



PROJECT MUSE®

The Feminist Beachscape: Catherine Breillat, Diane Kurys and Agnès Varda

Fiona Handyside

L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 51, Number 1, Spring 2011, pp. 83-96 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/esp.2011.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2011.0011)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/esp/summary/v051/51.1.handyside.html>

The Feminist Beachscape: Catherine Breillat, Diane Kurys and Agnès Varda

Fiona Handyside

“Space is very much on the agenda these days.”¹

FOLLOWING THE ‘SPATIAL TURN’ in the humanities, a variety of theorists (John Berger, Andrew Sayer, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, John Urry, and Fernand Braudel) have asserted the significance of the spatial in contemporary (post-modern) times. The spatial is also called upon in a variety of metaphorical ways in discussions of human identity in which the terminology of space, location, positionality, and place figure prominently. As an art that both mechanically reproduces and artistically represents the spatial, the cinema has become a privileged site in which to think through the varied meanings of space in these debates. The importance of cinema is especially telling in the French context, given the vital role French cinema has played as a symbol of France’s desire to resist homogenization and globalization (in defending film as a ‘cultural exception’), and the treatment given to film and spatiality by French theorists, notably in the work of Gilles Deleuze and André Gardies.² As James F. Austin states, “given its prestige, financial importance, and enormous cultural resonance in France, the cinema is well positioned to engage in a spatial politics, to be an art of space producing its own spaces and potentially redefining the spaces of France and French subjects.”³ In this article, I will be considering the ways in which three films by French female directors—*La Baule Les Pins* (Kurys, 1989), *À ma sœur* (Breillat, 2001), and *Les Plages d’Agnès* (Varda, 2008)—engage with the politics of the spatial through their intense investigations of the beach as the site for the expression of a specifically female subjectivity. These films construct the beach as a site of an alternative modernity, escaping the binding gendered opposites of the cityscape but still engaging with ‘modern’ sensibilities in such a way that a feminist reading of the beachscape becomes possible.

The overwhelmingly dominant paradigm for thinking through the complex relations between cinema and the spatial has involved analysing relations between cinema and the city, in which the visceral experiences of city life are held to echo the sensations of the film spectator and the film spectator experiences the representation of the city on screen, in a kind of osmosis. Above all, both the cinema and the city are taken to offer a new kind of optics. Giuliana Bruno, for example, argues that the new geography of modernity, the

cityscape with its arcades, bridges, railways, electric underground, powered flights, skyscrapers, department stores, and exhibition halls, produces a new spatio-visibility which emphasises transit. She concludes that

mobility—a form of cinematics—was the driving force of these new architectures. By changing the relationship between spatio-temporal perception and bodily motion, the architectures of transit prepared the ground for the invention of the moving image, the very epitome of modernity.⁴

The privileged relation accorded to the various places of the cityscape in thinking about cinema and space is testified to by the sheer volume of books considering the relations between the cinema and the city.⁵ The cityscape/cinema nexus reflects the feeling that both emerged as a response to the industrialising and modernising impulses of the late nineteenth century: both express a new, modern relation to space based on movement and sight. The city's dominance within considerations of cinema as a spatial art can however be questioned by examining how other sites can equally express the intense visual and spatial mobility offered by the city. Here, what Alain Corbin has called “the invention of the beach” as a modern rather than an Arcadian space, calls our attention to another site expressive of the changed social and spatial relations of modernity.⁶

The modern beach

At one point in his writings on space, Foucault refers, tantalisingly and briefly, to the beach. It is worth citing the passage at length:

L'œuvre—immense—de Bachelard, les descriptions des phénoménologues nous ont appris que nous ne vivons pas dans un espace homogène et vide, mais, au contraire, dans un espace qui est tout chargé de qualités, un espace, qui est peut-être aussi hanté de fantôme [...].

Autrement dit, nous ne vivons pas dans une sorte de vide, à l'intérieur duquel on pourrait situer des individus et des choses [...]. Nous vivons à l'intérieur d'un ensemble de relations qui définissent des emplacements irréductibles les uns aux autres et absolument non superposables. Bien sûr, on pourrait sans doute entreprendre la description de ces différents emplacements, en cherchant quel est l'ensemble de relations par lequel on peut définir cet emplacement. Par exemple, décrire l'ensemble des relations qui définissent les emplacements de passage, les rues, les trains [...]. On pourrait décrire, par le faisceau des relations qui permettent de les définir, ces emplacements de halte provisoire que sont les cafés, les cinémas, les plages.⁷

Foucault does not elaborate on this description, but the implication is clear: the beach is of the same order as the city's exemplary modern leisure sites, the cinema and the café. They share the qualities of being temporary stopping points in the daily round, areas of public intimacy and snatched leisure

moments, all predicated on mass entertainment and the fleeting encounter in the crowd. Indeed, the beach is a place where the mobile gaze at and of the crowd is encouraged, through activities such as promenading, sunbathing, and swimming. The Impressionists' paintings of Parisian society at Trouville or Deauville amply illustrate the beach as a habitat of the *flâneur* as much as the city street. John House writes that Eugène Boudin's paintings "have become archetypal painted images of holiday life in the nineteenth century [...] the primary focus is on the interrelationships between the clusters of fashionably dressed figures on the wide expanses of the sands. Their scattered, informal groupings mark the transfer of a particular vision of urban modernity to the 'summer boulevard' of Trouville beach."⁸

In the case of the beach, this modern mutability is inscribed into its nature, its ever shifting tides, and the processes of erosion and weathering that gradually transform the beach. The mobile spatiality taken to be inherently modern and urban is here revealed to be older, a quality of the beach itself that is borrowed from elsewhere. While this understanding of the inherently mobile nature of the beach inevitably informs all of the films and their beaches under discussion in this article, this mirroring of the urban patterns of departure and arrival in the very form of the beach is expressed most forcefully by Varda when she recreates a beach in the heart of Paris, dumping sand in the Rue Daguerre, the site of her studio, and showing her production team working at their Apple Macs organising her film schedule while wearing bikinis, sarongs, and flip-flops. The beach is an urban site and the urban site is a beach. These connections between the city and the beach, based as they are on their shared cinematic qualities of modernity, mobility, and vision, force us to conclude that if the city is somehow inherently cinematic, then so is the beach. One only has to consider the figuration of a summer beach, with bodies all facing the same direction toward a shimmering horizon of constant movement, to sense some of their shared qualities. Both also connote both absence and presence: the beach is conjured out of the absence/presence of water and land, while the cinema out of the absence and presence of light.

Relocating the emphasis in film studies on exploring cinematic space through an analysis of the cinematic beach has important repercussions for a feminist reappraisal of the politics of cinematic space. At a time when theoretical considerations of the spatial are ubiquitous, and when contemporary French cinema has reconstituted itself as a multiplicity of national, transnational, and post-colonial sites, the questions of what is France, what is French space, and where French citizens are to locate themselves are posed and answered within the filmic realm, and this realm may in turn produce new

ways of understanding and relating to space. By confusing and conflating the city and the beach through insisting on the urban, modern, and cinematic qualities of each of these spaces, held usually to be in opposition to each other (economic, political, and cultural centre vs. marginal periphery of winter desertion and summer holidays), the films under consideration in this article offer their female subjects a new relation to the world by examining the potential of the beach as a space that allows for the exploration of modern female subjectivity in new and productive ways. The beach is a site that is both other to and yet intimately linked to the city, as is symbolised, for example, by the fact the beach resort was created as a terminus for railway lines reaching from the city. These films demonstrate the similarities between beaches and other spaces associated with modernity (cities, airports) and thus reconfigure our ideas of what exactly modern, cinematic space might be. In doing so, they argue for a feminist understanding of alternatives to the male-dominated cityscape as *the* paradigm for understanding space, subjectivity, and its cinematic expressions.

The beach as labyrinth: *Les Plages d'Agnès*

In her polemic in praise of the city, Elizabeth Wilson argues that it is precisely in the labyrinthine nature of the city that its feminist potential can be found:

at the heart of the urban labyrinth lurked not the bull-like male Minotaur, but the female Sphinx [...] perhaps the 'disorder' of urban life does not so much disturb women. If this is so, maybe it is because they have not internalised as rigidly as men a need for over-rationalistic control and authoritarian order. The socialisation of women renders them less dependent upon duality and opposition; instead of setting nature against the city, they see nature in the city. For them, the second city, the invisible city, underworld or the labyrinth, instead of being sinister and diseased, is an Aladdin's Cave.⁹

Such an insight leads Wilson to argue for a feminist politics of the city that avoids the paternalism of town planning and insists on women's rights to the carnival, the intensity and even the risks of the city. She argues that

surely it is possible to be both pro-city and pro-women, to hold in balance an awareness of both the pleasures and dangers that the city offers women, and to judge that [...] urban life [...] has emancipated women more than rural life or suburban domesticity. It is time for a new vision, a new ideal of life in the city—and a new feminine voice in praise of cities (Wilson 35).

Varda's film creates the beach as an intense site of affective investment, labyrinthine in its overlapping circuits of past and present, desire and loss.

Refusing to reduce the beach to one singular meaning, but representing it in its plurality as her title suggests, Varda recreates Wilson's Aladdin's cave. However, she borrows Wilson's feminist assertion of female pleasure in the labyrinthine nature of the city and inserts an alternative to Wilson's view that one must choose between the rural, the suburban, and the city by focussing on the beach, which captures elements of all of these sites. The beach is the site of the massed summer crowd (the city), the site of family squabbles and female domestic labour (the suburban), the wild expanse far from civilisation (the rural). In a typically playful manoeuvre, Varda often films herself walking backwards on the sand, a literal representation of her desire to use the film to look back over different episodes of her life. However, in doing so, she adds a further layer of meaning, creating herself as a *flâneuse* of the beachscape. This link back to *flânerie* reminds us of the modernist heritage of the cinema and the city, placing both of these into a new environment in which female reminiscence and artistry become paramount through the figure of Varda herself. Although she refers only briefly to her feminist politics in the film, its very project becomes feminist as it both asserts the singularity of feminine experience as girls and women were socialised in the twentieth century and documents the multiplicities of meanings that emerge from the beach, figured as a delightful Aladdin's cave of possibility.

Varda's 2008 film is the culmination of a long interest in place in general and the beach in particular. As Alison Smith argues, "the sense of place is a constant throughout Varda's films." She goes on to quote Varda herself, who explains, "Je crois que les gens sont faits des endroits non seulement où ils ont été élevés, mais qu'ils aiment, je crois que le décor nous habite, nous dirige [...] en comprenant les gens on comprend mieux les lieux, en comprenant les lieux on comprend mieux les gens."¹⁰ This view, expressed in an interview in 1961, could stand as an epigraph for Varda's 2008 film, in which she examines the roles beaches have played throughout her film career and in her personal life. She travels from the Belgian beaches of childhood to the Sète beaches of her adolescence and her first feature film, *La Pointe courte* (1954), to the late 1960s and early 1970s in Los Angeles and the drop-outs and hippies on Venice beach, to her life with Jacques Demy and their children in Noirmoutier. The film thus offers us multiple images of differing beaches, as well as different insights into their function both in Varda's life, in Varda's films, and more generally as a cultural site.

The sheer multiplicity of connections Varda makes between different ideas, images, and cinematic representations of the beach is exemplified in a sequence that takes place in minutes 26:16-29:42. In this three-minute

sequence, Varda defamiliarizes the beach precisely by giving us a sense of the density of its meaning. The sequence begins with a reenactment for Varda's camera, which we see on-screen filming, of the old Sète tradition of fishing from the beach using drag nets. Here she recalls the historical heterogeneity of the beach, acknowledging its existence as a site of labour for the fishermen of Sète, showing us images of the beach covered in large drag nets and the tough physical labour they required. However, these images themselves are not of work but the reenactment of work, reminding us that the beach as site of labour is fading into the past and nostalgia. Typical of Varda's playful and complex evocation of the beach, however, she tells us that while witnessing these fishermen working and learning how to mend nets, she dreamed of running away to the circus. We then cut to images of trapeze artists flying through the air against the backdrop of the beach, the sea, and the sky, and the soundtrack takes on an exuberant circus theme tune, recalling perhaps Federico Fellini and his love of circuses and beaches as brought together in *8 1/2* (1962). The safety nets of the trapeze artists reference the nets of the fishermen, but they are used here to a different purpose to evoke the beach as a place of possibility and dreams. In her next sentence, delivered cheekily to the camera while sitting on a beach under a parasol, Varda then says that she knew nothing of life, of periods, of what men and women did when they were naked together, and we cut to an image where the nets have become a lover's hammock in which a couple embrace naked before tumbling out onto the sand. At this point the trapeze artists draw a pair of curtains made out of nets over the embracing couple. Here we may be reminded of Roger Vadim's beach in *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1955) and his iconic images of Brigitte Bardot and Jean-Louis Trintignant making love on the sand in scenes that helped shape the image of Bardot as representative of transnational beach culture, an image that was founded of course in Bardot's appearing in a bikini on the beach at the Cannes film festival. "The images that circulated of Bardot from the beach and her habit of sun-bathing subsequently became a mass-cultural ideal of pleasure around the world."¹¹ The nets are used in Varda's film to yet another purpose, to signify the mass cultural ideal of the beach as place of sexual hedonism and youthful liberation. Broadly speaking, then, this sequence moves from fishermen to a couple making love, from the beach as place of grinding poverty and back-breaking labour to the beach as place of youth, sex, and leisure, a movement that the beach anthropologist Jean-Didier Urbain argues is typical of the historical fate of the beach:

The beach becomes the theater of a confrontation between bathers and fishermen from which the former emerge victorious [...]. Symbolic in painting, the fisherman's disappearance was a reality

here, and the removal of the workforce from the coasts was a prophecy realized. The contemporary beach, more than ever emptied of its native populations, emerged triumphant from this technological and economic upheaval that deported seafaring men into city ports in massive numbers [...] and liberated the seashore [...] for] seaside vacationing.¹²

The sequence also contains further reflections on the beach as place of personal as well as cultural memory and myth. In the sequence, Varda inserts a black and white image of a beach, with a naked man standing at the water's edge, his back to the camera, and a young boy sitting on the ground. Its sea has been digitally altered to be blue and moving, and the image thus fuses together the still and the moving, the cinematic and the photographic, the past and the present. This one image echoes in its form the overlapping circuits of time that animate all of Varda's film. Against this crystalline image, Varda adds a further mythic dimension when she tells us that "tout homme qui regarde la mer est un Ulysse qui n'a pas toujours envie de revenir à la maison. Tous les garçons que j'aime et tous les hommes qui regardent la mer s'appellent Ulysse." She then cuts to a full-colour moving image of a man standing naked by the sea. Varda runs into the shot, speeded up as if in a 1920s slapstick comedy, carrying a blanket to cover him, and a jaunty electronic soundtrack plays. Such an undercutting of a melancholic image with a comedic take on beaches and nudity is typical of Varda's strategy in this film, which moves with lightness from humour to grief and back again. However, the reference to Ulysses has further complex meaning. Not only does it touch on the mythic nature of the beach as site of departure and return, and the idea that all men who watch the sea may recall for us the Ulysses of myth, it also refers directly to an earlier filmic project of Varda's, although one she chooses not to comment on further in this film.

In 1986 she made a short film named *Ulysse*. This film was based on a photograph she had taken in 1954. This photograph, almost identical to the black and white image of the naked man and young boy discussed above, shows a naked man, a boy, and a dead goat on a beach. The young boy in the picture is named Ulysse and lends his name to both the photograph and the film. In this film, Varda interviews the young boy, now an adult, and the naked man, trying to investigate what she and the models were thinking about when the photograph was taken. Both of them struggle to recall the photograph, but the interviews move Ulysse's mother to tears, as she recalls that that summer Ulysse could barely walk due to childhood polio, a knowledge that does not however permeate the photo at all. The boy lends his name, Ulysse, and thus its mythic associations, to that picture of a beach in Calais. However, as Alison Smith comments in her analysis of the film:

the attraction of the myth is also a lure in *Ulysse*. There is so much that is unexplained, both in the photograph and almost by definition in the myth, that the tenuous connection between image and title produces curiosity [...]. Its function is to make the spectator, as well as the narrator, dream by suggesting other possible meanings which are never going to be confirmed.¹³

This notion of an inexplicable, labyrinthine plethora of meanings is exemplified in the opening sequence of *Les Plages d'Agnès*, which consists of images shot on a wild, Belgian beach filled with multiple mirrors so that the shots become a complex interplay of fragmentation, dispersal, reflection, and refraction. As Franck Kausch writes, "le prologue, mettant en place un réseau de miroirs déroulant une série infinie de points de vue [...] souligne que le portrait est ici en creux, dissimulant toujours ce qu'il révèle en portant l'attention non sur une identité, mais sur ce avec quoi elle est en relation, donc en transformation."¹⁴ As in the reflected circuits between her various mirrors, Varda stresses connections, movements, and processes over fixed identities and objects. The visual images filling the screen offer us the beach as a place of endless horizontality, emphasised by tracking shots and the sea stretching to the horizon. These images also give a dizzying verticality to the depth of field which evokes the historical depth of Varda's relation to the beach, further figured in the depiction, in the same sequence, of her sitting in a sand dune surrounded by old black and white photos of her family, a scene in which the actual mirror images are replaced by virtual photographic images, giving a new perspective on the beach, memory and time. Varda then reconstructs these photographs on a contemporary beach, getting two young girls to wear swimming costumes in the style of the costumes in the photographs. Sitting alongside them, Varda, aged 80, passes shells to a reincarnation of her ten-year-old self. "Pour moi, c'est du cinéma, c'est un jeu," sums up Varda, questioning herself on the meaning and purpose of the reconstruction. The meaning is in the act of filming, of recreation, of enjoying the image, of this moment of complicity in the meeting of past and present, the young girls and the old woman.

Varda illustrates here the inseparability of place from people: these young girls and their actions of selling shells belong only to the beachscape. In her desire to explicate the links between places and people, it is thus fitting that she chose to focus this most intensely autobiographical film on the role of beaches in her life and work. As Sarah Cooper argues, "her interior is exteriorized as we move from beach to beach [...]. Spread across the globe, her life and memories are there on the beaches, and such an external, relational construction of her portrait broadens any solipsistic focus."¹⁵ In the mix of photographs and films from the past, reconstructions of the past with actors, brief artistic installations on beaches, interviews, and Varda herself talking to



FIGURE 1. Varda recreates events from her youth on the beach. Agnès Varda, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008). © Ciné-Tamaris/Cinema Guild.

camera, the film refuses to give a univocal idea of either the beach or the filmmaker, insisting on both of them as processes formed through relations between elements. It is precisely by suggesting meanings but refusing to confirm them that *Les Plages d'Agnès* offers up the beach as a site that can allow for eternal configurations and re-configurations of both space and the self. Varda's film becomes a feminist project in that it refuses to capture and fix the meaning of its subject, suggesting that this meaning is as friable and fragile as the shifting sands of the beaches of its title.

The beach as liminal space: *La Baule Les Pins* and *À ma sœur*

Varda's film celebrates a life in film, from the perspective of an artist interested in documenting her own ageing process as she reflects back on her history. Both Kurys and Breillat, in contrast, use the beachscape to document the coming-of-age of an adolescent girl in *La Baule Les Pins* and *À ma sœur*. If the urban metaphor that suits Varda's beach is that of the labyrinth, Kurys and Breillat both emphasise the beach as a liminal space, neither entirely nature nor entirely culture, neither entirely sea nor entirely land, but borrowing elements of both.

The relationship between the beach as liminal site and modernity is more complex to decipher than Varda's labyrinth. However, the beach as space of

transition can be understood as offering experiences similar to those of other sites not of the nineteenth-century phantasmagoria but the contemporary world. Here, we find an unlikely connection between beaches and airports, both of which function as spaces of transition and escape:

Airports might be considered liminal spaces par excellence because of their function as thresholds [...] airports are the gateway to the other, i.e. another staging area of action outside the ordinary bonds of existence [...]. Because they represent the transcendence of space and time, airports function as gateways and transition spaces; they personify the great escape. Precisely for this reason, air transportation possesses the aura of romance and exoticism, of possibility, difference and a new chance for daily living. Early in its history, this romantic element of escape to some fantasy location was the strongest aspect of commercial aviation's appeal.¹⁶

Turning to anthropological and ethnographic work on the beach, we can trace connections with the modernity of the airport in its creation of altered ways for people to experience themselves because both sites are thresholds between places. Jennifer Webb argues that the geography of the beach allows us to read the beach as a liminal space:

The beach is neither land nor sea, but has some characteristics of both. It therefore carries the meanings of both and is thus almost 'overloaded' with potential meanings. It is, as structural anthropologists call it, an 'anomalous category,' in the middle of basic oppositions of the culture from which we construct our meanings—such as 'them' and 'us,' 'good' and 'bad,' the land and the sea.¹⁷

John Fiske develops this understanding of the beach as anomalous, arguing that even the most suburban beach retains a sense of otherness from our everyday lives. The appeal of the suburban beach depends crucially on the fact that suburbanisation is incomplete: echoes of that which resists incorporation into the culture still exist to provide a frisson of the freedom, the danger, and the potentially subversive challenge that nature mounts against culture. Conversely, the wildest beach is still connected to our cultural patterns and expectations. In both cases, the beach is not allowed to violate the conceptual category to signify too much of nature or culture. Rather, the beach remains a transitional space *between* nature and culture, a liminal space that accrues its own liberties and constraints and that operates outside of the fixed binaries of the city versus the countryside.¹⁸

Webb and Fiske demonstrate that the beach is a place where the body is experienced differently from when it is in the city or the countryside. As an anomalous location, the beach renders relations more fantastical and ambiguous, and it places people on a threshold between nature and culture. Both



FIGURE 2. Breillat emphasises the difference between the girls' bodies in the beach scenes. Catherine Breillat, *À ma sœur* (2001). CB Films/Tartan Video.

Anaïs in *À ma sœur* and Frédérique in *La Baule Les Pins* use their experience of the beach to inform themselves critically about the configuration of female heterosexuality in French society. At the beach, the constructed nature of the gendered body is revealed precisely because culture and nature are placed into a relation different from that in most locations. It is thus a site in which the girls can attempt some self-invention beyond the dictates of the family structure that would contain them.

The shoreline, the absolute limit of the delimitation of land and sea, the place where the existence of the beach itself becomes indeterminate and uncertain (where the beach ends and the sea begins changes with every break of a wave), is the location where the questioning of heterosexual femininity within the patriarchal family unit reaches its zenith in both these films. The shoreline features at the very end of *La Baule Les Pins*, when Frédérique and Sophie have learnt that their mother and father are to divorce and that they will be moving to Paris with their mother, instead of returning to the family home in Lyon. The final image of the film is of Frédérique paddling along the edge of the breaking waves, slightly apart from the family group ahead of her. Here, in contrast to the secret diary that has been used as voice-over to narrate the film, Frédérique's voice-over narrates a letter she has written to her father, presumably from Paris to Lyon, after the end of the film's diegesis. Carrie Tarr argues

that “the switch from diary to letter and the acceptance of separation from the father are signs that she has left childish feelings behind and entered a more grown-up, if repressed, world. The film’s ending [...] shows that the daughter will survive, if at a cost.”¹⁹ However, we can read the disjuncture signalled between the space and time location of the image track (the beach at *La Baule Les Pins* at the end of the holidays) and that of the soundtrack (Paris during the school term) differently. The image track suggests that the letter is one that Frédérique is composing in the present, imagining what life will be like without her father and practising coming to terms with the change in her life. She is using this moment of walking along the shoreline to project herself into her new situation and fantasise about it in order to be able to make it her own, rather than something imposed on her by her parents. While on the image track, she is following in her mother’s footsteps on the sands, the soundtrack from her imagination acknowledges that Frédérique can now decide how to (re)construct her family. Although her mother has taken the decision to divorce her father, Frédérique’s final word maintains the relationship between father and daughter, suggesting that it will be Frédérique’s writing and expression of subjectivity that will determine her future.

Anaïs uses water and the shoreline in a far more radical way to call into question the very structure of patriarchy. The difference between bodies is emphasised by the beach scenes, where the elder, slim sister Elena engages in sexual activity with her Italian boyfriend Fernando, while the younger, plumper sister Anaïs strips naked and sings to herself in the sand. Breillat suggests that the conventionally attractive girl, educated by society to interpret the boy’s sexual overtures sentimentally as “une preuve d’amour,” cannot formulate her own desires, fashioned as she is as an object of desire.²⁰ Anaïs, however, her chubby body rendering her both less attractive and more child-like, thus doubly sexually unavailable, can use the space of the beach and the swimming pool, locations in which her body is constructed as a sight, to renegotiate her attitude towards heterosexual relationships through imagining different romantic scenarios and through singing her strange, cynical songs of boredom and death. She spends time caressing her body, the physical manifestation of her subjectivity, applying suntan lotion or sitting in the surf, and she uses the beach entirely differently from her sister. While her sister and Fernando kiss in the dunes, Anaïs lies in the surf and lets it wash completely over her, abandoning herself to physical sensation beyond the prescribed arena of heterosexual sex. She lies in the wash of the waves, isolated on the empty, gray beach. The feel of the waves that flow over her legs inspire her macabre songs which reduce her to the figure of the following shot, a cadaver

washed over by the sea. Water acts in this film as a medium through which Anaïs expresses her fascination with sexuality, death, and the imbrications of the two outside of her sister's naive consumption of Fernando's banal heterosexual romance narrative. David Vasse compares Anaïs to a water nymph, clothed often in green or blue and able to use water to gain critical purchase on the sexual relation experienced by her sister and even possibly her mother.²¹ It is only Anaïs who swims in the pool at the holiday home, while her mother and sister sunbathe and her father carries on business on his mobile phone. It is only Anaïs whose imagination can be stimulated by water. It is as if in giving herself over to the shoreline, surrendering to the feel of the cold sea water and gritty sand upon her skin, that Anaïs reimagines her relation to her body. In so doing, she takes her body outside the realm of specifically sexual touching into that of sensual experience through her experiences of the beach. The image of a young girl, alone on the sand, the sea's white foam covering her body, presents the beach as a site for the reconfiguring of sexuality, femininity, and the body.

All three of these films offer us powerful readings of the ways the beachscape can reconfigure our understanding of modern spatiality. Against the critical dominance of the city as the expression of mobile, modern, cinematic spatiality, these films demonstrate that the beach is also a site of modern mobility. By inscribing modernity into an alternative landscape, these films offer their female protagonists the space in which to explore different ideas and ways of being female away from the binary oppositions and exclusions that characterise the modern city.

University of Exeter

Notes

1. Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, Michael Keith and Steve Pile, eds. (London: Routledge, 1993), 141.
2. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L'Image-mouvement* (Paris: Minuit, 1985) and *Cinéma 2: L'Image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), and André Gardies, *L'Espace au cinéma* (Paris: Meridiens-Klincksieck, 1993).
3. James F. Austin, "Editor's Preface: New Spaces for French and Francophone Cinema," *Yale French Studies* 115 (2009): 3.
4. Giuliana Bruno, "Motion and Emotion: Film and the Urban Fabric," in *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and The Modern Metropolis*, Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, eds. (London: Wallflower, 2008), 15.
5. See Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities: Cinema and Urban Space* (London: Reaktion, 2002); David B. Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997); Jean Douchet and Gilles Nadeau, *Paris cinéma: une ville vue par le cinéma de 1895 à nos jours* (Paris: May, 1987); Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, eds., *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice,

- eds., *Screening the City* (London: Verso, 2003); Thierry Jousse and Thierry Paquot, eds., *La Ville au cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2005); Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, eds., *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and The Modern Metropolis* (London: Wallflower, 2008).
6. Alain Corbin, *Le Territoire du vide: l'Occident et le désir de rivage (1750-1840)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); see especially chapter 5, "L'Invention de la plage," 283-98.
 7. Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres: hétérotopies," in *Architecture, mouvement, continuité*, 5 (octobre 1984): 46-49.
 8. John House, *Impressionists By the Sea* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007), 24.
 9. Elizabeth Wilson, *Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, The Control of Disorder and Women* (London: Virago, 1992), 26.
 10. Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1998), 60.
 11. Vanessa Schwartz, *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008), 78.
 12. Jean-Didier Urbain, *At The Beach*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 53-54.
 13. Alison Smith, *Varda*, 47-48.
 14. Franck Kausch, "Les Plages d'Agnès: la mer, éternellement recommencée," *Positif*, 574 (2008): 15-16.
 15. Sarah Cooper, "Looking Back, Looking Onwards: Selflessness, Ethics, and French Documentary," *Studies in French Cinema*, 10:1 (2010): 62.
 16. Mark Gottdiener, *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 10-11.
 17. Jennifer Webb, "Beaches, Bodies and Being In the World," *Some Like It Hot: The Beach as a Cultural Dimension*, Keith Gilbert, James Skinner, and Allan Edwards, eds., (Oxford: Meyer and Meyer Sport, 2003), 78.
 18. John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London: Routledge, 1989), 43-76.
 19. Carrie Tarr, *Diane Kurys* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1999), 93-94.
 20. Stéphane Goudet and Claire Vassé, "Une âme à deux corps, entretien avec Catherine Breillat," *Positif*, 481 (March 2001): 26-30.
 21. David Vasse, *Catherine Breillat: un cinéma du rite et de la transgression* (Paris: Arte/Complexe, 2004), 163.