

La Pointe Courte (1955)

"Do you love me or 'our love?'" To love, and to live, is to be always divided between our experience and our expectations of what that experience should be. In her first film *La Pointe Courte*, Agnès Varda, the female precursor of the male-dominated French New Wave, sets a romantic crisis in the titular coastal fishing town where the man (Philippe Noiret) was born, and which he visits with his Parisian wife (Silvia Monfort) twelve years after having left. In this picturesque place, the woman finds her doubts about their enduring love confirmed, at first: this part of his life that she never knew – his childhood, and his provincial inclination – feels totally foreign to her, and so he does too.

But Varda won't let the woman's pessimism go unchallenged. Parallel to the couple's strolls around the beaches of la Pointe Courte, she presents the village's life itself and reveals – or rather implies, so tender and non-judgmental is her approach – that as the daydreaming lovers question themselves, the material world keeps turning. Her smooth camera, tracking below clotheslines on which only white knitwear hangs, going through timeworn houses where a mother tirelessly feeds her many young children, also embraces and highlights the gap between reality and the ideas we have of it. In the everydayness and even coarseness of the fishermen and housewives (played by the real inhabitants), she finds poetry and reflects it back in cinematic images and interweaving stories of village rebellion against the health authorities, child sickness and teenage love. Varda goes beyond the stereotypes and the assumptions one might have about these people of the ponds, to reveal them in their essential humanity.

In contrast with this gentle look at the town's daily struggles and simple joys, the woman's torturous self-questioning could have seemed trivial. When the couple is first introduced, they appear only from the back, as though seen from the point of view of the villagers, like strange figures walking across the land. When we finally see their faces, it is in sudden close-ups as we enter the personal, inner interrogation they are facing. Noiret and Monfort deliver their lines in a detached actorly way, wear more sophisticated clothes and rarely mingle with the inhabitants.

Varda, who was primarily a photographer at the time, translates the couple's isolation and divergence from each other also through framing, employing the fishnets, railroad tracks and shabby rooms as so many barriers between them, and superimposing the couple's faces at perpendicular angles (more than a decade later, Ingmar Bergman would explore the sameness and opposition of his two protagonists in *Persona* using similar compositions).

But the husband's calmness matches the setting, and is the standard that his wife measures her neuroses against. In fact, the word "neuroses" is too harsh: she fully understands his collected perspective. Her problem is that she cannot get on board with his passive acceptance of the damage of time. When she complains that she doesn't like the fact that she now sees other people, he replies that he always has, but "we chose each other." Her struggle is the feminine struggle of living in a world that isn't the fairytale little girls are promised it will be. In reality, the passion of the early days of a love affair has to change into something else; in reality, a little boy in the village can be alive and well one day, and pass away the next.

Progressively, through their conversation and their exposure to the concrete reality and endless forward motion of la Pointe Courte, the couple is reconciled. The woman comes to accept that romance is not just an idea, but the tangible relationship that she entertains with the person she chooses to be with. Yet that knowledge doesn't really change anything: she knows she will have more episodes of doubt about the purpose of their now less fiery, but more stable relationship. Still, "it's good to know what we've traded our youth for," she tells her ever-calm husband. As everyone dances at the ball, a villager remarks "A party doesn't change a thing, but it makes us feel good."

– Manuela Lazic