

## Vagabond (1985)

*Vagabond* takes as its subject the life and death of Mona (Sandrine Bonnaire), a scruffy-haired homeless girl who wanders the wintry, yellowing plains of rural France with a tent on her shoulders. In the lead role, Bonnaire is astoundingly self-assured and cheerfully unlikeable. In this deeply pessimistic tract, Agnes Varda examines the fate of women who fail to abide by social rules.

The film opens with the discovery of Mona's ignominious death in a ditch, presumably of exposure to the cold; but a quick rewind back to the beginning reveals slightly more of her situation. It is soon obvious that vagrancy is her active decision; she is rude, disloyal, and lazy, refusing any help that is offered to her. It isn't difficult to deduce that she might come from a middle-class background, and may well still have a family out there somewhere. But she remains fiery-eyed and enigmatic, disinterested in doing anything but drinking, smoking weed, and wandering around.

Varda's stylistic choices serve to disrupt and often intentionally obscure the uglier parts of Mona's existence. The result might almost seem unfocused, as if the camera is meandering in the same manner as its protagonist. In one especially grotesque moment, the camera pans slowly away, with a reticence and shame that disallows for gawking or sensationalism. Her tracking shots sweep straight past their apparent subject, and some of her narrative strands can seem abrupt or extraneous -- but the result is a drifting portrait of a woman unbound by organising factors.

Here, the defiant wanderer seems to be sketched as a figure of feminist social transgression. Mona's existence is a total reversal of the domiciliary imperatives of womankind, and discomfits others with the 'unseemliness' of a young woman who rejects a fixed abode, material wealth, and serious romance. The various people she encounters - farmers and their wives, hitchhiking companions, gas station attendants - ascribe their cultural values and expectations of femininity upon her. Her filthiness, in particular, is commented on again and again - mostly by other women, who, even when sympathetic, seem revolted by her.

Nonetheless, relationships with women prove to be Mona's only notable ones. Although other women are made uneasy and even threatened by her disinterest in subscribing to the same norms, they are the most charitable to her. A migrant farm worker from Tunisia is one male exception, but when his fellow immigrants refuse to allow Mona to stay with them, his hand is forced. Even shackled by disadvantage and oppressive poverty, these workers hold on to the exclusionary shield of their maleness.

*Vagabond*'s inescapably bleak conclusion suggests the consequences of failing to abide by the laws of patriarchy and polite society; Mona is a tragic feminist kamikaze. In what might be the only lighthearted scene of the film, she gets drunk and giggles with an elderly woman. The old woman knows that her nephew is waiting for her to die so he can get his inheritance. As such, the two discarded women, no longer able or willing to fulfill their feminine functions, are deemed useless by society. They laugh about it. It's a moment of humane, subtle solidarity that speaks volumes on Varda's feminist standpoint, and on her great intelligence as a filmmaker.

- Christina Newland