



The Main Feature

Season 43 – Issue 11 – Screening 22 February 2024

Vagabond (Sans toit ni loi)

France 1985
105 mins Cert 15

Director & Writer
Cinematographer
Original music
Production design

Agnès Varda
Patrick Blossier
Joanna Bruzdowicz
Jean Bauer, Anne Violet

Cast

Sandrine Bonnaire
Macha Méril

Mona, the vagabond
Madame Landier, the academic
(a 'platanologue', or plane tree
specialist)

Stéphane Freiss
Yolande Moreau
Patrick Lepczynski
Yahiaoui Assouna

Jean-Pierre, the agronomist
Yolande, the maid
David, the wandering Jew [sic]
Assoun, the agricultural worker

Joël Fosse
Marthe Jarnias
Laurence Cortadellas

Paulo
Old aunt Lydie
Éliane

The inhabitants of the region de Nîmes

*Sans toit
ni loi*
Agnès Varda



It begins with a dishevelled young woman's body in a country ditch, in the midst of winter. How did it – she – come to be here, her short life so casually rubbed out? The gendarmes at the scene rapidly and conveniently conclude it was an accident. They are right, but that does not answer the question. Over the course of this film, director Agnès Varda carries out her own investigation, interviewing witnesses and recreating the last two months in the life of 'la vagabonde', the vagrant.

"She died without leaving a trace", says Varda in an introductory voiceover, and "It seems to me she came from the sea". We first see Mona bathing naked and free in the chilly sea – more the epitome of liberty than a down-and-out stripped of even her minimal possessions, more a mythical goddess come to earth than a troubled, rootless human being.

Mona is not shown washing again, and we are frequently told how she stinks. The film traces her inexorable descent, from what might here indeed be in a sense a "lifestyle choice" to her death, from independence, self-control and elective frugality to powerlessness and utter destitution, from choice to no choice. It depicts without necessarily explaining. As Varda herself has said, Mona remains a mystery.

In an amazingly powerful central performance, 17-year-old Sandrine Bonnaire truly inhabits the part. In the words of one critic, she 'carries the whole film on her young shoulders and achieves the point, dear to Varda, of balance between the imaginary and the real.'

Mona is a mirror for the people she encounters on the road (who are often played by locals rather than professional actors). Their responses reveal much more about them than about her. She can be hostile, and does little or nothing to endear herself to them. Their varied responses cover a spectrum: interest and active help, conditional support, reciprocal or transactional sex, shared drug abuse, indifference, disdain, predation, aggression, rape.

Mona deliberately sets herself apart. In her world view there is indeed no such thing as society: how she came to this position, and exactly why she became a vagabond wandering from place to place with no home and no job, we do not know. Varda has commented that "Whatever happens to her, she is not a victim" and "She likes freedom for freedom's sake." All this rather deflates the production company's claim that this is the film about homeless people. The imaginary and the real do directly intersect though when two walk-on characters, one a homeless young drug addict and the other a well-dressed elderly gentleman, discover they have both been brought up in children's homes; so have the two non-professionals playing them.



There is certainly no doubting the reality of homelessness, which is as much with us now as when *Vagabond* was made nearly forty years ago. Over 300,000 people are homeless in England today, including nearly 139,000 children, the highest number on record¹. About 100,000 adults go missing annually in the UK. So do some 70,000 children, most commonly due to conflict, abuse and neglect at home, sexual exploitation, mental health issues, or trafficking².

Composer Joanna Bruzdowicz's original music is an integral part of the film, contributing to a strong (at time almost melodramatic) atmosphere of growing menace as it accompanies the twelve tracking shots of Mona walking. "It was a way of saying that she keeps on walking", Varda says, and "[T]he basic truth is that Mona is walking towards her death." As this hints, her death could from one perspective be seen as pre-determined, either by her own choice (a kind of self-imposed martyrdom in protest against the world she has grown up in) or by the rules of the economic, social and political order which surrounds her.

While the Radio Times film guide sums up *Vagabond* as 'a cheerless study of displacement, waste and collective responsibility', the film has its lighter moments. Marthe Jarnias as old aunt Lydie is delicious. The treatment of well-meaning lecturer Madame Landier (contrast her bathing arrangements with Mona's), and of scientist Jean-Pierre and his grasping wife, is tellingly satirical.

Agnès Varda died in 2019, age 90. She had come to be seen as the great surviving figurehead of the French New Wave, wrote Nigel Andrews in his obituary. For her and her fellows, 'Fact and fiction were brothers or sisters. Truth and reality were what mattered, in art as in life.' *Vagabond* won the Golden Lion at Venice in 1985; and Sandrine Bonnaire won the 1986 César for best actress.

Des Coles



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¹ https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/at_least_309000_people_homeless_in_england_today [posted 14/12/23]

² <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/key-information> [accessed 10/2/24]

Agnès Varda – not just a film director



Agnès Varda (1928 – 2019) made films for over 60 years. Her first drama *La Pointe Courte* (1954) interweaves fiction and documentary; her last film (*Villages Visages (Places Faces)* 2017), made in her late eighties, is a kind of road movie made with visual artist JR.

In between, she made films from a feminist perspective with *Le Bonheur (Happiness, 1965)*, and *L'une chante, l'autre pas (One Sings, the Other Doesn't, 1977)*; dramas like *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), telling in

real time the story of a popular singer awaiting an appointment with her doctor to know whether she has cancer, and tonight's film *Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond, 1985)*; documentaries notably *Daguerrotypes* (1977) about her neighbours in the rue Daguerre and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse (The Gleaners and I, 2000)* which, using the innovation of a small digital camera, focuses on the vulnerable who get their food from what is left behind at the market or in the fields.

La Pointe Courte is seen as a precursor of the New Wave, so Varda is sometimes described as the Mother (or even Grandmother) of the New Wave. She was married to another director, Jacques Demy (*Lola, Les Parapluies de Cherbourg; Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*) and made an affectionate biographical film about him, *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), as well as an autobiographical film *Les Plages d'Agnès (The Beaches of Agnès 2008)*.



Martin Scorsese said after her death 'I seriously doubt that Agnès Varda ever followed in anyone else's footsteps, in any corner of her life or her art. Every single one of her remarkable handmade pictures, so beautifully balanced between documentary and fiction, is like no one else's—every image, every cut ... What a body of work she left behind: movies big and small, playful and tough, generous and solitary, lyrical and unflinching ... and alive.'

But Agnès Varda was so much more than a director in the cinema. As a recent biography by Laure Adler emphasises: 'Film director, photographer, modern artist ... Agnès Varda has used many modes of expressing herself to describe society in a scrupulously ethical way. An observer of her era, she also shaped it by giving a voice and a face to the most vulnerable, the marginalised and the rebels, and she was actively engaged in the struggle for women's rights.' She trained as a photographer at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and started her career as a stage photographer of the Théâtre National Populaire. She was a photo-reporter in China and in Cuba. Her interest in images inspired much of her work, including *Villages Visages* where she and JR took photographs of the everyday,

enlarged them to advertising hoarding size and attached them to buildings and vehicles.

Towards the end of her life she turned to installations, beginning at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and moving on to Taipei in 2006. I saw one installation at the Liverpool Biennale in 2018. Entitled '*3 moving images. 3 rhythms. 3 sounds*, it was a three-channel video installation, whose varying speeds stimulate a reflection on temporality and the rhythm of human life, combining extracts from three of her films: *Documenteur* (1981), *Vagabond* and *The Gleaners and I*.

Michael Hipkins

Comments and reactions to: **Where the Crawdads Sing**

No of reaction slips received = 35

Average score = 7.83

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	~	~	1	5	6	11	11	1

A beautifully shot film, close to the book

Brilliant twist to ending!

Excellent film, glad I read the book first, well worth watching

Mildly diverting, highly improbable hokum – but enjoyable on its own terms

Excellent cinematography – very atmospheric

Beautifully filmed – but a bit too long

Excellent. Thoroughly enjoyed the film. Another good choice of film by the committee

Not sure about this film before the screening, but a wonderful film in all departments. Just superb!

A brilliant drama with a great twist at the end

Excellent film (with the sub-titles)

As well done as I could have hoped for – I've read the book – it was astonishing: so difficult

emotionally to reconstruct on film

Classy chick flick. Beautifully filmed

An unusual film, beautifully played out!

Great film, as good as the book

Brilliant story. Enjoyed it enormously. The best of the season so far.

Found some parts tense and almost uncomfortable – but still enjoyed it

We never found out what a crawdad is

Atmospheric, but 30 minutes too long

Good short. The film did not have the intense atmosphere of the book

We struggled with the improbability of the story and the inconsistencies between the capabilities and background of the main character, but the film was saved by the main character – the Marshes – and some wonderful photography

Great to watch on such a large screen

A gripping film with a good ending. Not sure how Kya always has perfect makeup and pristine clothes, but still, that's cinema.

Position	Film	Average score
1	Where the Crawdads Sing	7.83
2	Living	7.62
3=	Mrs Harris Goes to Paris	7.58
3=	Downton Abbey – A New Era	7.58
5	The Lost King	7.38
6	Dog Day Afternoon	7.15
7	The Banshees of Inisherin	7.06
8	Rams	6.40
9	Three Colours: Blue	6.18
10	Decision to Leave	4.59



Forthcoming attraction: 14 March 2024 – **Empire of Light**

The 'love letter to the movies' genre is revived in this poignant, wonderfully acted drama about love, life and films - Empire of Light is a sweet, heartfelt, humane movie, which doesn't shy away from the brutality and the racism that was happening in the streets outside the cinema: the Empire is showing Stir Crazy starring Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder, directed by Sidney Poitier – a message of diversity, if 1981 Britain cared to listen. It's clearly a labour of love for Sam Mendes: love requited. Guardian

Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 28 February 2024

Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.