

‘Sandrine Bonnaire regained’: space and mobility in Sans toit ni loi and Prendre le large.

WIGELSWORTH, Amy <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6539-6104>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/33957/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

WIGELSWORTH, Amy (2024). ‘Sandrine Bonnaire regained’: space and mobility in Sans toit ni loi and Prendre le large. French Screen Studies.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

‘Sandrine Bonnaire regained’: space and mobility in *Sans toit ni loi* and *Prendre le large*

Amy Wigelsworth (A.Wigelsworth@shu.ac.uk)

Languages & Cultures, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

This article considers the parallels that can be drawn between two characters portrayed by Sandrine Bonnaire at distinct junctures in her film career: Mona, a young homeless woman whose wanderings are recounted retrospectively after her frozen corpse is discovered at the start of Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (1985), and Édith, a middle-aged woman who relocates to Morocco to keep her job with an offshored French textile factory in Gaël Morel’s *Prendre le large/Catch the Wind* (2017). The author first considers Mona and Édith in the context of a stasis-mobility dynamic identified as central to both films, subsequently reflects on the political implications of their mobility and finally considers a more proximate notion of space, with reference to the theory of haptic visuality explored by Laura Marks (2000). *Prendre le large* illustrates the limits of the palimpsestic star image and, in counterpoint, the recuperative possibilities of a film depicting an immersive encounter with a foreign space. The article aims to demonstrate how the quite specific questions of labour and relocation broached in these films point to broader existential issues pertaining to identity and movement, as well as to consider what the two films, in dialogue with each other, might add to current debates around precarity in contemporary cinema.

Keywords

Sandrine Bonnaire; Agnès Varda; Gaël Morel; *Sans toit ni loi*; *Prendre le large*; space

In Gaël Morel’s *Prendre le large/Catch the Wind* (2017), Sandrine Bonnaire stars as a middle-aged woman who relocates to Morocco to keep her job with an offshored French textile factory. This performance came some thirty years after Bonnaire’s César de la meilleure actrice for her portrayal of Mona, in Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (1985), a performance that for its part came hot on the heels of her much-lauded debut in Maurice Pialat’s *À nos amours/To Our Loves* (1983). These early successes inevitably inform Bonnaire’s more recent roles. Ginette Vincendeau identifies Bonnaire as one of a number of young actresses who came to the fore in the French cinema of the mid-1980s (2000, 241). While she has remained active in film and television since then, Bonnaire’s earliest work is widely considered her best, hence a tendency among critics of *Prendre le large* to hail the film as a sort of ‘second coming.’ The *Inrockuptibles* review describes ‘une Sandrine Bonnaire retrouvée [Sandrine Bonnaire regained]’ and goes on to explain that ‘Gaël Morel’s sixth feature film marks the return of Sandrine Bonnaire to roles worthy of her, almost twenty years after her leading ones in the work of Rivette and Chabrol’ (Deruisseau 2017), while the *Le Monde* review refers to ‘the pleasure of reunion’ with Bonnaire, absent ‘since last century,’ before declaring, ‘Note to filmmakers: Sandrine Bonnaire is back in business’ (Sotinel 2017).¹ In an interview published as part of the press kit produced by Les films du losange, distributor of *Prendre le large*, Morel acknowledges explicitly that he and fellow scriptwriter Rachid O. wrote the film with Bonnaire in mind: ‘we had taken her as our “model,” we were “imagining” her in the situations of the film, without daring to tell ourselves that she would be the one to actually play the role [...] Sandrine is one of those actresses who influence scripts as they are written’ (Les films du losange 2017, 14).² Most

reviews of *Prendre le large* make passing reference to *Sans toit ni loi* but stop short of a meaningful comparison of the main characters. In this article, I would like to offer a systematic comparison of the two and, specifically, to argue that Bonnaire's portrayal of Mona and Édith can be approached fruitfully as a single trajectory. Édith, I contend, might be seen as an iteration of Mona, inflected – and at times problematised – by the narrative of the later film and by the contexts which frame it. Bonnaire's body and the meanings drawn from her previous appearances afford a continuity which invites us to compare two apparently distinct sociocultural moments. My methodological approach draws initially on Kate Ince's phenomenologically inspired reading of Varda, which she sums up with reference to the director's 'particularly perceptive portrayal of a set of geographical locations, and her visual and verbal emphasis on female embodiment' (2013, 602). I first consider Mona and Édith in the context of a stasis-mobility dynamic which I identify as central to both films, though with different associations and emphases and subsequently reflect on the political implications of their mobility. Finally, I use the theory of haptic visuality explored by Laura Marks (2000), and central to Ince, to consider a more proximate notion of space and, linked to this, an abstract understanding of space as noninstrumental and intersubjective. My approach aims to sensitise my reader to the experiences of precarity depicted in the films and to demonstrate how the quite specific questions of labour and relocation broached point to broader issues of identity and movement, *Prendre le large* extending these beyond the metropolitan frame. Bonnaire's body, which at times helps to foreground these issues, but elsewhere serves to complicate them, seems a crucial factor in this process. I argue that *Prendre le large* illustrates the limits of the palimpsestic star image and, in counterpoint, the recuperative possibilities of a film depicting an immersive encounter with a foreign space, thereby assuming a particular salience in the context of a body of film works with precarity as their central theme.

Stasis and mobility

The relationship between characters and their environment, and between identity and space, is a recurrent theme in Varda, as a number of critics have noted.³ In particular, she explores a dynamic between stasis and mobility, and between inside and outside, traditionally coded in gendered terms.⁴ Laura Mulvey, writing about melodrama, refers to a feminine and domestic genre, characterised by 'emotion, immobility, enclosed space, and confinement', in opposition to genres associated with masculine, outside space and characterised by 'adventure, movement, and cathartic action' (1992, 55). Varda proffers a challenge to this gendered dichotomy from the earliest scenes of *Sans toit ni loi*, and throughout the film, by showing Bonnaire's character, Mona, striding resolutely across the French countryside in a famous series of travelling shots. These provide a marked contrast to the immobility of the interviewees who relate their encounters with her and the *casaniers* often seen by the viewer, and observed by Mona, in front of the television (Decock 1988, 377). Her homelessness, given that 'the roof represents [...] the home which is the matrix of our origin and our identity' (Déchery 2005, 139), is an emphatic refusal of circumscription, especially in gendered terms.⁵ Mona's fate can, of course, be read as a punishment for that refusal, and thus a confirmation of oppressive gender dynamics. But an alternative reading might interpret this as an emphasis on rather more elemental associations with mobility and stasis, so that the

gender binary, having been turned on its head, seems finally to be dismissed altogether: Mona's tenacious walking provides the life-giving impetus for the film, and the stasis which bookends her perambulations is explicitly linked to her demise; the mobility-stasis dynamic thus becomes less a question of masculine or feminine, and more a matter of life or death.

Interestingly, the same dynamic is central to Bonnaire's character in *Prendre le large*, albeit with different associations. Édith Clerval lives alone, following the death of her husband and the departure of her son for Paris. The lack of attachment she shows to her house throughout the film is a sort of intertextual echo of Mona's homelessness. Although she doesn't sell the house until the end of the film, it seems little more than a source of capital for her, as her conversation with the HR officer who attempts to dissuade her from following her job to Morocco attests. Crucially, Édith's indifference to the house does not extend to the social relationships it represents; in fact, the loss of these relationships is the very reason the house is no longer important to her. Thus, when her son takes her back to France following her collapse in the Rif mountains, their awkward cohabitation prompts her to declare, 'There will never be anything in this house again.'⁶ A conversation with her son's husband towards the end of the film, when the house sale is going ahead, reinforces the point: '– I've been thinking about it for so long. – It's a beautiful house though. – Not when you are alone.'⁷ This 'aloneness,' which is so key in *Sans toit ni loi* too, makes for uncomfortable viewing in *Prendre le large*. Édith's obvious sadness at the alienation she experiences when she visits her son in Paris is a striking example of this. She finds herself unable to participate in conversations with him and his friends, and is dismayed to be banished to a hotel room rather than invited to stay at his apartment. All of this highlights a need for belonging clearly at odds with Mona's emphatic rejection of 'home.'

This questioning of home is linked to other issues of space in the film, some of which relate to the nexus of postcolonialism and precarity foregrounded by Édith's singular migration. In Tangiers, Édith clashes with those whose inflexibility is echoed in their spatial comportment and the language they use to keep others in place, both literally and figuratively. Mina (Mouna Fettou), the owner of the boarding house where she stays in Tangiers, speaks to Édith from behind the screen of her reception desk or holds a strategically placed fan between them; when she returns from the cinema to find Édith in her kitchen, Mina addresses her with frosty sarcasm, in terms which point to a broader critique of (neo)colonial white privilege: 'Don't be embarrassed. Make yourself at home.'⁸ She is also irritated at Édith's indifference to the interior space of the boarding house: '– Do you like the room? – Yes, it's OK. – OK, is that all? It's the nicest and the biggest, you know.'⁹ It is significant that the first meal Édith shares with Mina and her family, and which marks the beginning of their friendship, takes place outside. Najat, Édith's mistrustful supervisor, has a similar sensitivity, to spatial discipline: she barks, 'Everyone to their station!' as the factory lights are switched on, and 'To your posts!' when the workers gather around a woman who has been electrocuted by a faulty sewing machine.¹⁰ Najat's intransigence and her suspicion of Édith are rooted in a negative experience of mobility: as Karima explains, she was spurned by a fiancé who went to France to find work but never returned.

Morel explains his considered use of two different formats in the film and uses spatial terms associated with sleep and wakefulness (*allongé/debout*) to nuance the stasis-mobility dynamic: scope format at the start underscores Édith's restriction, resignation and inactivity

in France, while a more vertical format echoes the degree of autonomy and activity she rediscovers in Morocco:

It is often said that scope format allows you to breathe because it is wider; I find it, on the contrary, suffocating: it shrinks the characters. This is the reason why I only use it at the beginning of the film – to emphasise Édith’s confinement. As soon as she arrives in Tangiers, David Chambille, my cinematographer, and I wanted a more vertical format: it fits better with this city built on hills and corresponds to my desire to film people standing rather than lying down. (Les films du losange 2017, 15–16)¹¹

This is confirmed in the diegesis: in Tangiers, Édith gets up early at the weekend to shop and cook, rather than stay in bed. In contrast, in an anecdote which says much about her vexed relationship with her son, she remembers confining herself to bed at the weekend so as not to risk waking him: ‘When you were little, at the weekends, I didn’t dare get up. I was so afraid of making noise and waking you. So sometimes I stayed in bed until noon.’¹²

If Édith’s walking is, at times, aimless – perhaps most notably when she wanders through Tangiers after being mugged, and when she is fired from the factory and walks dejectedly through the dark city streets – more often her movement is synonymous with productive activity and, with this, social connection. Newly arrived in Tangiers, she walks to rehearse the journey to work, hurrying to keep up with a young boy paid by Mina to show her the way; she follows Madame Sarai across the factory floor to her workstation on her first day at the factory; at a distance, she follows a group of women to the fields where they are to work when they arrive in the Rif mountains. This is a far cry from the solitary and independent walking of Mona, who walks *away* from others, but while Édith’s tendency to follow does point to a certain lack of autonomy, it also indicates, perhaps more significantly, a need for social connection. This is borne out in the dialogue with the French HR officer who questions Édith’s motives for following her job to Morocco, pointing out, ‘You have a comfortable redundancy package. I’m not sure you have anything to gain by going over there,’ to which Édith responds, ‘Nor by staying here, all alone and unemployed.’¹³

Nomadism or migration

In thinking the two films together, there are important distinctions to be made when it comes to the political resonance of the mobility depicted by the two characters. The reconfiguration of gender roles implied by Mona’s walking is underlined at a formal level by Varda: the tracking shots which follow Mona’s progress move, counterintuitively, from right to left – a rejection of cinematographic convention which echoes the resistance to hegemonic perspectives integral to Varda’s feminist agenda. The point is made by Alison Smith, who also observes the striking lack of synchronisation between Mona’s movements and those of the camera (1998, 15), echoing the observations of Susan Hayward (1985, 272–73).¹⁴ Mona’s physical elusiveness reinforces the political point: this is an outright refusal to be ‘fixed’ by dominant perspectives; she escapes not only the fetishising gaze liable to settle on her as a female character, but indeed any sort of political appropriation or circumscription. Mona’s aimlessness, despite her apparent determination, is significant, in that movement emerges as an end in itself rather than a means. As Smith notes, ‘When asked to sum up her life, and

perhaps to sum up herself, she says simply ‘Je bouge’ (I move)’ (1998, 115).¹⁵ Florianne Wild refers explicitly to Mona as a nomad, while acknowledging that hers is an unconventional nomadism, given its solitary nature (1990, 92 and 93). For Wild, the significance of Mona’s nomadism lies in the character’s narrative mobility, which she explains with reference to Teresa de Lauretis’s discussion of Jurij Lotman: ‘Mona transgresses the most archaic rule of narrative: she is not a place, a territory to be won, to be penetrated by the hero, but rather, she ranges in freedom, the freedom to be a nomadic monad in a uniform world.’ (Wild 1990, 98).¹⁶ For Rosi Braidotti, the nomad provides an apt theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity, and female subjectivity in particular, as well as the opportunity for feminist theory to become ‘the site of [...] a transformation from sedentary logocentric thinking to nomadic creative thought’ (1994, 30).¹⁷

Édith’s movements draw us away from the nomadic feminist tradition associated with Mona, as the name of the boarding house where she stays in Tangiers suggests: ‘Terminus des nomades’ is an oxymoron, given that, as Braidotti explains, the nomadic style is one ‘without predetermined destinations or lost homelands’ (1994, 250). Although the details of Édith’s backstory are minimal, her destination and the desire to work motivating her displacement are made quite clear, and our knowledge of the job she has lost in France and the fractured relationship with the son she has left behind make for a wistful impression of homeland, all of which combine to suggest that she should more accurately be classified a migrant rather than a nomad.¹⁸ And yet hers is not a conventional migration, as the suspicion she inspires in her colleagues attests. Najat doesn’t believe that the traditional economic motivation for migration is there in Édith’s case, as Karima tells her: ‘Najat doesn’t understand you, how you manage to live on the lousy salary. That’s not what brought you to Tangiers. She thinks your story’s really strange.’¹⁹ Although Morel points out that Édith’s story is not without a factual basis – ‘The situation I imagine is not the stuff of science fiction: during the crisis in Spain, many people preferred to go temporarily to Morocco rather than remain unemployed in their country’ (Les films du losange 2017, 7) –, her choice is presented to us as an isolated exception, underlined by the slightly surreal images of her entirely alone on the ferry to Morocco, which arguably suggests a significance to her character beyond that of the realistic social portrait.²⁰

Édith emulates, on a larger scale, Mona’s radical, right-to-left walking by undertaking what Hakim Abderrezak terms an ‘ex-centric migration.’ Abderrezak’s study ‘reconfigures parameters that have traditionally put the ex-coloniser’s country and culture in the position of privileged destination’ (2016, 5), via an analysis of fictional, filmic and musical ‘counternarratives’ depicting migrations away from France (the ‘ex-center’). Specifically, Édith reverses the south-to-north direction of travel we have come to expect from postcolonial migration narratives seen in films such as Yamina Benguigui’s collection of documentaries, *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin* (1997) and Abdellatif Kechiche’s narrative *La graine et le mulet* (2007).²¹ There are several nods within the film to the reversal inherent to Édith’s migration,²² such as the subtitled conversation between Ali (Kamal El Amri) and Mina in which they note how strange it is that Édith has come to Morocco to work rather than for a holiday: ‘– Weird that she’s come to work here. Usually, the French come to sunbathe. – It’s the world turned upside down.’²³ Morel refers to the relationship between Mina and Ali as a sort of mirror image of that between Édith and

Jérémie: ‘Mina and her son, Ali, are almost a reverse copy Édith and Jérémie: on the one hand, a very Mediterranean mother reluctant to let her child go; on the other, a woman who chooses to offer freedom to hers and suffers terribly’ (Les films du losange 2017, 12).²⁴ Morel describes Mouna Fettou as a sort of ‘repetition with difference’ of Sandrine Bonnaire: ‘For Mina, I wanted an actress who would provide a contrast with Sandrine; she needed to cut a different figure but be able to sing from almost the same hymn sheet.’ (Les films du losange 2017, 15)²⁵ His description of Mina’s confident stride – ‘She owns the street when she walks through the crowd!’ (Les films du losange 2017, 13) – makes for a stark contrast with the rather more demure Édith and recalls, again, her difference from Mona.²⁶ Language is similarly deflected, for example when Ali is injured playing rugby (a sport which originated at an English public school in the nineteenth century and whose growth in popularity was concurrent with the expansion of the British Empire), and the overprotective Mina criticises the game in terms a coloniser might use to denounce the activities of uncivilised natives: ‘You’ll stop this barbarous sport!’²⁷ There are also visual references to the inversion, such as the static shot of a boy hanging upside down, with the port of Tangiers in the background, seen just after Édith’s shopping trip to the market. He stays suspended there for nearly eight seconds before we see his legs lower and understand that he is jumping down from a post he has been using as a climbing frame; he then runs to join his friends as they cartwheel around Édith, who is smiling and relaxed as she strolls through the group (see Figures 1–2). And significantly, most of the conversations between Édith and Karima in the locker room of the Tangiers factory take place in front of a mirror, notable by its absence in the exchanges between Édith and Nadia in the equivalent space of the French factory. All these references to reversal and reflection, both diegetic and formal, point to the subversive potential of this displacement *à rebours* [in reverse]; rather than dismiss Édith’s migration as a straightforward neocolonial incursion, we are invited to notice and to question what we might take for granted in a traditional postcolonial migration narrative. The inverted trope is arguably prefigured, with gender prejudice added to the mix, in *Sans toit ni loi*, through Mona’s ‘impossible encounter’ with Assoun, a Tunisian seasonal worker. For a while, the two enjoy an idyllic collaboration, sharing the accommodation provided by their employer and working peaceably alongside each other in the vineyards. But when Assoun’s Moroccan colleagues return, they object to the presence of a female in their midst, and she is ejected from the group.

INSERT FIGURES 1–2

Figures 1–2. ‘The world turned upside down’ (*Prendre le large*)

Water plays a significant part in the nonstandard trajectories of both characters, sometimes supporting the films’ political dimensions and at other times problematising them. In *Sans toit ni loi*, Mona is afforded mythical status, as we see her ‘emerging, like Botticelli’s Venus, from the Mediterranean’ (Wild 1990, 93) and Varda’s voiceover comments, ‘it seems to me that she came from the sea.’²⁸ This watery genesis is both a denial of social origin (Déchery 2005, 142) and, by extension, an assurance that Mona’s nomadic wandering will be unencumbered by ‘the psychologisation common to mainstream cinema’ (Wild 1990, 97). If

this is consistent with Varda's feminist project, the ferry scenes in *Prendre le large* depicting Édith's migratory journeys from France to Morocco, in contrast, arguably problematise any political pretensions the film might have. The shots of Édith, seen from behind as she looks out from the ferry, point to both her isolation and sense of adventure, but also clearly recall Bonnaire as Suzanne seen at the prow of a boat in Pialat's *À nos amours* (see Figures 3 and 4). The images and the context for them are different: the shot of Suzanne takes in more of her lower body, and in the film her brother and others look on and remark on her beauty as she poses, whereas the more modest Édith remains unobserved within the diegesis. The unmistakable reference to the earlier film is nonetheless an invitation to compare Édith to Suzanne, which hints at an objectification of the character entirely at odds with the revulsion we are encouraged to feel for the 'decidedly unglamorous' Mona (Flitterman-Lewis 1996, 313).²⁹ The idea that Édith's unorthodox migration might shed new light on the dominant postcolonial migration narrative is also called into question. Abderrezak notes that boat imagery has, historically, featured prominently in images of migration to France: 'In the past century, filmic portrayals of state-sponsored migration to France were often of a ferryboat leaving a Maghrebi port.' He goes on to observe the bleak character of more recent boat imagery, which bears testament to perilous journeys with sometimes tragic outcomes: 'Scenes no longer show imposing ferries full of migrants awaited by employers and family members, but rather they depict fishing boats packed with desperate migrant hopefuls. (2006, 18) The banal, frivolous image of the tourist implied by the reference to *À nos amours* seems incongruous, if not distasteful, in this context. We are reminded of a dialogue during which Édith offers a vacuous justification for her move to Morocco and shows an alarming insensitivity to the distinction between work and play – 'Let's say I wanted to get away' – to which an appalled Karima responds, 'Get away? [...] Édith, if I can't double my pay with the sewing I do at home [...] I'd have to prostitute myself.'³⁰ The insurmountable difference and distance between the two women underlined by Édith's ill-judged response to Karima's question is, again, arguably prefigured by Mona's failed assimilation into Assoun's group of workers in *Sans toit ni loi*. Both women are foiled by a lack of agency: Mona is an outsider in the migrant workers' space despite being in France, while Édith is naïve and idealistic about her capacity to adjust to her new life in Morocco and the willingness of her co-workers to accommodate her.

INSERT FIGURES 3–4

Figure 3. Bonnaire as Édith (*Prendre le large*)

Figure 4. Bonnaire as Suzanne (*À nos amours*)

Perhaps even more problematic than the references to *À nos amours* in the ferry scenes are those to Bonnaire's 'Frenchness'. Vincendeau explains that French stars have particularly strong national associations, given that they operate within a smaller domestic market than their American counterparts (2000, 31). These associations are underscored by our knowledge (at least, that of the white, Western viewer) of Bonnaire's performance as Joan of Arc in Jacques Rivette's 1994 *Jeanne la Pucelle* and, in *Prendre le large*, by the image of Édith looking out to sea (Figure 5), in a pose strongly reminiscent of Poisson's bust

of Marianne, the personification of the French Republic, complete with billowing top and curls framing her face like a Phrygian cap (Figure 6). While the palimpsestic ferry scenes could be said to compromise the film's potential to upset postcolonial migration narratives, perhaps the more important point, regardless of whether the various avatars of Bonnaire are contradictory or not, is that they coexist in the first place. As Bruno Deruisseau points out in his *Inrockuptibles* review, Bonnaire not only has multiple acting performances to her name, several of which are referenced in *Prendre le large*,³¹ but also, as Édith, performs multiple roles within the one film:

Sandrine Bonnaire undergoes all experiences in this film and embodies all women. Under pressure from her employer, she becomes militant. A neglected mother, she sees the return of her son and finds a new family. Responsible for the malaise of one colleague and an accusation of theft against another, she in turn is accused of theft and crumbles under unacceptable working conditions. (Deruisseau 2017)³²

Identity as it pertains to nationality can also be considered performative, a point reinforced by the succession of French actresses used as models for the plaster bust of Marianne displayed in French town halls throughout the Republic. Thus, if Bonnaire's 'intertextual myth' makes *Prendre le large*, at times, ambivalent in terms of its political message, the references to Bonnaire's various performances also point to an essential openness of identity and the subversive possibility of a rapprochement between self and other. The Marianne imagery remains problematic, nonetheless, in that this openness of identity is not without restrictions – racial, in this instance: every actress used as the model for Marianne to date has been white.³³ If Bonnaire's performance as Édith can be 'recuperated' in spite of this problematic image, I would argue that this is achieved elsewhere in the film, where haptic visuality shifts the emphasis to her immersive, sensory encounter with Morocco, rather than the status of Bonnaire as an object or icon.

INSERT FIGURES 5–6

Figure 5. Édith prepares to return to Tangiers (*Prendre le large*)

Figure 6. Poisson's Marianne, 1933 (Image Credit: Wokingham Town Council, UK)

Haptic visuality

I will now turn to a more intimate notion of space, with reference to Laura Marks's work on haptic visuality. Marks focuses on 'intercultural cinema,' or films produced by cultural minorities living in the West, but acknowledges that 'this movement is an international phenomenon, produced wherever people of different cultural backgrounds live together in the power-inflected spaces of diaspora, (post- or neo-) colonialism, and cultural apartheid' (2000, 1). Marks theorises 'a visuality that functions like the sense of touch' (22) and demonstrates how haptic images encourage 'a close engagement with surface detail and texture' (Kuhn and Westwell 2020), inviting intimate, embodied responses from the viewer and facilitating other sensory experiences. This implies, by extension, an erosion of the subject-object distinction which according to art historian Alois Riegl is characteristic of optical visuality and

synonymous with objectification and mastery. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's analysis of the materiality of *Sans toit ni loi* clearly anticipates Laura Marks's influential work. Flitterman-Lewis explores how the 'surface aesthetic' of the film informs our engagement with various aspects of it, and with Mona in particular. The film's 'visually lush cinematography' and 'systematic use of colour,' for example, draw attention to the materiality of the film image and to the viewing process, rather than the content:

'The strident hues of brilliant blue and gold match [Mona's] earliest journeys and her optimistic stride. The more subdued tones, washed with a harsh winter light, characterise the next stage of her wandering. [...] And finally, as Mona stumbles to her end, there is a curious kind of radiance in the purples and blues that surround her. This [...] is a way that the cinematography renders unconventional beauty in unexpected ways, and restores to the look of the camera that materiality which classical cinema denies it.' (Flitterman-Lewis 1996, 307–08)

The effect of this, Flitterman-Lewis posits, is to replace the 'omnipotence of the patriarchal view' with a more benevolent sort of surveillance, which she describes, in markedly haptic terms, as a sort of 'visual caress' (1996, 307). This is a material echo of the film's approach to its female subject: refusing the traditional, psychologising method of characterisation, and echoing Mona's preference for outside spaces, the film turns away from the interiority of the character, to concentrate on social 'externals' (1996, 308). This is not a denial of interiority in favour of physical objectification, of course, but more a reimagining of the 'external,' which becomes the repository of social rather than sexual meaning, so as to challenge this. For example, while the extreme long shot of Mona emerging nude from the sea and her wanderings in and out of shot are not haptic images as defined by Marks, they offer obscured or partial visions which influence our viewing in a similar way. These shots are designed to frustrate the voyeuristic gaze. As Wild observes, the shot which follows Mona's emergence from the sea underlines this by contrast: 'An abrupt cut to a close-up of a postcard, a conventional "bathing beauty" on a revolving display stand confronts us with the commodified image of the female' (1990, 96). When we do see Mona in her entirety, her unpleasant appearance is so at odds with the image we assume to have been hidden from us that we are fascinated and confused in equal measure, and the terms of our viewing pleasure are thereby transformed. Mulvey referred to this as a look of 'passionate detachment' ([1975] 1992, 274) and Flitterman-Lewis 'the contemplative gaze of meaning': our desire is to understand Mona rather than possess her.

In *Prendre le large*, haptic visuality provides a means of critiquing the optical visuality often associated with ethnography as well as the marked power dynamics that typically characterise narratives of precarity.³⁴ The use of haptic imagery in the opening-credit sequence is particularly striking. With the noise of factory machinery as an accompaniment, large expanses of fabric are propelled, at speed, into heaps, roll slowly past the screen in sheets, or billow gently down into piles. The credits fade in and out, are covered by falling folds of material (see Figure 7), or are lost against busy, coloured patterns (see Figure 8). Each time that we begin to focus and gain some sort of purchase on the image, it is replaced by a different image, of a different fabric, moving across the screen in a different

way. The final fabric we see is a repeating floral pattern moving downwards. As the camera also tilts downwards, we see the back of Édith's head as she works at the controls of a machine, and her hands reaching out to smooth the fabric as it descends (see Figure 9). As this 'bigger picture' is revealed, we settle back into the familiar subject position and the mastery of the image this implies. This haptic opening sequence prepares us for a certain mode of viewing: by inviting us to question our relationship to the image (which remains entirely ambiguous until Édith's appearance), the sequence also anticipates the way the film will question the certainty of our knowledge about the non-Western culture and the dynamics of the relationships depicted.

INSERT FIGURES 7–9

Figures 7–9. Opening credits (*Prendre le large*)

Another striking use of haptic imagery is when Édith, having lost her job at the factory, watches the women she will go on to join in the Rif mountains getting into a truck to be taken to work. The camera tracks from left to right across her stationary figure, as if to restrict our perception to the surface level. The 'surface aesthetic' here, as in *Sans toit ni loi*, encourages an appreciative 'graze' of the image, rather than an objectifying 'gaze', to use Marks's terms (2000, 162). The shot is also a physical expression of the intersectional confusion Édith presents to those around her. As Morel puts it, 'Is she Spanish, French, a tourist, a worker? Her image is completely blurred in the eyes of the factory employees, as it is for Mina' (Les films du losange 2017, 12).³⁵ For the taxi driver who accosts her when she arrives in Tangiers, Édith is a tourist, of indeterminate nationality; for Najat, she is 'the foreigner' [*l'étrangère*], with no other defining (or redeeming) characteristics.

Haptic perception could be said to take on a renewed resonance in the context of a film about work, especially given the perceived 'atrophy of sensuous knowledge in industrial and postindustrial societies' and the belief that 'capitalist culture alienated the "close" senses such as touch and smell, while honing the visual sense until it acquired the character of a weapon' (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994, 87).³⁶ References to Édith's sensory experiences of her work in Morocco – Morel refers to 'the almost physical reactions that this new space triggers in her' (Les films du losange 2017, 15) – could therefore be said to offer us a prototype for a more 'democratic' type of knowledge, rooted in haptic mutuality rather than optical mastery.³⁷ What Marks refers to as 'haptic hearing' is a good example of this. She describes this as 'that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to,' and explains that the experience can be sustained for longer periods in quiet environments, such as lying in bed in the morning, or overwhelmingly loud ones, such as a construction site. In such settings, Marks explains, 'the aural boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct' (2000, 183). A scene in which Édith is lying in bed at the boarding house and hears the call to prayer is a good example of this, as is, at the other extreme, what Morel describes as 'the almost unbearable noise' (Les films du losange 2017, 11) of the factory floor, at its most striking when Édith first arrives and struggles to make herself heard over the machines.³⁸ In another scene, when Édith wanders through Tangiers after being mugged, disorientated by construction dust and noise, both sound and image have a haptic quality (see

Figure 10). The effect of all these scenes is to erode the distinction between self and world, or self and other (Marks 2000, 149).

INSERT FIGURE 10

Figure 10. Édith disorientated by construction dust and noise (*Prendre le large*)

This is echoed at the diegetic level, in numerous images of and references to hands and touching. There are shots of Édith clutching her injured fingers while sitting at her sewing machine (see Figure 11), tentatively touching a burnt right finger with her left index finger as she rinses her hands at a locker room sink and rubbing salve into her hands at the boarding house. In the hammam scene, to which darkness and steam add a haptic dimension, Édith and Mina alternately have savon noir rubbed into their skin by a masseuse, and massage themselves. Again, this conveys the notion of a mutual permeability between self and other, insofar as ‘while looking tends to be unidirectional, one cannot touch without being touched’ (Marks 2000, 149). The subject-object confusion characterises a number of other shots in the film. When Édith shops for a head covering to wear on the bus into work, we are first shown the back of her head as she looks at a shop-window mannequin; the perspective then flips, so that we share the view of the mannequin, looking out at her, the blue of Édith’s dress echoing that of the mannequin’s headscarf. Similarly, towards the end of the film, Édith chats online with Ali, who shows her the work being done on the boarding house kitchen which they are going to turn into a restaurant (see Figure 12). Again, there is a haptic dimension here: these are images of images, variously small, grainy, or juxtaposed so that we are unsure where to focus our attention and our eyes wander across the surface of the image. We see Édith’s shoulder and the back of her head in the corner of the shot, and Ali’s face on the laptop screen, but also, in a smaller window, Édith’s own face looking back out at her, so that she is both subject and object, observer and observed. The mingling of spaces – real and virtual; individual and communal; the kitchen in Tangiers, blurred as Ali moves around to show off the renovations and framed, *en abyme* within Édith’s dining room in France – echoes the confusion of subject and object. The clarity of the images for the characters is revealed by Mina, whom we hear but don’t see, as the camera shows Édith smiling at the computer screen. Rather than contradicting the experience of the viewer, Mina’s comment points to the productive potential of the subject-object confusion: ‘The picture is so clear today that I feel like you’re next to me.’³⁹

INSERT FIGURES 11–12

Figure 11. Hands (*Prendre le large*)

Figure 12. Édith chats online with Ali (*Prendre le large*)

As a relatively new actress, Bonnaire delivered an assured and unambiguous performance as Mona, through whose character the gender assumptions behind the stasis-mobility dynamic were reconfigured, nomadic movement took on renewed political resonance, and haptic visuality was used to challenge the dominant male gaze. Her strong performance as Édith invites us to revisit her portrayal of Mona: nuancing the stasis-mobility dynamic, which takes on associations with work and social connection, proposing a

potentially subversive migration à rebours, and using haptic visuality to worry the boundaries between self and other, precarity and privilege. And yet it is a more complex performance, in the sense that the ‘intertextual baggage’ she carries, as an established actress, at times limits the film, pointing in some instances to an objectification at odds with the feminist agenda advanced through Mona and elsewhere to a national and racial association so strong it threatens to undermine the subversive potential of Édith’s displacement. Ultimately, if this is avoided, it is because the haptic elements of the film succeed in diverting our gaze away from this compelling, optical image of Bonnaire to concentrate on the sensory detail of Édith’s experience, blurring the lines between subject and object and thereby demonstrating the ethical possibilities of embracing otherness. The questions of space and star image considered here add compelling nuance, via wide-ranging issues of identity and movement, to specific and vibrant debates around precarity in contemporary cinema.

¹ ‘Le sixième long métrage de [Gaël Morel] [...] marque le retour de Sandrine Bonnaire dans des rôles à sa mesure, près de vingt ans après ceux de premier plan qu’elle tint chez Rivette ou Chabrol’; ‘Il y a d’abord le plaisir des retrouvailles, avec un regard. Celui de Sandrine Bonnaire, qu’on n’avait plus vu depuis le siècle dernier, au temps où elle tournait avec Pialat, Varda, Chabrol, Rivette... [...] Sandrine Bonnaire est de retour aux affaires. Avis aux cinéastes.’

² ‘[N]ous l’avions prise comme “modèle,” nous l’“ imaginions” dans les situations du film sans toutefois oser nous dire que ce serait elle qui jouerait. [...] Sandrine fait partie de ces actrices qui donnent une direction aux scénarios au moment de l’écriture.’

³ See, for example, Powrie (2011, 70) and Tuncer (2012, 105).

⁴ On status vs mobility in Varda, see Flitterman-Lewis (1996, 224–37) and Hayward (2014, 277).

⁵ ‘[I]e toit représente [...] le foyer qui est matrice de notre origine et de notre identité.’

⁶ ‘Il n’y aura plus jamais rien dans cette maison.’

⁷ ‘– Ça fait tellement longtemps que j’y pense. – C’est pourtant une belle maison. – Pas quand on est seule.’

⁸ ‘Ne vous gênez pas. Faites comme chez vous.’

⁹ ‘– Elle vous plaît, la chambre ? – Oui, ça va. – Ça va, c’est tout ? Pourtant, c’est la plus belle et la plus grande.’

¹⁰ ‘Chacun à sa place !’; ‘À vos postes !’

¹¹ ‘On dit souvent que le format scope permet de respirer parce qu’il est plus large ; je le trouve, au contraire, étouffant : il rétrécit les personnages. C’est la raison pour laquelle je ne l’utilise qu’au début du film – pour marquer l’enfermement dans lequel est Édith. Dès lors qu’elle arrive à Tanger, David Chambille, mon chef-opérateur, et moi, souhaitons un format plus vertical : il colle mieux à cette ville construite sur des collines et correspond à mon envie de filmer des gens debout plutôt qu’allongés.’

¹² ‘Quand tu étais petit, le week-end, j’osais pas me lever. J’avais tellement peur de faire du bruit et de te réveiller. Alors, des fois je restais au lit jusqu’à midi.’

¹³ ‘– Vous avez des indemnités confortables. Je ne suis pas certaine que vous gagniez quoi que ce soit à partir là-bas. – Ni de rester ici, toute seule, au chômage.’ Édith is one of a number of female figures in contemporary French and Belgian cinema characterised by their mobility, including the eponymous protagonists in the Dardennes’ *Rosetta* (1999) and *Le silence de Lorna/Lorna’s Silence* (2008); her story also offers a female counterpoint to that of a group of older male characters facing post-Fordist professional precarity, as in Stéphane Brizé’s *La Loi du marché/The Measure of a Man* (2015),

¹⁴ See also Tuncer (2012, 112–13).

¹⁵ Laurent Déchery similarly refers to ‘pure movement, the absence of goal or project’ (2005, 138) [‘le pur mouvement, l’absence de but et de projet’].

¹⁶ Discussions by Powrie (2011) and Tuncer (2012) of Varda’s films emphasise the philosophical notion of ‘nomadology’ expounded by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which posits walking as a creative ‘becoming’ (2004, 532) with ‘transformative qualities’ (2007, 2).

¹⁷ Martin O'Shaughnessy sees Mona's directionless walking away as symptomatic of 'the ultimate untenability of individual revolt' (2018, 298) rather than Braidotti's affirmative nomadism.

¹⁸ For Braidotti's useful distinctions between the exile, the migrant and the nomad, see (1994, 22).

¹⁹ 'Najat te comprend pas, comment tu fais avec la paye minable pour vivre. C'est pas ça qui t'a fait venir à Tanger. Elle pense que c'est vraiment bizarre ton histoire.'

²⁰ 'La situation que j'imagine n'appartient [...] pas à la science-fiction : durant la crise en Espagne, beaucoup de gens ont préféré partir temporairement au Maroc plutôt que de rester sans travail dans leur pays.' Abderrezak corroborates this, observing that 'the global crisis that began in 2008 has redefined some of the migratory dynamics between Spain and Morocco in unexampled ways, making Morocco a new destination for Spanish and other European citizens in search for employment' (2016, 225).

²¹ Note that Édith's atypical itinerary is not without filmic precedent. See Abderrezak (2016) for discussions of *Il était une fois dans l'oued/Once Upon a Time in the Oued* (2005), French-Algerian filmmaker Djamel Bensalah's comic film about a Frenchman obsessed with North-African culture who travels to Algeria as a stowaway, and *Exils/Exiles* (2004), by French Roma Tony Gatlif, which depicts the trip to Algiers taken by a young couple who mistakenly embark on a ferry to Morocco. Morel's catalogue also includes *Les chemins de l'oued/Under Another Sky* (2002), in which a young Franco-Algerian man leaves France for Kabylia to avoid prison. All these migrations however, unlike that of Édith, are clandestine and/or are undertaken by characters with North-African parentage.

²² I deliberately avoid the terms 'counter migration' and 'reverse migration,' as these are typically used to refer to migrants returning to their place of origin. In Abderrezak, 'reverse migration' refers specifically to 'the children of immigrants in France driving to their ancestors' homeland in the Maghreb to lay their parents to rest, thus finding themselves in an unknown country and culture' (2016, 4). See also stories of flight or expulsion from France in Rachid Bouchareb's *Cheb* (1991) Alain Gomis's *L'Afrique/As a Man* (2001), Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's *Bled Number One* (2006) and, as an adjunct to the main storyline, Laurent Cantet's *Entre les murs/The Class* (2008).

²³ '– Bizarre qu'elle vienne travailler ici. D'habitude, les Français viennent bronzer. – C'est le monde à l'envers.'

²⁴ 'Mina [...] et son fils, Ali, sont presque le calque inversé d'Édith et Jérémie : d'un côté, une mère très méditerranéenne peu disposée à laisser partir son enfant ; de l'autre, une femme qui choisit d'offrir la liberté au sien et en souffre terriblement.'

²⁵ 'Pour Mina, je voulais une actrice qui s'oppose à Sandrine, elle devait avoir une silhouette différente mais être capable de jouer presque la même musique.'

²⁶ 'Elle possède la rue quand elle marche au milieu de la foule !'

²⁷ 'Tu vas arrêter ce sport de barbares !'

²⁸ 'Il me semble qu'elle venait de la mer.'

²⁹ See also Wild (1990, 96). Morel's comments on the tenor of his discussions with Bonnaire also suggest a certain objectification: 'With Sandrine, our discussions mainly focused on her clothes: they had to reflect the evolution of the character, from the erasure of the very beginning to a femininity rediscovered at the end' ['Avec Sandrine, nos discussions ont surtout porté sur ses vêtements : ils devaient rendre compte de l'évolution du personnage, de l'effacement du tout début à une féminité retrouvée à la fin'].

³⁰ '– Disons que j'avais envie de prendre le large. – Le large ? [...] Édith, si je peux pas doubler ma paie avec la couture chez moi [...] je devrais aller faire la pute.'

³¹ In addition to 'l'éblouissant sourire de Suzanne' [Suzanne's dazzling smile] and 'le vagabondage de Mona' [Mona's wandering], Deruisseau recognises 'le port de tête gracieux de Mouchette dans *Sous le soleil de satan* de Pialat (1987)' [the graceful carriage of Mouchette in Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* (1987)] and 'la fragilité rugueuse de *Jeanne la Pucelle* dans le film de Jacques Rivette (1994)' [the rugged fragility of *Joan the Maid* in Jacques Rivette's 1994 film].

³² 'Sandrine Bonnaire traverse ce film dans tous les états et incarne toutes les femmes. Soumise au patronat, elle va se faire militante. Mère délaissée, elle verra le retour de son fils et trouvera une nouvelle famille.

Responsable du malaise et de l'accusation de vol d'autrui, à son tour elle sera accusée de vol et s'écroulera à cause des conditions de travail inacceptables.'

³³ On colour and French national identity, see, among others, Fatou Diome's *Marianne porte plaine !* (2017) and Mame-Fatou Niang's *Mariannes Noires : Mosaïques Afropéennes* (2015).

³⁴ On ethnography, see Marks 2000, 133.

³⁵ 'Est-elle Espagnole, Française, touriste, travailleuse ? Son image est complètement brouillée aux yeux des employés de l'usine comme à ceux de Mina.'

³⁶ Cited in Marks 2000, 139.

³⁷ 'les réactions presque physiques [que cet espace nouveau] déclenche en elle'

³⁸ 'le bruit presque insoutenable'

³⁹ 'L'image est tellement nette aujourd'hui que j'ai l'impression que tu es à côté.'

Notes on contributor

Amy Wigelsworth is Senior Lecturer in French at Sheffield Hallam University. She is the author of *Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris: The Mystères Urbains and the Palimpsest* (Legenda, 2016), as well as a number of articles and book chapters on urban mysteries, crime fiction and fictional representations of work. Her current research has two main axes: the first considering French-speaking cinematic representations of 'otherness' in the workplace and the second an interdisciplinary project investigating the effectiveness of bibliotherapy with French fiction in translation as treatment for work-related depression.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Martin O'Shaughnessy and Emma Wilson for the interest they showed in this article from its earliest stages and for the comments and suggestions they provided on multiple draft versions.

References

Abderrezak, H. 2016. *Ex-Centric Migrations: Europe and the Maghreb in Mediterranean Cinema, Literature, and Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Braidotti, R. 1994. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Classen, C., D. Howes, and A. Synnott. 1994. *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. London: Routledge.

Déchery, L. 2005. "Autour de Mona dans *Sans toit ni loi* d'Agnès Varda." *The French Review* 79 (1): 138–147.

Decock, J. 1988. "Entretien avec Varda sur *Sans toit ni loi*." *The French Review* 61 (3): 377–385.

Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 2004. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Continuum.

---. 2007. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London: Continuum.

Deruisseau, B. 2017. “Prendre le large de Gaël Morel.” *Les Inrockuptibles*:
<https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/prendre-le-large-141963-03-11-2017/>

Diome, F. 2017. *Marianne porte plaine !* Paris: Flammarion

Les films du losange. 2017. “Entretien avec Gaël Morel.” In *Prendre le large* presskit:
<https://filmsdulosange.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/fr-presskit-9749-prendre-le-large.pdf>

Flitterman-Lewis, S. 1996. *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hayward, S. 2014. “Beyond the Gaze and into *Femme-filmécriture*: Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi* (1985).” In *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, 269–280. Abingdon: Routledge.

Ince, K. 2013. “Feminist phenomenology and the film world of Agnès Varda.” *Hypatia* 28 (3): 602–617.

Kuhn, A., and G. Westwell. 2020. *A Dictionary of Film Studies*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marks, L. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mulvey, L. (1975) 1992. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, edited by Mandy Merck, 22–34. Abingdon: Routledge.

---. 1992. “Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity.” In *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, 53–71. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

O’Shaughnessy, M. 2018. “Representations: fiction, documentary and the political.” In *The French Cinema Book* (2nd ed.), edited by Michael Temple and Michael Witt, 297–303. London: BFI Palgrave.

Powrie, P. 2011. “Heterotopic Spaces and Nomadic Gazes in Varda: From *Cléo de 5 à 7* to *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 51 (1): 68–82.

Smith, A. 1998. *Agnès Varda*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sotinel, T. 2017. “Prendre le large: Sandrine Bonnaire, de la fuite dans les idées.” *Le Monde*:
https://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2017/11/08/prendre-le-large-sandrine-bonnaire-de-la-fuite-dans-les-idees_5211746_3476.html

Tuncer, A. 2012. "Women on the move: the politics of walking in Agnès Varda." *Deleuze Studies* 6 (1): 103–116.

Vincendeau, G. 2000. *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*. London and New York: Continuum.

Wild, F. 1990. "Écriture and cinematic practice in Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi*." *L'Esprit Créateur* 30 (2): 92–104.