

# The Feminist Perspective in Agnès Varda's *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*

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## Abstract

Varda's most overtly feminist film, *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* follows the friendship of two very different women over the course of two decades. This paper is going to analyze the narrative structure of the film from the perspective of feminism, applying Beauvoir's feminist theory and Shendan's theory of "implicit process" to the characters of Pauline and Suzanne; Meanwhile, the paper is going to relate the film to the background of Varda's creation with the analysis of Varda's creation of women. As a feminist, Varda's protests are never silent. The "hidden process" that exists underneath the surface, superficial and straightforward narrative content is more worthy of attention and analysis.

**Keywords:** Varda, *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, feminism, Beauvoir, film-making

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## 1. Varda's Feminist Views and Works

Agnès Varda, born in 1928 in Brussels, Belgium, is a French director and cinematographer, known as the "Grandmother of the New Wave".

In Varda's films, "realism" is one of her most important characteristics, and usually has a strong political tendency and feminist ideas. In the 1970s the development of the feminism wave penetrated the field of cinema, and all kinds of feminist film theories, feminist film groups, and magazines have emerged, and cinema has become an important position for feminist discourse. The film has become an important position for feminist discourse, and the image of women on screen, female discourse, and female directors have also become popular topics for feminists to study.

Varda believed that the existing film system dominated by male directors should be changed. 1974, in an interview with Jacqueline Levitin, she said: "The female form in mainstream cinema has been established by men and accepted by them, and of course by women, so as women, we have to accept the fact that women should be beautiful, wear clothes, be beautiful, be beautiful, be beautiful, wear clothes, and be beautiful. Women are supposed to be beautiful, well-dressed, likable, and always connected to issues of love. Men are in a different situation in the film, and will be filmed for their connection to their work, for the friendships that men ask."

Feminism in Varda's work is based on "anti-Hollywood" expression. Feminist film

theory is based on a critical narrative of Classical Hollywood, and in the eyes of early feminist filmmakers, the Classical Hollywood narrative was a “patriarchal” narrative. (Song, S, 2017)

The major difference between Varda’s work and that of other feminist films is that while most feminist films focus on the dismantling of male power (patriarchy), Varda is thinking about the reconstruction of the female self. She does not want to leave out the male and tries to focus on the establishment of the female spiritual self and the assumption of her destiny within the unproblematic relationship of equality with the male and the spiritual support of the women as they rebuild their selves. Supporting each other in the reconstruction of the self.

Women are often typecast in classical Hollywood films as a symbol, a vacant role, and a product of social construction. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that the image of femininity has been defined by social needs and imaginings represented by male-centered patriarchy. Women’s appearance, image, and personality invoke deeper social needs and are demanded and moulded into patterns of gender inequality. Women are thus defined by the claims of both human and female identities and are assigned different social needs and images at different times, thus losing their sense of self and free power.

As a result, the female characters in Varda’s films are richer and more three-dimensional than those in other films of the same period, and the female body is no longer the bearer and maker of meaning but becomes the central character of the story. Varda’s work not only influenced the New Wave’s creative concepts but also greatly extended the creative position of female directors. Varda’s distinctive and unique viewpoint on women’s cinema has become a genuine cinematic point of view, transcending gender, and the “women’s point of view” has become the exclusive label of Varda’s films.

Varda herself has also said that she is not an extreme feminist radical and that she stresses that women should conceive and shoot their films in their way, so you can find her films exploring feminism and switching to an objective point of view at the same time.

### 1.1 Background to the Study and Film Synopsis

*One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* is a feature film written by Varda in 1977. The film tells the story of Suzanne, a pregnant single mother, and his

vivacious friend Pauline as they move from youth to middle age. Varda’s portrayal of two very different women in *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* use an interactive structure to tell the story of their lives from the 1960s to the 1970s, exploring the power and image of women, with “singing” and “not singing” actually signifying the “singing” and “not singing” of women’s lives. “Singing” and “not singing” actually signify “voicing” and “not voicing”. (Zhang, J, & Cui, Y, 2015)

### 1.2 Progress of Research at Home and Abroad

At present, the research on the film in domestic academic circles is mostly based on the study of Varda’s feminist works and the study of Varda herself, and no scholars have made a comprehensive and systematic interpretation of the film for the time being. An Yanxin, in “An Inquiry into the Feminist Characteristics of Agnès Varda’s Dramatic Films”, argues that *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* is one of Varda’s feminist masterpieces, in which he focuses on the reconstruction of women’s spirit and mutual support among women. Chai Xiaoyan, the author of “A Study of Agnès Varda’s Cinema in the Perspective of ‘Body’ Theory”, analyses the two protagonists of *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* from the perspective of the construction of geographical space and argues that women’s bodies collide with each other in different geographical spaces and that women’s consciousness and identity also change with the constant changes of women’s bodies, and that female consciousness and identity are reawakened and reconstructed with the constant changes in the female body. Overseas scholars have studied the film in greater depth and from multiple angles. Most of the early studies considered that the film lacked dramatic tension in its narrative and that its story structure was not coherent enough, while at the same time, they acknowledged the political spirit contained in the film. More recent studies have disparaged its stylistic integrity while sometimes rejecting its politically charged content; Delphine Bénézet and Kate Ince apply contemporary phenomenological film theory to their analysis of *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*, praising the film’s political ethos while still criticising its narrative flaws. Ruth Hottell and Alison Smith find the film’s Marvellian reading of the challenges of the male gaze compelling, but there is no analysis of the specific political engagement of the women in the film. Rebecca DeRoo’s article ‘Confronting

Contradictions: Genre Subversion' and Feminist Politics in Agnès Varda's *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* use Brechtian theory for its reading, arguing that the plot of *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* challenges idealised heterosexual couples, and argues that Varda's use of Brechtian theory use adds an aesthetic dimension to the ongoing feminist debate.

### 1.3 Research Methodology and Content

"Implicit process" is a theory proposed by Professor Shen Dan in "Theoretical Innovation Beyond the Aristotelian Tradition of Narrative Studies – "Implicit Process" and Dual Narrative Processes." The "hidden process" refers to the narrative undercurrent that runs side by side with the plot development, and both of them complement or subvert each other in various ways. The theory of "hidden process" originates from the rearranging of the so-called uncategorisable "words" in the textual world, and appropriately identifies the narrative undercurrents that run alongside the plot development, further broadening the boundaries of the textual world. Shen Dan points out that in past research, linguistics, and literary criticism have failed to focus on the different meanings of words in different narrative processes. If we can re-understand the stylistic meanings (the thematic meanings of language in the narrative process), we can explore the other meanings of the works, which will also help to create complex characters and enrich the meaning of the literary works, and thus go beyond the previous literary research. Previous interpretative frameworks, theoretical concepts, and critical modes have been constructed based on a single narrative process, such as plot development, and thus severely constrained reading horizons, leading to blindness to the hidden processes in many works. To discover and explain the hidden process, it is necessary not only to break the constraints of the long-term critical tradition but also to expand the relevant theoretical framework and research model. (Lv, Z, 2022)

In this paper, we will analyse the narrative structure of *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* from the perspective of feminism, applying Beauvoir's feminist theory and Shendan's theory of "implicit process" to the characters of Pauline and Suzanne, and the same time, relate it to the background of Varda's creation, and analyse Varda's creation of women. At the same time, the feminist characteristics of Varda's creation and

the characteristics of her works are analysed concerning the background of Varda's creation, to sort out and analyse the hidden contents under the surface plot of *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*.

## 2. French New Wave Cinema and Feminism

Feminism in film theory is defined as an important aspect of feminist thought in the field of film theory and criticism. It mainly refers to the new feminism, also known as the second women's liberation movement, which emerged in Europe and the United States at the end of the 1960s. Especially after the May Storm in France in 1968, feminists demanded a fourth demand – gender equality – on top of the original three demands of political, economic, and professional equality, thus forming a formal confrontation with the whole patriarchal society. As a result, the field of literary criticism in Europe and the United States also began to be divided into two areas, one is the stage of female aesthetics and the other is the stage of gender aesthetics, the former with a unisexual and mainly male aesthetics of the viewpoint of the subjective perspective of the discourse, to deny women's subjective awareness of the aesthetics of gender and the ability to take the initiative. The latter, on the other hand, develops from a mere analysis of women's images in texts to an analysis of women's gender representations, beginning a post-structuralist phase of analysis that questions the subject of language and the nature of representation. The two phases in literature are also an extremely distinct watershed in the art of cinema, where the development of feminist theory laid the foundation for feminist film studies.

In the 1970s, feminist perspectives gradually appeared in film theory, mainly in the form of analyses of film plots and character images, as a way to criticise the idea of male-centredness in a patriarchal society and to reflect on the current situation of a gender-unequal society, as well as the oppression of women. (Li, M. & Wang, Y, 2022)

The New Wave's idea of "rebellion" was a perfect vehicle for feminism, and many films centred on women emerged during the New Wave period, for the first time placing women in the active position of "watching" rather than "being watched". For the first time, women were placed in the active position of "watching" rather than the subordinate position of "being

watched". "By arguing that the universal values to which women should subscribe are essentially male values, Beauvoir does not question patriarchal civilisation as a whole; whereas Sisu is committed to destroying logocentricity and phallogocentric, including the false universalism that favours men alone, through the promotion of women's values" (Luan, H., 2019), says Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir repeatedly emphasises the overarching premise that both women and men are human beings, arguing that the notion of difference overly highlights the specificity of women and leads to social discrimination and gender stratification.

*One Sings, the Other Doesn't* was written in 1977 when the second women's liberation movement was already taking the world by storm. As a result of World War II and the May Storm (1968), French feminists found that although women's endeavours to fight for equality in the political and economic spheres had achieved obvious results, the unequal status of women in social life had not been fundamentally improved. However, with the rise of the second wave of feminism, it became a fact that women were employed in large numbers and were no longer a point of contention. People began to focus on how women could balance family and work, and whether women should imitate the male lifestyle or turn to a new one of their own. This paradoxical situation prompted the French feminists of the time to think deeply and develop a unique theory of feminism: one that favoured equal rights over privileges. The aim was for women to win back their right to freedom and independence, which belonged to the human race as a whole, so that society would no longer define women by external criteria, such as family and children, but by the criteria of human beings, their achievements and values. And to reach this goal, firstly, the real differences between the sexes must be respected, and secondly, women must make themselves independent, both mentally and economically.

Influenced by the second wave of feminism, Varda's works at this stage (*One Sings, the Other Doesn't*) show strong qualities of "women's independence", including but not limited to the heroine Pauline's formation of her band and Suzanne's creation of a family management centre, they all break away from the traditional image of women as "housewives" and "good wives and mothers", and gradually transform

into "professional women".

Both physically and mentally, they demanded 'autonomy': Suzanne dared to defy the 'abortion ban' of the time and take responsibility for her own body, while Pauline repeatedly called for 'My body is my own' in her songs. My body is my own

Whether I'm a virgin or a whore

Whether I'm a lady or a slut

Whether I am worshipped or denigrated.'

The development and influence of French feminism in the 1970s were continuous and widespread, and compared to the first and third waves, the second wave was even more significant as a catalyst, highlighting its important place in history. Therefore, the development of feminism in the 1970s went deep into the field of cinema, and various feminist film theories, feminist film groups, and magazines also emerged, and cinema became an important position for feminist discourse, and the image of women on the screen, women's discourses, and women's directing became the hot topics of feminist research.

### 3. Two-Line Alternating Narrative Approach

Varda said, "The problem that cinema must solve is the narrative approach, not the story." In her films, narrative structure is one of the important expressions of film language, and a number of her films reflect her innovation of film structure, such as *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, which adopts the two-line alternating narrative method. (Song, S, 2017) The dual-line alternating narrative contains two distinct narrative threads, which appear alternately, with no obvious primary and secondary, and with almost equal narrative weight, together constructing the narrative space of the film. Although two clues are presented in the narrative process, there is a point of intersection between them. The dual-clue story creates a relationship of illumination in the narrative structure, which strengthens the themes hidden in the different narrative lines. In addition, the double-clue story makes the text richer, in a way, the two stories are puzzles and riddles for each other, leading the audience to decipher and reflect on the theme in the interweaving and collision. In *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, Agnès Varda portrays two very different women, boldly adopting the technique of cross-montage and using an interactive story structure to tell

the lives of two people from 1960 to 1970s, exploring the power and image of women.

### 3.1 *The Composition of Explicit Two-Line Narrative Threads*

Pauline and Suzanne form two threads of the film within the threads of each other's destinies. The contrast between their birth backgrounds, personalities, and destinies forms the contrast between the two threads. "Singing" and "not singing" are given multiple meanings, and Varda tries to emphasise the two trajectories of women's destinies of different backgrounds and identities through their destinies. One of the two clues is the intertwining of their fates in the plot, and the other is the dilution of time in the editing technique.

#### 3.1.1 Plot Interaction

In terms of plot, the two clues are connected at the beginning, while Paulina is still in the state of women being moulded, Susan completes the practice of free love ahead of time, which gives Paulina incentives. Suzanne encounters a situation where she is not free to procreate, and gets help from Paulina. Afterward, Paulina recognises the reality of sadness that needs to be changed in the excitement of helping Suzanne to have an abortion and witnessing Jerome's death. Suzanne also gets Paulina's help and attachment again and again, especially during the ten or so years she spends alone in the countryside with two children in lonely life water from a faraway place becomes the spiritual support, allowing her to slowly reinvent her female self. In this sense, the two clues create an intrinsic connection, a kind of interconnection and correlation of destinies. The two protagonists experience different destinies, but in the end, both of them have their happiness through self-improvement: one of them walks and sings alone with her child, while the other one lives in peace with her husband and child.

Varda tries to elaborate her definition of women's happiness with a bilinear structure, which is also a differentiation from radical feminism; the pursuit of gender equality does not mean absolute fairness, no reproduction, and refusal of marriage, but rather, women can choose their ideals, work, reproduction, and marriage, and define their content of happiness.

#### 3.1.2 Dilution of the Concept of Time in Editing

The grasp of time in French "New Wave" films is firstly based on the realism of the narrative

mode. In the handling of the narrative time display, French "New Wave" films have downplayed the concept of time and jumped out of the traditional linear mode of questioning, and have constantly made use of the unconventional non-linear mode of questioning. The French "New Wave" films downplayed the concept of time in their presentation of narrative time, and instead broke away from the traditional linear mode of questioning and constantly pursued the unconventional non-linear time, forming a special style of control over narrative time based on the aesthetics of pursuing true reproduction. The New Wave films downplayed the linear narrative of time in traditional cinema and the inherent patterns of traditional narratives, attempting to dissolve and reinterpret time and make a stylised interpretation of it. (Marcel-Gabriel, 2006) This is one of the characteristics of the New Wave film narrative time. Varda cuts the story into sections according to time and uses various techniques such as jump cuts, flashbacks, and interludes to reshape the surface of the story, thus blurring the timeline and the content of the story, and presenting the surface of childish innocence, friendship, freedom, and love, which are full of romanticism, and thus letting people neglect the realism and rationality of politics, rights, equality, and gender behind the framework of the story.

### 4. Revolt Against "Classical Hollywood" Films

The formation of the mature Hollywood industrial system to a certain extent brought the art of cinema to an impasse, not only for Hollywood but also for French cinema at that time, which was gradually moving towards the stereotypical situation brought about by extreme commercialisation. New Wave cinema was often revolutionary and experimental, so it became one of the attempts of New Wave cinema to resist the commercialisation of Hollywood films through formal exploration.

#### 4.1 *Anti-Patriarchal Narrative Content and Perspective*

The iconic moment when the film industry became overtly patriarchal and male-dominated was the creation of the classical Hollywood film industry. The birth of such a structure was accompanied by the establishment of patriarchal values. As Classical Hollywood gradually developed its monopoly, the reality of gender

oppression intensified.

In Classical Hollywood films, the male figure is always the active, saving, powerful, power-holding subject, while the female figure is always the beautiful, sexy, naïve, weak, passive Other. Laura Mulvey says in *VISUAL PLEASURE AND NARRATIVE CINEMA*: “Women are bearers of meaning, not creators.” This view recognises the ‘otherness’ of women and suggests that women have always been on the passive side of patriarchal society, influenced and conditioned by men. According to Laura Mulvey, the female character in classical Hollywood is undoubtedly a projection of male desire. The voyeuristic male imagination of women is reflected on the screen. (Mulvey, L, 1975) And this image has undoubtedly become a stereotypical role in the stereotypical Hollywood film-making process. This has led to the erasure of women’s faces in the real world, and women have existed on the screen not as women, but as “non-men”, as a visual spectacle, or as an imagination of desire.

The women in Varda’s film are resolute, while the men are also evasive and cowardly. This is in self-evident contrast to the stereotypical characterisation of “classical Hollywood cinema”. Amid the patriarchal film system, she constantly seeks women’s unique expression, and integrates the life experiences accumulated from women’s history into her stories and characters, *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* describe the trajectory of two women’s lives. In her descriptions, the women constantly reconstruct themselves during failures and live tenaciously amid fate and reality. Instead of being hysterical in the face of difficulties, they are always able to use wisdom and rationality to face life’s injustices and misfortunes. This makes women on the screen no longer reduced to a spectacle, on the contrary, they have a real texture and mastered the discourse of the narrative. The construction of such characters comes from the women’s own identity. Both Suzanne and Pauline do not denigrate themselves as “non-male” losers, in other words, the Freudian inferiority complex has disappeared from their bodies. In other words, there is no Freudian inferiority complex in them. They love themselves as women and their lives and identities as women.

Women’s film theory explores the sexism of women in film. This sexism focuses on the idea that men are the default narrative perspective in

the language of cinema, that the female perspective is missing, and that the female figure is gazed at by men in the film.

In *One Sing, the Other Doesn’t*, the male gaze is accomplished by borrowing cameras and photographs, and this gaze is a kind of attention that men regard women as the objects of their love. Jerome gazes at Suzanne in pain with a camera, but Jerome is finally overwhelmed by the burden of life and the pain of looking at Suzanne directly and chooses to hang himself under the heavy mental pressure. Suzanne, despite her pain, never gives up on the seriousness of her life, and it is the gaze of the Navy doctor that brings Suzanne back to her passion for love. Pauline also took a set of photographs under Jerome’s gaze that he was not satisfied with because she did not show the emotion that Jerome wished for — “pain”, which is the same as that of the photographs of Suzanne’s life. “Pain”, which is a reflection of Pauline’s strength of character and her resistance to the condescending male gaze. On the boat to the abortion, Pauline is also photographed by a male photographer, and instead of feeling angry or horrified like the female characters in “classic Hollywood” films, she calmly states that she should have laughed at the time, and eventually even buys the photo as a souvenir.

This “anti-classical Hollywood” style of expression has a lot to do with Varda’s feminist stance. Because feminist film theory is based on a critique of classical Hollywood. The early feminist filmmakers saw the classical Hollywood narrative as a patriarchal one. Therefore, finding the unique expression of the female director was the burden of being a feminist filmmaker. For Varda, she is not only exploring an anti-patriarchal narrative, but also attempting to use a woman’s perspective to reproduce the image of women, respond to the problems faced by women, and construct a woman’s identity.

French feminism not only deliberately ignores the confrontation between men and women, but even aspires to work with men to deal with the fatalistic sorrows of life. (An, Y, 2016) Pauline follows her Iranian boyfriend and marries him in his home, where geographical and cultural differences force them to part temporarily, and in the end, both she and Suzanne find their lovers to live with. Varda, however, is thinking about the reconstruction of the female self, trying to pay more attention to the

establishment of the female spiritual self and the assumption of her destiny in the unproblematic relationship of equality with men, as well as the spiritual support among women in reconstructing their selves.

#### 4.2 *The Construction of the Image of "The Voice" and "The Silent"*

In the film, Pauline is a middle-class girl who aspires to be a singer at the age of 17, and bravely fights against her traditional and conservative family, choosing to leave school and start her career as a singer. The verb to sing has a double definition for her, one is to refer to her ideals, which is to imply that she is a vocalist in the whole film, and the other is to face the reality that women are deprived of freedom and power in front of her, from the beginning of her rebellion against the traditional female destiny to the subsequent singing for the women in other societies, at this time, Pauline's singing has changed into an artistic way of women's shouting, which represents the women's opposition to the traditional social rules that deprive women of their right to reproductive freedom. It represents women's opposition to the traditional rules of society that deprive women of their right to reproductive freedom, and it is also a cry of women trying to fight for their power. Pauline becomes a godmother, and her song is her message to wake up women who are in deep pain. The song is free and female, a feminist idea that Agnès Varda wanted to convey through Pauline throughout the film to echo the women's liberation movement that was raging in France in the 1960s and 1970s, and which spawned a series of uses in the film such as contrasts, strings, and metaphors.

Suzanne, on the other hand, represents a kind of moth-eaten female character, the silent one and the one forced to awaken. They start as silent vases who compromise for others, and then, after their ordeal, are forced to become awakened when they can't take it anymore. In the first half of the film, the weakness of women is presented as Suzanne sacrifices herself for love and never says no to Jerome. Despite Jerome's inability to provide for her son Suzanne materially and spiritually, Suzanne is still unwilling to give up. Therefore, when Jerome is unable to bear the mental burden and chooses to commit suicide, Suzanne's spiritual world completely collapses. However, at the beginning of the awakening, she was more concerned about her children and her own life, and could

not guarantee, and thus began to say no. Until Susan gained the economic freedom to be able to support the child, she began to look more at the feelings of the self, when the appearance of the married doctor, after ten years of self-consciousness awakening, Susan learned to make rational choices, when he did not for the reality of not for a moment of goodwill decisively rejected the doctor's courtship, Susan's female consciousness is completely set up, and the changes that happened to her are also portrayed by Varda, competent short hair, convenient comfortable dress, a steady income, a career she is willing to work for and a mind that is comfortable in solitude. After the doctor's divorce, Susan accepts him, and the two independent, rational people stand the test of love together. Through Susan's awakening, Varda tries to emphasise the importance of female self-awareness.

### 5. **The Embodiment of Reality and the Setting of Hidden Processes in the Film**

#### 5.1 *The Embodiment of Reality in the Film*

In Varda's films, "realism" is one of her most important characteristics. Inspired by André Bazin's theory of realist cinema, realism has become an important backbone of Varda's films. Varda adds a unique personal artistic style to her perception of reality — "sensibility is by no means the opposite of rationality" — so that her films are not only simple reproductions of reality but also add more thoughts and understanding. Her films are not only simple reproductions of reality but also include more thinking and understanding. As André Bazin puts it, Varda's "film writing" is full of freedom and nature. There is no deliberate emphasis on dramatic conflict, nor is there a tendency towards aestheticism, Varda just gently reproduces life in people's eyes. This also makes Varda's film greatly exceed the narrative itself, even beyond the traditional sense of the film itself. This kind of transcendence is not similar to Godard's breakthrough of film itself from the inside out, but a brand-new path. Varda's uniqueness lies in the fact that she strives to explore and search, feel, and experience in her films, and sensibly demonstrates the critical thinking that an intellectual should have. The language of the camera in *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* is calm and matter-of-fact, building up the film's expression with a prose-like structure. Pauline seems to epitomise Varda. Agnès Varda herself was involved in all the feminist

movements that appear in the film. Like the “rebellious” girl Pauline, she fought fiercely for women’s rights, for the legalisation of abortion, signed the famous “343 Sluts Manifesto” drafted by Beauvoir, and even secretly opened an abortion centre to help more women. She even secretly opened an abortion centre to help more women. There is no doubt that the French feminist movement of the last century had an important intellectual impact on Varda. In *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*, Varda reproduced the faces of women that had long been hidden. She filmed nudity and breastfeeding without reservation and portrayed women’s lives in every detail, just as the famous feminist director Chantal Akerman said, “It’s because I love them that I want to film their lives as fully as possible, in more detail and more often.” This creates a coincidental effect with *One Sing, the Other Doesn’t*. In Varda’s narrative, women are no longer illusory and weak, as they are on the classical Hollywood screen, but are gentle and resolute, full of wisdom. In other words, in Varda’s film, women stand in the position of the subject rather than a distant, imagined “other”. In the film, Pauline and her band sing a lot of humorous and touching songs, the lyrics of which are all written by Varda. Through Pauline’s gentle singing, she is expressing her love for women and her thoughts based on feminism.

### 5.2 The Hidden Process of the Film: The Struggle for Abortion Rights

The struggle for abortion rights is one of the concrete manifestations of the French women’s movement. Although the theme of abortion was not introduced to French cinema by Varda, she not only subverts the social narrative of abortion in *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*, but also explicitly participates in the historical struggle for contraception and abortion rights.

Since Aristotle in ancient Greece, the narrative studies community has focused on plot development. Professor Shen Dan names the narrative process that is self-contained, constitutes another independent narrative process, runs alongside the plot development from the beginning to the end, and forms a contrasting, complementary, or antagonistic and subversive relationship with the plot development in terms of thematic significance, characterisation, and aesthetic value, as the “implicit process”. The hidden narrative under the surface narrative process constitutes the

intersection of text and reality, and becomes an effective channel from form to society and history. In “Theoretical Innovation Beyond the Aristotelian Tradition of Narrative Research: “Hidden Process” and Dual Narrative Processes,” Professor Shen Dan suggests that dual narrative dynamics may also exist in media other than the written word and that when reading works in other media, it is also necessary to explore whether there are hidden processes behind the development of the plot. Both Pauline, who “sings,” and Suzanne, who “doesn’t sing,” are projections of Varda’s ideas, and both represent Varda’s struggle for abortion rights. *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* is set from 1962 to 1976, and underneath the apparent storyline, each of the time points in the story is arranged to correspond to the French women’s struggle for the right to abortion. According to the process of storytelling, I correspond the epiphenomenal story to the implicit process:

#### 5.2.1 1962

Suzanne is unexpectedly pregnant with her third child and is unable to support it, so she has no choice but to leave France and travel to Switzerland to have an abortion. The hidden content behind this is precisely the fact that in a predominantly Catholic country such as France at the time, abortion was seen as a violation of patriarchal and marital rights, which was not only illegal at the time, but was even considered a crime against the state. At that time, French women who wanted to have an abortion could only go to an informal place to get one.

#### 5.2.2 1964-1965

Life was initially difficult for Suzanne when she returned to the countryside. After Suzanne went to work in a toy factory, she taught herself how to type and her living conditions improved. This is not only an expression of Suzanne’s endeavour to make a living, what is not explicitly stated is the reform law on the institution of marriage enacted in 1965. The reformed law allowed women to freely pursue professional activities without regard to their husbands’ opinions. At the same time, the law allowed women to open bank accounts in their name and to have their checkbook (posséder un chéquier), i.e., they were free to dispose of their property.

This is why Suzanne was able to earn her living by going to work in a factory.

#### 5.2.3 1971

Pauline is in Holland, on a cruise ship in Amsterdam, with many abortion women, calmly waiting for what is going to happen (abortion). Because abortion was still illegal in France, women could only get abortions in Holland, and Pauline sings: "Under the bridge in Amsterdam, on a cruise ship in Holland, we've been hurt by love, these aborted women, on a little steamer, disappearing dream. Looking out over the passing cars, we laughed about the pills we had talked about, the love we had lost, our bodies and our eggs." This reference is an allusion to Simone de Beauvoir's "343 Slut Manifesto", published in 1971 in the influential publication *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Manifeste des 343 salopes (Manifesto of the 343 Salopes). In the manifesto, 343 women from all walks of French society defy self-deprecation as "sluts" and risk criminal prosecution to fight for the legal right to abortion for French women. Among the 343 women who signed the petition was Varda herself. Thus, Varda's lyrics, written in Pauline's voice, express her answers to questions about the impossibility of abortion in a dignified manner, the vulnerable position in marriage, the womb expropriated by patriarchal power, the collision of ideals and love, and so on.

#### 5.2.4 1972

Reunited at the trial of the 16-year-old aborted girl, Pauline rises high above the crowd and sings "Our bodies belong to us", while Suzanne petitions the crowd but is denied access because it was a "closed trial". Varda goes on to map their relationship onto the important events of the French women's struggle for abortion rights at the time and intertwines this experience with political history. What is superficial here to express the different attitudes of the two men in their dealings is in the implicit process an important point in the French women's struggle for the right to abortion: the 'Procès de Bobigny', a section that also expresses Varda's moderate, but firm, feminist stance. One of the strongest pieces of evidence confirming this is the appearance of Gisèle Halimi. Since the 19th century, French women have been fighting the regime and anti-abortion society for the right to abortion. It wasn't until the 1970s that the women's abortion rights movement took on a new phase. (Oliver-Powell, M, 2020) Gisèle Halimi in the film makes a cameo appearance as herself. As an icon of French feminism, she was the only lawyer to sign the 343 Sluts Manifesto, and later Gisèle Halimi, along with Simone de

Beauvoir and Jean Rostand, founded the "Choose Women's Cause". In 1972, a famous trial (Procès de Bobigny) took place in the French commune of Bobigny. The mother was fined and sentenced to imprisonment for arranging an abortion for her daughter, who had been raped and impregnated. The trial involved five women: a minor who had an abortion after being raped and four other adult women who assisted in the abortion, including the girl's mother. Gisèle Halimi, acting as a lawyer for the women accused of illegal abortion, led to the acquittal of three of the defendants (permet l'acquiescement de trois) and the suspension of the sentence of a fourth defendant (des accusées ainsi qu'un sursis pour la quatrième). Subsequently, she also promoted the introduction of the 1975 Veil law on voluntary interruption of pregnancy (la loi Veil sur l'interruption volontaire de grossesse).

#### 5.2.5 1974-1976

Pauline and Suzanne separate again to pursue their own lives, Suzanne with the Navy doctor, living peacefully with the many children in the orphanage, Pauline through a failed marriage, "escaping" from the archaic, oppressive Iran and touring alone with her children and her band, Pauline and Suzanne. Pauline's songs not only decry the miserable fate of women after marriage, where the pregnant woman has to take care of the children and do the housework while the man just sits in a chair and reads the newspaper, but she sings, "Angelus said that in the family nowadays, the man is the proletariat and the woman is the proletariat". Here Varda cites Engels' analysis of the division of labour between domestic and industrial work. This analysis was widely cited by feminists in the 1970s (Nicholson, 1986, p. 39) as it combined issues of gender and social class to understand women's oppression. In dialogue with contemporary feminist discussions, Varda examined women's productive labour in the workplace and society Pauline was exploited both in the factory and at home, but she had less power in the home. This is because she is not paid or recognised at home. This vignette provides a footnote to the larger narrative, illustrating the familial responsibilities Pauline and Suzanne are expected to take on. (DeRoo, R, 2009) Later on, the content of Pauline's songs begins to shift towards a focus on the female body, such as pregnancy and breasts: "How exquisite is the female body, how beautiful is the

great belly, the body forged in fire, body, and soul, the quiet body with its deep beauty” but also reveals only praise of the body rather than finding itself in the specific sexual experience between women. But it was only a celebration of the body, not a way of finding her liberation in the specific sexual experience between women. One of the reasons for her transformation was the adoption of the 1975 Veil Law on voluntary interruption of pregnancy, which was made possible by the speech of Simone Veil, then Minister of Health of France, to the National Assembly on 26 November 1974, which led to the adoption of the Law on Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy (La légalisation de l’interruption volontaire de grossesse/grossesse). Volontaire de grossesse/IVG was passed.

It was only after the passage of the Loi Veil that abortion was legalised and no longer a crime for women to have abortions. Since then, the loi Veil has been continuously improved and amended, and women have been able to enjoy more and more rights in terms of their bodily rights. (Jean-Yves Le Naour & Catherine Valenti, 2012)

## 6. Conclusion

From the perspective of feminism, this paper applies Beauvoir’s theory of feminism and Shen Dan’s theory of “hidden process”, and analyses the feminist characteristics of Varda’s creation and the characteristics of her works by using the characters of Pauline and Suzanne. In the meantime, this paper connects with Varda’s creative background, in order to organise and analyse what is hidden under the surface plot of *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*. *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* adopts a two-line alternating narrative method in its narrative structure. Varda’s reluctance to provide a single solution to the feminist issue reflects her refusal to adopt a single narrative thread or to resolve the story skillfully with a happy, simple ending, but rather, she wishes to give an answer that will make the audience think about the answer. Rebecca DeRoo, in *Confronting Contradictions: Genre Subversion and Feminist Politics in Agnès Varda’s One Sing, the Other Doesn’t*, suggests that the film’s most important achievement is to trigger a braided debate on topics such as birth control and abortion in single-parent families. DeRoo, R (2009) suggesting that despite the legal progress of women’s right to abortion in France, fuelled by the women’s liberation movement, these issues are still in need of scrutiny and reflection, and even further social change.

*One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*, as an “anti-classical Hollywood” film, makes a bold attempt to rebel against the traditional male gaze: the camera appears as a vehicle representing the male gaze, and the person holding the camera (the cameraman in the film) is the one who holds it. The camera appears as a vehicle for the male gaze, while the cameraman (Jerome, the photographer in the film) is arranged to hang himself in the studio. At the same time, through the realistic portrayal of women, Varda breaks the stereotype of “classical Hollywood” in which women are soft and submissive.

As a feminist, Varda’s protests are never silent. The “hidden process” that exists underneath the surface, superficial and straightforward narrative content is more worthy of attention and analysis. In her films, she has always maintained a fierce attitude. The slices and microcosms of social reality in her films are wrapped up in bright colours and light-hearted storytelling, and people tend to be confused by these appearances and naturally refuse to accept the judgement that the works of a childlike woman contain deeper thoughts than those of a male author. Although Varda’s films are full of romanticism, such as childlike innocence, fun, love, romance, and friendship, behind the framework of the stories are the realism and rationality of politics, rights, equality, and gender, which are more worthwhile for the viewers to understand and think about.

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