles, là-bas is encountered in abundance. Its usage proliferates as the novel progresses, reaching a peak around three-quarters of the way through when the mother speaks of the (unnamed but distant) country that is home to her (equally unnamed and distant) sister but which did not appeal to her late husband (nameless for a further eight pages and irrevocably distanced through death):

on aurait peut-être déménagé là-bas près de chez ma soeur. Je me suis sentie si bien là-bas quand on y a été la première fois, c’est vrai je me suis sentie là-bas comme nulle part au monde. Mais lui ne s’imaginait pas là-bas. (1998: 61)

There is a troubling ambiguity to the phrase ‘je me suis sentie là-bas comme nulle part au monde’. Read figuratively, it underscores the sense of wellbeing that overcomes the mother during a trip to a more exotic location. Literally, however, it is a further instance of a ‘placeholder of nothing’. Là-bas is allied not with ailleurs, but with ‘nulle part’.

‘Nulle part’ and the in-between

As a destination, nulle part goes hand in hand with ‘n’importe où’ to create a threshold zone poised between everywhere and nowhere. Both are favoured by Akerman’s mother, who ‘part toujours à l’avance quand elle va n’importe où et même nulle part, même si maintenant elle ne va pas n’importe où’ (Akerman 2013: 62). In an article comparing Akerman and Vera Frenkel, Shelley Hornstein contends that their work is rich in ‘signposts to somewhere and nowhere’, which she attributes to a desire to map locations before they can be lost (2000: 53). As with Akerman’s evocative silences and haunted images, this signposted ‘nowhere’ (conjured up quite literally in the ‘DEAD END’ foregrounded in the image to the left in Figure 28) has a curious authenticity of its own for this écrivain-cinéaste, as well as a counter-intuitive omnipresence, as we discover from her comments on Anna’s itinerant lifestyle in Les Rendez-vous d’Anna: ‘Et puis on se rend compte que le vrai est nulle part. Mais alors s’il est nulle part, il est peut-être partout’ (1982b: 16). This nulle part that is equal
parts being and nothingness finds its demonstrative equivalent in the state of suspension that is là-bas.

Akerman uses the là-bas as a stand-in for very specific spaces – spaces in which the quotidian is suspended and the self floats free of the origo. While Agamben might, in their evocation of a ‘threshold of indeterminacy’, align these spaces with a (political and legal) ‘state of exception’ (2005: 3), I draw instead on Brugmann’s (grammatological and locational) place-deixis to refer to them as medial, for the simple reason that, by dint of the suspension induced by the là-bas, experiences within such spaces are always mediated as opposed to immediate. They are also spaces that point to homelands past and present, none of which acquires materiality beyond the hazy status of a projection. They are spaces-between.

Akerman is self-avowedly fond of betweenness (‘c’est vrai que j’aime “entre”’ [Devanne 2003: para. 113 of 113]) and critics have frequently deemed her a master of the in-between. This inevitably sets her up as an artist of extremes – not in the sense that she strives to view the world in black-and-white terms (she harbours a deep-seated hatred of binary divisions [ibid.: para. 21 of 113]), but rather that any endeavour to trace the ‘entre-deux’ requires that she first establish a relation of opposition. This has similarly been remarked upon in the critical literature, with Josette Déléas identifying ‘une oscillation constante […] entre ce qui s’affirme et ce qui se dérobe’ (1998: 122) that chimes with Akerman’s comments on D’Est’s afterechoes of Holocaust evacuations, complete with myriad faces that ‘vacillent entre la vie forte et la possibilité d’une mort qui viendrait les frapper sans qu’ils aient rien demandé’ (2004: 102). Akerman is acutely aware, too, that this pursuit of the interstice is a painful one, noting that ‘il est difficile de vivre dans “l’oscillement” dans l’entre-deux, entre le oui et le non’ (1982b: 15). Là-bas, a vacillating position that is neither here nor there, does not offer a shared space of in-betweenness; instead, it serves as a no-man’s land, captivating and suspending its subjects in a solitary state of pure betweenness.

_A state of suspension_

This oscillation – the simultaneous attraction and repulsion inherent in the liminality of là-bas – permeates Akerman’s films. In her _note d’intention_ for _D’Est_, conceived

as a record of a journey east across Europe, she admits that ‘j’ai envie de faire un film là-bas, parce que là-bas m’attire. M’attire depuis longtemps et terriblement’ (2003a: 7). The là-bas is attractive, yet terribly so. It pivots on compulsion rather than choice, reflected in Akerman’s subsequent note d’intention for Sud, which defines her documentary project set in the American South in terms of an inevitable obligation: ‘Alors il m’a fallu aller là-bas aussi’ (2003b: 13). This curiously conflicted relationship only starts to make sense when traced back to Akerman’s childhood. Là-bas, we discover, was used in two formative contexts, to circumvent her mother’s unspeakable experience of internment; and to refer to the countries that are home-yet-not-home to the Jewish diaspora: Poland (the parental birthplace) and Israel (the ancestral homeland).

Akerman’s Autoportrait notes that là-bas is her mother’s euphemism of choice for Auschwitz: ‘elle dit toujours là-bas, elle ne dit pas les camps’ (2004: 27). It is the place that threatens to intrude even on the bright and breezy set of Golden Eighties. Jeanne Schwarz (Delphine Seyrig), a Jewish shopkeeper, is confronted by her past in the shape of Eli (John Berry), the former GI who liberated her from a concentration camp towards the end of the Second World War. In a scene in the script that does not feature in the film, Jeanne reveals the number tattooed in blue on her arm, dazedly recalling that ‘[i]ls m’avaient rasé la tête là-bas’ (Cinémathèque française [Fonds Michael Lonsdale] 1984: 29).

Poland, meanwhile, is a birthplace tainted by persecution. Akerman’s familial ties to the country are multiple; as her mother tells her, ‘[o]n avait une grande famille là-bas en Pologne, tu sais, une très grande famille’ (Akerman 2013: 81). But the use of the past tense is telling. This parental là-bas is the site of a mass disappearance, as Nazi policies of ethnic cleansing disposed of its Jewish communities. Natalia Akerman speaks fondly of a cousin, only to break off her reminiscences to confirm that ‘[i]l a disparu comme tous ceux qui sont restés là-bas’ (ibid.: 80). Unlike the là, the là-bas is not a space of survival. In Ma mère rit, the hospital is referred to as là (2013: 24) because the mother recovers. In Une famille à Bruxelles, it is posited as là-bas (1998: 74) because the father does not. In Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, meanwhile, Ida (Magali Noël) advises Anna not to dwell on the past, noting that few outlived it, having chosen to remain ‘là-bas’. Everywhere we look, là-bas incurs a comprehensive eradication of life. A young man addresses the camera in Histoires d’Amérique. He brought his fiancée over to the States despite her misgivings, he confides. ‘Anyway,
we could not stay over there, that was no life’. In *Demain on déménage*, Catherine contemplates her mother’s diary as she, too, relives in memory an immense loss comprising ‘elle, là-bas, enfin tout’.

Nor is the Jewish homeland established in response to these atrocities immune from ‘over-thereness’: Akerman’s Israel is also là-bas (Brenez 2011: 13; Akerman 2004: 148), and Tel Aviv provides the backdrop for her documentary of the same name. In an interview with the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, Akerman explains why she entitled her film *Là-bas*:

> When French Jews say to each other ‘tu vas là-bas,’ [sic] we usually mean ‘are you going to Israel?’ We have the place where we live and we have ‘down there’. (Gilerman 2006: para. 9 of 23)

Yet this place of refuge never really takes shape. Akerman concedes in interview that:


What she hopes will be a film of sensations emerges as an exercise in agoraphobia as, trapped in a state of suspension, she is barely able to muster the energy to leave her apartment. In Akerman’s case, the là-bas imposes exile rather than resolves it. In its linguistic affiliation with other, unspeakable instances of là-bas, this Israel is not a home. Akerman even goes so far as to posit it as a fantasy space. ‘Ce n’est à jamais qu’un rêve, ce “là-bas”’, she concludes (ibid.: para. 15 of 41).

It is consequently hardly surprising that là-bas should inspire equal doses of revulsion and compulsion in its associations with Auschwitz, Poland and Israel, which in turn are painfully conjoined by means of the floating demonstrative shifter they share. In its suspension of being and association with atrocities, là-bas offers scant sanctuary. Yet its allure endures. As noted earlier, Akerman’s decision to travel to the American South to film *Sud* is driven by a curiosity that rapidly evolves into an

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37 Akerman’s final credits list her actors without specifying their respective roles. I am thus unable to provide either characters’ or actors’ names when referring to *Histoires d’Amérique*. 
obligation: ‘il m’a fallu aller là-bas’ (2003b: 13). What she finds, in her exploration of the traces of a recent lynching, are vestiges of an older, more personal atrocity, as one là-bas summons another. And these vestiges offer glimpses of that unremembered, inherited past that fascinates yet eludes her. The là-bas, like a liquid, holds her in suspension between the past and present moments.

The là-bas thus occupies a medial ground. It is a no-man’s land. Whilst evoking her mother’s inaccessible past of silence and suffering, it also represents a fluid, fantasy ‘home’ that holds Akerman, on location in Tel Aviv, suspended. Her voiceover describes a state halfway between floating and drowning. ‘Je regarde à peine, j’entends à peine, semi-aveugle, semi-sourde, je flotte’, she says. ‘Parfois je coule, mais pas tout-à-fait. Quelque chose, parfois un détail, me fait remonter à la surface où je recommence à flotter’. There are times when Akerman, deeply defined by a sense of ‘non-appartenance’ (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 35), explicitly craves this isolating state of suspension. Time and again, she invokes the medium of water as the (necessary) catalyst for creativity. When gathering material prior to shooting a film, she lets her senses wander, favouring above all ‘une écoute flottante’ (Akerman 2004: 90; Devanne 2003: para. 5 of 113). And as she edits the footage with Claire Atherton, she strives for a ‘floating gaze’ (Rosen 2004: para. 25 of 56), and ‘la même attention flottante que lors du tournage’ (Higuinen 2002: 27), harnessing a ‘senti flottant’ (Akerman 2004: 130) that will permit her, almost instinctively, to determine the requisite length of each shot. The effect of this practice of self-suspension, despite the ever-present danger of drowning, is thus – creatively speaking – positive. In this context, we might better understand Akerman’s conviction that ‘ce n’est pas bien d’avoir un ancrage’ (Elliott 2012: 33). By not tying herself down, Akerman risks submersion, yet simultaneously avoids the suffocation that would ensue should she be attached and thus unable to resurface.

The là-bas is the impossible medium through which the demonstrative passes; the middle ground between unlived past and present. It is the medial moment in the arc of linguistic gesture. As a perilous yet creative state of suspension that recurs multiple times in Akerman’s written oeuvre, it becomes a fulcrum between reality and possibility. In the cinematic context, meanwhile, it becomes the midpoint in a three-way filmic gesture linking body and object.
In medias res

I wish to examine the medial gesture of là-bas by studying two scenes between nighttime lovers Julie and Joseph in Nuit et jour. Initially, Julie enjoys a monogamous and seemingly idyllic partnership with Jack (Thomas Langmann), who works night shifts as a taxi driver. Nonetheless, when she meets his colleague, Joseph, who works days, she embarks on a nocturnal affair. Unwilling to choose between her companions – and perhaps craving a little sleep – she eventually leaves them both. The plot offers, on the face of it, a fairly straightforward re-rendering of the Paris settings and doomed loves of the Nouvelle Vague, and has elicited comparisons with Truffaut’s 1962 contribution to the canon, Jules et Jim (Jamshaid 2012: para. 14 of 16; Vincendeau 2003: 118). However, the composition of the shots, which transform the in medias res effect of the lovers’ encounters into an exploration of mediality, points to an ongoing concern with the ever-mediated demonstrative of là-bas.

The first sequence starts with a medium-shot of the couple, standing in front of what appears to be a building. It is practically impossible to tell; the shot privileges the human protagonists. Now, however, the camera starts to pull back, slowly but inexorably, until Julie and Joseph have been reduced to tiny, secondary figures isolated on the traffic-island at the heart of Place de la République and dwarfed by its statue of Marianne (Figure 29). We swiftly realise that the camera is not situated alongside the couple, it is ‘over there’. It has been simulating proximity with a zoom lens. As we backtrack through the chaotic Paris traffic, there is no sense of physical danger: we are already on the ‘other side’. Schmid sees this sequence as proof of ‘the individual’s absorption into the city space’ (2010: 133). Ginette Vincendeau, conversely, emphasises the loneliness of a couple whose only encounters are with the blurred outlines of moving cars (2003: 128). Yet while the shrinking protagonists and expanding peripheries confirm the distance between the camera and its human subjects (note the neat inclusion of Julie’s shopping bag labelled ‘DETAILS’), the sound-field remains resolutely uncharged with the noise of traffic, despite the latter’s visual foregrounding. The quality of the diegetic soundscape suggests that, though the camera may be là-bas, the microphone is firmly positioned alongside the interlocutors, always within their range. Though visually diminished (absorbed or isolated) the aural dimension of human presence remains constant. There is, it seems, an expressiveness that cannot be silenced in là-bas.
The second scene goes one stage further in a series of shots – corresponding with an increasing awareness that the couple is on the brink of a break-up – that sees Julie and Joseph literally mediated; suspended in an image framed by flowing water (Figure 30). Each snippet of conversation starts and ends with an empty backdrop of a fountain, thus privileging the landmark and its fixity over the bodies in motion.\(^{38}\) Julie and Joseph enter the frame from the left and exit to the right, and the sequence of shots is repeated. Attuned as we are to the Godardian jump-cut in the Parisian context (one might cite here the film-studies staple, *À bout de souffle* [1960]), we assume a linear progression despite clear evidence of montage. In the final shot of the sequence, however, the camera draws back to reveal a broader section of the fountain. It becomes apparent that the couple is not moving through Paris towards any specific destination, but is suspended within it, repeatedly circling the same landmark. In this visual *ressasement*, through a dialogue dominated by water, we are offered a cyclical suspension of meaning. Julie and Joseph never exceed the confines of *là-bas*. Their motion through time, by going nowhere, offers a visual equivalent to the ‘placeholder of nothing’ that is ‘over there’.

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\(^{38}\) The fountain is not identified in the film, nor is it shown in its entirety, but the sphinx sculptures adorning its base suggest that it is the Fontaine du Palmier in Place du Châtelet.
As in the earlier zoom-shot, the couple is marooned. Pinned to a topographical island, cut off by traffic, Julie and Joseph are not so much absorbed into the cityscape, as Schmid would have it, as cast adrift within it: framed, floating and marginalised.

The medial marginalisations of *Nuit et jour* are by no means exceptional. Images of suspension have featured in Akerman’s filmic work almost from the outset. Jeanne Dielman’s progressive breakdown is epitomised by an ever more rapid accumulation of temporary, and unwilling, occupancies of the film frame as she struggles to stay afloat. On day three, an involuntary divagation from strict routine causes her to arrive at her destination uncomfortably early (Figure 31). Jeanne is compelled to loiter, her practised quotidian gestures reduced to awkward manoeuvres to kill time before the shop shutters are raised. Accustomed to swimming unimpeded, the frame forces Jeanne to tread water.
Even *La Folie Almayer*, whose locations suggest a move away from familiar haunts (it is shot in Cambodia and much of the action takes place in dense jungle, a far cry from Akerman’s favoured urban settings), culminates in a (quite literal) return to the liquid suspension of *là-bas* (Figure 32). The eponymous Almayer (Stanislas Merhar), teetering on the brink of madness as his daughter, Nina (Aurora Marion), swims away with her lover, takes to the river and floats gradually out of the frame.
Such instances of in-frame suspension are so numerous in Akerman’s oeuvre as to be practically symptomatic. Time and again, they establish the no-man’s land in which presence is caught midway between transition and residue. Là-bas, the ‘placeholder of nothing’ (Agamben 1991a: 5) that is a medial state of suspension linked to tenuous refuges and familial loss, is the demonstrative of indeterminacy, where presence is always on the verge of effacement, already pre-figured as trace.

One question remains: if là is the proximal placeholder of nothing that maintains fraught ties with the ‘here’ as a stand-in for ici, and là-bas is the medial placeholder of nothing that suspends its subjects in a space of repetition and deictic uncertainty, where do we find the ‘nothing’ that might occupy the place of significance; the ‘Nothing’ that Agamben finds so compellingly (im)potential (1999d: 243-54)? I revisit my initial theory that the answer lies in a ressasement taken to the point of exhaustion that yields a return, via the corporeal, to the rien that so fascinates Akerman. I turn to the demonstrative shifter that recurs most insistently in her work; the pronoun furthest divorced from relatio and closest to nothingness. I turn to ça.

A pointing-towards the other: replacing the ‘rien’

‘Ça’: the distal

Quand on fait du cinéma, c’est aussi ça. Une sorte de bulle. Je dis ça, mais c’est pas seulement ça. (Akerman 2004: 108)

As an abbreviation of ‘cela’, ça is a pronoun premised on a lack: its ‘there’ has been truncated. While its demonstrative function is plain, its relation to the origo, fixed, displaced into the là or floating in the là-bas, is effaced. Neither a space of survival nor a state of suspension, it is best described not as a placeholder, but as an index of nothing. It does not seek to usurp the rien; it merely points towards it. Its potentiality is offset by its impotentiality: its meaning by definition withheld, ça is always ‘in relation to [its] own privation’ (Agamben 1999c: 183).

Born into a household overshadowed by a refusal to speak about the past, Akerman is ineluctably drawn to verbal lacunae. Returning to her parents’ denial of dialogue in Cha par Cha, she explains how her entire filmmaking endeavour revolves
around a need to give voice to the *rien*: ‘Et si eux voulaient oublier leur passé parce qu’il n’y avait rien à en dire, rien à en montrer, c’était autour de ce rien que Chantal tournait’. As we have seen, Akerman ends her documentary, *De l’autre côté*, with the story of a mother who has disappeared without trace, recounted in the voice of her landlady. Keen to divest herself of responsibility, the latter insists that ‘[i]l n’y a vraiment rien à dire sur elle’. On the contrary, we sense: that *rien* would have much to say about a missing mother.

Despite Natalia Akerman’s strenuous attempts to impose a *rien* subsumed in an unspeakable ‘that’ – dismissing her daughter’s desire to discuss the past in *Une famille à Bruxelles* with a terse ‘c’est pas la peine de dire des choses comme ça qui ne servent à rien’ (1998: 84) – a curious connection between nothingness and plenitude emerges. When Akerman’s mother laughs after a long illness in *Ma mère rit*, Akerman is delighted. ‘Elle rit pour un rien’, she remarks. ‘Ce rien, c’est beaucoup’ (2013: 10). Nothingness becomes endless: ‘Rien n’est jamais fini’ (ibid.: 30). When nothing happens, ‘nothing’ *happens*: ‘je me sens une personne qui a quelque chose à faire même s’il n’arrive rien’, explains Akerman. ‘Mais il arrive quand même quelque chose, des petits riens’ (ibid.: 32). Finally, towards the end of the book, the nothing emerges momentarily as the mother gives the *rien* a name, by now familiar. ‘Moi je n’ai rien eu à part les camps’ (ibid.: 183), she says, out of the blue. ‘C’était la première fois qu’elle disait ça’ (ibid.), Akerman confirms, wonderingly, as the *rien*, along with past atrocities, is finally enunciated and aligned with the ‘that’.

Akerman’s *ça* proves a multiform beast. By far the most ubiquitous of her demonstrative shifters, it is also the most iniquitous. It can assume several guises at once. Alternatively, it can stand in for the formless, the unutterable. Often, it achieves both simultaneously. Furthermore, it, too, is subject to *ressassement*. Akerman’s films and writing abound with the ‘that-without-there’ and they tend to occur in clusters as a reaction against accepted forms of social categorisation. Noting that her paternal grandmother endured the hardships of the Second World War only to succumb shortly afterwards, Akerman provides a litany of possible causes but elucidates none: ‘ça devait être ça ou autre chose’ (2013: 28). It is the justification without grounds that underpins social expectations and censors conversation. In *Jeanne Dielman*, the mother fends off her son’s unnervingly Oedipal interrogation at the end of day one by reducing its subjects to things. Did she want to marry? She cannot remember, ‘mais de toute façon ça devait se faire’. Did she find her husband unattractive? ‘[Ç]a n’avait
aucune importance’, she responds. On day two, Sylvain persists with intrusive questions about the act of penetration. Jeanne reduces the topic still further to the ‘ça’ of unspeakability: ‘Ça ne sert à rien de parler de ça’. In Une famille à Bruxelles, whose first 20 pages provide us with some 30 instances of the word ça, five of which occur on one page alone (1998: 14), a mother grasps for an evacuated demonstrative paired with a rien. She uses it to refer, obliquely, to family dysfunction (‘elles se demandent comment ça a pu arriver et personne n’y comprend rien’ followed by two ‘ça n’a quand même servi à rien’ in quick succession [ibid.: 16]) and to keep up appearances during telephone conversations in which the unspoken hangs heavy between mother and daughter:

bien sûr elle demandait comment ça va et je disais ça va et elle disait j’entends à ta voix que ça ne va pas et je disais qu’est-ce que je peux te dire et elle disait je ne sais pas et on parlait comme ça un peu de tout et de rien. (ibid.: 43)

Akerman’s 2013 ‘sequel’, Ma mère rit, similarly hosts an array of unspeakables that multiply in reported dialogues between mother and daughter that delicately avoid mentioning the former’s failing health. As the divisions between the first and third persons singular blur, we are assailed by four successive ça:

Ça va passer. Oui, dit ma mère, peut-être mais ça dure. Passer comme tout le reste, mais ça passe de plus en plus difficilement. Personne n’a envie d’écouter tout ça. (2013: 100-01)

Meanwhile, a mention of another family taboo, madness, triggers a manic accumulation of nine ça in the space of just one page (ibid.: 194). For all that it might be deemed unwelcome, this ça, ineluctably linked to atrocity and the unspeakable, seems unavoidable. ‘C’est comme ça’ is an oft-uttered phrase of resignation. It permits of no explanations. The documentary, Là-bas, came into being simply by setting up a camera ‘et voilà, ça a commencé comme ça’; it is

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39 They are provoked by a reference to Akerman’s aunt, Ruth, whose depression and eventual suicide are recounted in Là-bas. Akerman’s own struggles with bipolar disorder are referred to euphemistically in her Autoportrait (Akerman 2004: 65). More recently, she has been less reticent, integrating her illness into her installation pieces, Maniac Summer (2009) and Maniac Shadows (2013), as well as into Ma mère rit (Akerman 2013: 88), and even opening up in interview to describe her first, life-changing ‘crise maniaque à 34 ans’, which saw her briefly institutionalised (Brenez 2011: 12).
edited in the same way: ‘ça s’est monté comme ça, comme ça s’est tourné’ (Vermeersch, Zaoui and Zilberfarb 2007: para. 6 of 41). The phrase aligns with a parental authority that cannot be challenged because, ‘comme disait mon père, “c’est comme ça!”’ (Akerman 2004: 15). In Ma mère rit, Akerman concludes that her non-standard sexuality must be assumed because ‘j’étais comme ça et c’est tout’ (2013: 58). The phrase recurs like a refrain throughout. ‘Ça a toujours été comme ça avec elle’ laments Natalia Akerman, confronted with her daughter’s chaotic lifestyle (ibid.: 66); ‘ce n’était pas comme ça qu’il fallait parler vrai’, concludes Akerman after a maternal outburst of rage (ibid.: 92). Communication becomes an insufficiency of expression as Akerman redefines conversation: ‘On peut juste dire quelque chose et puis une autre chose, c’est comme ça qu’on parle’ (ibid.: 182). Demonstration erases its nameless subjects in a flurry of ‘thats’:

Moi non plus mais je sais que ça passe et je me dis ça tous les jours. C’est comme ça. Je l’ai et je n’y peux rien.

Mais ça ne devrait pas être comme ça. (ibid.: 137)

Confusion, it seems, reigns supreme. Yet can it be that the ‘that’, taken to excess, also points to a possibility of hope?

With its lack of *relatio*, the *ça* has an unknowable quality. This in turn implies that it points towards a multitude of potential meanings. Further, the repeated coupling with *rien* suggests that *ça* is equipped to counterbalance its nothingness. As such, we intimate, the *ça* may be the index of *everything*. It is not the *ça* in itself that is restrictive, Akerman suggests, so much as the structures into which it is coerced. Hence, in her *Autoportrait*, she rails against the *ça* within the either-or construct but welcomes it in a list, saying that ‘[d]ans ce monde binaire, c’est toujours ou ça, ou ça. J’aimerais tant parfois que cela soit, et ça, et ça, et ça’ (2004: 29). *Cha par Cha*, meanwhile, culminates in a uniquely authentic *ça* introduced by an ‘and’ that recalls other of her liturgical enumerations whose rhythmic accumulations, as we have seen in the preceding analysis of Akerman’s repetitions, are so much more than the sum of their parts. She ends her autobiographical reading with the words, ‘Je m’appelle Chantal Akerman. Je suis née à Bruxelles. Et ça, c’est vrai… ça, c’est vrai’. Here, the *ça*, released from linguistic subjugation and allowed its place in a psalmadic list of equivalencies, offers us a glimpse of truth.
In brief, ça enables the silence of rien to express itself. What is more, I contend, in effecting the transition from page to screen, it allies that rien with matter. By physically embodying the rien rather than merely standing in for it as a placeholder, the ça lends material form to that which cannot be lived or reconstructed. It transforms phantoms into vestiges, the ethereal into the real. I am reminded of Henry James’ literary quest for ‘the note... of the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy’ (cited in Lustig 1994: 2) in the way that Akerman’s absent bodies, through co-opting the ça, weave themselves into the fabric of her filmic medium to achieve a more substantial presence. We have seen how the (pre-inscribed) significance of certain shots in D’Est was to crystallise during editing as Akerman belatedly recognised their ‘vieilles images d’évacuation’ (2004: 102). They offer a celluloid trace of the ‘that’, the silence and rien of the camps, compelling Akerman to conclude: ‘Le film fini, je me suis dit, c’était donc ça, encore une fois ça’ (ibid.).

How else, I ask myself, does Akerman portray the ça in cinematic terms, as a material indicator of the rien? How might she ally it with a ressassement that Agamben conflates with memory in its ability to ‘restore possibility to the past’ (2002: 316)? And how does she unfold this ça through a gesture that, Agamben contends, ‘is always a gesture of a non-making of sense in language’ (1993: 156) – a gesture that, in its most extreme manifestation, is aligned with the gag: ‘something that is put in the mouth to hinder speech, and subsequently the actor’s improvisation to make up for a memory lapse or some impossibility of speech’ (ibid.)? To answer these questions, and to accommodate adequately the distanciating quality of the ça, I transfer my scrutiny from Akerman’s filmic subjects to her cinematic objects. In interview, she offers this fascinating statement of intent: ‘au lieu de montrer un événement “public” parce que sensationnel ou avec plein de choses’, Akerman tells us, ‘je raconterai juste la petite chose à côté’ (Godard 1980: 13). I take up this focus on ‘la petite chose à côté’ that Bergstrom neatly translates as ‘the story of something small nearby’ (2003: 94) to explore Akerman’s images of food, each of which triggers a powerful response as a visual/visceral equivalent of the ça. Specifically, I look at the ressassement of eggs and apples, and one plate of very expressive peas.

First of all, however, I chart how Akerman arrives at this curious interchangeability of foodstuff and ça by looking at the close, and tense, relationship
between the acts of writing and eating to be found in her oeuvre. The story of something small nearby commences, I suggest, with a pen – and a ladle.

*The story of something small nearby*

Although Akerman’s *Autoportrait* offers multiple references to the consumption of food, ingestion is never a ‘pure’ activity; it is always undertaken in relation to something else. This ‘something else’, more often than not, equates to story-telling and writing. Recounting her paternal grandmother’s exhortations to eat, Akerman’s *Autoportrait* tells us that there was a contract involved: ‘mange sinon je ne raconte plus’ (2004: 39). Not only is the divulging of personal and fictional stories held up as an incentive in a small act of familial blackmail; it is tied inextricably to the act of eating. Later, harking back to her unhappy years at secondary school, she recalls how her first essay was dismissed for its ‘style populaire’ (ibid.: 112). Immediately afterwards, she tells us that ‘aussi ma façon de manger, de tenir la louche pour servir la soupe a été critiquée’ (ibid.). The swift parallel between controlling a pen and manoeuvring a ladle (later reprised in interview [Adams 2010: para. 13 of 71]) makes the two interdependent, perhaps even interchangeable.

A broader appraisal of Akerman’s work reveals more extensive overlaps between eating and writing – and a shared link to disorder. An act of suicide in her first short, *Saute ma ville* (1968), is announced by a note scrawled – in mayonnaise – on a kitchen mirror (Figure 33). It is illegible. In *Je tu il elle*, meanwhile, as critics have observed, there is an ‘insistence on the movement of food from hand to mouth (and this in relationship to pen on paper)’ (Turim 2003: 13); an ‘intertwining’ of the ‘activities of eating and writing’ (Mayne 1990: 125). Neither provides substance or sustenance. We are afforded no opportunity to read the contents of the diary pages that accumulate before our eyes, while the sickly ritual of ingesting dry caster sugar rapidly borders on the unbearable (Figure 34). At the same time, however, these acts of inscription and ingestion share a purpose beyond that of documenting and nourishing, respectively. Both point towards the passage of (unspecified) time: ‘et j’ai mangé beaucoup de sucre en poudre pendant huit pages’, the film’s voiceover intones. Recalling how she would barter with her grandmother (a story in return for a meal consumed), Akerman asks herself whether ‘manger va avec raconter’, and settles upon a commonality that resuscitates the ominous ça. In both cases, ‘[ç]a prend du
temps’ (2004: 39). This act of time-taking, it transpires, is hardly an innocent one. It equates to the taking of life.

Taking time, taking life

Asked by Godard to describe the sensation induced by an ongoing film production, Akerman replies that it is ‘formidable parce que ça occupe le temps’ (Godard 1980: 7). As we shall see, the pleasure of the project, however keenly felt, soon cedes to unease as the ça takes possession of time.

Akerman’s works are permeated with an anxiety centreing on what critics allude to as ‘temps mortuaire’ (Soucy 2006: 4) or ‘dead time’ (Turvey 2008: para. 2
of 10; Dubroux 1976, cited in Martin and Akerman 1979: 44). This anxiety comes to the fore in Jeanne Dielman. Akerman claims that the film was designed to ‘show someone who organizes her life so that there is no hole in her time, because when there is a hole, there is also anxiety’ (MacDonald 2005: 260, emphasis in original) – a tactic she equates elsewhere with the workaholic: ‘When they stop, they die, because then they have to face something inside of them that they don’t want to face’ (Adams 2010: para. 31 of 71). Jeanne Dielman is, she says, ‘a film about occupying time to avoid anguish, to keep moving so as not to think about the fundamental thing, which is being’ (cited in Bergstrom 2003: 107). A correlation between unoccupied time and an awareness of mortality emerges.

Akerman conceives of this act of killing (through) time as intensely physical, powerfully emotional and ineluctably linked to ça. Prompted to elucidate her filmic approach, she explains:

Je voudrais que le spectateur éprouve une expérience physique par le temps utilisé dans chaque plan. Faire cette expérience physique que le temps se déroule en vous, que le temps du film rentre en vous. Le spectateur qui est face à ça, il a une expérience physique qui est liée aussi à une expérience émotionnelle, et pas uniquement mentale. (Lavin, Joyeux, Borgia and Beghin 2003: 23)

Through exposure to this practically visceral experience of duration, the spectator comes to realise that viewing does not lead to an accretion of knowledge so much as to a depletion of vitality, and that the artist as creator wields the power both to grant life and to take it away: ‘With me, you see the time pass. And feel it pass’, Akerman declares. ‘You also sense that this is the time that leads toward death. […] I took two hours of someone’s life’ (Rosen 2004: para. 29 of 56). So if the taking of time equates to the taking of life, and time-taking is characteristic of the act of eating, there is something decidedly unnerving in concluding that food intake, traditionally conducive to life, might more accurately be described as a marker of a death deferred but impending.
Ambivalent appetites: narrative disorder = eating disorder

Akerman’s work is literally time-consuming: writing and eating are affiliated with a passage of time that is also a loss of life. In their tacit affinity with death, these acts seem connected less to speech and sustenance than to the silent and unspeakable, the unsavoury and indigestible. Returning to the idea of disorder, we might draw an equation between narrative disruption – particularly in terms of chronology – and dysfunctional appetites. In many ways, I suggest, Akerman’s narrative disorder might also be deemed an eating disorder.

The critical literature has noted (and occasionally lamented) Akerman’s lack of traditional narrative structures. As Jenny Chamarette concludes, ‘[d]isruptions of narrative are […] a feature that permeates much of Akerman’s work’ (2013b: 351). Particular attention has been paid to her disjointed timeframes. Her stories are deemed ‘sans commencement ni fin’ (Mairesse 1977: 60); they lack a beginning, middle and end (Picard 2009: para. 6 of 10; Sultan 2008: 55-56; Martin and Akerman 1979: 35). Critics have equally discerned an attitude to consumption that is curiously out-of-synch with the body. As Françoise Audé remarks, eating is ‘une constante d’anormalité’; a dysfunctional need that oscillates between extremes, manifesting itself as ‘[u]ne avidité ou un refus, une faim qui semble pressante suivie d’une non-faim tout aussi catégorique que le coup d’appétit précédent’ (1982: 151). She categorises it as an eating disorder, much as Deleuze summarises Je tu il elle as ‘une cérémonie de l’anorexie’ (1985: 255). Pathological alimentation and curbed appetites can be found throughout Akerman’s opus – and, indeed, across species. They taint Jeanne Dielman’s disturbing dinners (surgically prepared; irredeemably stodgy), just as they afflict Edgard the dog in Un divan à New York (1996), whose poor appetite his fastidious psychotherapist-owner, Henry Harriston (William Hurt), attributes to ‘intestinal disorders’. They even permeate Demain on déménage through its tasteless parade of malodorous roast chickens. Disinclined to eat as a child (Akerman 2013: 51 and 81; Brenez 2011: 31; Akerman 1998: 57), for which she was berated by a mother obsessed with food (Brenez 2011: 14; Akerman 2004: 55), Akerman’s relation to ingestion remains fraught. A childhood photograph in which she dutifully propels a loaded forkful into her mouth, eyeing the camera as her mother hovers overhead (Figure 35), seems strangely formative.
We are to encounter uncomfortable visual reminders of it throughout her adult work. Family, whether (over-)present or absent, is certainly integral to the troubling connection that Akerman establishes between language and appetites forced, unsated or stifled, which is not limited to the obsessive acts of inscription and consumption in _Je tu il elle_, illustrated above. We might equally cite the correspondence that leaves Akerman’s distant mother craving more in _News from home_ (Akerman reads her mother’s missives aloud but withholds her own; Natalia Akerman finds the latter as insubstantial as we do, complaining that ‘je suis restée sur ma faim’). Then there is _Histoires d’Amérique_, whose recurrent concerns are encapsulated in its subtitle, _Food, Family and Philosophy_. Ehrenberg (who shares his surname with Akerman’s grandmother) recounts his emigration to America. After some years revelling in his newfound freedom, he tells us, ‘I lost my appetite’. He cannot stop thinking of his family, who perished in the war. Language is affected: ‘Conversations left me with a nasty taste in my mouth’, we learn. In Akerman’s work, underpinned by familial

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40 Photograph from Akerman 2013: 51.
anxieties, the crucial ability to distinguish between hunger and appetite is diminished at the same time that linguistic structures lose their cogency – and palatability.

‘Je n’ai pas envie de manger mais j’ai faim’, Akerman announces in Ma mère rit (2013: 111). Sometimes, eating is merely an urge requiring instantaneous fulfilment, reflected in the infantile immediacy of J’ai faim, j’ai froid’s title that harks back to the third part of Je tu il elle in which conversation comes second to sandwiches (and sex), and the protagonist limits herself to a monosyllabic ‘J’ai faim!’ followed by an equally curt ‘J’ai soif!’ (Figure 36). It is not long before an urge evolves into a compulsion, however, and during these childish attacks of appetite, hunger never seems to be sated. The girl who demands food in J’ai faim, j’ai froid constantly requires more, while in Je tu il elle, one laden slice of bread is gulped down only for a second to be demanded to replace it: ‘Encore!’.

Figure 36: Compulsive eating in J’ai faim, j’ai froid and Je tu il elle

The compulsion continues. Towards the end of Ma mère rit, Akerman pays a local restaurant an unscheduled visit. Rattled by a pharmacist’s refusal to dispense her medication without a prescription, she consumes ‘quatre pizzas d’affilées’ (2013: 186). This ingestive urgency finds its counterpart in La Folie Almayer. Nina is left unsatiated by the inadequate meals served at her school (Friday, for example, is ‘maigre’). ‘J’avais faim… tout le temps’, she tells us. Expelled when her mentor fails to pay her fees, her first action is to enter a restaurant and, casting etiquette aside, ravenously devour a bowl of soup (Figure 37).
What we have here is consumption as excess. In the following, I examine how, once again, this surfeit of sustenance engenders an unsettling awareness of mortality as Akerman homes in on specific foodstuffs to restore materiality to the rien.

Alimentary excess

Food, in Akerman, is not only more than it seems; it is often too much. Her foodstuffs, however small and ostensibly insignificant, are excessive. They rather overcompensate, it would seem, for a breakdown in linguistic expression. In Là-bas, the recurring ‘riz et des carottes’ are intended to calm her stomach and resolve other ailments, left uniterated (‘faire disparaître mes crampes et tout le reste’). Yet these bland, repetitive meals are symptomatic of a pathological lack of self-sufficiency. Even the staples – ‘du pain, du beurre, du café, du lait’ – that guarantee ‘un minimum d’ordre, un minimum de vie’ elude her. Obsessive consumption, inadequately expressed, is not, we conclude, conducive to a life well lived.

In such excesses, we again uncover an implicit relation between food and mortality, for compulsive eating is equally linked to a sickening loss of appetite. In La Folie Almayer, Nina’s cravings are associated with nausea, so that, presented with food, she tells us, ‘mon estomac se retournait’. Akerman’s bout of unrestrained pizza-eating in Ma mère rit ends, inevitably, in a ‘mal au ventre’ (2013: 186). Indeed, the book is strewn with sullied appetites. As her mother’s health deteriorates, the recalcitrant stomachs multiply in a chronic process of ressassement. Thus, we
encounter a series of ‘mal au coeur’ or ‘haut-le-coeur’ that, suggesting an affliction that is equal parts metabolic and affective, intensifies as the novel progresses (ibid.: 38; 66; 77; 113; 128; 130 [repeated twice in a single sentence]; 157 [repeated five times in the space of a sentence]).

Sometimes, the bond between excessive appetite and death is more jarring still. Consider Akerman’s protagonist in Saute ma ville: she wolfs down her spaghetti with apparent gusto (Figure 38) – knowing full well that, moments later, she will stage her own death.

Figure 38: Food as a precursor to death in Saute ma ville

It seems entirely apposite to argue that the compulsive filling of the mouth effectively stifles language – and, in particular, dialogue – altogether, of which more in due course. For the time being, I simply wish to suggest that traces of plenty are tainted with the dangers of excess, and generate revulsion in lieu of appetite. In Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, Heinrich (Helmut Griem) invites Anna to dinner at his home. Afterwards, he comments that she ate very quickly. ‘Oui, je n’avais pas faim, il y avait trop’, explains Anna. Later, espying a vacant table strangely laden with leftover food in a station restaurant, her hunger evaporates instantly. ‘Je crois que je n’ai plus tellement faim’, she tells her companion, Ida (Figure 39).
Given the film’s undercurrent of Holocaust memory, reactivated by the encounter with Ida, a family friend (the latter revisits its ‘malheurs’ in some detail), this sudden recoil in the face of (hastily abandoned) plenty recalls other, equally abrupt departures – still more ‘vieilles images d’évacuation’ (Akerman 2004: 102), perhaps – but also Akerman’s observation, in interview, that, following their liberation from the concentration camps, ‘[t]ant de gens sont morts en se remettant trop vite à manger’ (Brenez 2011: 27). Rapid consumption triggered by exceptional need can be fatal. Indeed, it is worrying to note how exaggerated appetites, more generally, are inextricable from the horrors of the past. Take, for example, Akerman’s recurring childhood nightmares of Jewish persecution, one of which features a famine that can be curbed only by another form of excessive consumption, in this case cannibalism: ‘il n’y avait rien à manger et donc, on mangeait les gens’ (ibid.: 31). Here, the act of eating evokes the unspeakable.

Like language, then, there is something disordered and extremely distressing about Akerman’s foodstuffs. Like many aspects of her œuvre, they appear to be so much less and yet so much more than they should be. They are ‘la petite chose à côté’, the ça that seems to conceal something weightier and altogether more overwhelming, all the while unseen and unspoken. In some cases, food is utterly formless – in Portrait d’une jeune fille, Michèle asks deserter Paul (Julien Rassam) what the canteen fare was like in the army. ‘C’était du genre difficile à reconnaître’,
he replies, ‘plutôt pâteux’. More often than not, though, it exceeds itself through ceaseless, sickening repetition and relentless detail. Who can forget Jeanne Dielman’s daily side-dish of potatoes that, once scorched, escalates into murder? Noting the imbalance between the banality of the object and the disproportionate attention it is accorded, critics have borrowed the vocabulary of crime fiction to describe it. Frédéric Sojcher observes how Akerman manages to ‘créer un suspens avec des pommes de terre qui brûlent’ (1999: 143). Margulies deduces that when Jeanne’s potatoes fail to meet her exacting standards, ‘the evidence must disappear completely, leaving no residue’ (1996: 77). They are disturbing because they are so visible and, as the tropes of crime fiction decree, overvisibility equates to culpability – and agency. Surely these potatoes must be… more than just potatoes, we surmise, just as Narboni’s viewing of Je tu il elle and its foregrounding of overconsumption leads him to discern ‘une insistante tension, c’est qu’il doit s’agir dans ce film d’autre chose que de se lever, se coucher, manger du sucre etc.’ (1977: 9).

I want to analyse these obtrusive comestibles that prove so difficult to swallow, that exceed themselves in a relentless process of ressassement. Akerman’s ambivalent foodstuffs, I suggest, are her alimentary equivalent of the distal demonstrative. The following considers three pathological foodstuffs that form the object of Akerman’s distal gesture to ask: when is a food not a food but a ça? I start with the egg.

*Bad eggs...*

Whenever an egg appears in Akerman, the question of motherhood is never far behind. In a telephone conversation between mother and daughter in *Une famille à Bruxelles*, the ‘œuf sur le plat’ provides mutual sustenance (1998: 12). The daughter eats to encourage her mother, recently widowed, to do likewise, and the mother takes pleasure, while eating, in the thought that she is sharing the experience with her child. It is rare, however, that an egg brings so much comfort in Akerman’s films (and, indeed, this happy scene is overshadowed by the book’s repeated evocations of appetites upset by illness and grief). Twice we watch as the eponymous Jeanne Dielman labours in the kitchen, breaking and beating eggs for the formulaic suppers she will serve her son. These are meals that require her to handle the eggs in their raw state, breading schnitzels and kneading a meat loaf into shape (Figure 40). The eggs
provide the viscosity needed to make the component ingredients adhere and hold their shape, and there is something distasteful in viewing the unsparing detail of the process; something that leaves the viewer not so much with a memory of the egg-as-container or, indeed, the egg-as-constituent, but of a slippery and decidedly formless something in-between. Sticky and altogether rather repellent, it does not leave us yearning for haptic involvement. It is a food that, in combination with a gaze that cannot be averted, brings us, as David Trotter would put it, to a certain ‘threshold of disgust’ (2010: 50). As the egg-as-container is evacuated, any lingering alliance between maternity and nourishment is similarly eroded. And as Jeanne’s routines dissolve, other foods associated with the mother are tainted. Her final cup of coffee before committing murder elicits a swift grimace and an off-kilter pose: the milk is off.

Figure 40: Jeanne Dielman’s threshold of disgust
These unsettling associations are to recur in *J'ai faim, j'ai froid*, ostensibly a carefree homage to the *Nouvelle Vague*. Once again, an egg intrudes, awakening worrying connotations of infiltration and upset. The two young female protagonists are invited to spend the night at the home of the man who has paid for their meal (Esmoris Hanibal). One of the girls, her appetite seemingly never sated, gets up in the night to prepare a plate of scrambled eggs. In her haste, she leaves them practically uncooked. As she scoops up the half-liquid eggs (Figure 41), we hear an agonised cry in the background. The host has seized the opportunity to make a move (albeit consensual) on the second girl. The eating of semi-rung eggs thus coincides with a rapid, and presumably painful, loss of virginity. The calendar image of an infant, apparently eating, that is visible over the first girl’s shoulder only adds to the incongruity of the situation as it mirrors the motion of her hand from plate to mouth.

![Figure 41: Semi-cooked eggs in *J'ai faim, j'ai froid*](image)

In *Demain on déménage*, meanwhile, the egg is not associated with the multiple chickens that Charlotte’s mother roasts throughout the film. The latter, in fact, produce nothing but smoke, itself – given the film’s relentless undertow of Holocaust memories – a highly disturbing reminder of other, historic practices of incineration; a link of which Akerman was purportedly unaware during filming (Kaganski 2004: para. 1 of 6). Here, the egg offers a rare instance, in a film replete with gapingly empty fridges, of food glimpsed in real estate for rent (Figure 42).
There is, in Akerman’s oeuvre, quite patently a broader thematic resonance to be discerned between vacant fridges and stories of survival. Her *Autoportrait* chapter title, ‘Le frigidaire est vide. On peut le remplir’ (2004: 7), is a line lifted from *Demain on déménage*, which dramatises her family history; her installation centring on the journal written by her grandmother, a Holocaust victim, is entitled *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*; and spartanly appointed fridges feature in films other than *Demain on déménage*, chief among them *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, *L’Homme à la valise* and *La Captive* (Figure 43), leading Schmid to identify these disenfranchised domestic appliances as yet another trace of the ‘concentrationary universe amidst a deceptively banal domestic context’ (2010: 165).

My interest, however, lies in their contents, meagre or mouldering, and I find, in the latter’s maternal associations, a further link to the parental disavowal of the past that is, throughout Akerman’s work, indivisible from historical atrocities. Yet again, *Demain on déménage* offers up the egg as a container that confounds the traditional
preconceptions of motherly sustenance. It has been left behind by a woman who has also abandoned her husband and child. Charlotte remarks that it might be construed as a symbol of rebellion (‘un oeuf à la coque. C’est ça aussi, la révolte’). Evidently well past its best-before date, it is also subtly revolting: a source of nutrition transformed into a barren reminder of maternity disavowed; a distal ça evacuated of relatio so that it might (d)evolve into something else, something unspeakable. As in Jeanne Dielman, its forlorn companions – a lone pot of yoghurt and some sliced cheese – are dairy derivatives gone bad.

The egg signals a loss of something. At best, this is a loss of appetite (as we have seen, one of Akerman’s cherished themes); a possibility that Un divan à New York mines for comedic value. Pseudo-psychoanalyst Béatrice (Juliette Binoche) assiduously takes notes as her client, Campton (Richard Jenkins), exhumes bitter memories of his divorce, tying the pain of rejection to the smell of fried eggs. Later, she too is afflicted by the unbearable odour of eggs (Figure 44). While her friend Anne (Stephanie Buttle) prepares an omelette in the kitchen, the pair exchanges thoughts on transference. As the eggs cook and the room slowly fills with smoke from an unattended toaster, Béatrice objects. ‘I don’t know how you can eat eggs for breakfast,’ she says. ‘They’re indigestible. The smell of them so early in the morning… ah… it turns my stomach.’

Figure 44: Indigestible eggs in Un divan à New York

At worst, however, the egg serves as an index of irreversible loss. It is linked to death. Faced with the prospect of her mother’s demise in Ma mère rit, Akerman
repairs to the hospital canteen. At first, she tells us, ‘j’avais terriblement envie de manger’, and orders an omelette. When it arrives, however, ‘j’ai eu un haut-le-coeur’ (2013: 77). The analogy is translated to the screen in *La Captive* (Figure 45). As the film draws to a close, Simon takes Ariane to a gloomy seaside hotel. She appears oddly distracted. When he asks her what she would like to eat, she reels off a list containing two orders of eggs: ‘Des oeufs brouillés, du saumon, de la salade, des oeufs à la coque’. The eggs arrive, Ariane disappears. We presume that she has used the time required to deliver them to take her own life.

Figure 45: Belated eggs in *La Captive*

Eggs, we conclude, are a fraught source of sustenance, indicative of a loss that exceeds them.

In this excessiveness of the egg, I find curious compatibilities with the painter, René Magritte, whose ‘strangeness’ Catherine Fowler draws upon to support her argument for Akerman’s ‘Belgianicity’ (2003: 84), but which I invoke in the light of a (conveniently alimentary) analogy that Akerman applies to *Jeanne Dielman*: ‘il y a beaucoup de gens qui me demandent si cette femme a vraiment existé. Alors je leur réponds par la tarte à la crème de Magritte’ (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 41). What is it about this painter’s art that she finds so relevant to her own? The answer, I contend, lies in the quality that makes it ‘la tarte à la crème’: its excessive familiarity. Its inscrutable focus on the everyday renders its subjects strange, just as Akerman’s
insistence on Jeanne’s routines transforms them into something utterly beyond the domestic.

Again, the story starts with an egg. Magritte remembers waking in a flurry of nocturnal confusion and glancing over to a birdcage only to visualise, behind its bars, not a bird but an egg. He summarises the sensation thus:

Une magnifique erreur me fit voir dans la cage un oeuf au lieu de l’oiseau. Je tenais là un nouveau secret poétique étonnant car le choc que je ressentis était provoqué précisément par l’affinité de deux objets: la cage et l’oeuf, alors que précédemment, je provoquais ce choc en faisant se rencontrer des objets sans parenté aucune. (Magritte 1979a: 143-44, emphasis in original)

The shock was to produce two paintings (1932/1933) entitled Les Affinités électives (Figure 46).41

Figure 46: Incarcerated eggs: Magritte’s Les Affinités électives

41 There is a discrepancy between the date that Magritte accords his dream of the ‘oeuf en cage’ (1936) and the dates of his two paintings of the experience (1932 and 1933). As it seems logical that the dream should precede the artwork, I assume that the difference derives from a lapse in memory rather than any deliberately Surrealist tactic on Magritte’s part designed to expand his ‘magnifique erreur’ and further subvert cause and effect.

42 1932 painting, left, reproduced from the Christie’s auction website (www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=4856987); image of the 1933 painting, right, owned by the Collection Étienne Périer in Paris, is taken from Paquet 1993: 26.
Henceforth, Magritte’s art was to be informed by this moment of visual transference (arguably also by an enduring fondness for literary transference; the title is derived from an 1809 novel by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*). The shock he experiences through ‘l’affinité de deux objets’ strongly parallels the unease generated by Akerman’s eggs as they (d)evolve from substance through substitute to ça, and goes some way towards explaining why, when asked whether Dielman was real, she chooses to respond with Magritte.

However, it is not the ‘œuf en cage’ that Akerman most explicitly references, but another Magritte motif. I turn to his recurring index of otherness: the apple.

... *bad apples*...

Akerman offers us two direct homages to Magritte’s disconcerting fruit. The first evokes his (practically iconic) 1964 painting, *Le Fils de l’homme*. In *Portrait d’une jeune fille*, Akerman stages a section of Michèle’s peregrinations on the streets of Brussels, taking advantage of the urban décor to shift attention from the protagonists to the periphery. Michèle passes an unidentified building, Paul in tow. The walls are adorned with chronophotographic stills by Muybridge. Their heads have been replaced – most strikingly by a large red apple (Figure 47). The (elective) affinity with *Le Fils de l’homme* is plain, and the layering of figure and foodstuff, like Magritte’s canvas, confounds. The human forms in the foreground are aped, but also partially erased, by the bodily representation in the background in which the face, as locus of expression, has been usurped. We might briefly recall, too, Agamben’s assertion that such chronophotographic images testify to a dissociation with motion, ‘a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere’ (1993: 150). In her inclusion of a backdrop that distracts from her purported subject, Michèle, Akerman certainly nudges our attention towards a portrait that points away from the self, no longer ‘jeune fille’ but foreign hybrid. The introduction of the apple effaces, and, in the process, inserts an unsettling *otherness* into Akerman’s narrative.
More disturbing still is Akerman’s homage to Magritte’s 1964 contribution to his ‘ceci n’est pas…’ series in which the familiarity of everyday objects is negated by an accompanying text. Her *Lettre d’une cinéaste* incorporates a direct reference to the Magritte painting (Figure 48). A hand places an orange on a table. ‘Ceci n’est pas une pomme’, the voiceover announces. The orange is swiftly replaced with an apple. ‘Ceci non plus’, the voice continues. The action is repeated, three times in total, in a visual *ressasement* doubly underscored by an off-screen voice intoning Gertrude Stein’s well-worn mantra, ‘Une rose est une rose est une rose…’.

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43 Detail from Muybridge’s *Male in pelvis cloth running at a half-mile gait (shoes)* reproduced from Plate 60 of his *Human and Animal Locomotion Photographs* (c. 1887), included in Adam 2014: 379. Image of *Le Fils de l’homme* (1964), owned by the Harry Torczyner Collection in New York, sourced from the Magritte Foundation website gallery (www.magritte.be/galerie).

44 From ‘Sacred Emily’ in *Geography and Plays* (Stein 1922: 187, line 318: ‘Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.’). In a pleasing parallel with Akerman’s food-rich films, the same poem also offers a litany of insistent – and active – apples (ibid.: 184, lines 216-18: ‘Apples./Apples./Apples went.’), not to mention a number of grammatically incongruous eggs (ibid.: 178, line 4: ‘Egg be takers.’ and lines 10-11: ‘Egg in places./Egg in few insists.’).
The analogy is applied to another of Akerman’s self-deprecating forays into self-portraiture; when asked to summarise her films, she describes both *Lettre d’une cinéaste* and *Cha par Cha* simply as ‘*A rose is a rose is a rose* et ceci n’est pas une pomme’ (Brenez 2011: 17, emphasis in original). Otherness is somehow *autobiographical*, we conclude, as alterity is applied, via borrowed citations and the image of the apple, to the authorial self.

Akerman acknowledges that she is not alone in appropriating Magritte to question the nature of reality versus (self-)representation; a tactic she deems ‘assez vieux’ (Dubroux, Giraud and Skorecki 1977: 41). Where her appropriation of this hackneyed frame of reference differs is in its provision for the *co-existence* of real and imaginary – ‘ceci n’est pas une pomme mais c’est une pomme quand même’ (ibid., emphasis in original) – that acknowledges the simultaneous materiality and immateriality of her cinematic medium. Like her eggs, Akerman’s apples disturb because they are always also something *beyond* themselves.

Already, the apple serves, repeatedly, to indicate away from the self to something ineluctably other. The question that remains after contemplating Magritte’s painting is: if this is not an apple, then what is it? Viewing Akerman’s *ressassement*-ridden restagings of the Magritte, I argue that her apples reframe the query thus: if this

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is not an apple, then what is ‘this’? – and that she answers the question with ‘that’. In divesting her apples of unambivalent indexicality, Akerman effectively transforms them into evacuated demonstratives, just as her eggs (d)evolve into empty (maternal) shells or contents without containers. There is again a gesture involved; a ‘pointing’ that, divorced from a stable self, serves not to locate the object in the proximal (‘this’) but to distract attention towards a distal elsewhere.

I am intrigued by the role of the apple in *La Chambre*, Akerman’s 1972 short made with Babette Mangolte when they found themselves with film-stock to spare after shooting *Hotel Monterey* (1972). Mangolte recalls that they used it to make a film ‘à la Michael Snow’ (Mangolte 2004: 174), having spent the best part of half a day imbibing the vertiginous effects of the experimental Canadian’s eight-hour *La Région centrale* (1971) in a New York cinema (ibid.). In Gustavo Beck and Leonardo Luiz Ferreira’s film-interview, *Chantal Akerman, de cá* (2010), Akerman also cites the camera technique in Snow’s 1969 *<---> (Back and Forth)* as a major influence. The outcome is a twelve-minute short consisting of circular pans shot from a fixed point in the centre of a modest apartment (Figure 49).

Figure 49: *La Chambre*’s repeated camera-pan
It is hardly what you would call an action film; indeed, the only action we witness, in a film entirely without interaction, is the eating of an apple. The camera swings sedately past the lone inhabitant, played by Akerman, lying in bed. En route, it offers us a repeated shot of the breakfast table, laid out with crockery, bread and a number of oranges and apples. It repeats the course, following the same, unhurried trajectory until Akerman sits up and takes an apple from her bedside table.

The camera now repeatedly changes direction, panning right, then left like a pendulum, the apple-eating exerting a seemingly centrifugal force on its motion. As the speed of consumption increases to a rate reminiscent of the obsessive spoon-feeding of caster sugar in *Je tu il elle*, the camera attunes itself to the new rhythm, increasing the tempo of its alternating arcs and entering into what can only be termed a dance with an avid act of ingestion. Yet what significance might we derive from these choreographed gestures, ‘captés sans être révélés complètement’ according to Mangolte (ibid.)? On one level, occluded action and synchronised movement serve to generate a sense of time passing, of time being taken away from the spectator (‘I want people to feel the time that it takes, which is not the time that it really takes’, as Akerman has put it [Rosen 2004, para. 24 of 56]). On another, however, they also give us time – time in which we are able to concentrate on ‘la petite chose à côté’. The *ressassement* of the revolving camera offers us ample opportunity to revisit the breakfast table, situated diagonally opposite the bed (Figure 50). And it is here that we note the arrangement of crockery.

Figure 50: Coffee cups and invisible others
There are two cups, evoking two mouths, yet the eating of an apple ensures that the secondary presence is never audibly substantiated through dialogue.46

The distal gesture of the camera, combined with the act of consumption, recalls Agamben’s description of language as a ‘gag’ (1993: 156; 1999a: 78), ‘something put in someone’s mouth to keep him from speaking and, then, the actor’s improvisation to make up for an impossibility of speaking’ (1999a: 78). Food, after all, does not simply sustain: it also occupies the mouth – and precludes speech. The apple, in La Chambre, serves to suppress dialogue and to give the viewer time to focus on an invisible other that is corroborated by the small objects nearby, but located elsewhere. It stifles language and in so doing, summons up a covert presence. A note in French stuck to the wall, only partially legible, confirms (and genders) it (Figure 51). It announces a woman’s departure in search of food. ‘Chantal, je suis allée à [?] pour manger…’, it commences. Yet it also testifies, once again, to a destructive passage of time. Mottled, yellowing, tattered, this missive from the missing may have been there for years. It is not a memo so much as a memento mori.

Figure 51: Memo as memento mori

In its intimation of mortality, this ominous apple’s genealogy can be plotted back to Saute ma ville (while also foreshadowing the scrambled eggs and concomitant vanishing that bring La Captive to a close). Akerman’s protagonist keeps her mouth occupied by an apple even as she seals the kitchen door in preparation for her suicide (Figure 52).

46 In Chantal Akerman, de cà, Akerman confides that ‘La Chambre used to have a soundtrack, but I lost it’. Rather than replace her accompanying voiceover, she decided that she liked the film without it.
The apple’s failure to sustain is likewise underlined in a scene from *Un jour Pina a demandé* that makes for excruciating viewing. Although the choreography comes courtesy of Bausch, the subject matter maps seamlessly onto Akerman’s own. Her unflinching camera watches as a member of Bausch’s dance troupe battles an apple, tearing chunks of flesh away from the core with her teeth and dropping them onto her plate (Figure 53). When she is done, she spears a piece with a fork, holds it aloft, emits an inchoate cry and stuffs it into her mouth. She repeats the motion *ad nauseam*, leaving herself no time to chew and swallow. When her mouth’s capacity is exceeded, her misery intensifies. She flicks away the remaining forkfuls of fruit and spits out the contents of her mouth. No part of the apple has been ingested. Her appetite, it transpires, is not sited in hunger but in a desire for dialogue. ‘I want people! People! I want people! I WANT PEOPLE!’ , she cries. We cannot escape the sense that this woman – unfed, unloved – is done for.

In this inability to ingest an apple that is also an inability to converse, we again find an echo of Agamben’s ‘gag’ that is a ‘gesture of a non-making of sense in language’ tied to an impossibility of speech (1993: 156). ‘Il y a des mots comme ça’, Akerman opines wearily in *Ma mère rit*, ‘il n’y a rien à faire ils restent en travers de la gorge’ (2013: 58).
With the referent effaced, the ça proves impossible to swallow. In its denial of language, the apple, I suggest, assumes the place of this ça. An egg might appear an obvious candidate for ambivalence – its consumption does, after all, entail the denial of one life to sustain another. Yet even Akerman’s seemingly more innocuous apples come burdened with uncertainty and anxiety. They, too, are a ‘that’.

I end my alimentary excursion with one final foodstuff that initiates a silent moment of revulsion to assume the place of discourse. My final port of call is the pea.

... and bad peas

Of all the fleeting encounters in Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, none captures my attention more than Anna’s interaction with a lone plate of peas.47 Walking down a hotel

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47 Although Magritte did not, regrettably, leave behind a canvas conveniently entitled ‘Ceci n’est pas un petit pois’, he does evoke the pea in a letter to Michel Foucault dated 23 May, 1966. Having read Les Mots et les choses, he picks the philosopher up on the difference between resemblance and similitude, and the relation of each to the sphere of the (in)visible (Magritte 1979b: 639). This discussion evidently exceeds the gestural remit of this thesis; however, readers may delve deeper into Magritte and Foucault’s dialogue, peas and all, in Chapter 3 of Joseph J. Tanke’s study of Foucault’s philosophy of art (2009); G. S. Evans’ review of Foucault’s essay, Ceci n’est pas une pipe (2005); and Silvano Levy’s article, ‘Foucault on Magritte on Resemblance’, in The Modern Language Review (1990).
corridor in Essen (which, fittingly, is also the noun for ‘food’ and the verb ‘to eat’ in German), her eye is caught by a pair of men’s shoes and a tray of leftovers outside one of the guest-rooms. Anna stops, bends down to examine the shoes and then picks distractedly at the heap of peas, pushing a few into her mouth before throwing the rest down in a brusque gesture of disgust (Figure 54).

![Image of Anna inspecting a pair of shoes and a tray of peas](image.jpg)

**Figure 54: An index of the absent guest: peas in *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna***

On the surface of it, these peas are an index of the absent guest, presumably ensconced in his room for the night. Yet there is a problem: as we see from the hinge to the left of the image, this particular door opens *outwards*; a fact that is confirmed when Anna walks back down the corridor the next day, flanked by doors left ajar by cleaning staff (Figure 55). We must conclude that the occupant could not have placed these objects directly outside the door to his room. Which begs the question: who *did* place them there? In one fell swoop, the shoes no longer testify to bodily presence and the peas are transformed into something more than remnants of a transitory visitor logged in the hotel register. Yet again, objects are divested of their banality, ceding to the prospect, in equal measure absurd and alarming, of an invisible, nameless (and shoeless) presence that, barred entry to a room, is presumably wandering the corridors barefoot. And once more, this haunting image of exclusion calls to mind Akerman’s reaction to *D’Est*’s figures of evacuation: ‘c’était donc ça, encore une fois ça’.
Akin to Agamben’s gesture that redefines *Dasein* as displacement, a ‘speechless dwelling in language’ (1999a: 78), these peas, reconfigured as *ça*, point only to an unspeakable absence. Any chance that their inclusion here is arbitrary is negated both by Akerman’s painstakingly specific screenplay (1978: 48), and by the *feuille de service* for the scene in question, which clearly calls for ‘1 plateau avec des restes de repas avec petits pois’ (Figure 56).

Figure 56: *Feuille de service*, complete with plate of peas

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48 From documentation for the shoot held by the Cinémathèque française in Paris (Fonds Romain Goupil 1978), my photograph.
And, notably, the pea will recur as an indicator of exclusion in *L’Homme à la valise*, this time as a side-dish to an involuntary incarceration. Confined to her room by the lowering presence of an unwanted houseguest, the unnamed protagonist places an order for food by phone. The list of emergency provisions includes ‘quatre grosses boîtes de petits pois en conserve’. Somehow, like Akerman’s eggs and apples, the pea exceeds its status as foodstuff to present itself as yet another anguished remainder/reminder.

Drawing on Agamben’s thoughts on gesture, with reference to his related writings on cinema, language, potentiality and repetition, as well as to an expanded conceptualisation of deixis elaborated through Brugmann, I have traced a gestural arc in Akerman’s oeuvre that traverses both her writing and her films. Elucidating her dual preoccupation with *ressassement* and the *rien* of unspeakable memories, I have examined the gesture through its three phases: the displaced proximality of là, the ‘placeholder of nothing’ and space of (bare) survival that unsettles the deictic centre; the mediality of là-bas, the ‘placeholder of nothing’ that holds its subjects in suspension; and the distality of the ça, the abject object that, through a process of evacuation, exceeds its limits as a linguistic placeholder – an Agambenian ‘gag’ – to become both ‘nothing’ and ‘everything’. An approach deriving from Agamben certainly offers rich and revealing resonances with the work of an *écrivain-cinéaste* so profoundly concerned with the *rien*.

However, I find myself questioning Agamben’s conclusion that the gesture, by dint of the displacement that underpins it, has been lost, particularly with regard to the cinematic medium. Do Akerman’s explorations of demonstrative disorder really preclude immediacy and authenticity, leaving us, as Agamben puts it, a ‘victim to interiority’ (1993: 151) and ‘bereft of all that is natural’ (1999a: 83)? Does Akerman’s oeuvre, though suitably ‘obsessed’ by all that is missing (1993: 151), support his conviction that ‘[b]y the end of the nineteenth century the gestures of the bourgeoisie were irretrievably lost’ (ibid.: 149) – an ‘irretrievably’ that lays claims to a state of disenfranchisement that persists into the present? Might we not discern, in Akerman’s demonstrative *ressassement*, an alternative to this denial of gesture-in-the-present? Before bringing this chapter to a close, I consider how Akerman’s excesses might also expose limitations to Agamben’s reading of gesture.
Beyond Agamben? Bringing the gestural arc full-circle

Where Agamben argues that gestures have been irrevocably effaced ‘under the influence of invisible powers’ (ibid.: 151), I counter that Akerman works precisely to turn these invisible influences back on themselves as a means of restituting the gesture. I contend that her three-stage motion of demonstration – proximal, medial and distal – is a reversible one that returns the gesture, full-force, to the body. By allowing for a (violent) return of the ça via the là-bas to the là, Akerman envisages a gestural arc whose rootedness in a process of ressassement makes possible a reclaiming of the gestures of the past within bodies of the present – a possibility that Agamben embraces in his thoughts on repetition (‘The force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was’ [2002: 315]), but does not transfer to his ‘Notes on Gesture’. He makes provision for a Nietzschean eternal return, admittedly, but in a form that merely corroborates a gesture whose every flicker of authenticity must contain an equal, and inseparable, measure of artifice. Gesture, he posits, exists ‘in the final analysis, therefore, solely as theatre’ (1993: 152).

Although Agamben suggests that cinema ‘leads images back into the realm of the gesture’ (ibid.: 153), he nonetheless insists that it has, since the advent of sound, lost its ability to capture an authentic gesture. This seems curiously at odds with his contention, with regard to difference and repetition, that there is an equation (and a reversible one, no less) to be drawn between cinema and memory, which in turn allows an engagement with the real:

Memory is, so to speak, the organ of reality’s modalization; it is that which can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real. If you think about it, that’s also the definition of cinema. Doesn’t cinema always do just that, transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real? (2002: 316)

We are offered a vision of cinema-as-memory that combines reality and possibility. This it achieves precisely through repetition, illustrated using Arendt’s definition of the concentration camps as ‘the principle of “everything is possible”,’ even the horror
we are now being shown. It is in this extreme sense that repetition restores possibility’ (ibid.). I posit that Akerman, in her artistic appropriation of linguistic modes of demonstration, coupled with a relentless politics of ressassement explicitly linked to memory (and a memory of atrocity, at that), reclaims this possibility. While Agamben believes that only silent cinema might ‘trace the magic circle in which humanity sought, for the last time, to evoke what was slipping through its fingers forever’ (1993: 152), I contend that Akerman, in her harnessing of a demonstrative tied to a cyclical ressassement, offers a ‘magic circle’ of her own that reunites the poles of demonstration and restores gesture even as she endeavours to establish a voice to counter ‘le silence du camp’ (Akerman 2004: 122).

Akerman’s reversal of the demonstrative to come full-circle, I believe, offers us a gesture that extends beyond Agamben’s definition of it as irretreivable. Where he reasons that gesture ‘is the display of mediation’ (1993: 155, emphasis in original), and can thus only ever provide a medium, or a means, whereby ‘there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting’ (ibid.: 154), Akerman’s gesture succeeds in both mediating and producing meaning. Gestures that Agamben deems forever ‘held in suspense’ (ibid.: 155) Akerman liberates anew by releasing them from the medium of suspension she defines as essentially transitory: a medial là-bas that is merely a temporary host to a subject travelling between a là and a ça. I find here ample reason to challenge Agamben’s conclusion that gesture cannot extend beyond ‘the communication of a potential to be communicated’, and I put forward a gestural arc derived from the linguistic act of demonstration drawn by Akerman to challenge the premise that gesture ‘has nothing to say, because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as a pure potential for mediation’ (ibid.: 157).

To end, then, I bring the gesture full-circle, mapping its arc through one of Akerman’s films to demonstrate the limitations of an Agambenian framework of gesture that is too swift to dismiss the power of repetition as a viable – and vital – means of restitution.

‘Au-delà. Peut-être en deçà’: brutal re-embodiments

I shall examine three shots from Akerman’s documentary, Sud. Specifically, having charted the gesture through its three-stage motion away from the body – proximal,
medial and distal – I wish to show how Akerman also reverses that gesture, thus providing a *return* to that body.

Akerman had found herself increasingly attracted to the southernmost states of the U.S., partly through a literary affinity with Faulkner and Baldwin, but also through the by-now familiar twin obsessions, ‘à cause de la cuisine. Et du silence’ (2004: 116) – a silence synonymous with ‘le silence du camp’ (ibid.: 122). Her focus was to evolve, however. Inspired by a news report on the lynching of James Byrd Jr., Akerman headed south with her camera just months after the event to film the aftermath. The documentary features a good number of her characteristic long takes and pans, interspersed with a series of talking heads that allow us gradually and painfully to piece together the story of Byrd’s murder. Over the course of the film, the way in which we view the landscape undergoes a radical change as, little by little, its features are ‘tainted’ by the knowledge of recent events (Schmid 2010: 111; MacDonald 2005: 260). Around twenty minutes into the film, a relatively brief shot of a road is presented (Figure 57), captured in the distal gesture of a camera mounted on the back of a slow-moving vehicle as it manoeuvres through peaceful countryside; a seemingly benign *ça*.

![Figure 57: The rolling road in *Sud*: a seemingly benign *ça*](image)

There is nothing particularly exceptional about this scene. Indeed, the smooth motion of the vehicle, the monotonous greenery of the verges, the slight blurring of the pitted tarmac unwinding in front of us, have a soothing, soporific quality to them, much like
the rhythmic gestures of Jeanne Dielman as she carries out the small, repetitive tasks of the everyday.

Although this similarity should alert us to the possibility of breakdown, the full implications of the filmic gesture in *Sud* nonetheless take us by surprise. Akerman’s transition to the medial *là-bas* is a telling one. The film’s penultimate shot adopts her trademark frontal camera position, interviewing a neighbour who witnessed the full horror of the lynching’s aftermath: the body parts and personal effects scattered the length of a three-mile stretch of road after white supremacists shackled Byrd to their pick-up truck and dragged him, dying, to the local cemetery. Throughout the neighbour’s account, Akerman’s camera retains an impassive stance, its horizontal motions kept to a minimum so as to hold the speaker in suspension between the sides of the frame. As he gesticulates to his left and right, recounting the agonising details of Byrd’s protracted death, drawing circles with his hands to describe the police markings that isolated the bodily fragments left behind en route, the camera steadfastly refuses to bow to the sensationalism of the point-of-view shot (Figure 58).

![Figure 58: The in-frame *là-bas*](image)

There are no cuts here but the borders of the shot that occasionally truncate the speaker’s arms, and the ones we hear recreated in words, those that cut apart another living body. This exclusion of the distal that suspends the speaker in a medium-shot and within the medium transforms his movements into occluded gestures. By
focusing on this interim space, his narrative of physical anguish remains bound to the limits of his own gestures, and, consequently, his own body, twinned by analogy with Byrd’s tethered body and its physical fate.

And then, Akerman does something even more horrifying. She offers us a point-of-view shot through a visual *ressassement*. The image cuts back to the same, slow view of the road unfolding behind a truck, only this time, the journey starts earlier, takes longer and is cut off before it reaches its destination (Figure 59).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 59: Back on the road: a violently re-embodied là**

As police markings proliferate, the camera gesture experienced as distal in the first instance is brutally converted into the proximal as we realise that we are occupying the same position as the dying Byrd. The same shot has switched from the *ça* to bring us face-to-face with the là. From a position of relative distance, we are forced to re-embody a passage towards death as we traverse a landscape now haunted by flesh and bone. It is with justification that critics dub this one of the most violent scenes in Akerman’s oeuvre (Schmid 2010: 113; Schmuckli 2004: 25). Even Vincent Dieutre was to admit to being perturbed by a shot in which ‘toute la violence du monde […] se dessine lentement’ (2004: 211). It is an image that, through successive narrative layering, exceeds its formal composition to become an index of suffering, and then inflicts that suffering on the spectator. Over the course of the film, Akerman has demonstrated how a single image can be transformed from actuality to potentiality (‘comme si toute image fonctionnait comme un possible’, to cite Lavin [2003: 17]);
how ‘le peuple qui manque’ (Deleuze 1985: 283) that haunts a landscape by association can be mobilised through the process of ressassement; and how a camera can apply these associations of existential annihilation bodily to the viewer through a transfer of gesture from the distal to the proximal.

In this transition from third to first person that is also an experience of historical atrocity made materially manifest, we must submit to the frightening possibility that proximal and distal are more closely connected than we might think – and that they may even be mutually evocative. It is a fine dividing line, Akerman suggests, that separates ‘being-the-that’ from ‘being-the-there’. Revisiting the screenplay for Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, we find a protagonist who has ‘l’air hors de tout’. She is beyond both the here-and-there, and the ‘that’, or, as the script has it: ‘Au-delà. Peut-être en deçà’ (1982b: 16). The coalition of proximal and distal comes to a head in Ma mère rit. When Akerman visits her mother in hospital, the older woman raises a fist against her, telling her ‘avec une violence telle que j’ai cru tomber’ that her blouse is dirty (2013: 47). Shocked, Akerman can only assume that, despite all the stifling expressions of physical affection lavished on her, her mother had long been harbouring this desire to hit her, concluding that ‘elle avait dû retenir cette violence pendant tant d’années. Que tous ces baisers qu’elle m’avait donnés ou arrachés n’étaient là que pour ça’ (ibid.).

Once again, Agamben’s thoughts on repetition are called to mind. ‘The force and the grace of repetition,’ he says, ‘the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was’ (2002: 315-16). By reversing the gestural arc so that it performs a return to the body, Akerman opens up images’ ability to render memory and the past physically perceptible, for, as she states, ‘[I]l y a une expérience physique qui est liée aussi à une expérience émotionnelle, et pas uniquement mentale’ (Lavin, Joyeux, Borgia and Beghin 2003: 23). In Akerman’s gesture, a pointing-away from the self and a pointing-towards the other can collude to offer a return: a pointing-back to the self through the other. Confronting the ça effects a reversion to the embodied là – and perhaps even to the immediacy of the ever-absent ici, for this re-embodiment is of the order of first-hand perception; a vital experience, not a vicarious one. In these shots from Sud, Akerman’s politics of ressassement reach a peak as she makes us bask in the pleasure of the distal gesture only to turn it back, via the brutally suspended là-bas, upon our own bodies so that we might feel it: ‘le plaisir et son frémissement, jusqu’au doute même de ce plaisir,

Summary

Quand on fait du cinéma, c’est aussi ça. Une sorte de bulle. Je dis ça, mais c’est pas seulement ça. On se lève plus facilement comme si les gestes quotidiens sortaient de leur quotidienneté, et devenaient moins pénibles.
(Akerman 2004: 108)

Agamben’s thoughts on gesture find significant resonance in Akerman’s work, both written and cinematic; an opus that, like Agamben’s own, is grounded in language, in general, and the demonstrative, in particular. Keen to ensure that her images are neither idolatrous nor possessive of their subjects, Akerman finds vindication in the written word. Through her own difficulties with writing, she cultivates a kinship with Kafka’s minor literature through Deleuze and Guattari, taking from it the idea that an enduring attitude of non-dominance and non-possession might allow the collective to be discerned through the individual. From Levinas’ notion of the face-à-face, meanwhile, she resolves a difficulty with representation, deriving a frontal approach to image-making that empowers the other while at the same time enabling forms of vision that, because rooted in language, exceed the ocular (and any concomitant accusations of idolatry and annexation).

Thus equipped, the écrivain-cinéaste harnesses her words and her camera in a gestural arc of demonstration, supported by an inexorable process of ressassement, that permits her to excavate the rien that substitutes for embodied memory in a family haunted by the Holocaust. Akerman turns to three demonstrative shifters. She points away from the self through the proximal là, a placeholder of nothing at the heart of her place-deixis yet at one remove from the ici, thus establishing a deictic centre based on displacement. Her medial gesture continues to point away from the body through a further placeholder of nothing, là-bas – a state of suspension that constantly draws attention to its own mediation and irresolution. As the gesture expands outwards, Akerman shifts her focus to point towards the other, opening up the distality of ça, not so much a placeholder as a ‘nothing’ in itself, evacuating her
objects of demonstration in order to gain access to the missing: invisible figures whose immateriality can be felt and whose speechlessness speaks volumes.

Even in elaborating an expanded framework of deixis, we are confronted with its limits. Akerman’s demonstrative shifters exceed the pronominal to inject a spatial indeterminacy that is equally adverbal, while undermining the origo on which deixis depends – a possibility not fully accounted for by Agamben and Brugmann. However, her demonstrative gesture most radically challenges Agamben in its (restorative) reversibility. Agamben’s vision of cinema as gesture pivots on his conviction that that gesture is lost. The moving image does not restitute, he claims, so much as restage, belatedly, the impossibility of authentic motion. ‘In the cinema’, he insists, ‘a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss’ (1993: 151). Implicit in this statement is his assumption that humankind, aspiring to reappropriate, fails. Cinema thus commemorates, as performance, that which was, but cannot recuperate it in the present. Akerman’s arc of demonstration, however, is reversible. Her gestures, endlessly repeated, conjoining proximal and distal via the medial, can also be brutally re-embodied. In this sense, her gesture, ever-entrenched in language and ressassement, is more akin to Agamben’s definition of repetition. Allying the latter with memory, which in turn is equated with cinema, Agamben contends that ‘[t]o repeat something is to make it possible anew’ (2002: 316). This, I have argued, is precisely what Akerman’s displaced demonstrative achieves. Her work allows the motions of the (unlived, unseen, unspeakable, but inherited) past to return, through relentless repetition, to the body, endowing them with a materiality-by-association, barely visible and utterly beyond touch, but nonetheless back in the present and the sentient domain. Where Agamben seems gloomily resigned to the idea that the power of the cinema is waning, taking Dasein down with it and heralding ‘the twilight of post-cinema, of which we are seeing the beginning’ (2014: 23), Akerman’s gestural arc, on the contrary, thoroughly reinstates it, reminding us, sometimes violently, of the reality of re-embodiment inherent even in seemingly irreversible processes of disembodiment.

This chapter has explored the applicability and limits of an Agambenian approach to Akerman’s gesture, shaped by a shared fascination with acts of literary and filmic demonstration. It is time, now, to move on to my second subject: an appraisal of the visual artwork of the artiste-cinéaste, Agnès Varda, through the altogether more animated gesture of art historian, Aby Warburg. Where Akerman’s
interest lies in the underlying vindication of representation through language, and her
gesture is thus translated from and to the demonstrative, Varda, we shall see, is all
about the image – in motion and immobile – and a spectatorial relation that is always
one of complicity, but a complicity premised on a necessary distance.
Chapter 2 – ‘L’absence a une présence très forte’: animating the immobile in Agnès Varda

This is a chapter on Agnès Varda that, taking its lead from Philippe Piguet (2011: 22), posits her as an artiste-cinéaste. It investigates the resonances between her photography, film and installation art, and the fascinating, if quite literally fragmentary, work on gesture produced by the art historian, Aby Warburg. It thus further unfolds this thesis’ definition of gesture as a pointing-away from the self and a pointing-towards the world contingent upon distance, albeit with a greater focus on the bridging of the space that separates them to create a state of in-betweenness.

Where Chapter 1 examined gesture through Giorgio Agamben and the arc of (linguistic and filmic) demonstration, Chapter 2 takes a different approach, through Warburg, that looks closely at questions of complicity from afar and the blurring of self and other that such complicity engenders.

As with Chantal Akerman, this chapter considers how that which is no longer animate might be rendered gestural once more. However, where Akerman’s concern is the domain of (invisible) memory, inherited but unlived, Varda’s artistic endeavours, as we shall see, centre on the reanimation of the (visible) representation in an act of complicit, active – and activating – contemplation. Her work, I demonstrate, finds a compelling correlate in Warburg’s conceptualisation of a gesture that is always tied to two bodies: those of the viewed object and the viewing subject.

Dependent on the onlooker’s ability to both move and be moved, the Warburgian gesture is read here as a bidirectional motion, encoded in the artwork and animated anew through active, empathic spectatorship. At the same time, and as in Chapter 1, consideration is given not only to the potential of such a theoretical approach, but also to its limitations. Its overarching objective remains the development of a gestural analysis that is shaped through an individual artist, yet resonates beyond the scope of its singular subject in its elaboration of a more broadly applicable method for exploring the artwork.

This is not to say that this chapter is structured identically to the one that precedes it. Significantly more space will be accorded, for example, to constructing a theoretical framework of Warburgian gesture in tune with the work and methods of
this *artiste-cinéaste*. This I deem doubly necessary: first, in order to allow me to revisit and reassess Warburg’s texts in the original German, the majority translated into English here for the first time; and second, to ensure sufficient scope to piece together elements of an opus of fragments that, while demonstrably underpinned by a fascination with gesture, Warburg chose never to assemble as a coherent whole. Where Agamben’s writings offer structure from the outset, Warburg’s require careful collation.

Let me indicate, then, what this chapter will and will not do as it constructs and tests its Warburgian framework. In order to explore in depth the gestural relationship between the onlooker and the work of art, it will privilege aspects of Warburg’s writings that centre on the plastic arts and focus mainly on the Renaissance period. It will touch only in passing on his equally profound fascination for the esoteric: astrology and magic, on the one hand; and the rituals practised by North American indigenous peoples, on the other. It will, in the latter stages, acknowledge, without excavating in detail, Warburg’s intermittent struggles with mental illness – eventually diagnosed as ‘mixed-state manic depression’ [*manisch-depressiver Mischzustand*] (cited in Stimilli 2007: 12)⁴⁹ – and his various institutionalisations, despite the rich resonances between his academic work and his psychotic episodes. These facets of his life and work undoubtedly offer tantalising opportunities for further research. In correspondence with Warburg’s brother, his physician, Ludwig Binswanger, was to remark on the ‘very interesting intersections between his academic views and certain of his delusional ideas’ (cited in ibid.: 21).⁵⁰ However, these lie, for the most part, beyond the scope of this chapter and readers must seek enlightenment elsewhere.⁵¹

As stipulated in my introduction, I shall favour source texts over secondary literature and thus move away from critics who, following Georges Didi-Huberman, organise their appraisals of Warburg’s thought around the latter’s use of the word ‘Nachleben’, with its connotations of the afterlife. I justify my decision in view of the ambivalence of this term, which is exceedingly difficult to pin down – and practically impossible to translate. While noting the enigmatic quality of ‘le mystérieux mot d’ordre de toute l’entreprise warburgienne’ (2002: 51), Didi-Huberman nonetheless

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⁴⁹ All translations from the German are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
⁵⁰ ‘sehr interessante Übergänge von seinen wissenschaftlichen Ansichten zu einzelnen Wahnideen’.
bravely structures his *L’Image survivante* around a translation of *Nachleben* as ‘survivance’ on the grounds that Julius von Schlosser renders the term as ‘survival, comme il arrivait quelquefois à Warburg de le faire’ (ibid.: 52). The justification seems rather tenuous, particularly as Ernst Gombrich (director of the Warburg Institute in London from 1959 to 1972) had, in his intellectual biography of the art historian, already dismissed ‘survival’ in favour of ‘what would now be described as “revivals”’ (1970: 16). Griselda Pollock opts to adapt Didi-Huberman’s translation, preferring the ‘afterlife of the image’ (2007: 18), though she later proposes that *Nachleben* is ‘best translated as *persistence-in-transmission*’ (ibid.: 60, emphasis in original), despite the fact that the concept of ‘transmission’ is absent from the original. Agamben, meanwhile, cannily favours ‘posthumous life’, albeit with rather more dubious overtones of ‘transmission, reception, and polarization’ (1999b: 93).

None of these translations, I counter, does *Nachleben* full justice. Its prefix, ‘nach’, is a slippery preposition. Appended to a verb to create a compound, it carries connotations of posterity, persistence and mimicry. In conjunction with -leben, it thus evokes everything from ‘afterlife’ through ‘living through emulation’ to ‘experiential legacy’ – and any number of related concepts in between. In view of the unresolvable indeterminacy of this term, and to move away from a vision of Warburg filtered through Didi-Huberman (while nonetheless drawing on the latter’s invaluable genealogy of the literary sources underpinning a number of Warburg’s ideas), I choose to examine three alternative ‘Warburgisms’. The first of these is the *bewegtes Beiwerk* (‘animated accessory’) and refers to the animation-in-waiting encoded in the details of the artwork. The second is the *Erinnerungsbild* (‘memory-image’), born of an empathetic relation towards that artwork. The third is the *Zwischenraum* (‘in-between space’) and pertains to the creation of a shared zone of artistic encounter in which the complicity of the viewed and viewing bodies plays a key role. In combination, these form the fundament for a Warburgian framework of gesture.

As my readings of Warburg centre on the potential for (oscillatory, transtemporal) motion that he distinguishes within the immobile artwork, my treatment of Varda singles out the still, even within her films. This decision to approach her work selectively is also in part a strategic one. Six decades of tireless artistic output have yielded a vast, varied and frankly overwhelming body of work (when her son, Mathieu Demy, is asked in interview what sport would most appeal to
Varda, he unhesitatingly settles on the marathon, ‘parce qu’elle ne s’arrête jamais’). Focusing on the still image allows me to carry out a more targeted analysis of her oeuvre. However, the choice of the still is motivated equally by the fact that Warburg’s work is almost entirely devoid of references to the moving image, with the exception of one glancing analogy, in a 1929 piece on Édouard Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe, to a row of stone sarcophagi whose juxtaposed reliefs recall a ‘ciné-filmstrip’ [Laufbildstreifen] (2010h: 648). Indeed, he appears to have abhorred most forms of technological apparatus, particularly those powered by electricity. In his notes on images depicting the rituals of the Pueblo Indians of North America, Warburg’s dislike for new technologies achieves almost apoplectic heights. Thomas Edison’s innovations, he fumes, have ‘wrested the lightning bolt from Nature’, while ‘the telegram and the telephone are destroying the cosmos’ (2010d: 561). From Gombrich, meanwhile, we learn that Warburg ‘never accepted the wireless because of this threatening obliteration of distance’ (1970: 224). One of the few exceptions the technophobe Warburg allows is the camera – the ‘Photoclark’ machine (Binswanger and Warburg 2007: 164) – that would enable him to reproduce still images for the panels of his final work, the Mnemosyne Atlas, presumably because this particular technological variant maintained what Warburg deemed an appropriate distance to the artwork (of which more in due course). In light of the privileged position that Warburg accords immobility – photographic, pictorial or plastic – this chapter therefore centres its consideration of the gaze on the animated observation of still images and objects as opposed to the still contemplation of animated ones.

It is my contention that Warburg has much to add to current theories of spectatorship in the ways in which he allows new approaches to the animated ‘still’ to unfold, and in his vision of a bidirectional space of artistic encounter. This I test through close attention to the immobile images – and images of (quasi-)immobility – to be found throughout Varda’s opus. This chapter thus draws not only on the majority of her cinematic and televisual features, shorts and documentaries, but also on her photography, and on her recent forays into mixed media in her installations and gallery-based exhibitions, namely Triptyques atypiques (2014); Agnès Varda in Californialand (2013-2014); Les Bouches-du-Rhône (2013); Le Voyage à Nantes: Des

53 ‘die Natur den Blitz entwunden.’
54 ‘Telegramm und Telephon zerstören den Kosmos.’
chambres en ville et des téléviseurs (2012); The Beaches of Agnès Varda in China (2012); Y’a pas que la mer (2011); Portraits brisés (2010); L’Île et Elle (2006); and Patatutopia, her contribution to the 2003 Venice Biennale.

Warburg and Varda: selective affinities

Warburg and Varda certainly make for an odd couple, and yet I find a number of curious compatibilities that amply justify bringing them together here. Specifically, they share a fascination with the minutiae of detail coupled with an abiding reluctance to submit to processes of categorisation that would clearly define – and by extension, limit – the outreach of their respective endeavours. Furthermore, both naturally gravitate away from the written word in favour of a gestural and image-centric alternative.

Microcosmic

In his attention to the microcosmic, Warburg has much in common with an artiste-cinéaste whose 1982 short, Ulysse, evolved from a desire to ‘commencer par une chose minuscule’ (Varda, Floret, Nave et al. 1992: 16). I should clarify that this ‘microcosmic’ is not to be confused with the extreme close-up to which Varda is so evidently averse (see introduction). It is to be read as a fascination for the detail. As will become apparent as this chapter progresses, Varda takes pleasure in isolating and amplifying the ‘chose minuscule’ embedded within the artwork as a means of rescaling our relation to it, in the same way that – as illustrated in my introduction – she reconfigures the body, in close-up, as a landscape whose scale exceeds us and thus evades touch. However, it is above all Warburg’s tendency to gather and rearrange such details that strikes a chord with Varda, an avid collector and collator of offcuts, memorabilia and images that she terms her ‘bric-à-brac personnel’ (Nave 2009a: 23). Alison Smith notes the prevalence of photographic collections in her films (1998: 48-49), and Varda’s camera frequently dwells on the accumulations, pictographic and other, of her fellow-‘collectionneurs’: the ‘ferrovipathe’ and his toy trains in Les Plages; the walls teeming with family photographs in Ydessa, les ours et
etc... (2004); or the chilling assortment of medical models on display in her 1984 short, *7p., cuis., s. de b., ... à saisir* (Figure 60).

![Figure 60: Collective obsessions in Les Plages, Ydessa and 7p., cuis., s. de b.](image)

At the same time, she leaves plenty of space to exhibit her own collections. Take the juxtaposed postcards of gleaners in *Deux ans après* (2002) or the garish flip-flops that feature among the plastic beach accoutrements of her installation piece, *Ping-Pong, Tong et Camping* (Figure 61). Both bear witness to an accumulatory urge bordering on the obsessive that would doubtless have appealed to Warburg.

![Figure 61: Obsessive collections: Deux ans après and Ping-Pong, Tong et Camping](image)

The art historian was a keen collector himself, and the sheer number of snippets, fragments and annotations he left behind – revisited and rearranged many times over the course of his life – is breathtaking. He spent years creating index cards (Figure 62) inscribed with ‘general ideas that I cherish so highly’ (cited in Mueller 2011: 13)\(^56\) which, when published posthumously, bore the title of *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde* (‘Fundamental Fragments for a Pragmatic Study of Expression’).

\(^{55}\) Image, right, from Varda 2006: 58-59.  
\(^{56}\) ‘von mir so hochgeschätzten allgemeinen Ideen’.
Even his final project, *Mnemosyne*, on which he was working at the time of his death, was to be an archive of small details. Here, Warburg created panels of black cloth to which he affixed images culled from all manner of Classical and modern sources, ranging from photographic reproductions of Renaissance art to cuttings from local newspapers. Panel 77 (Warburg 2008: 129) is a case in point (Figure 63). The visual parallels with Varda’s collages and collections are striking.

Yet despite the small scale of the image-components of *Mnemosyne*, Warburg seems patently uninterested in nailing himself down to an individual discipline or limiting himself to one side of an argument. Instead, he pushes the perimeters outwards in search of an ever-broader view of the field. A fascination with the microcosmic in no way precludes an equally powerful partiality for the macrocosmic – and again, the same applies to Varda.

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57 Left: Box File No. 6 [Zettelkasten Nr. 6] by Ian Jones (detail), from Papapetos 2012: 72; right: image (detail) from the Warburg Institute website at warburg.sas.ac.uk/archive/. 
Figure 63: Panel 77 of Warburg's Mnemoxyne, with simplified legends.
Macrosomic

In a piece on Italian art and international astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia (1912/1922), Warburg laments that ‘[o]ur young discipline is blocking itself off from a panoramic view of world history by submitting to a prevailing mood that is all-too materialistic or all-too mystical’ (2010c: 396). At the same time, he hardly appears to yearn for affiliations within his field, working mainly within the perimeters of the institute that he founded in Hamburg – an isolation born, perhaps, of a difficult childhood in which his Jewish upbringing marked him out among his fellow-pupils. A 1921 case study by Warburg’s then-physician, Heinrich Embden, refers (in terms that now seem troublingly free of cultural nuance) to his patient’s experiences of marginalisation – ‘Suffered greatly as a result of his ghetto upbringing, […] was not allowed to eat with friends for ritualistic reasons’ (in Various 2007: 260) – and such formative experiences may have contributed to Warburg’s ambivalent sense of self; what he refers to in private correspondence as the ‘compulsive idea that I must have a Janus head’ (2007: 105).

Again, I detect strong affinities with Varda, ever the outsider in the domain of French film. This artiste-cinéaste, who accepted a Palme d’honneur at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival with the words, ‘je la reçois comme une Palme de résistance et d’endurance’, has, as my introduction suggests, consistently eschewed conformity in favour of a position as pioneer. Varda’s self-identification as avant-garde is aptly summarised in her reappropriation of René Magritte’s reworking of his 1929 painting, La Femme cachée (and in Varda’s many references to Magritte we may, in passing, note a pleasing parallel with Akerman). Magritte adapted the original by framing it with photographs of the leading lights of the Surrealist movement, their eyes reverentially closed, and renaming it Je ne vois pas la [femme] cachée dans la forêt. Varda adapts the adaptation – and reclaims the original. In Les Plages and on the final page of the ‘texte illustré’ published to accompany the 2010 DVD release, she includes a photographic portrait of herself, by Bernard Gille. She surrounds it with

58 ‘[u]nsere junge Disziplin versperrt dich durch allzu materialistische oder allzu mystische Grundstimmung den weltgeschichtlichen Rundblick.’
59 ‘Schwer unter seiner Ghetto-Erziehung gelitten, […] durfte nicht bei Freunden essen aus rituellen Gründen.’
60 ‘Zwangsidee, daß ich einen Januskopf hätte.’
assorted (and, as in Magritte’s photo-montage, exclusively male) paragons of the French New Wave (Varda 2010b: 108, see Figure 64).

Figure 64: Taking centre-stage: Magritte’s La Femme cachée repurposed vs La Nouvelle Vague autour d’Agnès.62

Significantly, the image has been included in the book at her request, ‘[p]our faire plaisir à Agnès’ (ibid.). Cheekily usurping ‘la [femme] cachée dans la forêt’ at the centre of the image, Varda is no passive, parenthetical female subject of collective male fantasy. Her index finger pressed against her lips, her eyes closed, it is she who controls the domains of silence and the unseen here, wryly proposing that while she may have gone unnoticed, unheard and excluded from the ‘frame’, she is nonetheless at the heart of the movement around her, a director of directors.

Varda stands defiantly alone by her own definition: ‘je suis une vraie indépendante, une originale’ she announces, ‘ce qui ne veut pas dire que je n’ai pas d’amis, mais je ne travaille pas en réseau’ (Dubroux 1982: XV). She finds comfort in Jean-Luc Godard’s comment to her that ‘la marge c’est ça qui tient le livre’ (cited in Trilling 2011: 10). An outsider by inclination, this, like Warburg, is her position of choice: the margin.

In addition to their (paradoxical yet complementary) preference for both the micro- and macrocosmic, Warburg and Varda share a further predilection. They both distinctly favour the non-linguistic and, by extension, the gestural.

Non-linguistic

Let me be clear: I am not claiming that Warburg dismisses linguistic structures altogether. His keen interest in, for example, Hermann Osthoff’s 1899 lecture, *Vom Suppletivwesen der indogermanischen Sprachen* (‘On Suppletion in the Indo-Germanic Languages’) privileges the ways in which a process of verbal inflection might formally alter a radical ‘without detracting from the notion of the energetic identity of the property or action’ (2010f: 631). It is, however, safe to say that he was interested in language structures only insofar as they supported his art-historical theory of the energy encoded in objects that conjugates and reanimates them across time (of which more later). Agamben concludes that Warburg’s choice of a purely visual format for *Mnemosyne* was most probably informed ‘by his own difficulty with writing’ (1999b: 95), and Warburg would most likely have agreed.

Despite producing a large body of text, Warburg published little in his lifetime and was not a natural rhetorician. His notes on *Mnemosyne* feature an eye-watering array of increasingly cumbersome subtitles, ranging from ‘Image series for the observation, from the cultural studies perspective, of the expressionistic imprint that emulates Antiquity in the representation of internally and externally animated life in the era of the European Renaissance’ (2010g: 643) to the even catchier ‘Transformatio energetica as research object and proper function of a comparative historical library of the symbol (the symbol as catalytic quintessence)’ (ibid.: 644). Warburg was well aware of his linguistic limitations, cheerfully referring to his turgid prose as his ‘eel-soup style’ [*Aalsuppenstil*] (cited in Gombrich 1970: 14). Admittedly, his compound nouns and adjectives do not transfer well to English. Yet even readers of the original German balk at his meandering style. ‘Writing and publishing did present agonies to him’, affirms Gombrich (ibid.: 8), pointing to a style that ‘increasingly deviated from the normal conventions of expository prose’ (ibid.: 14). Susanne Mueller, editor of Warburg’s *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, ruefully remarks upon his ‘wobbly spelling’ [*schwankende Orthographie*] (2011: 12) and abiding failure to find a suitably transdisciplinary meta-language in which to couch

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63 ‘ohne dass die Vorstellung der energetischen Identität der Eigenschaft oder Aktion darunter leidet’.  
64 ‘Bilderreihen zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Betrachtung antikisierende Ausdrucksprägung bei der Darstellung inneren und äusseren bewegten Lebens im Zeitalter der europäischer Renaissance.’  
65 ‘Transformatio energetica als Forschungsobjekt und Eigenfunktion einer vergleichend historischen Symbolbibliothek (das Symbol als katalytische Quintessence).’
his theories (ibid.: 16). Perhaps we should breathe a sigh of relief knowing that Warburg eventually abandoned his attempts to label his research area, referring to it instead as a ‘nameless science’ (cited in Agamben 1999b: 94). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Warburg situates the locus of significance not in the written, but in the gestural terrain: his primary concern is with the ‘configuration of art through sign language’ [kunstgestaltende Gebärdensprache] (cited in Treml and Weigel 2010: 10).

Varda similarly embraces her status as ‘non-writer’. ‘I would like to be a writer, sometimes, but I’m not’, she informs us (Barnet and Jordan 2011: 193). While she insists that, in the case of Sans toit, ‘[t]out est très écrit’ (Wera 1986: 6), and repeats the claim almost verbatim when describing the genesis of her 1987 feature, Kung-fu master (Varda 1994b: 186), she is referring to a highly proprietary variant of writing. She is no fan of screenplays, scripts and detailed storylines, preferring to provide the most concise of outlines prior to a shoot because ‘[l]e scénario est un genre littéraire assez loin du film’ (Marvier 2000: 46). Instead, she turns to what she calls ‘cinécriture’, whereby each aspect that goes into forming a film is weighted equally, and during which inspiration is drawn from daydreams and moments of repose, the bathtub being a particularly favoured haven:

Tous les choix écrivent le film. Les repérages, pour se gaver d’impressions et d’informations ressenties in situ, le pré-commentaire qui s’écrit dans la tête et disparaîtra sans doute. Saisons, lieux, acteurs ou non-acteurs, rythme du film, complicité avec les techniciens pour obtenir telle ou telle image, et ce à quoi je réfléchis et rêvasse dans mon bain. Et le scénario, toujours modulable, et le montage où s’écrit aussi le film, et la pression atmosphérique, et le cours de l’euro et l’âge du capitaine. C’est tout cela, la cinécriture. Ce n’est pas fermé, c’est bien plus vaste que la notion de scénario. (ibid.: 47)

Her work thus takes shape not on the page, but in the mind (‘Ma tête écrit des mots sans crayon’ [Varda 1990: 30]), and while her wordplay is unfailingly deft, she is clear: the word is always subsidiary to the imagination – and the image. Du coq à l’âne emphatically states her case. In the film’s closing shot, the artiste-cinéaste slams down four brightly coloured alphabet blocks – D, I, R and E – and announces: ‘Je vous fais DIRE avec des images!’ (Figure 65).
Varda’s eclectic, image-centric approach, while antithetical to the production of lengthy prose, has much in keeping with the collages and Surrealist precepts that she deeply cherishes and frequently invokes (e.g. Tranchant 2008: para. 8 of 12; Marie 1991: 6) – and with Warburg’s equally fragmentary, associative endeavours, which the editors of his collected works, Martin Treml and Sigrid Weigel, describe in similar terms as a form of rhetoric situated ‘between creative neologisms, comparable to the Surrealist principle of montage’ (2010: 16). Varda’s work has been likened to a diary: André Bazin describes it as a ‘journal intime’ (1955: 36); Godard as a ‘Journal de bord […]. Journal intime […]. Enfin, journal d’une femme d’esprit’ (1959: 36). Yet Varda tells us that her attempts to log her life have inevitably petered out: ‘Quant à mes Journaux de bord, ou intimes, ou autres Carnets de notes retrouvés, ils sont toujours interrompus après quelques pages’ (1994b: 121). Any notes remaining are snippets, endless beginnings, snapshots without a context – and as such, have much in common with Warburg’s Grundlegende Bruchstücke. Of Les Plages, Varda muses:

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66 ‘zwischen kreativen Wortschöpfungen, vergleichbar dem surrealistischen Montageprinzip’.
C’est un collage. Un *scrapbook*, ce cahier dans lequel on colle un dessin, un article de presse, une photo de famille. La liberté de mélanger des éléments disparates. Moi, je n’ai jamais eu de carnet de notes sur ce qui se passe, sur tout. (Domenach and Rouyer 2008: 19)

Hence, Varda’s creative urge, like Warburg’s own, emerges in the act of ‘mélanger des éléments disparates’: the editorial process that animates her medium and the same impulse that led the art historian to create his *Mnemosyne* panels of eclectic images linked by association – a series that Margaret Iversen reminds us Warburg once considered labelling a ‘*Bilder Atlas zur Kritik der reinen Unvernunft* (Picture Book for a Critique of Pure Unreason)’ (1993: 547).

What is more, Varda’s work similarly privileges sign language. She, too, revels in associating mute yet meaningful gestures. In *Documenteur* (1981) – a film whose subtitle, *An Emotion Picture*, flags up the close bond that Varda discerns between movement and sensation – she observes ‘le geste qu’elle, Sabine [Mamou] actrice, faisait dans son lit d’amour: elle levait ses deux coudes à la hauteur de sa tête’ (Audé and Jeancolas 1982: 43). She is overjoyed to secure footage of a stranger in a laundrette performing an analogue motion with her arms (Figure 66): a second silent gesture of pathos that mirrors the first and resonates far more than it signifies in purely narrative terms.

![Figure 66: Documenteur: analogue gestures, unspoken associations](image)

Again, the (wordless) gesture intervenes at a moment at which language has failed on all levels. Mamou’s character, Émilie, lives in Los Angeles. Separated from her partner and increasingly out-of-touch with her mother-tongue, she is doubly in exile. Her native French, the opening voiceover intones, is reduced to ‘des mots décrochés des phrases’, words that are enduringly ‘immobiles, suspendus’. The only motion
remaining is that of the silent bodies on screen. ‘C’est ce que j’appelle le transfert’, Varda concludes (1982: 7).

In the following, I look more closely at Warburg’s concept of wordless, gestural transfer, and how this relates to Varda’s image-making process. Abandoning ekphrasis, Warburg opts for a gestural language of signs that he finds embedded in the details of the art-objects to whose scrutiny and obsessive rearrangement he was to dedicate his adult life. Specifically, he locates them in what he terms the *bewegtes Beiwerk*, or ‘animated accessory’ (2010a: 39).

**Making objects ‘move’: Warburg’s animated accessory**

So what exactly is the animated accessory? The concept first emerges in Warburg’s 1893 dissertation on Sandro Botticelli’s *Nascita di Venere* (Birth of Venus, c. 1484) and *Primavera* (Spring, c. 1482) (Figure 67).

![Figure 67: Botticelli’s Birth of Venus and Spring](commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:El_Nacimiento_de_Venus2.jpg; commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABotticelli-primavera.jpg)

To elucidate, I shall break the original German down into its constituent components, starting with the *Beiwerk*. The prepositional prefix, *bei* (which can mean ‘with’, ‘alongside’ or ‘near’, but also equates to the French ‘chez’), adds a nuance that cannot be captured with such elegant concision in English. The *Beiwerk* is not merely an accessory, it is an object generated as side-effect – a product of contingency dependent on co-presence, or even co-habitation. At the same time, however, it is not to be confused with a remnant or residue. As Spyros Papapetros notes, it is ‘literally a side-work, or *parergon* in Greek (yet not a *paralipomenon*, or leftover)’ (2012: 64).

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67 Paintings held by the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; photographs: Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:El_Nacimiento_de_Venus2.jpg; commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABotticelli-primavera.jpg).
Unlike Akerman’s ‘petite chose à côté’ that deflects demonstration to stand in for the unspoken or unspeakable (see Chapter 1), Warburg’s accessory, though peripheral to the ‘main’ work of art, is not dissociated from it. The Beiwerk is always a supplement, never a distraction or a substitute (and I emphasise that ‘supplement’ is to be read here simply as an ‘enhancement-through-addition’, supporting and intensifying the original with no connotations of supplanting it or compensating for a lack).

I thus render the Beiwerk as an accessory that is also a supplement. Its accompanying adjective, bewegt, meanwhile, is similarly rich in (fertile) ambiguities. The most accurate, if clumsy, equivalent in English would be ‘moved’, for it relates both to physical motion and psychical emotion. Through this motion-that-moves, there is a sense both that its evocation transcends temporal boundaries and that the spectator is not merely a passive onlooker, but a participant in the act of animation. As I explore the animated accessory below, I take with me these connotations of supplementarity and (e)motion implicit in Warburg’s original German, which, even at this early stage, hint at a kinship with the subtitle that Varda appends to Documenteur, her ‘Emotion Picture’.

**Transtemporal animation, audience participation**

Introducing his concept of the animated accessory, Warburg posits that Renaissance painters draw repeatedly, and knowingly, upon the gesturality of figures of Antiquity, while at the same time happily incorporating the features of Quattrocento Florentine beauties ‘whenever an embodiment of externally animated life is required’ (2010a: 63).\(^{68}\) This marriage of ancient and modern motifs – what Warburg, in his writings on Mnemosyne, terms a Classically-inspired ‘pathos formula’ [Pathosformel] (2010g: 646)\(^{69}\) – imbues the paintings with a transtemporal, aesthetic force capable of approximating even the most extreme of polarities, those of life and death:

> Within the hard, chiselled reliefs left behind by the pompously ostentatious or desperately moribund pagan world, a living dance of death rejoices and laments; human passion lives on through its dead in a fervent will to capture

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\(^{68}\) ‘sobald es sich um die Verkörperung äusserlich bewegten Lebens handelt.’

\(^{69}\) For a more extensive discussion of the pathos formula, see Pollock 2007: 18; Brown and Green 2002: 173; Didi-Huberman 2002: 199 and 256; Agamben 1999b: 90.
and in a fervent state of rapture, so serenely immortal that each man who comes after, provided his eyes and heart are in the right place, must mimic them in their style each time he is stirred by the immortal compulsion of [artistic] expression. (ibid.: 640)

This breaching of temporal boundaries in turn implicates the onlooker as historical and contemporary conflate in the act of viewing. Breaking with the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s notion of ‘still grandeur’ [stille Größe] that conceives of the observer of art as a hushed onlooker contemplating an immutable, inaccessible monument to the past (2010a: 108), Warburg calls upon the spectator to free the image from its temporal and spatial fixity by positing that image as frozen motion and, by extension, as emotion-in-waiting.

How, then, is this force triggered and transmitted from painting to onlooker? How does it move and, more specifically, how does it move *us*?

**Physical complicity: emulation and the elements**

It is in the flowing details of apparel and hair [der Gewandung und der Haare] – what Warburg terms the ‘externally animated accessory’ [äusserlich bewegtes Beiwerk] – that this persistent life-force resides (2010a: 39). It is here that the spectator’s physical complicity is called upon: the gestural transfer is dependent on a parallel motion on the part of the onlooker. In two fragments from Grundlegende Bruchstücke, both headed ‘Spectator and motion’ [Zuschauer und Bewegung] and dated 7 September, 1890, Warburg suggests that a human viewer will always seek to bestow his/her own human qualities upon the viewed object while simulating movement in what s/he sees on the basis of his/her own body:

Presented with these figures, the eye performs an emulative motion in order to create the illusion that the object is moving. […] If these [figures depicted] happen to be moving on a level parallel to that occupied by the spectator, then

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70 ‘Im harten Steinmetzwerk, das die pompös prahlende oder verzweifelt sterbende Heidenwelt hinterliess, jubelt und klagt ein lebender Totentanz, lebt die Menschenpassion in ihren Toten als leidenschaftlicher Greifwille und leidenschaftliche Ergriffensein so ungestört unsterblich weiter dass jeder Nachführende insofern nur Auge und Herz an der richtigen Stelle sitzen in diesem Stile nachsprenchen muss, sobald ihn unsterblicher Ausdruckszwang schüttelt.’
the spectator can only convince himself that a forwards motion is taking place if he moves his eyes. (2011: 50)71

Clothing, too, is key, providing a further extension of the self that reaches out towards the artwork, offering a ‘dynamic sense of being tied to something through additional material’ (ibid.: 81).72 Through the act of what Warburg, drawing on Thomas Carlyle’s apparel-rich novel, Sartor Resartus (1836), terms Hantieren und Tragen, or ‘handling and carrying’ (ibid.: 72), a gestural transfer is enacted by a psychological coming-into-contact of the ‘additional material’ borne by both artwork and onlooker. In his work on the animation of the inorganic, Papapetros describes these ‘fabric extensions’ beautifully as a ‘periphery of matter’ that ‘compose[s] a pliable threshold of the animated field’ (2012: 31). Warburg’s texts reveal that this material addition allows the perimeters of the artwork and beholder to merge, thereby establishing an expanded, shared – and bidirectional – space of encounter whose defining contours are those of both bodies in play. Once again, emulation is crucial: ‘Mimicry is a relationship to the object situated between carrying and being carried; it is the identification with the midway point of the [bipartite] object and the subsequent designation of its perimeters’ (2011: 108).73 The handling and carrying of insensible bodily extensions paradoxically enables emulation and an expansion of the sentient domain of embodied engagement. The onlooker is transformed from the intellectual observer of ‘still grandeur’ into a fully-integrated and physical participant in an act of emulation and exchange.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Warburg’s fascination with the mythological figure of Laocoön, condemned to die by the Greek gods who summoned up a knot of sea serpents to despatch the Trojan priest and his sons. Warburg dedicates an entire panel, 41a, of Mnemosyne to representations of Laocoön (2008: 74-75) and Gombrich testifies to his enthusiasm for its ‘unbridled passion’ (1970: 65). Key to this fascination is a literary source and a specific sculptural representation: both Michaud (2012: 94) and Didi-Huberman (2002: 207) note the influence of

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71 ‘Das Auge vollführt den Figuren gegenüber Nachbewegung, um die Illusion zu erhalten, als ob der Gegenstand sich bewegte. […] Bewegen dieselben [abgebildeten Figuren] sich in der Ebene parallel zum Zuschauer, so kann der Zuschauer nur dann an Vorwärtsbewegung glauben, wenn er die Augen bewegt.’
72 ‘dynamische Gebundenheit durch hinzukommende Materie’.
73 ‘Die Nachahmung ist ein Verhältnis zum Objekt das zwischen Tragen und Getragenwerden steht; es ist die Identification mit der Mittellinie des [zweitheligen] Objekts und darauffolgende Umfangsbestimmung’.
Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s 1798 analysis of the *Laocoön Group*, a sculpture created by an unknown artist from Rhodes in c. 40-30 B.C. (Figure 68).

In order best to experience this work, Goethe argues, the onlooker must play an active part in animating the serpents:

> To grasp the Laocoön’s intent, one must stand, eyes closed, at a proper distance from it; upon opening and closing them in quick succession, one sees the mass of marble in motion […] Standing there now, it is a flash of

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74 Image (detail, background removed) of the sculpture held by the Vatican Museums in Rome: Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laocoön_and_His_Sons.jpg).
lightning transfixed, a wave turned to stone in the very instant it washes up against the shore. (1986: 81)\textsuperscript{75}

The same effect, Goethe continues, is achieved by contemplating the group at night by the light of a torch (ibid.):\textsuperscript{76} the flickering flame lends a new layer of animation to the sculpture’s tortured contours.

While undoubtedly physical, the trigger for the animation of such accessories, according to Warburg, need not emanate \textit{exclusively} from the (viewed or viewing) body that carries them. Equally, an external element may intervene to provoke a disarrangement of surfaces. More specifically still, this elemental force may be traced to wind and waves. Hence, in his thesis on Botticelli, he cites verse 100 of Angelo Poliziano’s \textit{Stanze per la giostra} (c. 1475-1478), from which the artist may have drawn inspiration for \textit{Birth of Venus}. In it, water and air lend vitality and veracity to a scene relived (‘Vera la schiuma e vero il mar diresti,/E vero il nicchio e ver soffiar di venti’), and a breeze ruffles the white robes and curly locks of the passing Horae (‘L’aura incresparle e’ crin distesi e lenti’) (2010a: 42). In his appraisal of these lines, Warburg opens up his notion of the animated accessory or, more precisely, ‘this accessory animated by the wind’ \textit{dieses durch den Wind bewegte Beiwerk} (ibid.: 45). He further expands it in \textit{Grundlegende Bruchstücke}, relating that the movement of apparel and hair can be induced ‘by means of the motion of their own bodies, or failing this, that of the wind […] or of both together’ (2011: 50).\textsuperscript{77} Thus, the emulative act of handling and carrying engenders a disturbance of surfaces, or what Warburg terms a ‘special motion’ \textit{Spezialbewegung}, that is created either when a figure executes a forward motion that causes his/her clothing to shift, thus producing a ‘disturbance of these material parts’ \textit{die Unruhe dieser materiellen Theile} (ibid.: 68) or, should the figure remain motionless, by ‘impersonal forces’ \textit{unpersönliche Kräfte}, such as the wind, that intercede to animate that which cannot be broken down into its constitutive parts – what Warburg terms the ‘indecomposable’ \textit{das Unzersetzbare} (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{75} ‘Um die Intention des Laokoons recht zu fassen, stelle man sich in gehöriger Entfernung, mit geschlossenen Augen, davor, man öffne sie und schließe sie sogleich wieder, so wird man den ganzen Marmor in Bewegung sehen […] [W]ie sie jetzt dasteht, ist sie ein fixierter Blitz, eine Welle, versteinert im Augenblick da sie gegen das Ufer anström’t.’

\textsuperscript{76} ‘Dieselbe Wirkung entsteht, wenn man die Gruppe Nachts bei der Fackel sieht.’

\textsuperscript{77} ‘durch eigene Körperbewegungen oder ohne dies durch den Wind […] oder durch Beides zusammen.’
Psychological complicity: empathy and memory-images

Having established the animated accessory as the emotional core of the artistic encounter and the key to the release of the encoded gesture, Warburg allies it with the ‘aesthetic act of “empathy”’ [den ästhetischen Akt der ‘Einfühlung’] (2010a: 39-40); a concept derived from Robert Vischer (Rampley 1997: 45). Further, he ties this aesthetic undertaking dependent on compassion to individual acts of recall. To relive the motion captured in a still(ed) image, Warburg says, we scour our minds for comparable memories in order to set up conceptual associations, concluding that ‘[o]ne perceives oneself and animates the image because one has experienced it’ (2011: 44). Drawing on Richard Semon’s notion of the engram (see Didi-Huberman 2002: 241; Agamben 1999: 93; Hanssen 1999: 1006), he refers to this projection of personal recollection as an Erinnerungsbild, or ‘memory-image’ (2011: 49). The concept of the memory-image as a further, psychical ‘animated accessory’ through which a static image may be brought (back) to life and rendered gestural – perceptible by means of what Warburg later terms ‘psychological oscillations’ [seelische Schwingungen] (2010f: 637) – is to recur repeatedly, not to say obsessively, in his writings.

The complicity fostered by the empathic memory-image is not merely psychical, however. If we extend our excavation of the concept, we discover that it serves not merely to support a process of active (mental) reanimation; it also blurs the physical distinction between artwork and onlooker. Warburg quite literally equates the memory-image with the apparel of the bewegtes Beiwerk; in fact, he goes still further, in conflating apparel and limb, to posit a physical link between subject and object. In a note from his Grundlegende Bruchstücke on ‘Adornment and the Self’ [Schmuck und Ich], dated 22 September, 1890, he thus reaches the following conclusion:

78 ‘[m]an sieht sich und belebt das Bild, weil man es erlebt hat.’
79 See Warburg 2011: 52 (22 November, 1890); 80 (9 August, 1891); 90 (6 February, 1892); 91 (22 February, 1892); 93 (29 March, 1892); 98 (28 April, 1892); 106 (9 October, 1893); 127 (19 November, 1898); as well as the third of Warburg’s ‘Four Theses’ (1893-1906) appended to his study of Botticelli (2010a: 109); his 1898 work on theatrical costumes in the Intermedi (2010b: 125); and his 1923 lecture recounting his earlier visit to the North American Pueblo Indians (2010c: 582).
Garments are an inorganic extension of the individual; at the same time, however, they feel like painless organs – one does not see them, but must take them into account with each movement one makes. One accords these things the attribute of an implicit affiliation. The memory-image is apprehended as a limb. (2011: 52)\(^80\)

Just as the pictorial accessory-in-motion offers a gesture that exceeds the artwork, so do the non-sentient accessories of the spectator extend his/her realm of gesture beyond his/her purely bodily confines.

Lest we be tempted to discern, in this empathic approximation provoked by the memory-image, a form of attachment that echoes that of the haptic, we should bear in mind that Warburg’s artistic encounters are always absolutely predicated on a separation of the bodies of viewer and viewed. At no point in his work does Warburg advocate tactile engagement with the artwork; (e)motion is to be activated by ocular observation alone and is thus achieved at a necessary remove. In sum, provided that an appropriate physical distance is maintained, the work of art becomes a site of motions and emotions held in suspension. These are encoded in the gesture-rich accessories of hair and apparel: physical accessory-objects whose frozen motion may be animated and ‘regestured’, either through an aleatory intervention of the elemental, or through the viewing subject’s emulative, physical motions as the moving eye or limb lend movement to the inanimate, or through his/her psychical attributes of recollection and empathy – or all of these simultaneously, by dint of the memory-image. At the same time, the artistic encounter becomes a transtemporal one. The engaged contemplation of a (Classically inspired) work of art, suffused with a pathos that both predates and is concurrent with the moment of artistic creation, activates multiple layers of time past in the viewer’s present.

In the following, I examine further this idea that psychical complicity, coupled with a physical blurring of the limits of viewer and viewed, can lead not just to gestural complicity, but to gestural convergence – and that this convergence in turn lends the act of spectatorship a timeless quality. I enter the realm that Warburg refers

\(^80\) ‘Kleidungsstücke sind eine unorganische Erweiterung des Individuums; dieselben werden jedoch als schmerzlose Organe gefühlt – man sieht sie nicht, muß aber mit ihnen bei jeder Bewegung rechnen. Man erteilt den Dingen das Prädikat der unbedingten Zugehörigkeit. Das Erinnerungsbild wird als Glied gefühlt.’
to as the Zwischenraum: a space of artistic encounter that is out-of-place and out-of-time, yet nonetheless always determined by a distance-between.

From complicity to convergence: the in-between space

By making the viewing subject and viewed object complicit through the shared motif of the animated accessory, supported by the memory-image, Warburg not only opens up a broader space of mutual encounter, he also creates a zone of overlap. He defines this interstice of co-habitation as the Zwischenraum: the ‘in-between space’ (2010f: 629).

Critics have interpreted the term in various ways. Michaud references the theatrical (and by extension cinematic) ‘proscenium’ (2012: 165). Gombrich views it as ‘that intermediate realm in which the symbols are rooted’, translating it variously as ‘interval’ (1970: 252) and ‘gap’ (ibid.: 288). Agamben defines it similarly as ‘an intermediary domain between consciousness and primitive reactions, […] an “interval,” a kind of no-man’s-land at the center of the human’ (1999b: 94). Didi-Huberman concurs in his translation of the Zwischenraum as ‘l’intervalle’ (2002: 497) but discerns further sensory and temporal connotations, finding in it an ‘entre-deux sens’ that can only emerge in an ‘entre-deux temps’ (ibid.: 503). Returning to Warburg and the source-text, I find that his work on the interrelation between bodies viewing and viewed – and here, I emphasise again the aspect that sets it apart from the haptic whilst proffering a rich adjunct to theories of embodied spectatorship – contends that the energetic potential of a work of art, its inherent capacity for complicity with its audience, can be triggered only if the appropriate distance between onlooker and artwork is respected. Matthew Rampley underscores the ubiquity of distance in Warburg’s writings (1997: 52), as does Iversen, who highlights Warburg’s ‘dialectical grasp on the need for distanced reflection and intimate connection’ (1993: 541). We might expand her argument to propose not merely that these spectatorial prerequisites are far from mutually exclusive, but that they can only co-exist within the overlap between the spaces occupied by viewer and artwork. This necessarily entails a certain blurring of the borders between subject and object, and Warburg affirms that the willingness to seek out similarity through the substitution of Erinnerungsbilder and the drive for empathic Einfühlung are again prerequisites. A
fragment on ‘thought and distance’ [Denken und Entfernung] from 6 June, 1891, insists that ‘[t]he faculty of judgement is the product of the distance between subject and object’,\(^{81}\) but stipulates that the encounter depends on the ability both to remember and to forget that distance – the former allowing the onlooker to ‘describe’ the image; the latter to ‘possess’ it (2011: 76). Two years later, a note on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s petites perceptions observes how this physical distance coupled with empathy may instigate a psychical approximation: an encounter with an object with which the subject is able to identify as an equal breaks down the perceived distance between the two ‘and s. and o. become a single mass’ [S. und O. sind beide eine Masse] (ibid.: 92). An entry for 2 August, 1896, despite its curious punctuation and flawed grammar, sheds further light on Warburg’s theory of distanciation with regard to subject and object:

> Focusing attention on the object’s present expression generates a turning-away from the object’s real environment and – the nervous energy otherwise used to differentiate anew [being] induced to eliminate an analogous and more intense memory-impulse; the (artistic) expression thus obtained implies a decreasing measure of distance between subject and object. (ibid.: 113, emphasis in original)\(^{82}\)

In brief, Warburg suggests that an encounter between a viewing subject and a viewed object must maintain a certain physical distance. At the same time, however, provided that the encounter triggers an empathic response on the part of the subject, and provided that the subject detects an equivalency within the object, the psychological distance between the two is broken down, at which point – in the gesture-rich Zwischenraum of visual encounter – subject and object converge.

In the following, I consider how Varda’s focus on the ostensibly inanimate can, like Warburg’s own, bring a gesture embedded in these details (back) to life. I examine how these aspects of Warburg’s thought – the animation of the detail within the still image, the oscillations that allow images to ‘move’, the role of empathy and

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\(^{81}\) ‘[d]ie Urtheilskraft ist das Product der Thatsache der Distanz zwischen Subject und Object’.

\(^{82}\) ‘Durch Aufmerksamkeit auf den augenblicklichen Ausdruck des Objects wird eine Abkehr vom realen Milieu des Objects erzeugt und – die sonst zu neuer Differenzierung verwandte nervöse Energie zur Ausschaltung eines analogen intensiveren Erinnerungsreizes veranlaßt wird; der so gewonnene (künstlerische) Ausdruck bedeutet ein abnehmendes Entfernungsmaß zwischen Subject und Object.’
the memory-image, and the establishment of a complicit, in-between space of artistic encounter – might be traced and unfolded through Varda. As previously noted, my analysis approaches her work selectively in order to concentrate not on the still contemplation of the animated image, as one might describe the ‘standard’ cinematic experience, but on the animated contemplation of the still image. It homes in on those aspects of her photographs, films and installation art that draw our attention to a seemingly static detail in order to capture an unexpected animation at its heart. In particular, it studies five, interrelated facets of Varda’s work: first, the ways in which she evokes the gestural within the still, and how this animation is born of an oscillatory impulse; second, how she transforms the canonical into a ‘living image’ through a process of emulation centred in (and beyond) the tableau vivant dependent on a disturbance of status and of surfaces; third, how spectatorial empathy is harnessed and made manifest in a complicit act of portraiture; fourth, how Varda’s ‘memory-images’ function – or fail – by flagging up a gap; and finally, how this gap is filled through the creation of a shared space of mutual encounter.

Varda’s animated immobilism

For an artist known primarily for her moving-image work, Varda seems curiously concerned with immobility. In Jane B., she introduces us to the ‘Inconnue de la Seine’, a nineteenth-century suicide victim whose youth and beauty were captured post-mortem in plaster. ‘Je me demande si le seul portrait réel, ce n’est pas le masque mortuaire, le visage immobile, de face’, Varda muses. The preoccupation is an enduring one. Some ten years earlier, she had received a request from the German television channel, ZDF, to shoot a film ‘plus ou moins marginal’ (Varda 1994b: 142). It was to result in Daguerreotypes, a documentary charting the lives of her immediate neighbours, the shopkeepers of rue Daguerre. Born of a desire to ‘filmer des objets, des gens immobiles et même des visages de morts’ (ibid.), its express aim was to chart their ‘immobilisme’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 41).

Perhaps this fascination with the motionless derives from her early career as a photographer. Varda started out shooting twee children’s portraits – work that she dismisses as ‘[t]ravail à la chaîne’ (Varda 1994b: 25) – before moving to Avignon in the 1950s to work alongside Jean Vilar at the TNP, while freelancing for a number of
magazines (Bastide 1991a: 7-8). When making the transition to film, she never forgot her photographic roots, not only in terms of technique (‘J’étais photographe, je le suis restée… C’est plutôt une façon de voir’ [Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 45]), but also in the multiple references to and adoptions of photography in her films and installation art. We might cite her 1962 short, *Salut les cubains*, featuring hundreds of snapshots taken during a trip to the island and juxtaposed in a photo-montage reminiscent of Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*, released that same year. Then there is her short, *Ulysse*, crafted around the desire (doomed from the outset) to reassert a memory linked to an enigmatic photo of a child taken by Varda some thirty years previously. In 1983, she was even to head a television series, *Une minute pour une image*, each episode of which was dedicated to a different photographic image (Figure 69).

![Figure 69: The omnipresence of the immobile: still photographs in Salut les cubains, Ulysse and Une minute pour une image](image)

Even her most recent installation work is permeated with stills. Contemplating the rows of male and female faces set up on opposite walls in Varda’s *Cabane aux portraits* from the 2006 exhibition, *L’Île et Elle* (Figure 70), Macha Makeïeff is overwhelmed by ‘ce “presque immobile”, ce “presque arrêté”’ (2006: 11). This ‘presque’ is what interests me. On virtually every occasion that a still is presented in Varda’s work, an innate movement accompanies it. I am reminded, at this juncture, of the photograph of Vilar from *Les Plages*, included in the introduction (Figure 5), in
which the actor’s blurred ‘geste de l’abandon’, beckoning beyond the frame, foregrounds a motion that cannot quite be captured but equally cannot be overlooked.

Figure 70: The Cabane aux portraits

Very little, in Varda, is entirely without motion, even if that motion is supplementary or peripheral to the still: the unmoving is thus animated by proxy, through its juxtaposition with the living. I want to consider the ways in which the apparently peripheral still, in Varda, is, like Warburg’s supplementary Beiwerk, made to move.

*Cinema’s illusion of movement*

Looking back at her work in a 2015 *Sight & Sound* interview, Varda refers to her photographs as latent motion in terms almost eerily reminiscent of Warburg: ‘ultimately, what is a photograph? It’s a movement that’s asleep’ (Darke 2015: 48). At the same time, however, she allows that cinematic motion is necessarily always dependent on an *illusion* of movement. For Varda, the mediums of photography and cinema, seemingly opposed, are entirely complementary:

*Ces deux saisies de la vie, l’une immobile et muette, l’autre mouvante et parlante, ne sont pas ennemies mais différentes, complémentaires même. La photographie, c’est le mouvement arrêté ou le mouvement intérieur immobilisé. Le cinéma, lui, propose une série de photographies successives dans une durée qui les anime. (1994b: 130)*

In *La Côte d’Azur*, a book of film-stills embellished with short explanatory texts published shortly after the release of *Du côté de la Côte*, Varda’s introduction reiterates this almost symbiotic, and certainly symmetrical, relation between moving image and (annotated) photograph. ‘Si les images du film ont suscité un texte de commentaire,’ Varda writes, ‘nous souhaitons que quelques extraits de ce texte ressuscitent les images du film’ (1961: 2). As the moving image begets a still, so does that still, appropriately contextualised, have the potential to reanimate the film.

Varda’s belief in the complementarity of images, mobile and immobile, goes some way towards explaining her enduring desire ‘d’intégrer l’image fixe dans l’image mouvante’ (1994b: 130). She freely acknowledges the influence of the proto-cinematic. *Les Glaneurs* includes an excursion to a vineyard once owned by Jules-Étienne Marey, and revisits the sites of his experiments in chronophotography (again, serendipitous overlaps with Akerman can be discerned). There are less explicit references, too. Critics have pointed to an early shot, in *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), of the eponymous Cléo (Corinne Marchand) descending the stairs after a visit to a fortune-teller. Her trajectory is shown three times in rapid succession and compared to Marcel Duchamp’s 1912 painting, *Nu descendant un escalier (No. 2)* (Martin 2008: para. 7 of 8; Ungar 2008: 43), whose composition in turn clearly parallels the chronophotographic work of Marey and Eadweard Muybridge (Figure 71).

We might glimpse here a further affinity with Warburg: critics have compared Marey’s chronophotographic records of human motion with *Mnemosyne* and its

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84 Duchamp’s *Nu descendant un escalier (No. 2)* is sourced from the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s online catalogue (www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51449.html?mulR=35516325(4)). Muybridge’s *Descending stairs turning; pitcher in left hand* (Plate 138, c. 1887, detail) is taken from Adam 2014: 279.
concern with restituting movement through juxtaposed images (Michaud 2012: 97; Bennett 2007: 448). The interplay of stillness and mobility certainly exerts a comparable appeal for Varda, who admits: ‘Je suis fascinée par l’image fixe d’un visage, un regard immobilisé. Et tout autour la vie bouge’ (2011b: 19). In the synopsis for her 2011 exhibition at the Musée Paul Valéry in Sète, Y’a pas que la mer, she recounts how the Portraits à volet vidéo that feature in it (see Figure 72), were conceived as a ‘parcours […] contradictoire et complémentaire. Photographie et cinéma, portraits immobiles à côté d’images mouvantes’ (2011a: para. 10 of 10).

Figure 72: Alice et les vaches blanches: still image as centrepiece, mobile cows in the margins

Indeed, Varda repeatedly states her belief in this fundamental indivisibility of contradiction and complement. Her films, she observes, ‘sont faits là-dessus, sur la contradiction-juxtaposition’ (Narboni, Toubiana and Villain 1977: 25). Discussing Mur murs and Documenteur – two films that ‘were supposed to go together’ – she concludes that ‘the cinematic ability to perceive the contradictions at the same time has been the main element in my work’ (Quart and Varda 1986-87: 6). This perhaps also explains her delight, when releasing her older works on DVD, in furnishing them with more recent, and often rather tangentially related, bonus materials, also known as ‘compléments’ or ‘suppléments’ (reminiscent, once again, of the pervasive supplementarity of Warburg’s Beiwerk).

85 Image from Varda 2011b: 53.
The division between still and animate becomes diffuse in this fusion of contradiction and complementarity. In *Daguerréotypes*, Varda notes how ‘[l]’immobilisme de ce mini-quartier a pris la forme de photographies filmées’, which, while seemingly fixed, are nonetheless inhabited by tiny tremors: ‘quelques cheveux bougent, un geste s’ébauche, ils respirent!’ (1994b: 143). At the same time, and again in line with Warburg, this simulacrum of motion that the still-based cinematic medium offers in no way detracts from its emotional impact. Quite the opposite, in fact: ‘Le cinéma’, we learn, ‘c’est le mouvement des sensations’ (ibid.: 62). Furthermore, and in turn recalling Warburg’s gesture that transcends time, this emotional resonance suscitated in the translation of still to animate simultaneously elides temporal divides. As Isabelle McNeill suggests, there are here constant ‘oscillations between the motionlessness of the objects we are used to calling monuments and the mobility of film, which […] is inherently dynamic even in its moments of stillness’ (2010: 80) as past and present conflate in the installation space.

*Disturbing the surface: oscillatory impulses*

We are back in the realm of Warburg’s *Schwingungen*; the tiny, life-evoking disturbances of surface – those elemental interventions that animate the accessories of apparel and hair – that the onlooker can trigger within the artwork ‘provided that his eyes and heart are in the right place’ (Warburg 2010g: 640). Varda’s work is often described as the product of unexpected oscillations. Commenting on the installation piece, *Ping-Pong, Tong et Camping*, Marie Colmant affectionately outlines Varda’s love of inanimate bric-à-brac. ‘Il est tellement vivant’, she says. ‘Et, comme tout ce qui vibre, ça lui donne des idées’ (2006: 15). Varda, meanwhile, describes both her memory and her work in terms of vibrations. ‘[M]a mémoire oscille entre l’ardeur et l’erreur’ (1990: 30), we learn, while her work ‘est énormément fait des instants et du frémissement des hasards’ (Wera 1986: 11).

As with Warburg, these tremors are born of – and generate – powerful emotions. Just as his oscillatory impulse conceives of a ‘human passion [that] lives on through its dead’ (2010g: 640), so does Varda’s art, reanimated, move us. Since *La Pointe courte*, Varda has sought to shape her films in accordance with an unfettered flow of feeling, as ‘something that comes from emotion’ (Quart and Varda 1986-

The wind-as-artist

In Varda’s work, too, the elements conspire to animate the accessory. There are clear analogies to be drawn with Warburg as the wind intrudes to set Varda’s surfaces in motion, lending an additional layer of aleatory animation that runs parallel to the artwork on view. *Varda par Agnès*, a collage of musings in book form, ends with an aeolian image borrowed (though not acknowledged) from the final verse of Paul Valéry’s 1920 poem, *Le Cimetière marin* – ‘l’air immense ouvre et referme mon livre’ (1994b: 223), a wind that animates the pages of text and images – and indeed there is always, in Varda’s work, a possibility of interruption, some airy element that will unexpectedly disturb the surface of things. In *Les Glaneurs*, it is the sudden gust that greets museum staff as they salvage a painting of gleaners from storage and carry it out to the courtyard to be filmed (Figure 73). In true Warburgian style, this gust causes the canvas to ripple, adding a movement that is utterly in keeping with the lowering skies depicted in the painting and mirrored in the bearers’ clothing and hair, animated accessories whipped about by the wind.

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86 From Valéry’s 1922 collection, ‘Charmes’ (1996: 105, line 140).
In *Jane B.*, the same elemental disturbance intervenes at the pictorial level through Salvador Dali’s *Visage paranoïaque* (1935), a Surrealist exercise in optical illusions seen first on the page of a book and then restaged ‘live’ (Figure 74).

The image is shortly to be subjected to an elemental intrusion, an ‘élément perturbateur’ (Curot 1991b: 168). A sudden, and violent, desert wind cuts across the scene, lashing at the sitting nomads’ robes (Figure 75). As the gale force intensifies, the backdrop starts to tremble until, in one smooth motion, it is torn away from its moorings and sent tumbling down a hillside. At the same time, the ‘visage’ of the desert landscape is unmasked as the sandy expanse of a far more prosaic French or
Belgian beach is revealed, criss-crossed with tyre tracks (Figure 76). Once again, the supplementary motion of the wind has disturbed the surface of a painting and, through an animation of the accessories of apparel and hair, transported it brutally to the present.

Figure 75: The ‘élément perturbateur’

Figure 76: Disturbing the setting, unmasking the present
Les Plages, rich in pictorial references, begins on the beach. This time, the wind is present from the outset. Once again, it erupts into the frame to animate apparel. ‘Voilà mon idée du portrait!’ cries Varda, as a gust catches her scarf and blows it upwards, completely obscuring her face (Figure 77).

Figure 77: Animated apparel in Les Plages

‘The big thing in this scene is the wind’, Varda concludes (Warwick 2009: para. 33 of 37). Although she admits, in the film, to a degree of willing complicity (‘Je crois que je fais un peu exprès avec mon foulard’), the wind nonetheless has the greater degree of agency. It serves as an enabling accomplice, transposing a layer of authenticity to the careful disposition of frames, mirrors and images on the beach precisely by displacing them. Varda has described the film as a collage, a Surrealist art-form dear to her heart (1994b: 14), defined as ‘a way of disturbing the paper’ (Warwick 2009: para. 21 of 37), but also as a form of editing, a process she likens to ‘une feuille dans le vent’ (2001: 22) and which is allied with the technique of the collure: the splicing-together of film-frames (1994b: 14). In Les Plages, the wind is agitator, artist and editor. Aleatory, in control, yet also invisible, it sweeps through the scene, rearranging
the environment. ‘La vie est variée, l’art est comme le vent’, Varda writes in the catalogue for *Y’a pas que la mer*. ‘Décrivez-moi le vent. Quel vent?’ (2011b: 9).

The wind-as-artist (and anarchist) persists as Varda lays out a row of family photographs dating back to childhood – a time that escapes her, so that the photographs become a stand-in for memory. ‘C’est pour cela que dans mon film, je les ai disposées dans le sable, balayées par le vent’, she explains in interview (Bouché n.d.: para. 5 of 7). She abandons them to their fate. Buffeted by the returning breeze that lends them a mobility previously denied them by Varda’s lack of memory, they, too, are transformed into animated accessories (Figure 78).

![Figure 78: From still photograph to animated accessory](image)

It is striking that these oscillations almost always serve to interrupt an existing composition, and by so disturbing a still and carefully appointed surface, lend it an animation that *exceeds* its representation. I wish to take this further, examining Varda’s preoccupation with the medium of painting more generally to determine how the emotive, elemental oscillation described above lays the foundation for subsequent (re)animations of the artwork. By transforming the ‘tableau’ into a *tableau vivant*, I contend, Varda brings what Warburg terms ‘externally animated life’ (2010a: 63) into the domain of the inert and the canonical – in brief, into the frame.
Varda is adamant that she had seen only a handful of films before making her first feature, *La Pointe courte*, in 1955. The precise number, however, fluctuates wildly depending on the interview. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there is occasional confusion regarding what she had actually experienced. Ginette Vincendeau names *Citizen Kane* as the only film Varda could remember having seen prior to embarking on her own filmmaking career (2008: para. 1 of 8) – a reference that I cannot trace – while Steven Ungar’s list includes Luchino Visconti’s *La Terra Trema* (2008: 13), which Varda mentions only because Resnais had riled her during the editing of *La Pointe courte* by flagging up parallels between the two that purportedly baffled her, having never seen the Visconti (Varda 1994b: 46; Varda, Floret, Nave et al. 1992: 8).

Consequently, Varda’s early experiments in cinema were to draw on her knowledge of still rather than moving images. As we have seen, Varda’s initial incarnation as a photographer was to have a powerful influence on her subsequent work. However, let us not forget that Varda first enrolled as an art history student at the École du Louvre, although she never completed her course, finding herself ‘fatiguée d’avance en m’imaginant classer des fiches dans un musée de province’ (Varda 1994b: 25). On making *La Pointe courte*, she thus claims that it was not photography that shaped it or, indeed, film, but the plastic arts: ‘je l’ai fait plus par amour de la peinture et de la sculpture que par amour du cinéma’ (Breton with Andréani, de Kermadec et al.: 55). Ever since, critics have underscored the primordial role that painting plays in Varda’s work. While René Prédal detects a proprietary vocabulary that has developed ‘en résonance avec la peinture et l’art photographique’ (1987: 18), others allude to the canvas to argue that ‘paintings frequently catalyse [her] narratives’ (Varda and Allsopp 2009: 70), comparing her role to that of a ‘peintre de l’éphémère’ (Quenin 1988: 7), and her working methods to those of the artist, brush in hand, ‘l’objet d’un désir de la part d’Agnès Varda’ (Curol 1991b: 155). Varda concurs. She was to discover that the filmmaking process offers ‘la liberté du peintre: mettre des couleurs, en enlever, ajouter un personnage, une tâche’ (Audé

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1988: 3), and she delights in manipulating the medium like paint or putty, elevating substance above subject ‘à la manière d’un peintre’ to privilege ‘la texture, le rendu de la peinture, la pâte, la façon de peindre, le style’ (Varda, cited in Racine 1986: 27). Even today, she turns to painting for inspiration. ‘I go to films, sure, and I always listen to music,’ she tells us, ‘but nothing else nourishes me like that’ (Williams 2009: para. 12 of 16). Her installations, while revelling in the ‘diverses dimensions’ unavailable to the 2D mediums of cinema and painting (Nave 2009a: 22), nevertheless hark back – and arguably increasingly so – to historical, even primitive, forms of representation that emulate the depth of real space, chief among them the triptych, which Varda positions ‘au coeur de mon travail’ (2011b: 20). In particular, her Venice Biennale contribution, *Patatutopia*, as well as her more extensive exhibitions, *L’Île et Elle* and *Y’a pas que la mer*, owe much to the triptych and polyptych forms (Vallès-Bled 2011: 16; Varda 2011b: 20; Gailleurd 2009: 201) (Figure 79).

Figure 79: *Triptyque de Noirmoutier, Patatutopia* and the polyptych, *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*88

Varda continues to pay homage to the pictorial tradition: her 2014 exhibition at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris, composed entirely around the number three, was entitled *Triptyques atypiques* (Figure 80).

88 Image, top, from Varda 2006: 66-67; images, bottom left and right, from Varda 2011b: 31 and 58.
As Varda tells Bernard Nave in interview:

J’aime beaucoup le chiffre trois, c’est tout mon amour pour les triptyques anciens, toute cette peinture flamande avec ces panneaux qu’on n’ouvrait que le dimanche comme dans certains hôpitaux. J’aime beaucoup toute cette cérémonie de découvrir l’image. Le hors champ m’intéresse et m’intrigue. Des questions que les installations permettent d’aborder dans de l’espace. Dans la peinture ou le cinéma, il faut faire entrer dans un espace plat ce qui n’est pas plat. (Nave 2009a: 21-22)

Painting thus serves Varda – as it did Warburg – not merely as a medium, but also as an intermediary. It offers a means of accessing a three-dimensional space.

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89 Plan and photographs are my own.
through the mobile contemplation of a two-dimensional surface. By the same process of emulation, it also allows painting to effect a shift from ‘still life’ to serve as an extension to ‘real life’. Just as Warburg, in his *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, craves a spectatorship premised on a dual desire to observe rationally and to engage through emulation – ‘[o]n the one hand, the desire to be made to feel the artwork’s non-vitality as a tacit pre-condition; on the other, the desire to experience the illusion of life in full’ (2011: 26)\(^90\) – so, too, does Varda harness the canvas as a locus for emotional deferral. When overwhelmed, she expresses her pain by proxy, through a work of art that offers her the opportunity to achieve a certain distance from her emotions while at the same time enabling her to engage with them *through* that distance. Even when shedding tears on camera in *Les Plages*, the emotion is triggered by an exhibition, in Avignon, of portraits of actors taken during her time with the TNP; people loved, now deceased. The emotion, though raw, is nonetheless filtered through the artistic context (and filmed by not one but two cameras). ‘Je les pleure très sincèrement,’ Varda says, ‘et je les expose comme une artiste qui est fière de montrer ce qu’elle sait faire’. Thus, although not averse to shedding tears, she prefers them to flow via a representation: ‘J’aime pleurer pour une chanson, j’aime pleurer au cinéma’ (Kaganski 2000: para. 5 of 7). These tears are not a side-effect of self-indulgence, but a means of overstepping the everyday. Under ‘L comme Larmes’ in the ‘Abécédaire’ included in *Varda par Agnès*, she notes how a sad film offers ‘une belle occasion de pleurer sans s’occuper du reste ni de sa propre vie’, while recognising that real tears are off-limits: ‘je n’en parlerai pas ici ou peu’ (1994b: 24). Art inserts itself in place of first-degree sorrow as a catalyst for empathic tears, but tears that distract from and replace present woes.

Varda recounts the arguments that she was having with Jacques Demy during the making of *Documenteur*, ‘mon film le plus triste’ (Fitoussi 2012: para. 8 of 32; Varda 2001: 18); on two separate occasions when she revisits the experience, however, she evokes it through the second-degree medium of painting. In a *Cahiers du cinéma* interview from 1987, she summarises those turbulent years in terms of Magritte’s 1955 painting, *Les Idées claires*, seeing in it a sense of suspension that offers a fitting parallel to ‘des émotions et des contradictions de cette époque’ (Varda 1987: 51).

More than two decades later, an interview following the release of *Les Plages* reveals

\(^90\) ‘[e]inerseits der Wunsch, die Nicht Lebendigkeit des Kunstwerks als stilschweigende Voraussetzung fühlbar gemacht zu bekommen, anderseits der Wunsch, den völligen Schein des Lebens zu empfinden.’
that such emotions continue to be relived by proxy, through ‘that beautiful Picasso painting called La femme qui pleure’ (Heti 2009: para. 29 of 82) (Figure 81).

Figure 81: Second-degree sensations: Magritte’s Les Idées claires and Picasso’s La Femme qui pleure

The practice endures: accepting a lifetime achievement award at Cannes in 2015, Varda posits art as a constant source of emotional resilience; a repository for sorrow and frustration that in return offers joy. ‘Quant à moi’, she informs her audience, ‘pour résister au découragement, à la flemme, à l’imbécillité, je suis aidée par des artistes et leurs œuvres. Quand je visualise une peinture de Picasso, je suis de bonne humeur’. Painting, for Varda, seems to permit a certain depersonalisation of the subject that allows her to engage with it anew through a process of emotive emulation – echoes here of Warburg’s empathic Erinnerungsbild, entailing the ‘repetition of a foreign image as if it were one of our own memory-images’ (2011: 80).

Indeed, emulation appears key to Varda’s oeuvre more generally, which overflows with details from and homages to existing artworks, some of which are evoked repeatedly. Even during her early years as a photographer, Varda was to situate herself in relation to a painting, capturing her profile alongside those of the kneeling figures in a detail from Gentile Bellini’s 1500 painting, Miracolo della

93 ‘Wiederholung eines fremden Bildes als ob es ein eigenes Erinnerungsbild wäre.’
In this way, she finds a means, through emulation, simultaneously to observe and to be included in the image. ‘Je me suis placée parmi eux, devant eux’, Varda writes (cited in Piguet 2011: 26).

Varda’s transtemporal emulations evolve over time as she revisits the work to lend it new life: out-of-time – and always also rather out-of-place (‘Space goes with duration’, Varda insists [Barnet and Jordan 2011: 184]). The script for Les Amours de Valentin (also known as La Mélangite), while never progressing from scenario to screen, brims with stage directions that point to Varda’s desire to resituate the canonical and bring iconic art quite literally back to life. The script unfolds five facets of her hapless and hopelessly enamoured protagonist, the eponymous Valentin. His early interactions are mirrored in the motions of the Renaissance paintings he encounters in Venice. One of these is the Bellini. Varda homes in on an expanded detail (Figure 83):

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94 From Varda 2011b: 27.

95 Unable to secure funding for the feature, all that remains of La Mélangite are a few rushes from 1960 that Varda includes as a DVD extra in her 2012 Tout(e) Varda box set.
Un detail d’une peinture de Gentille [sic] Bellini: les moines nageant dans le canal du Rialto, dans le même sens que les notables donateurs.

Valentin-Premier, de profil devant la toile, dans le même sens que les notables donateurs. (Cinémathèque française [Fonds Jacqueline Moreau/Bernard Evein] n.d.: 14)

Figure 83: Bellini revisited: the expanded detail reanimated in *Les Amours de Valentin*.

Varda executes a gestural transfer from canvas to onlooker as she accords Valentin the position she once occupied herself. This intermedial – and transtemporal – transfer is doubly underscored by a linguistic repetition that heightens the mirror-effect (‘dans le même sens que les notables donateurs’) as Valentin emulates the still image. The script is full of such moments of pictorial reanimation, symptomatic of Valentin’s love, both ardent and unrequited. Back in the South of France, he prolongs the practice as a means of keeping alive an affection to which its object proves stonily impervious: ‘la peinture vénitienne, la musique vénitienne sont pour lui les meilleurs moyens de poursuivre l’image de Stella’ (ibid.: 19).

Even now, Varda continues to repurpose Bellini’s painting, lending it life in new contexts. Today, it serves as the backdrop to yet another intermedial, transtemporal gesture; an altogether more irreverent one. Varda’s official Facebook page features a profile picture (taken by the street artist, JR) that shows her thumbing her nose at her younger self, posed unsmilingly in front of the Bellini detail in her original *Autoportrait* (Figure 84).

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Bellini painting reproduced from Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1500_Gentile_Bellini,_Miracle_of_the_Cross_at_the_Bridge_of_S_Lorenzo_Galleria_dell'Accademia,_Venice.jpg).

I am reminded, by this anachronistic, incongruous insertion of the self into the artwork, of Warburg’s thoughts on clothing as an extension of bodily perimeters, offering a ‘dynamic sense of being tied to something through additional material’ (2011: 81). I am reminded, too, of his notion of ‘handling and carrying’ that is equally one of animation-through-mimicry, and that is so dependent on a ‘disturbance of […] material parts’ (ibid.: 68). Varda, I argue, similarly seeks animation within the canvas, and she does so through a process of emulation that disturbs its material surface, moving from ‘tableau’ to tableau vivant. Her films are immensely rich in references to painting, both Surrealist and, in tune with Warburg, Renaissance. And these images from the past become, as they did for Warburg, a conduit for self-expression in the present as Varda emulates and reanimates their surfaces. Sylvia Monfort was chosen to play ‘Elle’ in La Pointe courte because of her long, slender neck and calm, rather blank facial expression, which, for Varda, replicated the traits of the pious women that people the work of Piero della Francesca (Kaganski 2000: para. 7 of 7; Varda 1994b: 44; Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 45) (Figure 85).

An image, by Hans Baldung Grien, of a young, barely veiled woman shuddering in Death’s skeletal embrace similarly informs Cléo, featuring as the frontispiece to the 1962 screenplay, while a copy of the painting was often pinned to the wall of the set during filming to act as a visual reminder of the links between love and death (Varda 1994b: 48). The reference returns in Les Plages and her

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accompanying ‘texte illustré’ in which two of Baldung Grien’s manifestations of ‘[l]a beauté pulpeuse et la mort osseuse’ (2010b: 49) are superimposed onto a still of Cléo’s reflection captured, tableau-like – indeed again much like the centrepiece of a triptych – within the frame of an ornate mirror (Figure 86).

Figure 85: Della Francesca and Monfort in La Pointe courte

Figure 86: Baldung Grien’s Death and the Maiden motif

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99 Fresco detail, left, from La Leggenda della Vera Croce (The Legend of the True Cross, 1452-1459), adorning the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy; sourced from Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piero_della_Francesca_013.jpg).

100 Left, Baldung Grien’s Der Tod und das Mädchen (1517), used to preface Varda’s Cléo screenplay (Varda 1994b: 49), here reproduced from Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Baldung_006.jpg); right, composite image from Varda 2010b: 49. Both Baldung Grien paintings in the latter photograph – left, Der Tod und die Frau (c. 1520-1525); right, Der Tod und das Mädchen (1517) – are held by the Kunstmuseum Basel.
The emulation and revival of the still through the medium of painting continues. Varda’s 1958 short, *L’Opéra-Mouffe*, as Esteve Riambeau has noted (2009: 139), contains a nod to (the rather more baroque) Diego Velázquez’s *Venus del espejo* (*Rokeby Venus*, 1647-1651), albeit reversed (Figure 87).

![Figure 87: Evoking Velázquez: the Rokeby Venus reversed in *L’Opéra-Mouffe*](image1)

Embodying the Venus, the young protagonist (Dorothée Blanck) reflects a beauty and vitality starkly at odds with the haggard faces and damaged bodies of the down-and-out locals whom Varda films on Paris’ rue Mouffetard.

The reconstruction of a canonical and Classically-inflected painting as living image – *tableau vivant* – is thus a recurring, and deliberate, technique in Varda’s work. Take, for example, *Lions love (... and lies)*, from 1969 (Figure 88).

![Figure 88: Reanimating the Classical at two removes in *Lions love*](image2)

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102 Image from Picasso’s *Suite Vollard* (Plate 46: *Young sculptor at work*, dated 23 March, 1933, held by the British Museum) sourced from the museum website at www.britishmuseum.org/images/picasso_304portrait.jpg.
Varda tells us that she arranged the actors in a reconstruction of a picture, inspired by the art of Antiquity, from Pablo Picasso’s *Suite Vollard* (2001: 13) so that she could enter into a ‘tableau vivant de faux-semblants’ (1994b: 97).

However, in co-opting the canonical, Varda is not merely seeking to relive the past: these paintings serve equally as a conduit to – even a canvas for – the present. Céline Gaillerd has written of Varda’s fascination with the island of Noirmoutier, noting how her vision ‘n’est pas seulement nostalgique, le présent y fait sans cesse irruption’ (2009: 206), and the same applies to the artworks to which, like much-loved locations, she returns time and again. Once more, Warburg comes to mind through his vision of a surface disturbance dependent on active spectatorship that allows art to transcend time, whereby ‘[t]hrough the marvel that is the normal human eye, new generations may experience, embedded in the unyielding masonry of the Antique past in Italy, the vitality of those selfsame oscillations, surviving across centuries’ (2010f: 637). In keeping with Warburg’s transtemporal gesture, Varda’s appropriation of the painting exceeds the ‘still life’ through a disturbance of surfaces that constantly allows the present to intrude. I wish to analyse further this idea of the *tableau vivant*, the means by which Varda, through a process of pictorial reconstruction that has much in common with Warburg’s ‘emulative motion’ (2011: 50), once again redeems the gesture within the inert as a means of breathing new – indeed, modern – life into iconic images.

The *tableau vivant* is most prominent in Varda’s portrait of Jane Birkin, *Jane B*. Described by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis as a film in which ‘a rich history of pictorial representation is condensed’ (1993: 312), it overflows with visual homages to the plastic arts. Again, the ‘living painting’ prevails and Flitterman-Lewis testifies to the way in which a detail from Hieronymous Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500) – which, like Dalí’s *Visage paranoiaque*, first features as a reproduction in an art catalogue – makes the leap from page to screen as a ‘modified *tableau vivant*’ (ibid.: 319). Transplanted to a casino whose walls are decorated with Magritte murals, the restaging of the Bosch allows sixteenth-century nudes to cavort merrily against a twentieth-century background (Figure 89). We might go further still and

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103 ‘durch das Wunderwerk des normalen Menschenauges bleiben in Italien im starren Steinwerk der antiken Vorzeit, Jahrhunderte überdauerd, den Nachfahren gleiche seelische Schwingungen lebendig.’

104 For comprehensive details of the paintings featured in the film, see Smith, A. 1998 (Chapter 1); Flitterman-Lewis 1993; and Curot 1991b.

105 The Grand Casino in Knokke, Belgium (see www.grandcasinoknokke.be/fr/organisation-des-festivites).
single out the animated accessory of apparel that features in this pictorial composite. The headgear sported by these transplanted figures, in combination with the masked apples espied in the background, is strongly reminiscent of Magritte’s 1964 painting, *Le Fils de l’homme*, whose bowler-hatted subject is famously masked by an apple (again offering a pleasing, if coincidental, parallel with my previous chapter on Akerman). The fact that the film is a portrait of Jane, which ultimately fails through her contradictory desire to be an ‘inconnue célèbre’, as Varda observes in the film, is thus also neatly captured in this transtemporal staging of the pictorial gesture as both re-enactment and self-effacement.

![Figure 89: Gambolling gamblers: Bosch meets Magritte in *Jane B.*](image)

I wish to examine further Varda’s repurposed ‘tableaux’ and her concomitant freeing of the gesture frozen within the still through a process of animatory emulation. I turn to a painterly composition that is to recur on multiple occasions throughout *Jane B*. Subjected to intermedial interventions, the canvas – flitting between the mediums of painting and the moving image, blurring boundaries at once physical, social and temporal – offers a vibrant site of reanimation.

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106 *Le Fils de l’homme*, currently owned by the Harry Torczyner Collection in New York, is reproduced from the Magritte Foundation website (www.magritte.be/galerie).
An intermedial interrogation of status

In the course of the film, Varda shifts her focus from a frontal reconstruction, as tableau vivant, of what appears to be a composite of the posed female figure (reversed) from Francisco Goya’s Maja vestida (c. 1800-1808) and Maja desnuda (c. 1795-1800) and background detail from Titian’s 1538 Venere di Urbino (Venus d’Urbino) (Figure 90), to home in on the working women in the deep space to the right of the latter painting. In the following, I consider how Varda, through emulation, disturbs the surfaces of these images, rendering them gestural while multiplying their meanings across time.

Figure 90: Titian’s Venus d’Urbino; Goya’s Majas, clothed and naked

As befits an artiste-cinéaste who delights in displacement, both spatial and temporal, and who loves to ‘donner une coloration ludique aux choses les plus sérieuses’ (De Bruyn 2012: para. 8 of 19), Varda’s emulation is never entirely reverential. We find no simple reassertion of ‘still grandeur’: reactivated, these paintings trigger fresh associations that are very much of the present moment. Hence, in re-appropriating the Old Masters, Varda signal (and, we suspect, consciously) fails to respect the social codes incorporated into their work. Rather than replicate the strict class divides that separate foreground from recess in the original Titian, she starts her film in the margins, her camera singling out the servants’ quarters and omitting the Venus/Maja altogether (Figure 91). At the same time, the film

107 Photograph of the Venus d’Urbino, held by the Galleria degli Uffizi, by juanlumen1 (www.flickr.com/photos/76384462@N06/18539389996); Goya’s Majas, owned by the Museo del Prado in Madrid, by Art Gallery ErgsArt (www.flickr.com/photos/ergsart/22149883999/ and www.flickr.com/photos/ergsart/22310321286/).
commences with a voiceover by Varda that refuses to date her backdrop: ‘C’est une image très calme. Hors du temps’.

Figure 91: Contemporary narrative vs classical backdrop

As Varda’s introduction cedes to Birkin’s opening monologue, the temporal uncertainty intensifies, paired with a further incongruity at the level of language. The actress’ words are crushingly contemporary, recounting the sorry tale of her nausea-ridden 30th-birthday celebrations some ten years previously. Poised decorously, her hands clasped in her lap, Birkin does not spare us the gory details. After a bottle of cheap booze, she tells us, ‘j’ai commencé ce chemin pénible sur les genoux jusqu’à la salle de bains pour arriver jusqu’à les [sic] toilettes pour gerber dans les toilettes’.

The vulgar vocabulary, coupled with Birkin’s strong English accent, exaggerated deliberately at Varda’s request (see Birkin’s interview, ‘Jane Birkin en Jeanne d’Arc’, included on the DVD of Jane B.), is starkly at odds with her exquisitely appointed Renaissance environment, and it transports us brutally from the rarefied past to the (literally) visceral domain of the recent past. Again, I find compelling compatibilities with Warburg and the transtemporal gesture he defines to link the static artwork with a ‘human passion [that] lives on through its dead’ (2010g: 640) in his lifelong search for an iconological analysis that ‘discourages us neither from considering Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the modern era as interrelated epochs, nor from interrogating
examples of the freest and most practical [forms of] art imaginable as records of expression to be treated as equals’ (2010c: 396).

Varda suspends the ‘full’ reconstruction of her painterly amalgam, half Venus, half *Maja vestida*, for a full five minutes. Finally, her camera cuts back from a café scene with Birkin. Curiously, following this cinematic deferral, Jane has shifted from the margin to the foreground, now adopting the pose of the reclining woman (Figure 92). She holds it for a full 13 seconds as stillness returns to the scene. Once again, Varda makes us hesitate before presenting her next tableau, the *Maja desnuda* (Figure 93).

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108 ‘weder davon abschrecken lässt, Antike, Mittelalter und Neuzeit als zusammenhängende Epoche anzusehen, noch davon, die Werke freiesten und angewandtesten Kunst als gleichberechtigte Dokumente des Ausdrucks zu befragen’.
And here we experience a disorienting change of pace and perspective. Introduced by a close-up of the recess that lasts just two seconds, Varda permits us a still more fleeting glimpse of the *desnuda*, according her at most a second of screen time before again cutting, this time to the contours of Birkin’s naked body, presented in such proximity that the camera navigates it like a landscape, much as Varda’s close-ups would (as illustrated in my introduction) map Demy’s body under such different circumstances in *Jacquot de Nantes*.\textsuperscript{109} We have been drawn into the detail once again, and a different kind of topographical viewing, as Alison Smith has ascertained, in which the body is shot as ‘a landscape in which one sometimes needs landmarks – the nipple, the mouth – to work out where the camera is’ (1998: 40). Moreover, the camera-pan, occupying a leisurely 18 seconds of our time as it glides in an uninterrupted line from right to left, is ‘à contre-courant’ (as Varda has said of the comparable travelling shots in *Sans toit*, ‘on lit de gauche à droite et tout mouvement de droite à gauche est un peu contrarié, contraignant’ [1994b: 174]). We reconstruct it in reverse, from toe to top, so to speak (Figure 94).

Figure 94: ‘Le corps à contre-courant’

Despite the lack of cuts, our overall impression of the body is nonetheless disturbed by a lack of congruity, making it still more difficult to gain a coherent image of what might constitute the ‘whole’. Varda has upset the image by animating it, turning it backwards by reversing the relations between foreground and periphery, and inverting and amplifying our gaze to question its scale, depth and topography. In these disarrangements, she reveals the painting as disposition. She lays bare the role of the animated detail and the structures behind the image, and then challenges them. In so doing, she reappoints the image as a three-dimensional zone. In sum, her disturbance of status and of surfaces allows her to expand the image, not only within but also beyond the frame. For Varda, painting is not merely an emotional extension, but a spatial one as well. ‘Pour moi,’ she says, ‘la peinture élargit la sensibilité, ouvre des espaces’ (2001: 13).

\textsuperscript{109} Demy was suffering from late-stage AIDS. He died before Varda had finished editing the film. As we view the images of his body in close-up, we are thus painfully aware that we are witnessing a body destined to disappear.
Later, Birkin, in everyday dress, is able to inhabit the scene in the present and from behind. Flitting around the studio set, she gives us an insight into ‘l’envers du décor’: the beyond-the-frame that makes manifest the cinematic apparatus. She narrates her trajectory, drawing attention away from the actors to the vital role played by the on-set crew, while revealing the wooden boards and supports, the lights, tripods, hoardings and cables, that underpin the artifice of the tableau vivant (Figure 95).

Figure 95: Beyond the frame: the apparatus revealed

This disturbance of surfaces – and concomitant interrogation of status – is to return each time the reconstructed painterly composite reappears. And each time, too, a new depth is added as the recesses of the image are in turn expanded outwards. In its subsequent manifestation, the servants again take centre-stage, conversing. Birkin, relegated once more to the role of lowly handmaiden, is handed a dress by her superior. The camera slowly tracks her as she passes through an unseen corridor masked by a further painting compositionally similar to the Venus d’Urbino (Figure 96).

110 The painting, unidentified in the film, is known as La Dame à sa toilette (c. 1580). Currently held by the Musée des beaux-arts de Dijon, it is one of several very similar paintings on the theme – half allegory, half erotic vision – produced by the École de Fontainebleau around that time (Jugie 2004: 1).
Figure 96: The canvas as intermediary

The camera pauses briefly to observe the painting, then moves on to a room located to the right of the tableau, beyond the frame (Figure 97). This second canvas becomes both a wall and an intermediary as the following shot shows Birkin reading aloud from a small book of verse. In a further Warburgian animation of the accessories of hair and apparel, she has, in passing behind it, miraculously adopted the painted jewellery, garb and coiffure of the foregrounded figure.

Figure 97: Adornment re-embodied and reanimated

A whole new world beyond the wings – and outside the seemingly rigid confines of the painting – has opened up laterally, mediated by its own medium. The domains of ‘within’ and ‘beyond’ conflate as the gesture, released by the disturbance of surface, extends the painterly universe. The servant’s superior intervenes robustly to put the recalcitrant Birkin firmly (back) in the frame. We see her banished once again to the recess. The camera cuts back to the foreground, occupied now by another nude, far closer in pose to the Venus d’Urbino (Figure 98).
Evidently determined not to let this reassertion of classical hierarchy stand, and with a look of steely resolve in her eye, Birkin’s servant engineers a final disturbance of status and of surfaces. Commanding the camera once more, she opens her clasped hands to release a swarm of flies, in an image that again harks back to the Surrealists, explicitly evoking the hand teeming with ants in Dali and Luis Buñuel’s 1929 film, Un chien andalou (Figure 99). \footnote{Varda has attested repeatedly to her profound regard for the latter filmmaker. In Les Cent et une nuits de Simon Cinéma (1994), she accords him one of the film’s cinematographic ‘hommages non déguisés’ (Varda and Bastide 1995: 9); in Varda par Agnès, he features as a standalone entry in her ‘Abécédaire’ (1994b: 12); and an article penned by Varda for Positif concludes that ‘[t]out est bon pour penser à Buñuel’ (1994a: 143).}

The camera cuts to show the swarm congregating on and around the body in repose, crawling across the ‘canvas’ and infesting the image. Here, we discern a further nod to Dali whose disconcerting fondness for entomological accessories
emerges in the insect-ridden nude of *Ants, Nails and Flies on Nude* (1967) and fly-blown apparel and accoutrements of his *Hallucinogenic Toreador* (1970), among others (Figure 100).\textsuperscript{112} These invading insects add another layer of (Surrealist) animation to the now-still picture before us, and elevate the still-humbler housefly to the foreground.

Figure 100: Insect infestations: a nod to Dalí

With art as its intermediary, the transtemporal gesture has flourished in a proliferation of projections, blurring the distinction between margin and centre-stage to erode hierarchical divides; then expanding the image backwards to lay bare its scaffolding; before expanding it sideways to introduce a recess-beyond-the-recess; and finally overwriting the whole with the introduction of another layer of foreground animation released from the hollow of a marginal figure’s hand.

The image is subjected to one final intrusion of pure present. The film closes with a shot of Birkin, seated in the recess, her demure pose identical to the one that opened the film. It is her 40th birthday. Suddenly, she is assailed on all sides by crew-members bearing gifts (Figure 101).

Figure 101: Invading the painting: taking the *tableau vivant* forward in time

Once again, the present invades, but this time it takes over the domain ‘within’. And the moment becomes cinematic as Varda sets it within a modern-day frame: a

\textsuperscript{112} For further details, see Steven Connor’s online piece at www.stevenconnor.com/flysight, from which the Dalí images in Figure 100 are taken.
dressing-room mirror. The releasing of the transtemporal gesture (in the present) has culminated in a painterly composition (from the past) that pays homage to its (future) cinematic affinities.

Like Warburg, Varda’s reanimation of the still entails an empathic appropriation of its surface and subject matter. She then proceeds to mimic and disturb them, adding a layer of animation that not only releases the gestures of the past through the interruption of the present, but also invents them afresh by providing a glimpse of the future. She makes these gestures her own and, through an emulation that transforms ‘tableau’ into tableau vivant, opens up a space for empathy. It is extremely tempting to read these reanimated portraits as autobiographical assertions. ‘Je crois que je suis dans une peinture d’Agnès’, as Birkin sagely surmises in Jane B. Yet to what degree does an act of artistic appropriation usurp original authorship? To what extent are these refashioned portraits also portraits of Varda and is it her intention that they be interpreted as such? Opening up these issues of ownership, I move on to explore the implications of this proprietary gesture in Varda’s work more broadly.

**Implicating the other: empathy and omniportraits**

As we have seen, the artwork serves Varda as a source of emotional displacement, achieved through an accessory reanimated and rendered gestural by a disturbance of surfaces triggered by emulation. And yet, I contend, this appropriating instinct is not a selfish one; it is based on complicity and a desire to share. I propose that Varda’s artistic borrowings are motivated by a wish not to usurp the artwork, but to defer authorship, which conversely serves to expand the canvas still further by enabling Varda to co-habit its space alongside the original author, while simultaneously opening up a space of voisinage to accommodate, and implicate, the onlooker. To frame this in Warburgian terms, I am intrigued by the ways in which Varda, through the act of authorial complicity, first fosters what the art historian terms the ‘aesthetic act of “empathy”’ (2010a: 39-40), and then harnesses it in order to make the spectator complicit in a process of gestural, image-based (re)animation. At the same time, I argue, in adopting a practice of expanded portraiture that allows for a plethora of
authors, Varda flags up a constant co-presence, but also a certain absence at the heart of the image.

**Co-authorship and complicity: authorial deferral**

Every instance of portraiture in Varda is to some extent one of self-portraiture, and she claims that her films ‘sont tous autobiographiques’ (Wera 1986: 5). She also accepts that they bear an imprint of her person – in the case of the commentaries she voices, quite literally. ‘En laissant ma voix,’ she explains, ‘j’ai l’impression que c’est un peu de moi qui reste dans le film. Du charnel’ (2001: 26). Her audience certainly does not begrudge her this indulgence. Particularly in old age, and since the success of *Les Glaneurs*, Varda has garnered intense affection – an affection that suscitates in her a wry amusement even as she acknowledges it. Noting that ‘[j]’ai la sensation d’être aimée. Plus aimée qu’admirée, d’ailleurs’ (Libiot 2012: para. 10 of 17), she also freely admits that the sensation is not an unpleasant one, for ‘au fond on fait tous des choses pour être aimé, pour être admiré’ (2001: 6). Yet she repeatedly repudiates the culture of self-aggrandisement inherent in the ‘autoportrait’. This she does by making each self-portrait the product of a process of co-authorship.

Returning from a road-trip in *Les Glaneurs*, Varda shuffles through a selection of postcards gleaned en route. Our eye alights on a reproduction of a Rembrandt self-portrait (Figure 102). Varda’s hand descends upon it. For several seconds, Rembrandt’s face is obscured as the digital camera is distracted by Varda’s ageing skin, and as it scans its landscape of lines and liver spots in extreme close-up, a very different self-portrait emerges, of the ‘artist as an old lady’ (Rosello 2001: 29). But then the hand is lifted, and the ‘original’ artist’s face restored. One self-portrait has facilitated another, without, however, losing its integrity. Consequently, while Varda has been criticised for a degree of self-indulgence in her repeated recourse to self-portraiture (Alain Philippon, for example, laments that Varda ‘ne peut accepter de renoncer à l’auto-satisfaction, à l’auto-référence’ [1988: 12]), she defends the autobiographical urge as one born of a drive towards candour and authenticity rather than self-referentiality. ‘Je m’implique toujours très précisément dans mes films, non par narcissisme, mais par honnêteté dans ma démarche’, she says (cited in Prédal 1987: 10), comparing her endeavour to that of Rembrandt, who painted multiple self-portraits throughout his life, but whose ‘grande humilité’ spares him accusations of
‘coquetterie’: ‘Ce n’est pas du tout le contentement de soi, ni l’autosatisfaction. Pas du tout’ (Domenach and Rouyer 2008: 18).

Let me test Varda’s claim to a deference that hinges on self-implication more stringently by examining how it manifests in her work. The device, which achieves authorial deferral without succumbing to the immobilising deference of the ‘still grandeur’ that so infuriated Warburg, is particularly evident in Les Glaneurs’s camera that always moves away from Varda’s person in order to capture the far vaster body of ‘glaneurs’ to whom Varda, in the film’s full title, is appended as an afterthought (a straggling ‘glaneuse’). It can be discerned, too, in L’Une chante l’autre pas. The ill-fated Jérôme is a photographer by trade and the walls of his studio are home to a series of mournful female forms and faces, black-and-white studies in mute suffering that seem to presage his subsequent suicide. These photographs, it transpires, were taken by Varda; however, as she indicates in Varda par Agnès (1994b: 131), they were staged and shot in the style of the photographer, Bernard Poinssot (1922-1965) (Figure 103). Authorship, deferred by two degrees, is also multiplied.
There is perhaps an ethics to be discerned in this deferral to multiple authors. After all, Varda concedes that the people captured by her camera may be being held against their will. Even in her own photographic portraits, therefore, she on occasion finds herself compelled to return to earlier works in order to reanimate (and liberate) them, to ‘[f]aire vivre ce qui est fixe par la vie du regard’ (ibid.), but this time by giving this gaze back to her subjects. An installation piece from Y’a pas que la mer brings photography and cinema together as Varda juxtaposes her 1956 photograph, La Terrasse du Corbusier, with a short film from 2007 entitled Les Gens de la terrasse, which restages and thus re-releases the action frozen in the original image (Figure 104). ‘Revoici un peu de cinéma’, she announces in the exhibition catalogue (2011b: 20). Varda par Agnès informs us that she took the original photograph in Marseilles – ‘j’ai saisi un de ces instants que les gens eux-mêmes veulent saisir’ – while at the same time transferring the credit for the pose to the unwitting protagonists and their animated accessories: ‘elles ont déjà tout préparé, leurs gestes, leurs habits, leurs chapeaux, souliers et sacs’ (1994b: 125). More than half a century later, she recreates the Modernist setting (in Sète) to film the second, seeking perhaps to loosen her grip on the images she had ‘seized’ (a verb repeated in

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113 Poinssot images (untitled and undated), right, reproduced from the website of the Bibliothèque nationale Française (expositions.bnf.fr/portraits/arret/2/4.htm).
114 As in Chapter 1, I touch on the topic only in passing. For an exploration of portraiture and ethics in Varda, see Sarah Cooper’s (primarily Levinasian) Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary, in which chapter 5 is dedicated to Varda’s non-fiction ‘film portraits’ (2006: 77-90); Delphine Bénézet’s monograph, which includes a chapter on Varda’s ethics of filming as a ‘cinéaste passeur’ (2014: 71-87); and Claire Boyle’s article that excavates the ethics of Varda’s ‘self-fictions’ through Michel Foucault’s ‘techniques de soi’, in particular his concept of ‘le souci de soi’ (2012: para. 7 of 26).
the accompanying catalogue to describe the figures ‘saisis par mon objectif’ [2011b: 20]) by reviving the motion that her camera had taken away and restoring agency from camera to filmed subjects.

Figure 104: The ‘terrasse’, seized and re-released

The image’s afterlife continues to expand. For her 2013 exhibition in Aix-en-Provence, *Les Bouches-du-Rhône*, Varda was to include a further take on her original photograph, this time reinstating the Marseilles backdrop, but repopulating it with women and changing the pose so that their gaze confronts the camera (Figure 105).

Figure 105: Expanding the afterlife (again): the Cité radieuse reclaimed

The artwork is doubly reclaimed: not only is possession of the image restored to its subjects; so is that of the site as these women cheerfully ignore the prominent signs,

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115 Photograph and screenshot taken from episode one of the 2011 ARTE television series, *Agnès de ci de là Varda*.
in French and English, barring entry to Le Corbusier’s concrete structure (‘MONTÉE INTERDITE/NO ACCESS’) in a mass act of récup’ that is also one of occup’. Dated 2012, Varda entitles the image *Citoyennes radieuses sur la terrasse de la Cité radieuse.*

In this desire to re-establish her subjects as the owners of the gestures ‘stolen’ by her camera (under ‘P’ for ‘Prise de vues’ in *Varda par Agnès*, Varda affirms that ‘[d]es actrices disent que les metteurs en scène leur volent leurs gestes et leurs sentiments’ [1994b: 28]), Varda’s public is accorded an authorial role. Again, we find her in search of the ‘second degree’. ‘Parler des autres en parlant de soi, ou parler de soi en parlant des autres. C’est vrai de la plupart de mes films’, she admits, but not without the proviso: ‘Mais pas au premier degré’ (Domanach and Royer 2008: 18). Her self-referentiality is designed to open up the self-image to the presence of others, to create what we might term an ‘omniportrait’. Time and again, she refers to Gertrude Stein’s 1937 work, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (Bear 2009: para. 77 of 77; Murray 2009: para. 9 of 31; Williams 2009: para. 4 of 16), telling us that, as in Stein’s work, ‘in my film I’m not just putting myself in the mirror so much. It’s me among other things’ (Murray 2009: para. 9 of 31). Varda is a Varda is a Varda is a Varda. Describing herself as a ‘go-between’ rather than a creator (Darke 2015: 50), she insists that ‘je laisse de la place dans mes films pour que le public puisse y pénétrer’ (Varda, Prédal and Piazzo 1992: 17), noting that her films ‘participant du désir de participation’ (Decock and Varda 1993: 953-54). Complicity is key. Looking back on the reception of her television series, *Une minute pour une image*, she gleefully states that she had ‘rarement eu autant la sensation d’être en connivence avec un public’ (Varda 1994b: 137).

Varda thus yearns for an empathic spectatorship that is above all playfully conspiratorial. As noted earlier, her recent DVD releases come with a host of extras that she terms ‘boni’ (‘un bonus, des boni, c’est plus latin, c’est plus joli’ [Varda 2010a: 68]), and that represent a means by which Varda can involve those bodies-at-a-distance, her spectators, in an editorial collaboration. The DVD of *Les Glaneurs*, for example, comes with an added feature: the ability to click on a heart-shaped potato

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117 The right to occupancy is an issue close to Varda’s heart and one that she explores in her portrayal of the homeless in *Sans toit* and her interviews with *Les Glaneurs*’s more socially precarious protagonists, but also in her contribution to the cultural festival, *Le Voyage à Nantes* (June-August, 2012). Entitled *Des chambres en ville et des téléviseurs*, the second floor of Varda’s exhibition was (literally) occupied by a three-screen video installation, *Paroles de squatteurs*. It combined filmed conversations with ‘sans logis’ and ‘les objets de leurs besoins de base’ (Varda 2012a: para. 3 of 3) to deliver an artwork that was also a heartfelt social critique.
icon that blinks intermittently on-screen during viewing. This simple act of digital complicity allows the spectator to access the continuation of the protagonists’ trajectories in Varda’s follow-up feature, *Deux ans après* (Figure 106), and offers a degree of co-authorial implication by enabling viewers to impose their own ‘montage’ as they reanimate the images retrospectively as and when they wish.

Varda achieves a further degree of conspiratorial co-authorship with her public through an often tongue-in-cheek approach to the representation of the self that suggests that identity is to a large extent accorded not by being, but by being *perceived*. In other words, identity requires an audience. In *Les Plages*, Varda doubly deflates her retrospective from the outset. ‘Je joue une petite vieille, rondeur et bavarde, qui raconte sa vie’, she announces as she walks backwards along the beach, setting herself up as a figure of fun while at the same time indicating just how consciously performative this faintly absurd self-image is (Figure 107).
Attention is drawn here to the proscenium, the domain of the viewer. If anything, Varda’s awareness of the contrived nature of self-portraiture serves to deflect attention away from the subject and towards the spectator.

Throughout her career, Varda has been acutely conscious of the extent to which her appearance has been subject to – even dependent upon – the projections of others. In *Varda par Agnès*, a studio photograph of herself as a child in Ixelles is anonymised under the entry ‘X comme X elle’ (1994b: 35) and later woven into a number of her films (Figure 108).

![Figure 108: Resurgence of the unknown portrait in *Ydessa* and *Les Plages*](image)

‘De ma naissance et de ma petite enfance, je ne suis que le récit des autres’, Varda writes (ibid.). Through her implicit invitation to collaborate in the creation of her ‘identity’, the onlooker is made complicit – and, by extension, elevated to the status of co-creator.

In making the leap from the frame to the exhibition space, Varda takes with her this desire for conspiratorial spectatorship. Her aim, again, is to ‘créer un rapport direct avec le spectateur’ (Cesbron 2006: 65), and this she does by exploiting the interactive potential of the three-dimensional work of art. Alain Veinstein summarises the user-configurable installation piece, *La Grande Carte postale ou Souvenir de*...
Noirmoutier (Figure 109), as an image that, although controlled remotely and thus precluding touch, ‘ne peut rien dire d’autre que ce désir de proximité’ (Adler and Veinstein 2006: 27). Varda’s installations thus offer a two-way (and three-dimensional) space of voisinage; an encounter by proxy, spurred on by a desire for proximity, inciting, as Aurélie Jacques contends, ‘un rapport physique à l’image, un déplacement du spectateur’ (2006: 30). As with Warburg’s empathic transfer of the gesture in the observation of the still, so too does Varda allow us to approach and collude in her creative process, animating it through active and equal participation.

Figure 109: Interactive installations: La Grande Carte postale

Consequently, whilst underscoring the subjective and self-inflected nature of her camerawork, Varda nonetheless testifies to the authorial debt that she owes both the artists who have preceded her and her artistic subjects. She simultaneously acknowledges that, to acquire an identity, an image requires the participation of the audience that receives it. Every self-portrait necessarily defers to the life around it. Even her self-depictions are thus omniportraits that bear the imprint of her environment, including her spectators. Seeking an analogy with classical painting, she notes how her presence in her filmic work is ‘l’équivalent des peintres anciens qui installaient dans un coin du tableau un petit autoportrait perdu dans la foule’ (Marvier 2000: 47). Self-referentiality is also a form of self-effacement, but equally it offers a

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118 Image from Varda 2006: 24-25.
means of becoming part of the crowd and, by extension, of engaging with the broader audience.

The presence of a ‘foule’ of empathic onlookers is enough to enable their inclusion in the portrayal in a process of contingent complicity, as it were, that in turn allows the artist to observe her audience. In interview following the release of *Les Plages*, Varda returns to the *autoportrait* in order, once again, to negate any implicit accusations of narcissistic self-regard. In the process, she repeatedly invokes the motif of the mirror. ‘Qu’est-ce que fait le peintre qui se peint? Il se met devant un miroir’, she admits, but goes on to justify the stance by explaining that ‘[l]e miroir est l’outil de l’autoportrait, mais moi je le retourne vers les autres’ (Nave 2009a: 25). Hence, the mirror of self-portraiture becomes a manual device that allows her better to contemplate the other: ‘If I take a mirror and I look at myself by holding it in my hands, and then I just turn it, I see other people’ (Murray 2009: para. 9 of 31).

Yet there is something missing here. By so thoroughly deferring to her painterly and photographic predecessors, artistic subjects and ‘grand public’, the one person who might ultimately be deemed absent from these portraits – the face that is not reflected back in the mirror that the *artiste-cinéaste* repeatedly turns away to capture the life around her – is Varda herself.

*Where’s Varda: authorial absence?*

When asked whether she had ever been tempted to act in her own films, Varda’s forthright response in the negative – ‘j’apparais le moins possible’ (2001: 24) – suggests that this is no coincidence. As she argues, there is perhaps no such thing as an entirely authentic self-portrait: following the release of her biopic of Birkin, *Jane B.*, she emphasises that ‘ce faux autoportrait n’est ni le mien, ni le sien’ (1994b: 185). Birkin concurs, describing Varda’s ambivalent position as both auteur and actor as an interplay between transparency and concealment. ‘Elle est comme une maison. Avec les fenêtres peut-être qui fait qu’on pense qu’on connaît beaucoup d’elle’, reflects Birkin. ‘Mais finalement jusqu’à quel point elle se laisse voir ce qu’elle a envie qu’on voie d’elle. Et pour le reste, il y a des volets fermés, je pense’.119

Hence, although Varda’s films ‘sont tous autobiographiques’, as the *artiste-cinéaste* insists (Wera 1986: 5), the mirror-medium of the self-portrait is held up as

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119 From an interview with Birkin (‘Agnès V. par Jane B.’) included on the DVD of *Jane B.* The errors in French are from the original.
fundamentally flawed. The word that Varda uses to describe this flaw-in-the-mirror is the *creux*. We should pause here to clarify that Varda emphatically does not equate the *creux* with the *rien* that Akerman finds so painfully compelling. Varda’s *creux* is an absence of *something*; Akerman’s *rien* an absence of *everything*. The former – the equivalent in English of a ‘gap’, ‘cavity’ or ‘hollow’ – can be filled. Hence, Varda shies away from the incommensurable nothingness of the ‘vide’, but embraces a silence that represents a choice not to speak and a potential, therefore, for plenitude:


In *Ydessa*, a short charting the artist Ydessa Hendeles’ 2004 ‘Teddy Bear Project’, whose endless walls of anonymous photographs offer a search for identity by proxy, Varda describes the project as ‘la première étape de cet autoportrait en creux, pour ne pas dire en miroir’ (Brioude 2007: para. 29 of 63). Similarly, a gap is to be found at the heart of the representation in her portrayal of *Sans toit*’s central figure, Mona, which ‘se fait en creux’ (Alion 2003: 8), and the futility of the exercise is writ large in Varda’s interviews on the subject. Mona is a ‘portrait impossible’ (Varda, Prédal and Piazzo 1992: 8), ‘impossible à faire’ (Varda 1994b: 159), because Varda ‘ne croi[...] qu’aux impossibles portraits’ (Audé 1988: 3).121 Unlike Warburg’s belief that an attitude of empathy naturally inclines us towards infusing the (unknown and unknowable) artwork with our own mobile recall – what he terms the ‘repetition of a foreign image as if it were one of our own memory-images’ (2011: 80) – Varda’s reassertions of the impossibility of (authentic, comprehensive) portraiture repeatedly confront us with a *creux*. Warburg sets a great deal of store by his memory-image, that visual unit of personal recollection that he believes allows the onlooker to empathise with the image and set free its latent gesturality ‘because one has experienced it’ (ibid.: 44). In considering Varda’s work and the recurring issue of authorial effacement, however, a question swiftly presents itself: what to do when we encounter an absence? How do we restore gesture to the inanimate through an *Erinnerungsbild* when memory is *missing?*

120 Varda reprises the line from her short charting Aragon’s relationship with his wife and muse, *Elsa la rose* (1965).
121 One might note that this film is dedicated to the writer, Nathalie Sarraute, greatly admired by Varda as a fellow-portraitist of the impossible and a woman similarly ahead of her time ‘qui avait écrit *Portrait d’un inconnu* bien avant que se dessine le groupe du Nouveau Roman dont elle était la seule femme’ (Varda 1994b: 31).
While Varda is undoubtedly fascinated by the matter of memory – ‘La mémoire m’a toujours passionnée’ (Tranchant 2008: para. 6 of 12) – her relationship with it is rather fraught. Her own, as we know, vacillates ‘entre l’ardeur et l’erreur’ (Varda 1990: 30). Recall is a wasteland, a ‘terrain vague’ (Varda 1994b: 214), with which she cultivates ‘de mauvais rapports’ – an adversary, almost, against which she pitched a sustained battle when writing Varda par Agnès, described under ‘M comme Mémoire’ as ‘un combat pour pactiser avec cette mémoire souvent muette’ (ibid.: 24). Her childhood, in particular, is presented as sparsely furnished with strong recollections. Interviewed following the release of Jacquot de Nantes – inspired by her late husband’s startlingly accurate memories of his early years – Varda confides that ‘rien de ma propre enfance n’a jamais inspiré une photo, un livre, un scénario, un poème’ (Marie 1991: 3), and confesses to a degree of envy for Demy who could so effortlessly re-inhabit his past (ibid.; Varda, Floret, Nave et al. 1992: 16). Her endeavours to reanimate two photographs of herself at the beach as a small girl in Les Plages fail as she concludes that her youth ‘c’est pas une référence pour les choses auxquelles je pense; c’est pas une inspiration’. She dresses two small children in bathing costumes copied from the photographs and looks on, pensively (Figure 110).
‘Je ne sais pas…’, she muses hesitantly, visibly unconvinced by the re-enactment. ‘Je ne sais pas ce que c’est de reconstituer un scèone comme ça. Est-ce que ça fait revivre ce temps-là? Pour moi, c’est du cinéma, c’est un jeu’. At base, Varda is no aficionado of the retrograde desire to revisit her childhood, which she sees as a step – or rather, a gallop – in the wrong direction. ‘Essayer de se revoir enfant’, she says, drily, ‘c’est courir à contre-sens’.

What Varda does find compelling is not the promise of accurate personal recall, but the possibility of unexpected associations; the point at which the ‘erreur’ of memory can become ‘errance’; what McNeill describes, paraphrasing Godard, as ‘the beautiful accident that memory becomes’ (2010: 71). To achieve this, a space must be opened up to accommodate the unexpected. Varda consequently seems altogether more at ease with forgetting than with remembering – her ‘Abécédaire’ entry under ‘O’ is a significantly more succinct ‘O comme Oubli et comme Omission’ (1994b: 27) – and it is memory in its manifestation as lack that she finds most fruitful. She repeatedly expresses a fascination with what she terms ‘la mémoire défaillante’ (Tranchant 2008: para. 6 of 12; Wera 1986: 4). Recounting the filming of Documenteur, Varda explains how she felt drawn not to words, but to ‘l’écho des mots’, not to ‘souvenirs’, but to ‘des souvenirs oubliés’ – traces always slightly out-of-reach and always in-between, occupying a ‘temps-espace de silence entre les moments d’émotion’ (Audé and Jeancolas 1982: 42). Forgetting – not a failing but ‘a form of freedom’ (Béar 2009: para. 32 of 77) – opens up these interstices in order to allow a proliferation of unfettered, associative memory-images. While this might, at first glance, appear antithetical to Warburg’s endeavour to harness individual memory to decode the gesturality of the artwork, his own concept of the memory-image has much to do with involuntary association. In a section of his Grundlegende Bruchstücke dated 4 September, 1890, dedicated to ‘Image and sense of self’ [Bild und Ichgefühl], he notes: ‘Only when we need to come to some conclusion do we differentiate strictly between our real and imagined experiences’ (2011: 49).122 This relation between memory-image and projected experience implies a comparable willingness to embrace an absence at the heart of recall. As the following will demonstrate, this in turn chimes with Varda’s fractious relationship with recollection, whose resuscitation takes place not by reinstating the original event as such, but

122 ‘Nur wenn wir uns zusammenfassen müssen, scheiden wir streng zwischen unseren wirklichen und eingebildeten Erfahrungen.’
through a further disturbance of surfaces: on the one hand, a fragmentation of the image; on the other, a means of visual redaction that ‘blanks out’ and blurs the boundaries between representation and reality.

*Mirrors and jigsaws: the aesthetics of incompletion*

Let me consider this idea of the imperfect, redacted ‘memory-image’ further. The question of fragmentary self-representation has been a persistent, and consistent, one in Varda’s photographic and filmic work over the years. I return to her fascination with the role played by the mirror in the act of (self-)portraiture. In 1949, Varda created an *Autoportrait en mosaïque*, posing ‘toute seule devant un miroir’ to capture the image and then cutting up the print and rearranging it to reconstitute her features as mosaic (Varda 2011b: 24).\(^{123}\) Six decades later, she revisited the mirror to create her *Autoportrait morcelé* (2009), her face distorted by the myriad ‘petits miroirs’ that multiply her reflection (ibid.: 22) (Figure 111). Visible but not ‘all there’, these photographic self-portraits raise fascinating questions about the presence, or otherwise, of the artist in the process of portraiture.

![Figure 111: Fragmentary self-portraits, from *Y’a pas que la mer*](image)

Much ink has been expended charting the proliferation of mirrors in Varda’s film-work, particularly in *Cléo*, and it is not my intention to expand significantly on

\(^{123}\) A term that, like the Surrealist collage, has also been applied to Warburg’s art-historical output: grappling with his thesis on Botticelli, Gombrich refers to it as a ‘mosaic of quotations and references’ (1970: 59).

\(^{124}\) Images from Varda 2011b: 25 (*Autoportrait en mosaïque*) and 23 (*Autoportrait morcelé*).
these invaluable and very comprehensive analyses. To underscore the consistency with which Varda fragments her mirror-portraits, I merely draw attention to the remarkable similarity between Varda’s self-portraits, above, and two instances of Cléo’s reflected self, the first in the tiny panels of a mosaic adorning a column in a café; the second in the shards of a shattered compact dropped by Cléo’s friend, Dorothée (Dorothée Blanck) (Figure 112).

Figure 112: Portraits of Cléo, en mosaique and morcelè

What I wish to highlight here is what is missing in these mirror-based portraits: on the one hand, a coherent image of the subject in its entirety; on the other, the authorial presence, diminished, or even edited out, by the reductive and partial process of fragmentation. Varda’s mirror-based portraits are fundamentally flawed, I suggest – but is this flaw a fatal one?

Superficially, Varda’s desire to shatter the subject does have a murderous, perhaps even suicidal, tinge to it. To create her ‘portraits brisés’ (earmarked for an exhibition of the same name at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels in June, 2010),

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she starts with a violent disturbance of surface facilitated by a more material animatory accomplice than either wind or water: she takes a hammer to her mirror-canvas. She charts the process with some relish in episode three of *Agnès de ci de là Varda* (Figure 113).

![Figure 113: Varda’s violent disturbance of surface: creating the portraits brisés in *Agnès de ci de là Varda*](image)

Then, camera in hand, she photographs the fragmented faces of her subjects in an over-the-shoulder shot. Already, the image has narrowed. Shifting from the 16:9 aspect ratio used to capture the shattering of the mirror, black bars have appeared to the right and left of the image, reducing it to the 4:3 ratio that once represented the televisual (and cinematic) standard. In this second image, Varda-as-author is clearly visible, poised with her camera (Figure 114).

![Figure 114: The author in the frame…](image)

The final portrait, however, has been pared down still further. The image has been rotated and the encroaching black bars on either side have again expanded – this time
to excise the author. Varda, in the process of creating the portrait, has excluded herself (Figure 115).

Figure 115: ... and the author excised

I am curious as to why an *artiste-cinéaste* who insists that her films contain ‘la substance de moi’ (Domenach and Rouyer 2008: 18) should choose to edit herself out of the frame in an act of portraiture that simultaneously seems designed to fragment the subject. A scene in *Les Plages* offers insight. As Varda prepares an exhibition of photographs dating from her time with the TNP in Avignon, her camera-eye alights upon a young man, Thierry, who is repairing the ‘ancestral’ mosaic floor tiles of the exhibition space. She compares the process with her photographs of Vilar and his troupe, several of which have been divided into square panels to be slotted together (Figure 116), and which she, too, describes as fragmentary. Significantly, she proceeds to link this to the act of memory: ‘Il y a l’idée de fragmentation que j’aime beaucoup, qui correspond vraiment à quelque chose de la mémoire. Est-ce qu’on peut reconstituer ce personnage, cette personne de Jean Vilar, si exceptionnelle?’ In brief, she suggests that portraiture and memory can never revive a subject, nor render it whole; far better, therefore, to dismantle it. Fragmentation is a more *honest* portrayal of a person whose identity, captured as material remains at a specific moment in time, can no longer truly inhabit the present.
Moreover, the proliferation of pieces leads to a proliferation, too, of portraits, each sliver revealing a different snippet of the subject from a variety of angles. The flaw at the heart of the shattered portrait, it seems, is not fatal, but vital. In Varda’s imperfect memory-images, portraiture’s disturbed surface, while no replacement for the three dimensions of real life, nonetheless offers a plenitude of perspectives. Fragmentation, in other words, is also a form of animation-through-omission. Just as haphazard recall proves more authentic than sequential (and selective) memory, fragmentation here offers the closest approximation of life possible on the screen/canvas, while bringing together the microcosmic (the shard) and the macrocosmic (the image that is infinitely more than the sum of its parts).

Varda’s fascination with the fragment comes to the fore in her lifelong love of jigsaws. Looking on as museum staff assemble the panels of a giant portrait of Gérard Philipe in Avignon (see Figure 116, above), Varda muses: ‘C’est drôle, c’est le côté puzzle […] qui me plaît’. Equating the placement of each interlocking part with a filmmaking process designed to ‘reconstituer une image faite de fragments qui s’emboîtent’ (1994b: 159), she charts how her approach to the jigsaw has evolved over the years. Demy would tease her as she slaved determinedly over her puzzle pieces. Eventually, she was forced to abandon a particularly fiendish specimen. Comparing the experience to that of filming *Ulysse*, the 1982 short tracing her failure to reconstruct a photograph due to its subjects’ inability or unwillingness to collude in the endeavour, she tells us that ‘[j]’ai un jour décidé de ne pas souffrir davantage,
d’accepter le puzzle comme impossible à compléter’ (ibid.). She had come to realise that she wanted to be ‘un auteur sans certitudes’ (ibid.); one who would accept the fragments left over and embrace the holes in the image. An aesthetics of incompletion starts to take form.

After Ulysse, the jigsaw motif thus comes to occupy a privileged position in Varda’s vocabulary, and critics have seized upon it with enthusiasm, particularly in connection with the fragmentary female portraits found in Sans toit (Serceau 2009: 131; Picant 1991: 151-52; Flitterman-Lewis 1990: 313), Jane B. (Bastide 1991b: 81; Flitterman-Lewis 1990: 352) and Les Plages (Levy n.d.: paras 24 and 27 of 34; Nave 2009b: 26). Mona, the itinerant protagonist of Sans toit, is depicted as a wandering enigma. Never whole on her own terms and defined only in relation to her incessant motion (‘Je bouge’), Varda describes her as a ‘portrait-puzzle’ (1985: 3). We might recollect Warburg’s Mnemosyne, whose combination of images and blank, black backdrops Didi Huberman has compellingly equated with the jigsaw (2002: 496). Certainly, non-linear memory-images and puzzle pieces – present and absent – are intricately interlinked in Varda’s work. The blanks, as with Warburg’s Mnemosyne panels, provide a crucial context. In Jane B., in which ‘c’est le thème du labyrinthe qui, avec celui du puzzle, me passionne’ (Audé 1988: 3), the portrait is deliberately left unfinished. There is always a hole at the heart of her representation of Jane, Varda remarks in the film, ‘comme quand on fait un puzzle. On pose des petits morceaux par-ci, par-là, et puis ça se dessine doucement et il y a encore un trou au milieu’. The jigsaw, like the shattered mirror, points us once again towards a creux, offering parallels with the puzzle-map of France glimpsed in Les Plages. While its contours are complete, the constituent regions have yet to be placed. We are in uncharted territory (Figure 117).
Tellingly, the sole exception – a small, yellow section to the centre left – is the department of Vendée, home to Noirmoutier and thus, by extension, to Demy. Yet the island itself, to the north of the region, has been excised, while Demy, we know, is long-deceased. Even this apparent exception itself evolves into an omission, a haunting marker of enduring absence that conjures up a further associative memory-image through its incompleteness. The image is reduced to its peripheries and the solidity of geography reversed as the ‘trou au milieu’ takes centre-stage – a creux that is located, too, at the very heart of the self-portrait in Varda’s manipulations of shadows and light.

Shadows and light: towards an intermediary zone of projection

As the frontispiece to the catalogue for Y’a pas que la mer, Varda chooses a photograph by Julia Fabry entitled ‘Ombre d’Agnès Varda’ (2011b: 8). In lieu of features, we are offered a shadow; an outline created from an absence of light and material (Figure 118).

Figure 118: Ombre d’Agnès Varda, from Y’a pas que la mer
On the final page of her book published to accompany *L’Île et Elle* (2006: 88), meanwhile, Varda presents us with an earlier image of herself that is similarly evocative of absence as she strides across the sand and away from the camera, her black clothes flapping bat-like about her body (Figure 119).

![Figure 119: Varda’s presence as absence, from *L’Île et Elle*](image)

Superficially, she seems a formidable presence. Yet the contrast between light and shadow is so stark in this latter image as to prevent us from discerning any details of her clothing. The overall effect is not of fluttering fabric, but of a ragged black hole at the heart of the photograph. ‘L’absence a une présence très forte’, as Varda has noted in interview (Audé and Jeancolas 1982: 43).

Yet again, we might discern here a correlative to the *Mnemosyne* panels clad in black cloth to which Warburg would pin his assorted images. What interests me specifically is the way in which the *creux* at the centre of Varda’s image, like the uninscribed interval between the disparate elements of *Mnemosyne*, does not serve to polarise the images or to alienate the onlooker. Instead, the blank space becomes a zone of infinite rearrangement, and thus of endless, gestural associations, duly reminding us of Varda’s own predilection for blanks, and more specifically still, *blancs*:
Le blanc est une couleur fascinante, et, là, mon propre vocabulaire persiste. De même que les écrivains ont des mots privilégiés, moi, j’ai des mots-images, dans tous mes films ils apparaissent: ainsi, tout ce qui est lié à l’amour se concrétise dans la blancheur, blancheur du sable, des draps, des murs ou du papier. Ou encore blancheur de la neige, de la lumière sur les pelouses, comme dans Cléo. Il existe une dissolution dans la blancheur qui est pour moi l’amour et la mort. Ce n’est pas symbolique ni systématique. Ce sont des images qui s’éveillent seules, qui s’imposent à moi. (Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 50)

The blank, the black or white screen, becomes the setting for what Warburg terms ‘a living dance of death [that] rejoices and laments’ (2010g: 640). The description seems particularly apt when applied to a further sequence of Les Plages in which Varda, wrapped in white robes, sits motionless at a table, listening to the radio. The image is borrowed from George Segal, the Pop artist known for positioning eerily monochrome plaster figures in landscapes made of found materials (Figure 120).126

The scene immediately succeeds a section on the dead Demy. Varda remains immobile as an image of rolling waves plays over, or through, her white robe. We never quite know whether the restless sea – another elemental oscillation that animates – is being projected onto her, or whether the white material is transparent, offering a window to a world beyond. Both layers are equally present and absent in the scene.

Figure 120: Projection and/or transparency? Restaging Segal in Les Plages

126 The Segal in question is Alice Listening to Her Poetry and Music (1970), held by the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich.
127 Image, right, is a detail from a screenshot taken from episode three of Agnès de ci de là Varda, in which Varda revisits the scene from Les Plages.
‘Cette œuvre racontait mon vécu’, Varda explains in interview (Nave 2009a: 21), white again key to the sensations beyond the surface. Having divested herself of substance in the *creux*, Varda – and her concomitant, unspoken ‘memory-images’ of the deceased – are present through absence.

What captures my attention is how this blank/ *blanc* at the heart of Varda’s self-representation, like the neutral black fabric of Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* panels, is subsequently co-opted as a site for competing-yet-complementary presences. Further, I am fascinated by the connection that Varda establishes between these *blancs* and the dissolve: ‘une dissolution dans la blancheur’ (Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 50). In sum, I am drawn to the ways in which erasure and the cinematic technique of the dissolve expose a space that, like the screen that separates proscenium from spectacle, can be used as a *shared* and *intermediary* site for multiple projections. Varda is intrigued by the co-presences that these intermedial absences can accommodate. ‘Il me semble’, she says, ‘que je suis plus attentive à ces silences entre les images, ces pâleurs entre les sons’ (Narboni, Toubiana and Villain 1977: 25). We are entering the zone of the *Zwischenraum*.

*Shared spaces as ‘Zwischenraum’: dissolving the ‘creux’*

When contemplating an object, Warburg tells us, concentrating on its expressivity – its encoded gesturality – shifts the focus from its ‘real environment’. As a result, the viewing subject experiences a psychological approximation with the object that in turn liberates the motion embedded within. Pinpointing a state of invested spectatorship that he defines as ‘proprietary judgement’ [*Besitzurtheil*], he argues that when an onlooker comes to feel that s/he ‘owns’ an artwork, this signals ‘the point at which [physical] distance begins to be forgotten’ (2011: 76, emphasis in original).128 This ‘decreasing measure of distance between subject and object’ on the psychological level leads to the formation of a space of artistic encounter occupied by both parties (ibid.: 113). Provided that the object suscitates an empathic response on the part of the viewing subject, and provided that the subject is simultaneously able to detect an equivalency within that object, a non-binary space of convergence opens up

128 ‘des [sic] Beginn des Vergessens des Entferntseins.’
that Warburg terms the ‘in-between space’ (*Zwischenraum*) and in which subject and object become one.

Evidently, there is a certain dissolving of the self required in this act of complicit encounter. We have witnessed above Varda’s continual deferral of authorship; her tendency to integrate herself into her work the better to enter, through a contradictory-yet-complementary process of self-erasure, into complicity with her artistic forebears and onlookers. And, indeed, when a merging of inanimate and animate takes place and the painterly and living converge on screen, it is often through the technique of the cinematic dissolve that Varda allows them to co-exist across time and space. The dissolve allows the screen to be transformed from a two-dimensional surface of projection into the three-dimensional space of co-habitation, while the act of spectatorship evolves from a ‘looking-at’ to a motion-rich and emotional ‘being-with’. In this space of the *entre-deux*, I propose, we shift from an act of viewing to one that can more accurately be described as a viewing-between: *entrevoir*. We do not so much see as glimpse something enduringly liminal, something that we might attribute to the *au-delà* and that is redolent of the supplementarity of the Warburgian *Beiwerk*. Once again, as Varda says, ‘l’absence a une présence très forte’. At the same time, in accessing a space in-between, we enter into a mode of *shared* perception; one very much in keeping with Varda’s constant deferral – and pluralisation – of authorship from self to surroundings.

*‘Entrevoir’: uncanny transparencies*

As always, in Varda as in Warburg, the motionless serves as the intermediary for shared (e)motion. Empty spaces and blank canvases become sites for multiple, and moving, projections, in which past and present converge and commingle.

Take, for example, *7p., cuis., s. de b*. We are thrice offered a view of an unfurnished room in a former hospice for the elderly. On the first two occasions, it is presented by means of an occluded gesture. A male voiceover introduces the property, estate agent-style. As it does so, a disembodied but unmistakeably female arm emerges from the off-screen space to our right and gesticulates (Figure 121). The camera remains fixed, the contours of the cinematic space unchanged, the voice tantalisingly divorced from the gesturing body that remains stubbornly beyond the frame.
Almost exactly ten minutes later, the room returns. From the same, static viewpoint as before, we observe a woman walking slowly across the room (Figure 122). Her gaze fixed on the floor, seemingly lost in thought, she does not engage with the spectator in any way. Again, she points. This time, however, although her gesture is visible, it does not motion towards the interior of the room but towards the space *behind* her, back to the off-screen zone beyond our range of vision.

It is the third visit to this bare and unpromisingly institutionalised space, a further ten minutes into the film, that particularly commands my attention. The camera adopts its by-now habitual immobile pose. Quite unexpectedly, and literally out of nowhere, the frame is inhabited by the past. As we watch, a fade-out/fade-in reveals two nuns, folding a sheet. After a brief moment of observation, the image fades out and in again to return us to the empty, featureless room (Figure 123). This is no simple cut back and forth between past and present. An unwavering patch of sunlight on the floor indicates that the space and its ghostly occupants exist concurrently. We find ourselves in the *Zwischenraum*. A memory-image, introduced by the gesture linking
on- and off-screen space, given substance through the dissolve and animated by an act of *entrevoir*, can inhabit the present in material form.

In *Jane B.*, meanwhile, one of the many vignettes – a hammy thriller starring Birkin as a conniving *femme fatale* sporting an endearingly unconvincing brunette wig, and Philippe Léotard as the feckless artist/criminal she betrays (and shoots) – culminates in a showdown in a warehouse, complete with labyrinthine rows of shelves swarming with sparring gangs of thugs. The continuity of the scene is constantly disturbed as Varda jumps from industrial interior to glimpses of the Magritte-muralled casino and another, more literal labyrinth in which Birkin, as Ariadne, is pursued by a lowering camera-Minotaur. Back in the depot, Léotard cries out in anguish as he violently confronts Birkin: ‘Le mystère, c’est que je t’ai aimée!’. Immediately, the action freezes. The couple looks at each other silently, the goons hold their punches, and into this instant of suspended animation triggered by overwhelming emotion walks a strange and ghostly apparition (Figure 124).
Out-of-focus, distant but visible through the isolation of its contours in motion against the brilliant white of the daylight flooding in through the warehouse windows, a winged figure slowly traverses the background. This oddly serene and utterly displaced passer-by offers a trace of things to come. As the frenetic action resumes as suddenly as it had ceased, we cut to yet another version of Jane, a Renaissance emanation this time, in Bruges. Opposite her, an angel raises a finger and points, before fading out of the picture in a slow dissolve. The inspiration for this scene is the centrepiece of Rogier van der Weyden’s *Annonciation*, a subject with which Varda has a long-standing and oft-stated affinity – her mother collected postcards on the theme and ‘m’a transmis ce penchant, je continue’ (1994b: 212) – and an artist whom Varda cherishes as ‘celui dont l’oeuvre me touche infiniment’ (cited in Piguet 2011: 21). She turns to van der Weyden as a site of co-habitation and animation in *Jane B* (Figure 125). ‘On cherche les mouvements, les gestes’, she explains (1994b: 192), and in seeking out these motions, Varda brings together present and past, fiction and portraiture, to open up the screen as an in-between domain of co-presence and gesturality.

We are reminded of Varda’s love of the materiality of film, the ways in which it can animate the painterly, ‘la texture, le rendu de la peinture, la pâte, la façon de peindre, le style’ (Varda, cited in Racine 1986: 27). Through the diffuse (the soft lines

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129 Van der Weyden’s *Annonciation* centrepiece (c. 1440), from the website of the Musée du Louvre in Paris (cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=23980).
and bewegtes Beiwerk of the peripheral figure from the past invading the present as marginalia) and the dissolved (the same angelic apparition fading from the representation of the past), we are ushered into a mutual space halfway between projection and proscenium; a space not merely of present or of presence, but of the au-delà, whereby the screen becomes something midway between here and there.

Again, the blanc/blank of screen and canvas is key. As noted earlier, this particular creux is anything but devoid of meaning for Varda. The colour white (and Varda, thanks to her photographic training, does deem it a colour [1994b: 62]) is integral to her unique visual vocabulary and is closely aligned with the dissolve: ‘une dissolution dans la blancheur qui est pour moi l’amour et la mort’ (Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 50). White, experienced ‘comme une sensation’, provides a catalyst for the reawakening of motion, what Varda terms ‘des images qui s’éveillent seules, qui s’imposent à moi’ (1994b: 62). In Les Plages, a scene towards the end of the film shows Varda’s family gathering, rather sheepishly, for a group photograph on the island of Noirmoutier. With the exception of Varda, they are all clad, rather diaphanously, in white. Varda explains the choice of colour thus: ‘pour moi, la famille n’est pas un concept fixe mais fluctuant. Je leur ai demandé de s’habiller de blanc, tous […]. C’était clair pour moi, le groupe de famille est une rêverie compacte qui protège’ (Domenach and Rouyer 2008: 21). White here opens up a dream space of personal projection, requiring an imaginative investment on the part of the viewer, while ensuring, too, that the artiste-cinéaste – a lone figure clad drably in brown – does not ‘colour’ the image by imposing herself. There is something rather uncanny about the image, and it is not until some moments have passed that the onlooker realises why. It is a composite, and as the figures cluster and gesticulate, we become aware that they are transparent (Figure 126).

![Figure 126: The transparent family in Les Plages](image-url)
Look closely, and foliage is visible through the contours of their superimposed bodies, reducing their solidity and presence to an illusion, digitally transposed from an elsewhere and not quite of the here-and-now. Varda’s voiceover injects a further note of doubt into this bucolic scene: ‘Tous ensemble ils font mon bonheur. Mais je ne sais pas si je les connais, chacun, chacune, ou si je les comprends. Je vais juste vers eux’.

It is only later that this family group regains its opacity – and significantly, it occurs during a moment of projection. The scene commences with an image of Varda, writing. On the wall behind her hangs a blank, blue painting. Suddenly she stops and puts her pencil down firmly. The camera cuts to the blue canvas (Figure 127). Varda’s voice intervenes as voiceover: ‘Souvent, je m’arrête d’écrire’.

As she abandons writing in favour of rêverie (ever faithful to her precept of cinécriture), her family is superimposed, in motion, over the painting; doubly moved by the wind that whips across the seaside location, the accessories of hair and apparel reanimated through an elemental oscillation. Shifting completely to the realm of the daydream, they are transparent no longer (Figure 128).
The forms and figures are clearly the same ones that Varda had choreographed in her earlier group photograph. This time, however, their original backdrop has been restored and they are neither diffuse nor transplanted. The image sharpens and the whites intensify until they occupy the frame, overwriting the blue background completely and transforming the canvas into a living family album. Varda, by stilling herself in inward contemplation (‘Je ne bouge pas et je pense aux miens’), figures forth a living, moving image. ‘La famille, c’est un concept un peu compact’, her voiceover continues. ‘On ne cesse de les regrouper mentalement. De les imaginer comme un îlot de paix.’

The canvas thus becomes a frame for fresh projections, and an in-between space in which Varda’s loved ones can be reanimated and re-encountered. As it transpires, Varda’s (e)motional Zwischenraum can also facilitate reunions with those she has loved and lost. Demy († 1990), omnipresent in Varda’s more recent work through his oft-stated absence, is accorded a comparable dissolve in the final moments of Les Plages. Again we see Varda at work, the sound of her pencil clearly audible as she inscribes the pages in front of her. In the background, a window offers a framed view of the courtyard of her home in rue Daguerre, familiar to us from her films and the site of a half-century of life, love and loss. And once more, she lays aside her pencil and the written word cedes to a projection (Figure 129).

Figure 129: Memorial projections: the courtyard as canvas

Varda turns her head towards the window and Demy’s features gradually fade in, momentarily reversing the process of evanescence contingent upon material loss as he
occupies the space like a canvas. Varda remains motionless for several seconds, contemplating his face as it slowly disappears. This act of projection that allows for a wordless yet animated entre-deux conjured up by an act of entrevoir offers a complicity beyond the confines of life, and a space in which Varda can find refuge: another ‘îlot de paix’.

Before accusing her of escapism or over-sentimentality, however, let us briefly revisit Varda’s installation piece, Le Tombeau de Zgougou, in which a patch of sand and a white wall are transformed into a moving-image homage to her much-loved cat († 2005). The piece (Figure 130) comprises two films. The first, projected onto the burial mound and the lower half of the wall behind it, offers a reconstruction of Zgougou’s final resting place on Noirmoutier, a brash medley of seashells and pink crepe flowers.

Figure 130: Zgougou’s tomb reconstructed through projection

The second, projected onto the wall above the mound only, cedes to a bombastically cinematic (and deliberately excessive) series of crane and helicopter shots of Noirmoutier and Zgougou’s tomb (Figure 131), a “vaste et coûteuse entreprise et travail collectif” (Varda 2006: 26). This is not mourning as ‘still grandeur’, but as a ludic and lucid celebration (‘du repos éternel de Zgougou. Repos et décomposition’ [ibid.: 27]); a process of loving yet rueful reanimation through renewed encounters. The division between living and dead is blurred, experienced as partage rather than clivage. Once more, we might recall Warburg’s words on the ‘living dance of death’ within the seemingly static monument, whereby ‘human passion lives on through its dead in a fervent will to capture and in a fervent state of rapture, […] stirred by the immortal compulsion of [artistic] expression’ (2010g: 640) – albeit, in Varda’s case, while simultaneously remaining refreshingly clear-eyed as to the substratum of vanity.

130 Images from Varda 2011b: 76-77.
and self-indulgence that underpins all such disproportionate displays of mourning, post-mortem.

Figure 131: Le Tombeau de Zgougou’s extravagant aerial images of Noirmoutier

Empty surfaces and spaces, for Varda, become the site for an act of *entrevoir*, and a screen for the projection of shared encounters; every blanc/blank a possibility for ‘une dissolution […] qui est pour moi l’amour et la mort’ (Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 50).

*Accessing the ‘au-delà’: the screen as in-between*

This process of ‘dissolution’, I propose, reaches a peak in Varda’s recent installations. With the added dimension of depth, it is not merely the projection that dissolves the boundaries between viewing subject and artistic object. The screen itself becomes porous – and penetrable. A translucent curtain, guarded by a red and white barrier, forms the entrance to Varda’s installation piece, *Le Passage du Gois* (Figure 132). An image of the causeway is projected onto it, and can be viewed both outside and from within the demarcated exhibition space. Flooded twice daily, visitors are made to wait as the water rises and recedes in fast motion. Finally, the barrier is raised and entry allowed. As Varda demonstrates in *Les Plages*, the spectator is required literally to pass *through* the screen (Figure 133). The projection is viewed, breached and traversed as we make the passage from passive spectatorship to an active involvement that takes us into and beyond the moving image.

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131 Images taken from a pre-sale catalogue for the installation piece, held by the Musée d’art contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC/VAL), my photograph.
132 The projection recalls the opening credits of Varda’s *Les Créatures* (1965), which include speeded-up footage of the Noirmoutier causeway as it is subjected to tidal ebbs and flows.
The ploy is a deliberate and more universal one in Varda’s installation art. In *L’Île et Elle*, *Le Passage du Gois* leads directly to *La Grande Carte postale*, and the catalogue entry accompanying the latter signals her more general intent. ‘Il suffit de traverser la surface des images’, Varda writes, ‘pour voir autre chose ou réveiller des souvenirs’ (2006: 31). The screen becomes a portal to the memory-image as the divisions between viewing subject and viewed object merge in a *Zwischenraum* in which two dimensions become three, through the physical involvement of the onlooker.

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133 Image from the Fondation Cartier website (fondation.cartier.com/#/fr/art-contemporain/26/expositions/294/toutes-les-expositions/627/agnes-varda-l-ile-et-elle).
Both *L’Île et Elle* and *Les Plages* end with a final crossing of the medium. Varda enters her *Cabane de l’échec*, walks over to a pile of film canisters and sits down (Figure 134). Again, it transpires, we are on the ‘other side’ of a projection. The walls and ceiling of this cabin are crafted from surplus film stock culled from further ‘memory-images’: unwanted copies of one of Varda’s most spectacular flops to date, *Les Créatures*. When Varda staged her 2013-2014 exhibition, *Agnès Varda in Californialand*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), she was to recreate this ‘cinema shack’ (Varda 2013: 12) using leftover reels from a second box-office bomb, *Lions love* (Figure 135).

Figure 134: Inhabiting film from both sides: repurposing *Les Créatures* in the original *Cabane de l’échec*

Figure 135: Filmstrip ceiling: recycling *Lions love* in Varda’s *Cabane de l’échec* ‘sequel’134

134 Photograph courtesy of Zaza Gomurashvili.
Stoically accepting the fate accorded her original creations – *Les Créatures* was ‘un échec épouvantable’ (Varda 1994b: 87); *Lions love* ‘failed’ – Varda literally refashions her medium, sculpting it into a place to be inhabited. Her artwork accommodates us as an in-between space in which past and present converge. She has taken one _creux_ – an artistic failure – and made it into another; one that shelters: a home. ‘Quand je suis là, j’ai l’impression que j’habite le cinéma, que c’est ma maison’, Varda states serenely, perched atop her canisters towards the close of *Les Plages*.

**Beyond Warburg? Immobilising the (in)animate**

Yet why, after this happy homecoming, do I feel that there is still something _more_ to Varda, something that goes beyond even Warburg’s *Zwischenraum*? Perhaps it is because Warburg appears so very homeless by comparison.

Varda’s divagations always seem to emanate outwards from a stable core – more often than not her longstanding ‘[w]orkplace, lifespace, and homebase’ in Paris, rue Daguerre (Levy n.d.: para. 18 of 34). While filming *Daguerréotypes*, she quite literally limited herself to a maximum radius, to ensure that she was never far from her infant son. She did this quite simply by running an extension cord from her home to the neighbouring shops. The length of the cable determined the distance she could travel with her camera. Later, she was to realise its symbolic significance. The cable was a stand-in ‘cordon ombilical’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 29), ‘ce fil qui m’avait gardée attachée à la maison et au petit Mathieu’ (Varda 1994b: 143). The ‘fils’ has grown up, but the ‘fil’ remains: interviewed after completing her commissioned short, *Les 3 boutons* (2015), the latter half of which was filmed just metres from her front door, Varda confides that ‘ça m’a amusé que, comme d’habitude, je me sente à l’aise parce que je tourne près de chez moi’. Warburg’s excursions, by contrast, smack of escapism. Varda’s pleasurable returns to rue Daguerre, documented in *Les Glaneurs*, *Deux ans après*, *Les Plages* and *Agnès de ci de là Varda*, find no equivalent in Warburg’s journey back to Hamburg following his institutionalisation in Kreuzlingen. The latter signals less a return to home and hearth than a temporary reprieve, causing him to remark drily that he had been ‘granted leave to pay normality a visit’

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(Binswanger and Warburg 2007: 130). Warburg, we might surmise, is none too keen to abandon the psychological Zwischenraum of empathic (and occasionally psychotic) animation in favour of the more prosaic everyday. Yet artistic accessories cannot be endlessly animated, while intermediary – and intermedial – encounters sometimes elude us. What Varda acknowledges and Warburg does not, I contend in the following, is a need to accept the limitations of the animating urge and return home. While gestures may be freed through an active contemplation of the still, there are nonetheless immobile images that depict immobility, in which there is no latent motion to be triggered and no additional dimensionality to be mined. And equally, there are still images that, instead of reawakening, might better be renewed through a further process of immobilisation.

**Gestural paralysis**

Unlike Warburg, Varda is not averse to divesting the gesture of motion as she sees fit. And in immobilising the image, both animated and still, she denies us the (potentially precarious) luxury of escaping to a psychological space of complicit co-spectatorship. To explore this practice further I return to the analogue gestures with which I opened this chapter; Varda’s ‘mirror-motions’ in which pathos outweighs narrative logic. We have noted how the mirror – whole or fragmented – can serve as a tool for nuanced portraiture. Yet Varda freely acknowledges that this is not a given. In *Mur murs*, Varda affords Los Angeles’ street artists a voice. Terry Schoonhoven narrates shots of his trompe-l’oeil piece in Venice Beach (Figure 136). At first glance, it appears to be a highly realist copy, a reflection almost, of the street scene opposite. However, as Schoonhoven remarks, ‘[p]eople are just looking at what they miss. The painting isn’t really a literal mirror. It’s really reflecting what’s there all the time. The whole theme of the painting is the fact that it’s empty. It’s still and empty’ – a statement that Varda liked well enough to include it, in translation, in *Varda par Agnès* (1994b: 146).

Mirroring, it seems, can at times flag up a lack that fails to transcend its stillness and emptiness; a lack that is not a creux but a void – a ‘vide’ that we know strikes fear into Varda’s heart (2001: 28).

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137 ‘zur Normalität beurlaubt’.
Figure 136: Schoonhoven’s trompe-l’œil in Mur murs: mirror or mask?

We have seen how, in Documenteur, Varda borrows an image of an unknown woman in a laundrette to set up a resonance with a lost gesture in lieu of narrative (Figure 137).

Figure 137: Reflected gestures in Documenteur

In the first image, Émilie, alone and abandoned in Los Angeles after her partner, Tom (Tom Taplin), has left, remembers a fleeting moment of intimacy. Rather than providing a counterpoint to the lovemaking in the first sequence, the second, which immediately succeeds it, transfers that gesture – ‘un geste de solitude de femme’ (ibid.: 18) – from the past to the present day. By juxtaposition, the image of the destitute woman arranging her matted hair, her face obscured, still further isolated from us by the plate-glass of the shop-front, effectively underscores Émilie’s current state of devastating loneliness ‘séparée d’un homme, […] en exil parmi tous les hommes’ and doubly at odds with language, be it foreign or familiar.

Although a gestural transfer takes place, it is not Warburgian in that it serves to paralyse rather than reanimate. As the film’s opening voiceover informs us (in the
first-person of Émilie, but uttered by Varda), gesture’s power to signify has, like that of language, been consigned to the past. ‘Avant, les gestes avaient un sens, comme les phrases’, Varda’s voice intones, setting up a present characterised by stasis and senselessness. Here, we are not imbuing the immobile with life so much as we are transposing immobility onto life. Hence, the vitality of the intertwined bodies, exposed through an unhurried pan, is in doubt from the outset. The image follows another bodily encounter, similarly presented in close-up. On this occasion, however, we are viewing not living flesh but the cracked and rigid limbs of shop-window mannequins. The camera moves back and forth over these orphaned extremities, coming to rest on a pelvis, disturbingly severed from its torso; a grotesque prosthesis further marred by a gaping hole – another void – that underscores its plastic impotence.139 It is here that Varda cuts to the lovemaking, divesting its living limbs by proxy of eroticism (Figure 138).

The rigour of the first sequence denies the vigour of the second. Indelibly marked by the eerie artificiality and incompleteness of the truncated dummies, these gestures from the past are necessarily drained of life, and coherence, through association, further underscored by the strong, straight lines that traverse both images, providing an additional, angular continuity. Bookended by images that evoke disembodiment and dysfunction, this central sequence loses its link not only with language, but also with life.

139 One might cite a similar use of mannequins in 7p., cuis., s. de b., in which medical waxworks – some made to breathe through macabre mechanics, others part-dissected midway through childbirth, still more marred by the lesions of degenerative disease and old age – seem uncomfortably at odds with life. Varda’s setting is Louis Bec’s 1984 exhibition, *Le Vivant et l’artificiel*, housed in a former hospice in Avignon (Varda 1994b: 156).
‘Séparation de corps’: the disembodied image

Let me look more closely at an earlier succession of images that foreshadows this paralysis of gesture. Émilie earns a living as a secretary for a French actress (never seen but whose husky voice, heard as the two converse by telephone, is unmistakeably that of Delphine Seyrig). As we watch her at work in her employer’s home, Émilie’s environment contrives to immobilise her. Varda juxtaposes still and mobile images to frame a gesture struggling, in vain, for self-expression (Figure 139).

![Figure 139: Petrifying murals: stilling the nascent gesture](image)

A snapshot of Émilie and Tom in happier times appears on screen. Their son, Martin (Mathieu Demy), looks on, his gaze difficult to decipher: quizzical, perhaps, and marginalised by his exclusion from the couple’s embrace as they laugh at something beyond the frame. There is no move to reanimate this particular photograph; quite the opposite, in fact. The camera cuts to a detail from a mural, its composition identical to that of the snapshot but its gazes radically altered. The second couple is confrontational, the woman staring directly at us, the embrace tighter, the child further excluded and evidently distressed. A moment of (tenuous) happiness has ceded to an image of (outright) hostility. The painting is subsequently replaced by a moving

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140 We recognise the detail from *Murs murs*, the documentary made in tandem with *Documenteur* (Varda has a predilection for shooting films in pairs, referring to them as her ‘films jumeaux’ [1994b: 183]). It is taken from Willie Herron’s *Moratorium: The Black and White Mural* (1973), see muralconservancy.org/murals/moratorium-black-and-white-mural.
image of Émilie’s hands at the typewriter. Again, the nascent gesture (and with it, any vestige of tactility) is stilled by a swift cut to a second detail borrowed from street art, depicting a skeletal hand.\textsuperscript{141} A flicker of life has been overwritten by an image of death.

The camera cuts back to Émilie’s office environment and we come face-to-face with her typed text. Where we might expect a neatly formatted letter or a summary of a recent telephone call, we are offered a series of words, disjointed, riddled with errors, erratically spaced and reminiscent of nothing so much as a Surrealist poem (Figure 140).

![Figure 140: ‘Séparation de corps’: Émilie’s typescript](image)

Here, however, the eclectic juxtapositions of the verbal collage fail to generate associations that might animate afresh. The contents of the letter – ‘lettre morte’, ‘séparation de corps’ – point us ineluctably back to the immobilism and physical severances, literal and metaphorical, that have gone before.\textsuperscript{142} Words, once again, are decontextualised, immobilising. Even the ‘brise de mer’ that breathes hope into the last line – reminding us of Varda’s elemental agents, the wind and the sea, that are so often the source of animating oscillations in an œuvre that strives above all for ‘fluidity’ (Darke 2015: 50) – is swiftly stifled by juxtaposition: fractured by the

\textsuperscript{141} Similarly identifiable from \textit{Murs murs}, in which the unnamed mural, depicting the ravages of hard drug use, appears just after the 12-minute mark and is attributed to Virginia Torres.

\textsuperscript{142} In interview, Varda has noted the double meaning of the ‘séparation de corps’ that evokes both a physical separation and an established legal term: ‘the first step in divorce’ (Darke 2015: 50).
preceding ‘phrase brisée’ and embittered by the subsequent repetition of ‘amer’. We cut from the page to another mural. A woman holds a telephone to her ear, the top of her head brutally sliced away by the lower edge of a second, intruding image. Yet another cut takes us back to Émilie, executing a further analogue gesture as she speaks on the telephone (Figure 141). Her head, too, is obscured by a superimposed reflection of children playing on the beach outside, the horizon drawing a sharp line across her neck to almost decapitating effect – another ‘séparation de corps’. As she stares impassively out of the window, we recall the appeal that Varda finds in ‘l’image fixe d’un visage’ when ‘tout autour la vie bouge’ (2011b: 19).

Figure 141: Telephones and decapitations

Émilie hangs up and sits down on a nearby sofa. The glass-fronted office space in the actress’ home frames her as we glimpse her through a half-open sliding door, offering her up as a triptych centrepiece whose adjoining panels (much like Varda’s recent *Portraits à volets vidéo*) continue to reflect the vibrant outside world of the beach, in stark contrast to Émilie’s unmoving pose (Figure 142). In this instance, however, the centrepiece does not make the transition from ‘tableau’ to *tableau vivant*. All around Émilie, life is moving – and its motion paralyses her. As the film’s initial narrator (voiced by Varda) observes, Émilie is incapacitated by the ‘autour’: ‘Je me perds dans ce qu’il y a autour des mots. Je me perds dans ce qu’il y a autour des visages’. Trapped by the mobile exterior that precludes a return to the essential or meaningful, Émilie retreats to the inner sanctum of the bedroom, only to find herself imprisoned anew by a reflection as she undresses, reclines on the bed and catches sight of her image, divided again – dismembered dummy-like, even – by the crack between two slightly misaligned mirrors on the wardrobe by the bed. Alienated from language and from life, Émilie is a captive of an environmental ‘immobilisme’

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143 Another detail from Herrón’s *Moratorium* mural.
in which walls petrify her gestures and glass fittings (including the images mirrored in them) frame and dissect her.

Figure 142: Framed and fragmented by reflections

There is a possibility, then, that the process of reflection and replication that underpins Varda’s editorial collures may not always give rise to animation or psychological approximation. The technique certainly harks back to the Surrealist principle of collage (Varda 1994b: 14) whereby alternative juxtapositions multiply interpretive possibilities ‘par le rapprochement des images’ (Tranchant 2008: para. 10 of 12), recalling the proliferation of pictorial associations at the heart of Warburg’s Mnemosyne. However, the splice does not serve exclusively to provide contiguity. It can also be used to sever, as a ‘séparation de corps’. In our desire always to presume a connection between juxtaposed images, Varda proposes, we might also identify a problem: a concomitant tendency to over-interpret the image (and the mirror-image in particular), seeking animation and associations where none exist.

**Accessories after the fact: the lure of over-animation**

Although Varda’s final product is undeniably tightly structured, its minutiae may nonetheless be determined by chance encounters. In Cléo, Varda reminds us that a shot of a pregnant woman passing in front of an undertaker’s premises was unplanned despite the fact that it echoes an earlier image of a funeral parlour (‘Rivoli Deuil’) glimpsed through a shop window as Cléo browses for hats (Figure 143). Faced with her spectators’ tendency to read this mirror-image as yet another deliberate reference to the film’s twin themes of love and death, Varda is dismissive: ‘c’est une femme enceinte qui passe devant une boutique de pompes funèbres, elle est passée là à ce moment précis, zut, et puis c’est tout…’ (Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 45).
On other occasions, we may seize upon a reflection to read meaning into objects, endowing them retrospectively with a talismanic force that Varda – ever tongue-in-cheek when it comes to fortune-telling and superstition, as Cléo and her 2003 short, Le Lion volatil, remind us – progressively deflates. Here, the mirror, while facilitating self-portraits that also reflect the onlooker, can equally be a means of misrepresentation, of self-fragmentation and, ultimately, of exclusion. In Le Bonheur, whose landscapes and palette are indebted to the Impressionist school of painting (Varda 2001: 11-12; Varda 1994b: 62; Fieschi and Ollier 1965: 50), the saturated sunflowers swaying in the breeze that open the film are doubly immobilised in a subsequent shot, literally captured as mirror-image, and further frozen by association (Figure 144). In this later manifestation, midway through a brisk family visit, the sunflowers are glimpsed as a reflection in a sitting-room window that stands ajar.

Figure 143: Choreography vs chance in Cléo

Figure 144: Immobilism through reflection: Le Bonheur
Framed by the casement, they find their counterpart in the inanimate black-and-white family photograph perched on top of a television – a moment cemented not in the present, but in the (distant and, in all probability, long-dead) past. The film playing on the television screen, Jean Renoir’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1959), takes us one step further away from life (if not two: Renoir’s film title derives from Manet’s painting of the same name that caused quite a scandal at the 1863 *Salon des Refusés*) as its protagonist, Étienne Alexis (Paul Meurisse), muses, ‘Quelle est l’origine de la vie organique, *that is the question*’. The vitality of the film’s first image is thus diminished, when it recurs, by a dual freeze-framing device. If a precursor to anything, it is of that ultimate stilling of life: the death (in all probability suicide) by drowning of Thérèse (Claire Drouot), wife of François (Jean-Claude Drouot). At her funeral, a bouquet of yellow gerbera daisies and dahlias is brutally foregrounded (Figure 145). Limp, severed and stripped of life, it offers an anaemic ersatz for the sunflowers that opened the film.

![Funereal flowers](image)

Figure 145: Funereal flowers

There are consequently moments in which an analogue gesture or a reflection of a living object, immobilised, merely *represent*. This, I contend, is the possibility contingent upon a creative process hinging on the aleatory: sometimes the gesture *resists* animation.
‘Le refus de sortir du cliché’

Presented with a still image that refuses to move, we may conclude that replication and proliferation do not necessarily multiply meaning. Varda’s short, *Ulysse*, is a case in point. Beguiled yet bemused by a photograph she had taken in 1954 (of a small child sitting on a stony beach, a naked man standing beside him, the foreground occupied by the carcass of a goat), Varda set out to retrieve, or rather, confirm, her memories of the shoot. Her attempts are thwarted. The man on the beach, Fouli Elia, ‘disait se souvenir plus des habits qu’il portait le dimanche 9 mai 1954 que de l’homme qu’il était’ (Varda 1994b: 135) – hardly helpful when excavating an image in which he features naked (and denying us, of course, the *Beiwerk* of clothing to animate). The little boy, the eponymous Ulysse, all grown-up, frustrates her with his blank refusal to remember. ‘Chacun sa propre histoire en fin de compte’, he says, shrugging. Varda must ruefully accept that, whatever her own intentions, ‘le modèle vit en dehors du projet’ (ibid.: 136).

Strenuous attempts to reanimate the photograph fail (Figure 146). Try as she might to situate the photograph alongside other contemporary images, it resists her. She inverts it, surrounds it with other snapshots taken the same day, all to no avail. She strives to allow art to act as an intermediary, briefly inserting a sculpture and painting of a goat by Picasso, followed by a copy of the original image painted by its protagonist as a child. The image refuses to become symbolic. Varda’s voiceover contextualises the photograph in the light of current events gleaned from newsreel footage – the fall of Diên Biên Phu; Colette’s last spring; Sylvie Vartan’s tenth birthday – but the image refuses to become historical. She surrounds it with texts evoking the passage of time: a quote by the eighth-century Chinese poet, Li Po (‘Comme le temps, l’eau fuit pour toujours’) cedes to Lamartine (who, 11 centuries later, implores: ‘Ô Temps, suspends ton vol…’), followed by a yellowing postcard inscribed with a message both illegible and unsigned. The image of *Ulysse* thus also resists language, and with it, ancestral filiation and authorship. ‘J’aurais pu la faire dimanche dernier ou hier… moi ou quelqu’un d’autre. L’image est là, c’est tout’, Varda’s voiceover concludes, recalling her dismissal of any suggestion of intelligent design in *Cléo*’s recurring funeral parlours. ‘Une image, on y voit ce qu’on veut. Une image, c’est ça et le reste.’
Faced with a photograph that mutely resists reanimation, Varda must accept that ‘elle représentait seulement’ (Decock and Varda 1993: 948).

And now, we are confronted with something that exhausts even Warburg’s notion of the ‘indecomposable’ (2011: 68), his vision of a work of art resistant to all but the elements. For in Varda’s impervious images, accessories defy animation even when an external, elemental oscillation is suscitated. *Les Plages* encompasses a wry nod to the illuminating failure of memory experienced in *Ulysse* (Figure 147). We are shown a painting of a man on a beach, gesticulating towards the sea.145 The voiceover

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144 Both works by Picasso are held by the Musée Picasso in Paris (www.museepicassoparis.fr, listed as inventory items MP339 and MP201).
145 The (unidentified) image is Gustave Courbet’s *Le Bord de mer à Palavas* (1854), held by the Musée Fabre in Montpellier (museefabre.montpellier3m.fr/content/download/805/4021/version/2/file/Courbet,+Bord+de+mer+à+Palavas.pdf).
cites a line from that Varda staple, Valéry’s *Le Cimetière marin* (‘La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée’).\(^{146}\) The image cedes almost immediately to a detail from Varda’s 1954 photograph, omitting the goat. A layer of animation has been added, as has a layer of colour. The sea in the background is accorded a new prominence, its waves in motion. Our attention has been diverted from foreground to background; the protagonists’ stories overwritten by the elemental motion of the water. Again the camera cuts, this time to a naked man, filmed in colour and evidently a further homage of sorts to the photograph. This time, however, the live reconstruction also omits the little boy, and as Varda hastens across the sand, a blanket clutched solicitously in her hands, she is evidently about to cover up the naked protagonist, too.

\[\text{Figure 147: Accessories beyond animation: *Ulysse* revisited in *Les Plages*}\]

A *tableau vivant* is attempted as the eddying waves are allowed to disturb the surface of Varda’s images multiple times, but to no avail: the story in the foreground refuses to be brought back to life. All that remains is the sea, endlessly mobile, but only ever reinventing *itself*: animation without an accessory.

\(^{146}\) From the poem’s opening verse (1996: 100, line 4).
However disturbing the realisation that an image can sidestep the associative, animating process that allows for a gestural transfer across time and space, Varda’s underlying technique makes it inevitable. Scrupulously mapped as her moving images may be, they are always the product of an editing process that makes room for the aleatory – and on occasion, the random defies reanimation. Sometimes, the image cannot move or be moved, despite attempts at approximation, and despite the subsequent insertion of elemental forces. I have argued, earlier in this chapter, that an oscillation, by disturbing a still and carefully appointed surface, can lend it an animation that exceeds its representation. Yet the reverse can equally hold true: a representation can transcend animation, leaving only an oscillation – powerful, yes, but in danger of destroying rather than disturbing the non-compliant surfaces it encounters. Here, wind and water may not so much supplement as supplant. *Mur murs* ends on an elemental yet ambivalent note as Varda’s voiceover concludes: ‘L’avenir, c’est peut-être une vague qui nous emportera’. The uncertainty of the ‘peut-être’ endures. As the credits roll, the (synthesizer-rich and thus highly synthetic) soundtrack ends; the final, frozen image, fading slowly to black, shows a mother and child playing ball, the final, frozen image, fading slowly to black, shows a mother and child playing ball, set against a mural depicting the post-apocalyptic ruin of a freeway overpass clinging to a clifftop and assailed on all sides by turbulent waters (Figure 148).

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147 The pair is played by Sabine Mamou and Mathieu Demy, who feature (as Émilie and Martin Cooper) in *Documenteur*, which opens with an (animate) version of this same image.
The last sound we hear is that of a wave crashing against the shore. Outliving the immobilised image, it literally drowns (out) the final note of the C minor score (Figure 149). The film ends in hesitation as the ‘bécarre’ (♮) that concludes the penultimate bar of the synthesizer parts (panpipe and harpsichord) yearns for upward resolution. Yet the C that would redress this accident(al) and bring the piece back ‘on key’ never arrives. The melody is eternally interrupted: like the final, fading image of destruction, it, too, is unresolved and overwritten by the sea.

Figure 149: Unresolved endings: synthetic score cedes to elemental overscore

Here again, Varda’s work is at odds with Warburg’s concept of the animated accessory, so dependent on an oscillatory impulse but which does not anticipate a refusal to resonate on the part of the image itself. This refusal comes to the fore in Varda’s Daguerréotypes, a film explicitly centred on the notion of ‘immobilisme’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 41). More specifically, it charts the inhabitants of rue Daguerre and their desire not to move that Varda terms ‘[l]e refus de sortir du cliché’ (ibid.: 44). In French, the dual meaning of the cliché lends it a fitting (and, one assumes, deliberate) ambiguity in this context. Always happy to engage in a game, Varda toys with its various definitions, and her photographic background and sensibility often make it impossible to decide whether she is referring to tired and trying stereotypes, or simply to a snapshot, as Alison Smith remarks (1998: 18) – or, indeed, to both. Thus, when rendering the ‘[c]lichés de Las Vegas cliquetant de

149 Fittingly, given the aleatory forces at play in marine motion, the is also known as an ‘altération accidentelle’.

150 Transcription courtesy of Katia Makdissi-Warren.
lumières colorées’ in *Varda par Agnès*, Varda revels in the city’s garish image even as she mimics the camera shutter in the onomatopoeic ‘cliqueter’ (1994b: 20).

*Daguerréotypes* expands upon this ambiguity, consistently building visual bridges between stereotypes and snapshots: the repeated, familiar gestures of ‘le petit commerce’ (ibid.: 39), followed by footage of their various representatives, posing so rigidly that their motions are almost imperceptible (Figure 150).

Figure 150: Stereotypes and snapshots in *Daguerréotypes*

As with the image of Émilie’s fingers busily typing in *Documenteur*, this frenetic motion of hands at work is misleading. Each story ends in the stasis of the cliché, both
literal and metaphorical. The approach is not unique to this film, and Varda acknowledges that ‘cette ambiguïté, cette contradiction entre les clichés de la vie intérieure et les images de la vie vécue, c’est le sujet de tous mes films, il me semble’ (ibid.: 49). We might recall Le Bonheur and Rebecca DeRoo’s insightful article on the ‘serving hand’ similarly seen at work, and the ‘myth of domestic labour’ the film mercilessly unpicks (2008: 198). We might cite, too, Varda’s synopsis of that film as ‘un exposé minutieux, presque maniaque, des images et des clichés d’un certain bonheur, c’est le geste et la fonction du geste jusqu’à ce que sa signification éclate’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 49). An excess of representation here denies us the possibility of according meaning to gesture. On occasion, Varda reminds us, over-bountiful animation can overwhelm: ‘C’est toute la vie qui est impossible à filmer’ (2001: 28).

This excess returns in the almost manic gesturality of Daguerreotypes; the hands-in-motion that time and again fail to free their owners from a more pervading immobility that has much in common, we conclude, with servitude. We need only look at the curious recurrence, in this film, of another ‘séparation de corps’ that evokes the solitude and severances of Documenteur: the gradual dissociation of hand from human (Figure 151).

Figure 151: Bodies immobilised and dismantled

In a sequence filmed in a local café, an itinerant magician, Mystag, conjures up a chalk handprint, purportedly that of a female volunteer. How – and from whom – he actually obtains this bodily trace cannot be explained. Later, the amnesiac shopkeeper, Mme Chardon-Bleu, rummaging through a box of bric-à-brac, unearths a solitary mannequin’s hand. Held in the grip of a woman described by Varda as ‘le fantôme du petit commerce’ (Varda and Amiel 1975: 39), the plastic hand is haunted twice over,
doubly alienated from life and from motion. Not only is a hand, thus amputated, denied its hapticity; it is divorced, too, from the process that Warburg terms ‘handling and carrying’: that material extension of bodily perimeters that allows subjects and objects to converge and commingle in an in-between zone of encounter. Gone is any ‘dynamic sense of being tied to something through additional material’ (Warburg 2011: 81). Take, for example, the hands-in-motion in Le Lion volatil. The sight of a fortune-teller’s hands laying out a row of tarot cards that opens the short (and immediately recalls the sequence that launches Cléo) is drained of its potential equation with insight by a later shot of hands shuffling and distributing postcards of the Paris catacombs (Figure 152). The visual similarity between the two establishes, in retrospect, the initial act as analogue to the second. As in Daguerreotypes and Le Bonheur, severed hands executing repetitive motions become serving hands, engaged in commerce rather than complicity.

Figure 152: Equating tarot cards and postcards in Le Lion volatil

The impression is further cemented in a later visual analogy. This time, the link is made still more explicit as Varda uses a collure to bring together two images of money changing hands (Figure 153).

Figure 153: Commerce in lieu of complicity

The two fifty-franc notes, held briefly by both parties as they are exchanged, serve as surrogates for corporeal contact. What we have here is a transaction in lieu of
interaction, whereby culture in the form of commerce transforms gestures into calculated, and thus predominantly contractual, motions separated from the body.

This concept of the programmatic gesture – the cultural contracts that automate rather than animate – returns in Varda’s work as a further cliché: namely, as the endless reproduction of art that is valued for its enigmatic quality yet deemed canonical. We are dealing with images, many of them depicting young women, that are deliberately denied reanimation because their purported immobility and unknowability have become so culturally embedded as to monumentalise them. Here, we go beyond the Venus d’Urbino and Goya’s Majas that, however full of erotic appeal, nonetheless maintain a life of their own to be reawakened: they have not yet been entirely appropriated (and frozen) as fetish. There are artworks, however, whose ‘still grandeur’ we are consistently invited not to question – and in Varda, this immobility proves contagious. In Daguerreotypes, for example, the camera capturing the magic show lingers momentarily on a young volunteer, Isabelle – allegedly the owner of the ghostly handprint, above (Figure 154).

Figure 154: *Mona Lisa*, the reproduction reproduced, in *Daguerreotypes*
Behind her hangs a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s *La Gioconda* (*La Joconde/Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-1506), transplanted from its nearby home in the Louvre. The enigma – and utter paralysis – of the painting is transmitted to the living being by juxtaposition. The *Joconde*, forever unanimated, gleans nothing of Isabelle’s present vitality through association. Instead, Isabelle is drained of motion and emotion, a reproduction of a reproduction of an unknown and unmoving model.

While nature may overwrite the synthetic/artistic by refusing to participate in the process of oscillatory animation, as the final bars of *Mur murs* imply, cultural artefacts may equally mesmerise and immobilise nature (and fittingly, *Documenteur’s* magic-show sequence ends with an act of mass hypnosis). The inscrutable *Inconnue de la Seine*, substituted by Birkin through a dissolve in *Jane B.*, offers a further example (Figure 155).

![Figure 155: Cultural immobilism: mapping the death mask onto the living in *Jane B.*](image)

Attempting to craft an ‘impossible portrait’ of the actress, Varda harks back to the death-mask of an unknown suicide victim whose eerie beauty was eternalised in plaster by an enterprising pathologist at the Paris morgue. The blank, alabaster perfection of her skin, her serene expression, are starkly at odds with this young woman’s fate. Testifying to the macabre contemporary cult of the *memento mori*, as well as to a more enduring desire to submit to the enigma, the mask was widely reproduced and found its way onto the walls and into the works of numerous artists in
the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, her allure endures. As recently as 2012, Didier Blonde was to publish a novel, *L’Inconnue de la Seine*, whose protagonist is intent on demythologising her. In interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*, the author variously references the writers enthralled by her (including Jules Supervielle, Maurice Blanchot, Aragon, Rainer Maria Rilke and Ödön von Horváth); the faces projected onto the mask (a modern-day Mona Lisa or Smiling Angel of Reims); even its curious recurrence in the films of François Truffaut (*La Mariée était en noir; Les Deux Anglaises et le continent*). ‘Il y a surtout en elle quelque chose qui transcende l’histoire’, Blonde concludes. ‘Elle reste insaisissable parce qu’elle est à la frontière du réel et de l’imaginaire’ (Méjean 2012: para. 16 of 22). Varda co-opts the image – or, rather, its by-now almost universal associations with life denied and the enduring enigma – and, through the technique of the dissolve, maps this unknowability onto Birkin, another ‘inconnue célèbre’. The dissolve, while a potent means for enlivening the still, as we have seen, may also take motion away by immobilising the living. Art makes the real indecipherable as culture stifles nature.

But is this really where the afterlife of the image ends, in Varda? The *artiste-cinéaste* is nothing if not tenacious. Although some images, like *Ulysse*, stubbornly resist her, she does not cede without a fight, and in the case of iconic images exhausted through overfamiliarity, her perseverance has, on occasion, paid off. Thus, her final encounter with the *Inconnue de la Seine* to date, documented in *Agnès de ci de là Varda*, sees her break, quite literally, with the stereotype of the unknown woman (and its concomitant morbid fetishisation). She plants a screwdriver in its pristine white forehead and hammers it home (Figure 156).

Figure 156: Shattering the stereotype: *Agnès de ci de là Varda* reclaims the *Inconnue de la Seine*
The shattered face is subsequently reconfigured – and thus, like Magritte’s *La Femme cachée* (see Figure 64), reclaimed – as Varda’s own, and added to her collection of *portraits brisés*. An image, culturally immobilised, may defy reanimation, Varda proposes, but it may equally succumb to a further process of immobilisation that in turn redefines – and renews – it. I end this chapter by assessing briefly how, in Varda’s work, a refusal of motion, repeated, may extend a life seemingly terminated. In an act of apparent destruction, I contend, we find a renaissance – not of the capitalised variety that Warburg was so loath to leave behind, but in the sense, quite simply, of rebirth.

**Coming full-circle (again)**

We have seen, in the earlier analysis of the gestural in Varda’s oeuvre through Warburg, how an image may be granted new life through the engaged, complicit and transtemporal animation of the still. The above proposes that there exist, nonetheless, images that staunchly resist resuscitation, pointing to a reversibility in Varda’s approach to (im)mobility and time absent from the art historian’s thoughts on gesture. In view of this reversibility, it follows, then, that Varda must also make space for a further (and equally transtemporal) afterlife of the image made possible by, as it were, stilling the still.151

In (re-)immobilising, I suggest, Varda extends her practice of expanding the afterlife of the image – an eminently multidirectional endeavour. At the start of this chapter, I noted how Warburg’s gesture can be termed bidirectional in that it is tied to two participating bodies in the animation of the accessory: those of the viewing subject and viewed object. However, in his efforts to merge them so that they might ‘become a single mass’ (2011: 92), Warburg ensures that we embark on a journey – its unique purpose that of reanimation, its sole destination the Zwischenraum – that is strictly one-way. Varda, while also envisaging the artwork as an excursion (‘Toute oeuvre d’art est un voyage’ [Wera 1986: 7]), always conceives of a homecoming. An ‘aller’ is accompanied by a ‘retour’. Let me examine the idea that Varda, in stilling

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151 It would similarly follow that Varda must, to complete the circle, also animate the (already) animated. As stated at the start of this chapter, however, I am deliberately limiting my focus to the immobile and its various permutations in order to test fully a Warburgian framework centred on the still.
the already inanimate, effects a break with the (culturally) immobile that is also a return home.

Varda’s 2012 exhibition, *The Beaches of Agnès Varda in China*, included a section dubbed the Pavilion of Chinese Souvenirs (Figure 156). A tour of this space, she relates, is the equivalent of an ‘aller-retour’ (Libiot 2012: para. 3 of 17).

![Figure 157: Travelling back in time – to the present, in the Pavilion of Chinese Souvenirs](image)

Featuring photographs from a 1957 trip to China that were not published at the time, and decorated with mementos she had brought back with her but never

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152 Image reproduced from the exhibition catalogue (Varda 2012b: 49).
153 Varda secured a commission to China when Marker nominated her as a ‘photographe sinophile’, despite her notable lack of knowledge of all things Chinese (Varda 1994b: 13). Her images failed to garner interest on her return, trumped by Henri Cartier-Bresson who had visited the country, camera in hand, just two months before her. Given a choice between the two, Varda concedes resignedly, publishers opted for the more established artist: ‘célébrité et grand talent obligent’ (ibid.: 14).
unpacked (ibid.: para. 3 of 7), these stills carry within them a history of immobility – doubly so in that, as the product of a revolution whose traces were to be largely effaced (‘des photos que la révolution culturelle avait détruites’ [ibid.]), they foreshadow a policy of cultural immobilisation. Varda describes them thus:

Entering the room via a portico photograph made in 1957, I am exhibiting my photographs of that time and also a lot of goodies that I had brought back to Paris […].
All these objects have made the return trip 55 years later.
The past and the present coexist naturally in the pavilion. (2012b: 48)

By displaying historic artefacts that have lain still in the interim, Varda offers us a journey that returns to the source that is also an opportunity for regeneration. Varda par Agnès’ ‘synonyme d’introduction’ cites Ernest Renan – ‘Le passé n’est qu’un préambule’ (1994b: 6)\textsuperscript{154} – to outline a transtemporal quality foundational to her work. We find ourselves in a Zwischenraum beyond Warburg’s scope that is dependent neither on escaping the present to blend with the past, nor on sidestepping time altogether, but allows us to move freely between both from a position predicated on the return. Where Warburg craves sanctuary by reanimating a past far preferable to his (painful) present, Varda, in embracing the image’s animatory (or immobilising) potential, neither wallows in the past nor denies its persistent life-force, seeking instead the cyclical and an axis firmly planted in the here-and-now. ‘I’m very excited about going back to places that I know,’ she confides, ‘and again, and again’ (Barnet and Jordan 2011: 194, my emphasis). Where Warburg’s Renaissance is a refuge, Varda’s renaissance, resolutely lower-case, is a continuous rebirth. As with Akerman, Varda exceeds her appointed gestural framework by permitting it to come full-circle.

**Summary**

Et cela c’est vraiment la matière cinématographique: questionner en même temps le temps, le mouvement, et surtout l’image. (Varda, in Wera 1986: 4)

\textsuperscript{154} From Renan 1851: 610.
Warburg’s thoughts, collated to compile a framework of the gesture, undoubtedly offer a valuable adjunct to theories of embodied engagement within – and beyond – film studies. Shaped by the *artiste-cinéaste*, this chapter has brought together three of the art historian’s key concepts that resonate with Varda’s work: first, the *bewegtes Beiwerk*, the ‘animated accessory’, with its connotations of supplementarity and (e)motion; second, the *Erinnerungsbild*, the empathic ‘memory-image’ that fosters complicit spectatorship; and third, the *Zwischenraum*, Warburg’s ‘in-between space’ in which viewer and viewed merge in the artistic encounter. In Varda’s fascination with the (quasi)-immobile, even within the cinematic medium, we find an impulse, shared with Warburg, to revive through a process of animated spectatorship contingent upon a disturbance of surfaces. In Varda’s multiple homages to and revivals of the artwork as *tableau vivant*, we distinguish the same emulatory, transtemporal urge that underpins the Warburgian memory-image; and in her multiple portraits, too, a desire to share authorship with her onlookers that recalls Warburg’s comparable desire for complicity in the artistic encounter. And in this wish to share that establishes an intermediary zone of projection, we discern, in Varda’s work, a kinship with the in-between on a par with Warburg’s notion of a space of overlap in which viewing subject and viewed object might converge across time. Viewing Varda through a Warburgian approach to gesture centred on the still, in immobile media and moving images alike, allows us to approach her art – and, indeed, art more generally – in new ways.

Warburg, however, can be applied only up to a certain point. The relation between viewer and viewed, while bidirectional in that it envisions a fusion of subject and object at the moment of encounter, neither caters for an image that resists animation, nor makes provision for a return home. Varda’s work emphatically does both. Warburg would deny that some images are defined by their immobility, and would gladly leave us marooned indefinitely in the gallery. Varda, on the contrary, embraces (re)immobilisation as part of the broader lifecycle of the image even as she maintains a secure foothold in the present. It is in her willingness to abandon the in-between and embrace exceptions to her tenets of gestural reanimation – and to return home – that Varda differs so radically from Warburg. Her image-making, dispersed across her ‘trois vies’ as photographer, filmmaker and visual artist, always contains a possibility of reversibility, which is also a possibility of regeneration beyond Warburg. In Varda, still and animate interact, but in both directions; timeframes past
and present collide and collude, but always return to a home anchored in the present moment. Even Documenteur, her essay on the ‘séparation de corps’ examined above, eventually seeks a physical restitution centred in this notion of the return. It is, she tells us, is not merely the story of a separation sited in an on-screen body; it is also an affirmation of the medium itself, as film-body, and of the restorative quality of the montage that has the power, through the collure, not only to sever, but also to suture. Hence, Documenteur is equally a meditation on the reparative potential of filmmaking, ‘[c]omment donner un corps à cette idée de “rentrer chez soi”’ (Varda 1982: 7).

We might speculate that Warburg’s wish always to animate and his reluctance to leave the Zwischenraum are indivisible from his need to seek out a haven in times racked with bipolar outbursts and psychotic uncertainties. As stated at the start of this chapter, I have no pressing desire to pathologise Warburg or, by extension, his work (Didi-Huberman, in the lengthy third section of L’Image survivante, ‘L’image-symptôme’, achieves this more thoroughly that I could ever hope to [2002: 273-514]). Nonetheless, I cannot overlook the fact that Warburg evidently struggles not to enliven his surroundings by association; to accept that an immobile artwork, however gravid with animatory promise, may yet refuse to deliver. Nor can I deny that such struggles may be rooted in dysfunction. Binswanger describes a conversation following his patient’s release from the Kreuzlingen sanatorium in August, 1924, invoking Warburg’s childhood, during which the art historian admits to having ‘endowed his toys with spirit and life to an exaggerated degree’ (Binswanger and Binswanger 2007: 91), chronicling, too, his ‘tender consideration for plants, animals and inanimate objects’ (ibid.: 92). Warburg was not unaware of his compulsion to complicate relations through the addition of exorbitant (e)motion, wryly pinpointing a concomitant loss of ‘the ability to link things in terms of their simple, causal relations’ (2007: 99). Where Varda is as content to grapple with the infinite as she is to tackle the everyday, Warburg – as his phobia of all things technological intimates – may bask in the intermediate, but is no master of immediacy.

155 ‘das Spielzeug übertrieben stark beseelend und belebend’.
156 ‘seiner zarten Rücksicht für Pflanzen, Tiere und unbelebte Gegenstände’.
157 ‘die Fähigkeit, die Dinge in ihren einfachen Kausalitätsverhältnissen zu verknüpfen’.
And here, we gain an inkling of both the potential and the limitations of a Warburgian art-historical approach. Brilliantly applicable in the ways in which his notion of the animated accessory allows us to unfold and enliven the gestures encoded in the still, and in the complicit spectatorship sketched out in his notes on the in-between space of artistic encounter, Warburg’s tenuous, even petulant, relationship with ‘normality’ reflects an unwillingness to acknowledge those occasions on which an image may contain no latent gesture, or an artist (or onlooker) may willingly leave the immobile unanimated, and head for home.

We have observed how Varda reclaims the canonical portrait – Magritte’s *La Femme cachée*; Titian’s *Venus d’Urbino*; Bellini’s *Miracolo della Croce caduta nel canale di San Lorenzo*; even the enduringly unresponsive alabaster of the *Inconnue de la Seine* – by repositioning herself at its heart. We have seen, too, that the urge here is not solipsistic, but is intended to engender a complicity – and co-authorship – with the onlooker. And we have witnessed the evolution of her image of Le Corbusier’s Cité radieuse in Marseilles from a (stolen) snapshot through a (reanimating) short film to a second (restorative) snapshot. Varda’s portraits, it seems, always return (something) to her audience and her subjects. The ‘aller’ goes hand-in-hand with the ‘retour’ in a circular motion that, like so many aspects of an oeuvre that happily conflates the cinematic and the photographic (Varda 1994b: 130), is both ‘contradictoire et complémentaire’ (Varda 2011b: para. 10 of 10). Perhaps in this contradictory-yet-complementary circularity that pivots on a homecoming, this repurposing of material that is also a restitution, we find an analogue to Akerman’s gestural arc that comes full-circle. Warburg, like Agamben, is reluctant to countenance a gesture that returns to the source. Where Agamben resists the return of the identical and deems the gesture irretrievably lost, however, Warburg (over-)acknowledges the reanimatory potential of gestural interactions with art, yet actively avoids a return home. If Agamben’s limit might be deemed his unwillingness to concede that a gesture may be recuperated through a possibility of inversion inherent in the process of demonstration, Warburg’s lies in his disinclination to accept that a gesture, latent or reactivated, may once again be stilled; and that implicit in the journey into the past is a return to the present. Ultimately, it is gesture’s reversibility – the idea that it might, through art, be turned back upon itself – that, in these artists’ work, escapes the arguably too inflexible limits of theory.
Conclusion

I started this thesis as a means of moving beyond the haptic criticism that has garnered much attention in recent years, singling out Laura U. Marks’ ground-breaking concept of haptic visuality whereby ‘the eyes themselves function like organs of touch’ (2000: 162). Privileging images that ‘resolve into figuration only gradually, if at all’, Marks’ touch-based viewing demands a level of detail ‘sometimes through miniaturism, that […] evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close’ (ibid.: 162-63). Noting that the cinematic experience, whether from the camera-eye or the audience point-of-view, is nonetheless dependent on distance, I argued that the haptic requires an adjunct in the form of the gesture. Envisioned as a means of charting a space between viewer (comprising both spectatorial and camera perspectives) and viewed (encompassing both the image as a whole and the detail), gesture has been presented here as a motion-from that is also a motion-to that, in dialogue, delineate an in-between. As a pointing-away from the (carnal and camera) body and a pointing-towards the other, this gesture accommodates distance while always retaining its link to its constituent bodies. Thus outlining a space of in-betweensness by means of a gesture that bridges the gap between view(finder) and viewed, I reasoned, we might find an expanded form of embodied engagement that is not predicated on touch.

This hypothesis has been tested through close analysis of the work of the écrivain-cinéaste, Chantal Akerman, and the artiste-cinéaste, Agnès Varda. To respect their defining singularity, I set out to construct, from the source rather than the secondary literature, a framework of gesturality apiece, attuned to its subject’s unique methods and output. The aim was not to apply a pre-existing theoretical construct, but rather to establish, in each case, an alternative approach shaped (and challenged) by the artist in question.

Chapter 1 examined Akerman through Giorgio Agamben. Largely leaving aside his essays on ethics and the political, it concentrated on his thoughts on gesture, augmented through relevant – and eminently interrelated – writings on cinema, repetition and, above all, language. The chapter identified a twin resonance with
Akerman: first, in her moving images that (drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as on Emmanuel Levinas) she deems subsidiary to a written word neither idolatrous nor possessive; and second, in her deliberate policy of insistent repetition, unfolding the gesture as a mode of demonstration indicating away from the body and towards the other. To explore language as what Agamben terms a ‘placeholder of nothing’ (1991a: 5), the discussion of the demonstrative was extended through Karl Brugmann’s notion of place-deixis. Three stages of gesture were thus isolated and paired with a demonstrative shifter that recurs – repeatedly – in Akerman’s work, inflected always by personal (hi)stories linked back, through her mother, to the Holocaust. First, we encountered the proximal là, a space of sheer survival. Second, we passed through the medial là-bas, a perilously liminal state of suspension. Finally, we came (literally) face-to-face with the distal ça, the index of a rien that underpins Akerman’s oeuvre and finds (material) expression in the (hi)story of ‘la petite chose à côté’ (Godard 1980: 13): an exceedingly unappetising array of stand-in foodstuffs. Each of these demonstrative shifters is displayed (and displaced) in a process of obsessive repetition that Akerman refers to as ressassement. At every stage of the analysis, clear affinities were discerned with Agamben. In the final instance, however, his central contention – that gesture must be considered irretrievably lost – is overturned by Akerman in her vision of demonstration as reversible. Embodied and disembodied experience, là and ça, converge via the medial là-bas. Turning the gesture back on the body, Akerman effects a return to the self that may not be entirely restorative (after all, what she seeks is sited in appalling loss), but does allow for a return – and a fleeting moment of shared materiality. Thus, while the potential of an Agambenian approach to the demonstrative gesture was evident, so too was its essential limitation: its refusal to conceive of a gestural form that, recuperated, might complete a ‘magic circle’ (Agamben 1993: 152), engaging with the past and the other even as it returns us to the present and the self.

Chapter 2 offered new readings of Varda through Aby Warburg, starting with an assessment of their curious yet compelling compatibilities. Translating (often fragmentary) key concepts from Warburg’s original German into English, many for the first time, the chapter moved away from an application of Warburg filtered through Georges Didi-Huberman’s readings of his papers (and psychosis) to focus on three, interdependent threads of thought. First, the bewegtes Beiwerk, rendered as the
‘animated accessory’ with connotations of supplementarity and a motion-that-moves. Second, the Erinnerungsbild, the ‘memory-image’ dependent on spectatorial empathy and conducive to a conspiratorial relationship with the artwork. Third, the Zwischenraum, the ‘in-between space’ that is out-of-place and out-of-time. Here, complicity leads to psychical convergence as viewer and viewed meet and merge through the motif of gesture, even as the physical distance between them is maintained. In examining Varda, close affinities were revealed between her visual art and the three tenets of Warburg’s thought in her reanimation of existing artworks through a disturbance of surfaces; in her (omni)portraits that demand complicity and co-authorship with her spectators; and in her aesthetics of incompleteness that flag up a shared zone of projection, establishing an entre-deux triggered by the act of entrevoir. Again, however, Varda’s opus does not simply conform to this Warburgian framework of gesture: like Akerman in the Agambenian context, Varda exceeds the theoretical method in question. In her exploration of disembodied images, of images that run the risk of over-animation, and of images that culturally immobilised – refuse reanimation, Varda far exceeds Warburg. And in her ability to expand the image-afterlife yet further by stilling the already inanimate and creating a full cycle of animation and immobilisation, Varda introduces a circularity that Warburg did not envisage. Although the Warburgian relation between viewer and viewed is a bidirectional one, the act of reanimation is resolutely one-way: he has no wish, once ensconced in the Zwischenraum, to return to normality. Varda, conversely, is fiercely attached to her home – and to the here-and-now. Thus, her excursions into the in-between never blur her grasp of the relative status of actual and artistic universes. ‘I always feel two spaces at the same time’, she insists, ‘the space where I am and my inner space in which I sometimes wander’ (Barnet and Jordan 2011: 185), ensuring that her gestural journeys, unlike Warburg’s, always culminate in a homecoming and a return to reality.

It is, I conclude, in their mutual affirmation of the possibility of a return – across time and via the gesture – to the self, that Akerman and Varda coincide, and radically outstrip their respective theorists: Agamben’s refusal to countenance that a (lost) gesture might be restored; Warburg’s unwillingness to accept an animatory in-between that pivots on the return home. I offer these analyses of gesture as examples of how art can be used to shape theory, both in testing and in extending its limits, in
the belief that both will find far broader applicability – in intermedial studies of linguistic and cinematic gesturality in the case of the Akerman-led Agambenian approach; and in assessments of the gestural interrelations between still and moving images in and beyond film, in the case of the Warburgian framework expanded through Varda. At the same time, I acknowledge freely that each may be developed significantly further. Within this conclusion, then, there is also space for inconclusion.

… and inconclusion

Under ‘inconclusion’, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a definition of pervading uncertainty bracingly mitigated by a citation from Fanny Kemble’s 1882 memoir, *Records of Later Life*: ‘I float comfortably enough over infinite abysses of inconclusion’.158 I happily borrow it to describe my own position. No thesis can be entirely exhaustive, and mine is no exception – though I might substitute ‘specific lacunae’ in place of ‘infinite abysses’, not merely for reasons of academic self-interest, but also because I am keenly aware of the nature of at least some of my omissions.

As the introduction states, I have, for reasons of concision and to attend adequately to Akerman’s literary influences and output, barely touched upon her installation work and accompanying questions of mobile, interactive spectatorship that themselves raise issues of ownership and co-responsibility. Similarly, I have left aside her pungent evocations of smell whose vestigial corporeality offers a means of transmission beyond touch and from afar, analogue to the gesture: the deeply unsettling parade of olfactory remains in *Demain on déménage* with its myriad charred chickens, disinfected apartments and faulty appliances; the smothering scents of *La Captive* that mask originary odour in an attempt to fend off allergies and aversions; and the oddly displaced aromatic imprints that abound in *Un divan à New York*, even in annotations to the shooting script (Cinémathèque française [Fonds Zoé Zurstrassen] 1995: 24v). Nor has my exploration of Akerman’s writing had sufficient scope to scrutinise her idiosyncratic usages. Particularly notable is her non-standard punctuation that interrupts and suspends: among others, the truncated *points de*

158 See www.oed.com (citation from Kemble 1882: 576).
suspension (‘.’) in Akerman’s first draft of Jeanne Dielman (1982c: 63); a proprietary ellipsis that tallies with her broader focus on the uncannily unspoken and oddly incomplete. We might also cite her vacillating tenses, strikingly prominent in the stage directions of her screenplay for Les Rendez-vous d’Anna (1978: cf. 32-33; 39-40; 43; 63-65; 71; 75; 109), but also in the competing narrative voices of Nuit et jour and the typed texts, intertitles and dictées of L’Homme à la valise. Incongruous interchanges between present, perfect, past historic, imperfect, future and a conditional whose defining ‘si’ is overwhelmingly occluded hint at further temporal dimensions to her personal (hi)stories that might, in their degrees of distance from the self (and other), usefully be allied with her demonstrative shifters.

As to Varda, while my introduction alludes to her interest in the body-as-landscape, there remains a wealth of material tied to the organic still to be unearthed. We might single out her pervading fondness for the rooted and rhizomatic; a fondness both metaphorical and – in her constant returns to trees and potatoes – literal. Here, in turn, we might discern a counterpart to Warburg’s fascination with the ‘inorganic extension of the self’ through the fabric of apparel (2011: 52), elucidated in Chapter 2, towards an organic extension of the self in which the biological and botanical ‘material’ of body and world merge. Not only does plant-life find a correlate in the human/animal (recalling her cellar full of gently rotting potatoes waiting to be photographed, post-Les Glaneurs, Varda observes that ‘elles respirent!’ [cited in Benedetti 2011: para. 5 of 6]); bodily movement equally finds a living equivalent in landscape and allied matter. Varda has expressed pleasure in creating films and characters that are ‘une matière vivante’ (Jan 1978: para. 5 of 6) and describes Sans toit’s protagonist, Mona, as ‘végétale’ (Decock and Varda 1988: 277). She even conceives of her spectators as ‘un champ de blé qui ondule plus ou moins’ (1994b: 7). The organic thus offers itself as a further, fruitful addendum to Warburg’s framework of gesture, to be explored elsewhere.

While all of these elements offer tantalising avenues for research, there is one area common to both artists and eminently compatible with gesture that constitutes a broader and more reluctant omission. Were I to expand these two chapters, I should further accommodate sound. What better way to posit a sensorial and corporeal interaction non-dependent on touch than through the acoustic channel as sounds travel from one (performing) body to be intercepted and absorbed, via the ear, by another?
And what better complement to the gesture dependent on distance yet anchored in the body than the voice that similarly bridges self and world? While I have emphasised the rhythmic qualities of Akerman’s work in Chapter 1, I have done so primarily to underline her politics of ressassement. As to Varda, my second chapter has only briefly referenced an unresolved soundtrack to illustrate her broader aesthetics of incompletion. Yet both artists agree: music is indivisible from the cinematic experience. ‘[L]e cinéma et la musique, c’est la même chose’, says Akerman (cited in Marx 1991: 33); ‘le cinéma c’est de la musique’, Varda concurs (cited in Decock 1996: 162). Potentially, then, their soundtracks offer a whole new seam of aural gesturality to be mined.

Akerman has, in recent years, worked intensively with the cellist, Sonia Wieder-Atherton, producing three films that focus on her performing body (Figure 158): À l’Est avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton (2009), Avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton (2003) and Trois strophes sur le nom de Sacher de Henri Dutilleux (1989).

While these collaborations have transformed Akerman’s understanding of music as something to be experienced in a profoundly embodied way, ‘comme si tout était soudain vécu de l’intérieur’ (Delorme 2003: 74), language nonetheless remains foundational. Hence, it is through music in its manifestation as vocal and verbal cadence that this embodiment of the musical best finds expression. Even as she plans her first musical comedy, Les Années 80, Akerman pays less attention to its a capella numbers than to its spoken-word aesthetic, seeking above all ‘une transition qui soit entre le rapp [sic] et ce qu’a inventé Laurie Anderson dans [O] Superman’ (1982a:
38). Chapter 1 has amply illustrated the écrivain-cinéaste’s concern with (repetitive) rhythm that sees her exploiting speech for sonority in lieu of significance. It has not, however, considered the choreographic potential of language harnessed to sonic effect.

As noted briefly in the introduction, choreography has informed Akerman’s working methods from the outset. This is as applicable to her soundscapes as it is to her images: she is not only a director; she is also a conductor. Jeanne Dielman is not merely ‘totally choreographed’, Akerman informs us (Adams 2010: para. 34 of 71); it is simultaneously ‘terriblement dirigé’ (Champetier 1978: 57). Thus, we might accord Akerman an expanded role as chef d’orchestre – one she adopts quite literally in Les Années 80 to conduct her cast (Figure 159).

![Figure 159: Akerman conducts in Les Années 80](image)

In co-opting the musical comedy, Akerman is conducting the voice, and in this combination of direction and (as always) language we find a valuable codicil to the notion of gesture-as-indication elaborated in Chapter 1: a promising overlap with Agamben’s thoughts, outlined therein, on the rich resonances of a performed ‘Voice’ that, supplanting the natural ‘voice’, is closely allied with the act of demonstration (1991a: 36-37).

Varda’s musicality, meanwhile, has received only limited critical attention, to the chagrin of musicologist Claudia Gorbman, who refers to her as a ‘mélomane’ (2008: 27). Yet even Varda’s early feature, Cléo, was designed as an experiment in timbre and tempo, and her foreword to the screenplay describes its exploration of subjective and objective duration as ‘les variations du violon et le métronome’ (1962: 9). This interest in the flows and patterns of music has stayed with her. In interview, Varda insists that the ‘rythme du film’ is crucial to her cinécriture (Marvier 2000: ...
meticulous montage depends equally on music and image. When she came to collate photographs for *Salut les cubains*, the syncopated continuity produced by stitching together still images was to determine the film’s ‘rythme du cha-cha-cha, du boléro, du danson et du guaguanco’, and this sutured staccato was, in turn, to dictate her editorial decisions on the visual level, requiring her to ‘calculer le nombre d’images d’après le rythme’ (Varda 1994b: 133). Conversely, when Varda assembled *Sans toit*, she included twelve tracking shots (Figure 160), winningly described by Serge Toubiana as ‘ces travelling millimétrés’ (1985: 11).

Figure 160: Timed tracking shots in *Sans toit*
This time, the commissioned score, by Joanna Bruzdowicz, was composed to match precisely the length of these constituent shots (Varda 2003: 23).

For Varda, rhythm lends form to the filmmaking process even as it, in turn, is informed by the film. What is more (and akin to Akerman), it is sited within the body: ‘La musique intérieure quand on filme, c’est le tempo’ (Narboni, Toubiana and Villain 1977: 25). Consequently, Varda proffers other of her sonic elements as corporeal complements, including her (numerous) voiceovers, presented as a material remnant of the self: ‘c’est un peu de moi qui reste dans le film. Du charnel’ (2001: 26). And again, we find a link between this (carnal) voice and gesture. At a certain point in her career, Varda explains, she decided to narrate her voiceovers herself, ‘ajoutant la voix aux mots comme d’autres ajoutent le geste à la parole’ (1994b: 16).

Varda’s interest in her film-scores’ choreographic, even programmatic, potential emerges, too. The soundtrack to Les Créatures, for example, is almost entirely computer-generated (ibid.: 208) and the film’s sci-fi scenario can be summarised by its score as human-authored and arithmetic orchestral parts vie for supremacy. However, Warburg’s insistence on the animated contemplation of the still makes no provision for sound; in Varda’s case, there are thus compelling reasons to seek an alternative framework of gesturality outside the art-historical environs.159

Just as a thesis selects a specific starting point, so must it choose where to end. While Akerman and Varda’s measured musicality evidently richly deserves further attention, it could not be accommodated fully here. Hence, in view of the pressing need to elucidate Akerman’s fascination with language when testing a gestural analysis derived from Agamben, and given that Varda’s soundscapes, undeniably important, find no equivalent in Warburg’s animated contemplation of art, I draw the line here, leaving aural gesturality aside as a fertile area for future research.

159 Although unable to explore Varda’s aural gesturality within the confines of a Warburgian approach, I have attended to her predilection for (strategic) gameplay and (programmatic) soundscapes in a book chapter on Agnès de ci de là Varda, Kung-fu master and Les Créatures that derives its framework of film-analysis from the nascent field of ludomusicology (Mowat 2016 [forthcoming]).
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