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“I wanted to approach the curation from a position of abundance”: Wanda and Beyond curator Elena Gorfinkel on her season around one-feature filmmaker Barbara Loden

North Carolina native Barbara Loden only made one feature, but that film – Wanda – has endured as a lodestar for feminist filmmakers. We speak to Elena Gorfinkel, curator of a new BFI season about Loden, who explains how her study of Loden’s life and work inspired a wealth of programming.

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By [Rachel Pronger](#)

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How do you plan a retrospective around a filmmaker with a limited body of work? This question lies at the heart of [Wanda and Beyond: The World of Barbara Loden](#), a new season screening at BFI Southbank this June. Many fans of feminist and US independent cinema will have heard of Wanda, a low budget 1970 US indie road movie, and the sole directorial feature of actor turned filmmaker Barbara Loden. A loose, semi-improvised story of an aimless divorcee who drifts into the orbit of an unstable bank robber, on the surface Wanda is a modest proposition. But the film has acquired a special status over the decades and is now celebrated as a cult classic and a lodestar of feminist filmmaking.

The case for screening Wanda is clear, but for Wanda and Beyond season curator Elena Gorfinkel, there’s a wider story here than one standout feature. Gorfinkel, a film scholar and critic, has been watching and rewatching Wanda for 20 years. In the process of writing a new [BFI Film Classic](#) book about the film, she uncovered an abundance of material that challenged some of the assumptions surrounding Loden, whose death in 1980, at the age of 48 years old, cut her filmmaking career short.

“There’s this discourse of lack that circulates around Loden, which comes from the fact that she made an ‘only’ feature,” says Gorfinkel. “Yet when I was researching, I came across so much material attesting to Loden’s historical presence and so many ways of thinking with and alongside the film. I wanted to approach the curation from a position of abundance and to counter the idea that one couldn’t stage a programme around Loden because she had ‘too little’ work.”

Wanda (1970)



Drawing on this spirit of abundance, Wanda and Beyond offers a refreshing approach, which reframes Loden’s minimal filmography as a portal into a wider cinematic cosmos, a constellation of films that speak to and overlap with Wanda’s production and afterlife. A focus on Loden’s career as a Hollywood actor, and screenings of her educational shorts, offer wider perspective on the filmmaker, while a strand exploring other “mad housewives and wayward women” of 1970s cinema gives social and political context to Loden’s proto-feminist anti-heroine. Elsewhere, the season examines the classic cinema that influenced Loden, and traces her later influence on filmmakers such as Nina Menkes and Kelly Reichardt. And, of course, at the season’s centre lies Wanda, its singular, dazzling star.

In this interview Gorfinkel discusses the challenges of curating the season, the fascination surrounding Wanda, and Loden’s cinematic legacy.

When did you first encounter Wanda?

I first saw Wanda 20 years ago. I was writing about 1960s sex films, so I was gathering work about gender and sexuality from that period. I watched Wanda on a bootleg that I bought off the internet. Shortly afterwards, I read Bérénice Reynaud’s essay [“For Wanda”, in *The Last Great American Picture Show*], so my encounter with Wanda was mediated by the voices of other feminist scholars and thinkers.

At that time, I had just begun teaching a course on women directors, so I began to show the bootleg to my students. I was really struck by how bracing, surprising and powerful Wanda is, how modern it feels, partly because of its smallness. Here was this person who was just trying to express themselves in a distinct way. As I continued teaching Wanda, over the years, I was always carrying the film with me. Its images leave this indelible mark.

Why do you think Wanda is so deeply loved (and fetishised) compared with other landmark women-authored films?

I don’t think it’s entirely treated differently. There’s fetishisation too of, for instance, Agnès Varda, but because she’s so prolific it’s different, a kind of meme-ification or cardboard-cutout-ification. But there is a specificity to Loden’s biographical narrative and how it gets affixed to Wanda. As different generations have re-encountered the film, there’s been a lamination of Loden on to the character of Wanda. That collapse is troubling, but it’s also part of the reason why the film holds this potent charge.

Loden died young, and Wanda captures something about the injustices women face when they attempt to make work within the inhospitable structures of mainstream film industry. Loden has become an emblem for other women who couldn’t make work or whose work was unfinished. Also there’s the fact that Loden stood both before and behind the camera. She was a beautiful, glamorous figure, with a relationship to Hollywood via her relationship with Elia Kazan [Loden’s second husband]. All these factors play into it.

Then there’s film itself, which is perfect in many ways. With the season I wanted to argue that Wanda constitutes an entire world, that a single film can present a whole constellation or cosmos. The brilliance of Wanda is also bound up in the film’s narrative. It’s the story of a woman who, as Bérénice Reynaud says, “could be Barbara Loden, or you or me”. There’s also a very tantalising dimension to the “what if?”, this counterfactual question: what if Loden was able to make more work? What if is intoxicating, but it’s also melancholy. Loden didn’t necessarily see herself as mediated only through her death. She was making and trying to make work her entire life. That tension is something the book and the season addresses.



Wanda (1970)

Wanda was once difficult to access and screen, but is now widely available. How straightforward was it to access other, lesser known films that are part of the season?

Loden’s [16mm short educational films](#), *The Frontier Experience* and *The Boy Who Liked Deer*, are an important case in point. They are original of a project that I’m working on with restorationist Ross Lipman. The original negatives appear to be lost, but because these were classroom films, a lot of worn prints are in circulation. The ideal would be to make restored prints of these films, but it’s difficult without the original negatives. Lipman will be speaking about the work he has done so far on digital upgrading of prints, [at the symposium](#).

The shorts raise questions about how film culture values “minor works”. Wanda has been legitimised, but these films are easier to discount. Yet I think it’s important to look at this area of “useful films”, where women filmmakers were making work in the 1970s, not just Loden but also contemporaries like Joan Micklin Silver. One can imagine that in many classrooms in America, there was a point when someone was watching a Loden film without knowing it. This is a different way of thinking about encounters with women’s cinema that are neglected, but which raise important questions about what kinds of film culture is valued.

How do you think Wanda’s influence has resonated across cinema history?

The question of influence is hard to pin down, but I do think it’s productive to trace affinities. With the strand entitled [All The Wandas](#), I wanted to imagine who the contemporary inheritors might be of Loden’s ethos and aesthetic. That led me to filmmakers who may or may not have been aware of Loden, but who I think are in dialogue, overtly or not, with her legacy.

Part of Wanda’s enduring brilliance is how it speaks to modes of making and aesthetic strategies that continue into the present. We see this, for instance, in Nina Menkes’s [Queen of Diamonds](#), which, like Wanda, engages with endurance and with a refusal of the capitalist exploitation of ordinary women. Kelly Reichardt’s [River of Grass](#) offers a similar genre-scrambling to Wanda in its approach to the outlaw couple narrative. There’s also the recent ascendance of the “difficult” in films like Cristina Álvarez López and Daughter Martin talk about. We see this in works like Maggie Gyllenhaal’s *The Lost Daughter* and Lynne Ramsay’s *Morvern Callar*, or in Claudia von Alemann’s *Blind Spot*, which is about a woman who abandons her family to chase the traces of a French socialist feminist. Loden’s legacy moves in many directions. I am less interested in suggesting a one-to-one relationship, and more about where the glimmers of Loden’s imagination lead the audience. That’s the real premise of the season.

[Wanda and Beyond: The World of Barbara Loden](#) is at BFI Southbank until 29 June

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