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Contemporary Women Directors

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How Agnes Varda Blurred the Lines of Fiction and Reality While Creating a New Representation of the Modern Woman

The tradition of female directors in France has gone back all since the time of the silent period. Alice Guy was one of the major pioneers throughout the silent era along with surrealistic filmmaker Germaine Dulac. But unfortunately history tends to ignore and appreciate the development and growth of female's contribution in the film industry. Professor Jill Forbes states that much of this is mainly because of our biased interpretation of women filmmaking and how we shape form and categorize women films and women filmmakers. Much of our interpretation over the years was has been affected by the profound rise of the women's movement and feminism expression. "Our interpretation of women's films, our attitude towards women film makers and out appreciation of the prospects for the growth and development of women's film making have all been profoundly affected by the women's movement" (Forbes 76).

What Forbes calls the 'image of women' represented all throughout film history is essentially the male hegemony of the cinematic evolution. "In the 1950's they were invariably housebound; in the 1980's they tended to have jobs. In other words the mainstream cinema reflects the documented changed in the socio-economic status of women in the postwar period" (Forbes 77). Fortunately in France throughout the late 50's and 60's, unlike Britain and the

United States, these superficial representations of the women through the male perspective began to change. Cinematic aesthetics and how females were represented in the cinema took a different more radical approach by the popular critics of Cahiers magazine. These counter-culture critics helped lead a European movement called the French New Wave which explored various feminism themes like sexual difference, distinguishing boundaries of realism and biological relationships between men and women.

The French New Wave movement was broken into two subgroups: the Cahiers du Cinema group and the Left Bank Cinema group. The Cahiers du Cinema group was looked at as more famous and financially successful. Most of the critics were younger and much more hardcore movie buffs. The filmmakers who constituted the Cahiers du Cinema group were Claude Chabrol, Francois Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard. The Left Bank New Wave group of Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Agnes Varda, were a contingent of filmmakers who were slightly older than the Cahiers du Cinema group. They tended to see cinema through the themes of abstract memory, surrealistic dreams and experimental filmmaking. As significant as the French New Wave movement was in exploring the themes of female representation and postwar feminism, surprisingly director Agnes Varda was the only female director among all the French New Wave comrades.

Today Agnes Varda is looked at by many critics as the 'Godmother' and pioneer of the French New Wave and yet besides her being a woman, it seems a little unfair to simply describe her like that. It seems most critics would use that term just as a way to distinguish her among her other male companions like Godard, Truffaut, Rivette, Rohmer, Resnais, Chabrol and her husband Jacques Demy. Varda has stated on various occasions that she claims no prior influence to the New Wave movement; nonetheless her first *feature La Pointe Courte* (1954) remains a

clear influence and helped pave the way for French New Wave filmmakers. “Agnes Varda has never been comfortable with being included within the New Wave, much less the Left Bank Group. ‘It is not my fault I made a movie just before the New Wave. But I cannot control how histories treat me as a precursor’” (Neupert 330).

Because Varda was caught right in with the sudden popularity and rise of the French New Wave, she was able to make a profound impact within the women’s movement that stood out among all her male counterparts. Besides her films representing women in a more unbiased light, she also brilliantly blended cinematic fiction and documentary realism into one artistic fusion. Unlike her predecessors, director Agnes Varda had experience not just as a filmmaker but as a documentarian as well. These two specific aesthetics ultimately distinguished and set her apart from the others, and contributed in creating her own personal authorship. I want to incorporate these two elements of French New Wave and documentary shooting aesthetics into three of her films: *La Pointe Court* (1954), *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) and *Vagabond* (1985), and present how Varda seamlessly used these elements to blur the lines between fiction and reality, ultimately revolutionizing how women are represented within the cinema.

Varda claimed that when filming her very first feature *La Pointe Courte* (1954) she had virtually seen no other films before making it except for Orson Welles *Citizen Kane* (1941). But the release of *La Pointe* had ultimately achieved a cult-like status as historian Georges Sadoul called the film "truly the first film of the nouvelle vague.” The production of *La Pointe Court* was budgeted by Varda’s very own company, Cine-Tamaris, which was about a tenth the size of that average French film made at the time. All without any prior filmmaking experience, the loan from close friends and the help of a recent family inheritance, Varda took full creative control of the film. She shot exclusively on location in la Pointe Courte which was a neighborhood of Sete,

and used professional and nonprofessional actors. “La Pointe Courte anticipates the new wave in its dialectical meshing of documentary and fiction, of neorealist aesthetics and high culture” (Vincendeau 2).

Much of what Varda was doing was extremely groundbreaking, especially for the early 1950’s and in many ways her film *La Pointe Courte* was a pre-cursor to the quintessential films of the French New Wave. *La Pointe Courte* was released nearly five years earlier than Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1960) and Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959); and yet the film encompassed many extraordinary free-wheeling documentary-like elements that the spirit of the French New Wave would ultimately become known for. “In mixing a quasi-neorealist approach with high Parisian culture, Varda, with La Pointe Courte, forged a new filmic aesthetic that would have major resonance in both her work and the rest of French cinema” (Vincentdeau 2). Unfortunately *La Pointe Courte* wasn’t properly distributed and the film was later forgotten by the tidal wave of French New Wave films released several years later.

The story of *La Pointe Courte* is simple, as it presents a young Parisian couple who spend several days in la Pointe Courte in order to decide whether they should stay together or not. Varda knew the location since she lived in Sete when she was much younger and it helps add a personal and more autobiographical element to the fictional story. The film perfectly represents Varda’s famous authorship, meshing documentary aesthetics of the neighborhood and the people who inhabit it alongside professional actors Philippe Noiret and Silvia Monfort who play the central couple in the story whose relationship is in shambles. The two actors scripted exchanges on love and marriage is an interesting contrast to the gritty ethnographic cinematography of the villagers in the town. “Varda documents these people’s lives, their eating, gossiping, quarreling,

courting, working, seemingly at random, although she subtly weaves in several narrative threads" (Vincentdeau 3).

Seven years later when Varda released *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), this time she played with the effects of space and real-time and reconstructed them into the fictional narrative of the story. The story involves a beautiful but self absorbed pop singer named Cleo who undergoes a profound transformation while counting down the minutes and seconds until she learns of the results of a test that will confirm if she has cancer. Varda beautifully incorporates the elements of documentary filmmaking into the narrative as the audience spends two hours following Cleo though the city streets, cafes, her luxurious studio apartment and within fancy restaurants. Varda also creates diegetic sound and music, as audiences are able to overhear character's domestic disputes and even a woman complaining about the noise on the radio (which ironically is one of Cleo's)! Within these unimportant secondary stories you watch Cleo mindlessly drift throughout its scenery while her own internal anxieties are dwelling on her consciousness.

The documentary visuals and diegetic sounds make for a very interesting contrast to the subtle cinematic aesthetics which Varda places in various dramatic moments. The most obvious part is the silent cartoon-like movie sequence that features Godard and Anna Karina, as Varda for a moment explores the silent film within a film concept. Another moment which is not so subtle is the smooth camera rotation around Cleo while she sings during a rehearsal session. Not surprisingly it is this very moment within the story where Cleo has an epiphany and becomes suddenly aware of herself and of her surroundings. "In fact, this sequence occurs at the exact temporal middle of the film, making it possible to trace Cleo's radical change through an analysis of the corresponding differences in each half of the film" (Flitterman-Lewis 198). But

another cinematic technique that Varda incorporates into the film is the contrasting use of the mirrors and how it explores the themes of duality.

The first half of the story visually presents mirrors as interplay of reflection, which constantly gives Cleo positive narcissistic validation to herself. “When Cleo enters the Café Ca Va Ca Vient, once again mirrors provide her with a unified image; faced with a distorting join in the mirror, she adjusts her position until the image in its totality satisfies her” (Flitterman-Lewis 199). These mirrors ultimately begin to appear less frequently during the second half of the story. After Cleo has her sudden spiritual awakening mirrors no longer provide her the validation of her beauty. Most of the mirrors that appear during the second half of the picture are either reflected images of other people in the background or they are visually ruptured or even shattered apart. The cinematic visual placement of the mirrors make for a fascinating contrast to the documentary footage which is beautifully photographed and choreographed as the camera strolls with Cleo throughout the busy streets of Paris following her on this spiritual journey of self enlightenment and discovery. Once the cinematic invention of the various mirrors no longer makes a frequent appearance in the second half of the film, this is the moment when Cleo finally develops a new social awareness and begins to take a curious interest in her documentary surroundings and the non-actors who inhabit it.

Even though Varda’s *Vagabond* (1985) was made long after the French New Wave era, it still incorporated many of the aesthetic techniques that films of the French New Wave used. The film is also much grittier and emotionally complex than the other two pictures. The opening shot of the film perfectly lays out the entire tone of the film, as the camera moves across a bleak stark grey field to the bottom of a ditch presenting to us the body of a young woman named Mona. We eventually hear the narrator (it’s in fact Agnes Varda’s own voice) instructing the audience on

how this mysterious woman affected the men she came in contact with before her demise. Similar to the non-linear narrative structure of Orson Welles *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Vagabond* is essentially the story of a woman who will never be known. Her opening death opens up a fascinating mystery which will in time through gossip, lies and exaggerations make Mona ultimately more mythical and mysterious then she probably ever was.

Mona's character is fascinating, as she represents an independent, self-assured and ideologically modern female character. She is at heart an anarchist, a feminist whose ideals tend to reject all forms of societal conformities. And yet on the other hand Mona is incredibly lazy, ungrateful and callously takes advantage of others. She consumes all the resources she needs to survive and immediately relocates to another location. And still, the way Mona proudly chooses the life of a drifter and the freedom on the road all the while continuing to battle treacherous weather and predatory males is in a strange way highly commendable. The way that Mona will never give in to her strange revolt and of her proud dignity also makes her death extremely sorrowful. *Vagabond* can also be viewed as a kind of road movie and the character of Mona as an ambiguous femme fatale. Even though the narrative uses the conventions of a road film the female drifter (who is usually male) is instead moving from location to location, searching for an identity, all the while consuming every man who tries to get in her way. "Vagabond has two primary cinematic references…the road movie and the film noir. Traditionally, the road movie is associated with an existential quest." (Forbes 216).

Whether these testimonies in *Vagabond* are unreliable or not, the audience begins to learn more and more about Mona, through small bits and pieces of information that the girl spreads out among various people she meets like a Tunisian farm laborer, a philosophical shepherd and an elderly lady proprietor of a large estate. The eye witness accounts that our given immediately

bring to mind Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), especially the themes on point of view and unreliable flashbacks that could or could not reveal the truth. The French New Wave aesthetics that Varda uses throughout *Vagabond* is a non-linear episodic structure that begins at the end and flashes back through the various testimonies of the locals who have run into Mona or even sheltered her. And yet the approach and style to the testimonies and interviews of the locals has elements highly similar to a documentary film. Even though the actress playing Mona is a professional French actress (Sandrine Bonnaire) in many ways Vagabond approaches the material like a documentary and even uses non-actors to play the townspeople being interviewed.

Agnes Varda's brilliant fusion of French New Wave aesthetics and documentary footage beautifully blurs that line between the real and the cinematic, making Agnes Varda an unforgettable auteur. Many look at Varda as a feminist of cinema but she also was an extremely gifted visionary who knew how to perfectly incorporate the creative tools of the French New Wave. She took advantage of this rare moment in cinematic history to develop her very own authentic craft and style, while at the same time also evolving that 'image of women' and present a new modern and feminist representation that has never been seen before in the medium of the cinema.

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