

# The Establishment of Female Imagery in Agnès Varda's Film "Vagabond"

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## Abstract:

With the advancement of film studies and theory in China, theoretical directions such as the establishment of female perspectives and female imagery have become increasingly significant. Research on female directors within the French New Wave movement will be strengthened and occupy a larger proportion. In the past, understanding of feminist aspects within the New Wave was largely confined to interview materials with Agnès Varda, lacking an in-depth exploration of the female characters in her works and the intended meanings they conveyed. This paper intends to adopt textual analysis, visual language analysis, and sociocultural context analysis to investigate these issues and proposes solutions to address some of the methods employed by Varda in establishing female imagery. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of research on the portrayal of female imagery in Varda's works within the context of the French New Wave, and promote an increased proportion of feminist perspectives in Chinese film studies.

**Keywords:** Agnès Varda; Female Imagery; French New Wave

## 1. Introduction

In the vast realm of exploring cinematic art, the French New Wave and its embedded feminist currents, along with the contributions of the prominent female director Agnès Varda, have undoubtedly carved new paths for the development of film theory and practice.

The French New Wave, emerging in the late 1950s to early 1960s as the third globally influential film movement following European avant-garde and Italian neorealism, lacked a fixed organization, unified manifesto, or comprehensive artistic program. How-

ever, its core lay in the radical transformation of cinematic art with a modernist spirit. New Wave cinema emphasized the director's personal style and creative freedom, rejecting traditional narrative structures and cinematic language in favor of improvisation, location shooting, and the use of non-professional actors, thus imparting a more authentic, direct, and personalized expression to films. Notable works such as François Truffaut's "The 400 Blows" and Jean-Luc Godard's "Breathless" not only shocked the film industry at the time but also exerted a profound influence on subsequent film creations.

Amidst the French New Wave, feminist currents

gradually emerged and played a significant role. Although the core members of the New Wave were primarily male directors, female directors, and filmmakers likewise injected new vitality into cinematic art with their unique perspectives and creative techniques. They explored issues of female identity, gender relations, social roles, and more through their films, challenging traditional gender concepts and propelling cinema toward greater diversity and equality. Agnès Varda, as the sole female director within the New Wave, became a crucial representative of feminist cinema with her keen social insight and distinctive artistic style.

Agnès Varda was born in Brussels, Belgium in 1928 and later moved to France where she grew into a treasure of the French film industry, was not only a director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and actor but also a producer, earning her the title of the “Grandmother of the New Wave.” Varda’s cinematic works were renowned for their profound humanistic concern, unique narrative style, and distinct personal imprint. Her films such as “Cléo from 5 to 7,” “Happiness,” and “Vagabond” not only depicted the existence and emotional world of women in society but also profoundly reflected social changes and explorations of humanity. Varda’s cinematic language was imbued with experimentation and innovation; she was adept at blending documentary and fictional techniques, skillfully merging reality and fiction to create a unique cinematic aesthetic. Furthermore, Varda was an active social activist who paid attention to women’s rights, social issues, and cultural diversity, conveying her voice and stance through the medium of film. Her works not only possessed artistic value but also contained profound social significance and humanistic concern.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on the French New Wave and its feminist aspects in China has primarily focused on the New Wave itself, with feminist studies examining the multifaceted portrayal of female images in the works of both female and male directors. Studies on Agnès Varda’s films have mainly been conducted from a holistic perspective or through specific angles, often using her more recent films as a starting point for discussion.

The literature highlights the diverse portrayal of female images, ranging from the awakening of self-awareness to the assertion of subjectivity, amidst constant struggles and resistance. Attention is also given to women on the societal margins.

In Varda’s films, female characters often undergo a transformation from vague self-awareness to the awakening of subjectivity [1]. In “Cléo from 5 to 7,” Cléo, a renowned

female singer, gradually shifts her focus from external appearance to inner self while awaiting her cancer diagnosis, ultimately transitioning from being an object of gaze to a subject of observation. This process not only embodies the awakening of female self-awareness but also reflects Varda’s profound insight into the inner world of women [2].

Varda conveys a spirit of resistance and rebellion against social injustice through the female images in her films. Suzanne and Pauline in “One Sings, the Other Doesn’t” represent women from different social backgrounds who, faced with life’s hardships, choose different paths but collectively demonstrate female resilience and unyielding spirit [3]. Suzanne learns skills and rebuilds her life, while Pauline persists in pursuing her musical dreams. Their stories inspire countless female viewers to bravely face life’s challenges.

Varda also pays special attention to the existence of socially marginalized groups, particularly the lives of marginalized women. Mona in “Vagabond” as a wanderer, profoundly reveals the survival dilemmas and helpless choices of women at the bottom of society. Through Mona’s story, Varda critiques society’s neglect and indifference towards vulnerable groups, calling on all sectors to pay attention to and improve their living conditions [4].

Female films embody deeper explorations of social issues, including gender and power relations, social marginalization, and inclusivity, as well as considerations of life, death, and existentialism [5].

Varda’s cinematic works frequently touch upon the topic of gender and power relations. By portraying female images with different personalities and destinies, she explores women’s status and struggles in a male-dominated society. For example, Thérèse’s tragic fate in “Happiness” reveals the oppression and constraints imposed by traditional marriage systems on women, while the stories of Suzanne and Pauline showcase the difficulties and hopes of women in their pursuit of independence and freedom [6].

Varda also advocates for societal inclusivity and understanding towards marginalized groups through her films. “Vagabond” not only focuses on the survival state of wandering women but also reflects on the flaws of social systems and human indifference through their stories. Varda conveys an important message through the film: everyone should be respected and included, regardless of their position in society [7].

Varda’s films often contain profound philosophies of life and death, as well as existentialist reflections. Cléo’s fear and eventual acceptance of death in “Cléo from 5 to 7” embody the complex emotions and philosophical contemplations humans face when confronted with life and death.

Varda guides viewers to ponder the meaning and value of life through her films, encouraging people to cherish the present and bravely face life's challenges [8].

In summary, Agnès Varda's film "Vagabond" through the image of its protagonist Mona, profoundly reveals the survival state and psychological changes of women in a specific societal context, showcasing female self-awareness and resistance in the face of adversity. The film not only reflects society's neglect and indifference towards vulnerable groups but also conveys deep concern for women's destinies and a call for gender equality. Mona's image transcends the traditional victim positioning, becoming a symbol of the pursuit of independence and freedom, enriching practical cases of feminist theory in contemporary society. Meanwhile, the artistic creativity and cultural inheritance value of the film cannot be overlooked, providing viewers with profound aesthetic experiences and cultural reflections. Overall, "Vagabond" with its unique female perspective and profound social insight, has made significant contributions to understanding the state of female existence, promoting gender equality, and fostering artistic and cultural development.

### 3. Methodology

When delving into the construction of female imagery in French director Agnès Varda's film "Vagabond" a more exhaustive elaboration can be provided through three primary aspects: textual analysis, visual language analysis, and sociocultural context analysis.

#### 3.1 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis forms the foundation for studying female imagery in films, encompassing two key facets: plot and character analysis, as well as interpretation of lines and dialogues. In analyzing the plot and characters, we must not only focus on the growth journey and inner world of Mona, the female protagonist but also deeply explore the social challenges she faces. This includes a meticulous examination of her behavioral motivations, emotional transformation trajectories, and interaction patterns with others. Through these analyses, we can uncover the characteristics of Mona's image as an independent woman, such as her tenacity, autonomy, and rebellious spirit. Meanwhile, the interpretation of lines and dialogues is also crucial. Speech in films is a direct expression of characters' thoughts and emotions; therefore, we need to carefully scrutinize the lines and dialogues related to Mona's image construction. By deeply interpreting these verbal expressions, we can more accurately grasp Mona's personality traits, values, and perspectives on social reality, thereby achieving a more comprehensive understanding

of her female imagery.

#### 3.2 Visual Language Analysis

Visual language is a vital component of cinematic art and a significant means of shaping female imagery. In "Vagabond" director Varda skillfully employs cinematic language to mold Mona's image. This includes the delicate capture of Mona's facial expressions through close-up shots, the comprehensive presentation of her living environment through long shots, and the ingenious use of depth-of-field shots in depicting her relationships with other characters. Through these various cinematic techniques, Varda successfully reveals Mona's inner world, emotional state, and social circumstances, enabling viewers to gain a deeper understanding of her female imagery. Additionally, color and composition are indispensable elements in visual language. The use of color and composition in the film is closely tied to the establishment of Mona's image. Color can create atmosphere and express emotions, while composition can emphasize Mona's subject position, reinforcing her image as an independent woman. Through an in-depth analysis of these visual elements, we can more comprehensively grasp the artistic techniques employed in the film to shape female imagery.

#### 3.3 Sociocultural Context Analysis

Sociocultural context is an indispensable background factor for understanding female imagery in films. In "Vagabond", we need to examine the film within the specific backdrop of French society in the 1980s. This includes analyzing the gender concepts, social structures, and living conditions of marginalized groups during that period. Through these analyses, we can better comprehend the social roots and practical significance of Mona's image construction. Simultaneously, from a feminist perspective, we can explore how the film reflects the real situations and predicaments of women in society, as well as how Mona emerges as a representative image of feminism. This involves analyzing the film's critical stance towards issues such as gender discrimination and social injustice, as well as its advocacy for women's freedom, independence, and dignity. Through these analyses, we can gain a deeper understanding of the profound meanings and social values embedded in the female imagery within the film.

### 4. Results and Discussion

"Sans toit ni loi" (Vagabond) is a 1985 dramatic film directed by the renowned French female director Agnès Varda. Through the protagonist Mona's vagrant life, the film delves deeply into the living conditions and psycho-

logical changes of women within a specific social context, successfully portraying a female image characterized by a rebellious spirit and independent consciousness.

The plot of “Vagabond” revolves around Mona’s vagrant lifestyle, where she rejects the constraints of societal norms and chooses to live in a radical manner. Mona’s image is complex and multifaceted, with each of her behavioral choices reflecting her inner world and values. She refuses any form of charity or pity, insisting on surviving in her own way, demonstrating an unyielding spirit and an intense desire for freedom.

Mona’s growth journey is filled with hardships and struggles, but she never abandons her pursuit of a better life. Although her life is impoverished and unstable, she faces the hardships of life with an almost philosophical attitude. Her rebellion is not merely against material conditions but also against spiritual constraints. Mona’s image transcends the traditional positioning of women as victims, becoming a female character with distinct personality and independent consciousness.

The lines and dialogues in the film reveal Mona’s character traits and values. Her speech is filled with love for life and aspiration for freedom, unafraid of difficulties, and courageous in expressing her viewpoints and emotions. When faced with society’s coldness and ridicule, she chooses to use humor and self-deprecation to dissipate awkwardness and anger. This optimistic and positive attitude makes her image more vivid and three-dimensional. Mona’s dialogues also reveal her profound insight and critique of social reality. She acutely recognizes society’s neglect and indifference towards marginalized groups and, through her own experiences, calls for societal attention and improvement in their living conditions. Her words, though simple and straightforward, are full of power, allowing viewers to sense her steadfast pursuit of freedom and dignity.

The film employs a nonlinear narrative technique, intertwining Mona’s past and present. For instance, in a recall scene, the camera switches to Mona’s youthful arguments with her family, then quickly returns to her current vagrant life. This narrative approach gradually exposes Mona’s past to the audience and the reasons behind her choice to become a vagrant. This technique not only increases the film’s suspense and appeal but also makes Mona’s image more three-dimensional and complex.

In the film, as Mona wanders the streets of Paris, the director uses subjective camera angles to follow her gaze, showcasing the city scenes she observes: indifferent passersby, crowded streets, and the occasional people she interacts with. These subjective shots immerse viewers in Mona’s world, enabling them to feel her loneliness and wandering. Meanwhile, objective shots capture Mona’s

interactions with others, such as her brief conversations with passersby and her solitary sitting in cafés. These shots, from a spectator’s perspective, present Mona’s living conditions, making her image more realistic and tangible.

Through Mona’s story, the film deeply explores female desires and destinies. For example, in a scene where Mona interacts with a male passerby, the camera captures her aspiration for freedom and love but also reveals the constraints and limitations society imposes on her. The use of such cinematic language allows viewers to gain a deeper understanding of Mona’s inner world and the predicaments she faces.

The director profoundly portrays Mona’s image through cinematic language. For instance, in a scene where Mona sits alone in a café, the camera focuses on her face, revealing her complex expressions: nostalgia for the past and confusion about the future. This delicate capture of her expressions makes Mona’s image more vivid and real, allowing viewers to understand her inner world more deeply. At the same time, although Mona in the film appears disheveled and unkempt, her eyes reveal tenacity and independence, making her a vivid and complex character.

The use of depth-of-field shots highlights Mona’s subject position, showcasing her tenacity and courage amidst difficulties through contrasts and interactions with other characters. The integrated use of these cinematic techniques makes Mona’s image more authentic, three-dimensional, and rich, leaving a profound impression on viewers.

The film’s color palette is full of contrasts and symbolic meanings. Despite Mona’s impoverished and unstable life, the colors in the film are not gloomy or oppressive but instead create a warm and bright atmosphere, symbolizing Mona’s love for life and hope for the future. This color usage not only beautifies the visuals but also profoundly conveys the film’s theme and emotions.

In terms of composition, the film employs various techniques to emphasize Mona’s subject position. Techniques such as foreground occlusion and silhouette reinforce Mona’s image characteristics, making her more distinct and prominent in the frame. The use of these composition techniques not only enhances the film’s visual aesthetics but also profoundly reveals Mona’s tenacity and independence amidst difficulties.

The story of “Vagabond” is set in French society in the 1980s, a period of rapid social change where the living conditions of marginalized groups had not fundamentally improved. Through the perspective of Mona, a vagrant woman, the film exposes the neglect and indifference of French society towards marginalized groups. Mona’s identity as a vagrant continuously exposes her to survival

challenges and social exclusion, yet she persists in living her own way and pursuing freedom. This pursuit of freedom and love for life not only reflects Mona's personal tenacity and courage but also mirrors the injustice and neglect society, particularly towards female vagrants, exhibited during that time.

From a feminist perspective, "Vagabond" deeply explores feminist themes. Mona's image represents women's marginalized status and the reality of struggling to survive in society. She refuses to accept societal constraints and limitations, insisting on pursuing her own freedom and dignity. Her rebellious spirit and pursuit of self-identification embody the core idea of feminism—that women should have equal rights and opportunities as men, freely choosing their lifestyles and pursuing their dreams.

Through Mona's story, the film reveals societal injustice and discrimination towards women, calling for societal attention to women's rights and status. Simultaneously, the film showcases women's tenacity and courage amidst difficulties, as well as their relentless pursuit of freedom and dignity. This profound exploration of feminist themes gave "Vagabond" not only artistic value but also far-reaching social significance.

The film "Vagabond" with its unique narrative techniques and profound thematic explorations, presents viewers with the tragic destiny of a marginalized character while also revealing the complexities of social reality and human nature. The protagonist Mona is declared dead at the outset, and this sudden ending, like the death that each person will ultimately face, is inescapable and full of unknowns. However, for Mona, her manner of death becomes a ritualized plot—in a society like France, where heating is available, creating a seemingly warm and safe environment, she dies of exposure due to basic survival needs not being met. The setting of this plot is not only shocking but also provokes deep thought.

The film, through Mona's tragedy, raises two profound destiny issues. Firstly, it reveals that even in societies with highly developed material civilization, there are still instances where lives are lost due to basic survival needs not being met. The existence of such phenomena is a sharp critique of the social system, reminding people to pay attention to those marginalized and neglected groups. Secondly, the film touches upon the complex emotions people harbor towards vagrant life. For most people living in stable environments, vagrancy seems to carry a romantic and free aura, becoming a fantasy of escaping daily trivia and pursuing spiritual freedom and adventure. However, through Mona's story, the film reveals the true hardships and dangers of vagrant life, reminding viewers not to romanticize vagrancy but to face its underlying reality.

The film also deeply explores the dialectical relationship

between stability and vagrancy. Stability provides people with material and spiritual security, allowing them to enjoy stable interpersonal relationships, definite living environments, and stable work. However, this stability can also become a shackle that restricts personal freedom and creativity, causing people to lose the courage to pursue their dreams and adventures. In contrast, although vagrancy is full of unknowns and dangers, it also nurtures infinite possibilities and freedom. Vagrants are not bound by social norms and expectations, freely exploring their inner and outer worlds. This contrast not only reflects humanity's diverse pursuits of living states but also reveals the profound impact of social structure on individual destinies.

Furthermore, through Mona's vagrant experiences, the film showcases the difficulties and struggles of marginalized individuals in society. They often lack basic living security and social support, facing survival scarcity and dangers. However, they also possess their own dignity and pursuits, unwilling to be forgotten and ignored by society. Through Mona's image, the film calls for societal attention to the living conditions of marginalized groups, urging more care and support for them.

In conclusion, "Vagabond" through its ingenious narrative techniques and cinematic language, successfully portrays Mona as a female image with profound social significance. Mona's tenacity, independence, and rebellious spirit not only represent women's marginalized status and living conditions in society but also embody the core ideas and pursuits of feminism. Through its profound depiction of Mona's vagrant life, the film calls for societal attention to the living conditions of marginalized groups, promoting the realization of gender equality and social justice.

## 5. Conclusion

"Sans Toit Ni Loi" (Vagabond) is a 1985 drama film directed by the French female director Agnès Varda. Through the protagonist Mona's wandering life, the film deeply explores the living conditions, psychological changes, and desires and destinies of women within a specific social context. The film successfully portrays a female character with a rebellious spirit and sense of independence. Mona rejects the constraint of social norms and persists in her own way of life, demonstrating unyielding spirit and an intense desire for freedom. The movie employs nonlinear narration, a combination of subjective and objective shots, and deep focus shots, enriching the three-dimensionality and complexity of Mona's character. Meanwhile, the film's use of color and composition reinforces the thematic expression, creating a warm and bright atmosphere that symbolizes Mona's love for life

and hope for the future. From a feminist perspective, the film reveals the injustices and discrimination faced by women in society, calling for attention to women's rights and showcasing women's resilience and courage amidst adversity. "Sans Toit Ni Loi" not only holds artistic value but also profoundly reflects the complex facets of social reality and human nature. It raises profound reflections on stability versus wandering, survival versus freedom, and calls on society to pay attention to marginalized groups, promoting gender equality and social justice.

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