



## Dear Barbara Loden: Reconsidering *Wanda*

Sadia Quraeshi Shepard, Film Studies, Wesleyan University, United States, [sshepard@wesleyan.edu](mailto:sshepard@wesleyan.edu)

---

Faced with the limited opportunities available to tell a complex story of an aging, working-class character within the Hollywood system, filmmaker Barbara Loden made her directorial debut at thirty-eight years old with *Wanda* (1970), a microbudget, neorealist portrait of a woman from a rural mining area who leaves her husband and children to drift precariously on the margins of society. Through an imagined letter to Barbara Loden, "Dear Barbara Loden: Reconsidering *Wanda*" explores Loden's directorial choices to reevaluate her singular work as a writer, director, and actor.

---





### Creator's Statement

As an undergraduate film student in the 1990s, I first encountered Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970) in discussions of the many hurdles female directors faced in the prior generation, particularly as they aged. I learned that the list of American films directed by women and released theatrically in the 1970s was short and burned bright: Elaine May's *A New Leaf* (1971) and *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972), Claudia Weill's *Girlfriends* (1978), Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1975), and Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970) are a few notable examples. As Maya Montañez Smukler notes in *Liberating Hollywood*, barely 1 in 200 movies rated by the Motion Picture Association between 1970 and 1978 were directed by women. In this climate, finding support to make feature films and to create a sustainable career proved almost impossible for most female directors of the period. Many, like Barbara Loden, would struggle to secure financing after directing their first film. Despite the critical acclaim it received in Europe, *Wanda* was unable to find distribution and went on to screen only a handful of times in the United States between 1970 and 1980, when Loden died of breast cancer in her late 40s. That Loden was the second wife of celebrated Hollywood director Elia Kazan made her career trajectory even more remarkable. As a young woman, I recall feeling struck by the fact

that in the 1970s, an award-winning female director with contacts in the film industry could not get a second feature financed in her 40s. Since that time, my fascination with *Wanda*, and Barbara Loden's choices as a director, has grown, and provides the impetus for "Dear Barbara Loden: Reconsidering *Wanda*."

In this video essay, I draw inspiration from films that use the conceit of letters as voice-over, including Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977), and Nicholas Pereda's *Querida Chantal* (2021). In addressing Loden in an imagined, unanswerable letter, I aim to create a speculative, one-sided conversation which asks the viewer to observe and engage with Loden's formal choices as a filmmaker. As in *Querida Chantal*, in which the viewer is aware that the late Chantal Akerman cannot respond to Pereda's cinematic letter, my epistolary address aims to highlight Loden's absence from the ongoing discourse surrounding *Wanda*. I argue that Loden's interest in collapsing the lines between fact and fiction—creating a character with whom she shared biographical traits, employing improvised dialogue, embodying a nearly affectless performance style, and shooting the film in 16mm color reversal—signaled her emerging cinematic voice as a filmmaker while paradoxically causing critics and scholars to assume that Loden's directorial choices were circumstantial or accidental.

*Wanda*, a working-class character who leaves her husband and children to drift precariously on the margins of society, was a surprising choice of subject matter for Loden, an actor best known for smaller roles in Kazan's films *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and *Wild River* (1960). As a first-time writer/director, Loden rejected the visual tropes of Hollywood storytelling to explore the stark realities of an aging woman's life in mining country with gritty realism. "I really hate slick pictures," Loden told *The New York Times*, during the film's brief theatrical run in New York. "They're too perfect to be believable. I don't mean just in the look. I mean in the rhythm, in the cutting, the music—everything. The slicker the technique is, the slicker the content becomes, until everything turns into Formica, including the people." While *Wanda* is compared frequently with *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), my video essay proposes that Loden's film has less in common with Penn's than it does with observational documentaries of the period. Describing the comparisons with *Bonnie and Clyde* to Ruby Melton in *Film Journal* in 1971, Loden said: "I didn't care for (it) because it was unrealistic and it glamorized the characters[.] People like that would never get into those situations or lead that kind of life—they were too beautiful[.] *Wanda* is anti-*Bonnie and Clyde*." Seeking a collaborator who understood the creative possibilities of a handheld 16mm camera and small crew, Loden chose Nicholas T. Proferes as her cinematographer and editor, in part because of his experience working on 16mm documentaries, including Richard Leacock's

*Crisis* (1963) and D.A. Pennebaker's *Monterey Pop* (1968). By filming on 16mm Kodak Ektachrome ECB film stock with mostly available light, Loden and Proferes were able to shoot with a high ratio, follow the spontaneous movements of actors in real locations, and push the ASA where necessary, resulting in an improvisatory, often grainy look. In the scene from *Wanda* with which I draw a parallel to Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976), we see Wanda walking through a working coal mine and speaking informally with an older man, presumably a non-actor encountered on location. Letting the improvised action inform the composition and duration of each shot, Proferes keeps the shot wide, which allows him to capture the conversation from a comfortable distance and stay alert to possible changes. Similarly, the use of long takes echoes the observational documentary strategies of Maysles, Pennebaker, Kopple, et al. Notably, *Wanda's* visual approach differs dramatically from any film that Loden had been a part of previously or would work on again.

As scholars and fans have observed, the similarities between Loden and Wanda are unmistakable. Both hail from rural, economically depressed areas where their survival is dependent mainly on their ability to fulfill prescribed roles for women that society dictates for them. Both are aging out of the roles they have played in their lives until this point. Both are "directed" by strong, older men. In her book *Suite for Barbara Loden*, Nathalie Léger interweaves biography, film analysis, and Léger's research process to trace the biography of Loden, the making of *Wanda*, and the author's search to understand both. In Léger's close reading of *Wanda*, she details Loden's creative process, in which she "was trying to invent a character as close as possible to herself, using another woman's life as a template." As Léger points out, regarding Wanda's character, Loden drew a line between herself and the role: "Until I was 30, I had no identity of my own." And yet, characterizing *Wanda* as the strictly autobiographical project of a female director approaching midlife does not adequately reflect the complexity of Loden's achievement as a filmmaker. Marguerite Duras, in a conversation with Kazan after Loden's passing, said: "I think that there is a miracle in *Wanda*. Usually there is a distance between the visual representation and the text, as well as the subject and the action. Here this distance is completely nullified; there is an instant and permanent continuity between Barbara Loden and *Wanda*." In response, Kazan suggested to Duras that Loden understood her character intimately because, like Wanda, she shared the character's need for a male protector: "I will say that most women in our society are familiar with this, understand this, need this, but are not honest enough to say it. And she was saying it sadly." While Kazan commends the candor of Loden's approach, he reifies the idea that she and Wanda are one and the same. As Isabelle Labrouillère argues: "Kazan's comments mobilise a reading matrix destined

not so much to measure Wanda by the yardstick of Loden, but Loden by the yardstick of Wanda.” While Loden’s marriage to Kazan played a deeply significant role in her work and life, in this video essay, I have chosen to focus on reassessing and reevaluating her work on its own terms, primarily using footage from *Wanda* to do so, as well as placing the film in conversation with Loden’s other roles and other films of the period.

In 1970, *Wanda* premiered at the Venice Film Festival and won the International Critics’ Prize, followed by a brief theatrical run in New York. While the idea of perceived continuity between Loden as writer/director and Loden as star in her own film was one for which the film was lauded in Europe, in the United States *Wanda*’s reception was decidedly more mixed. U.S. critics, including Pauline Kael, Rex Reed, and Robert Greenspun, simultaneously expressed admiration for the realism of the film and Loden’s performance and seemed intent on passing judgment on the character of Wanda, whom Reed and Kael referred to as a “slut” in their reviews. According to Kael: “Wanda is a real depressant—a stringy-haired rag mop. That makes her a sort of un-protagonist; generally you’d have to have something stirring in you to make you that unhappy, but she’s so dumb that we can’t tell what has made her miserable.” It is a credit to the believability of Loden’s performance that critics, audiences, and fans seem unwilling or unable to recognize Loden and Wanda as distinct entities. And yet, in so doing, Loden’s identity as a filmmaker is eclipsed by the misperception that she is the character instead of an emerging artist making considered formal choices.

Because Loden died of breast cancer at 48 years old, not much is known about her creative process, and we can only speculate about the career she might have had in her 50s and beyond. Loden and Proferes reportedly collaborated on several more screenplays after *Wanda*’s release, but they were unable to secure financing to make another feature film. As Léger describes in her book, Barbara’s “closest professional associate,” presumably Proferes, refused her interview request and there was very little information available to piece together the story of *Wanda*’s creation. In her research process Léger learned that twenty-five boxes of archival material exist, but she was unable to gain access to see them. At present, no institution holds the papers of Barbara Loden, and few traces of Loden exist in The Elia Kazan Collection at Wesleyan University’s Reid Cinema Archive. In 1971, film scholar Jeanine Basinger, founder of Wesleyan’s Film Studies department and Cinema Archive, invited Loden and Kazan to campus where *Wanda* opened the Wesleyan Women’s Film Festival. Basinger warmly remembers Loden introducing the film and answering student questions—one of the film’s few screenings in the United States after its brief theatrical run. What remains of Barbara Loden’s legacy in the public record are a handful of interviews that Loden

gave in the early 1970s, interviews after her death with Proferes and Elia Kazan, and analyses and commentary on *Wanda* by some of the film's most ardent admirers, including Marguerite Duras, Bérénice Reynaud, and Isabelle Huppert. In an interview in *Sight and Sound* in 2015, Huppert speculated that Loden's film, and *Wanda*'s reliance on men, was symbolic: "And that's one reason why the film is so moving: it reflects Loden's own very sad destiny. It feels like a scream of someone just about surviving." In this video essay, my aim is to speak into the vacuum left by Loden's rejection by the film industry and her untimely death.

Virtually unseen for decades, *Wanda* was initially released on DVD in France by Huppert in 2004, restored by the UCLA Film and Television Archive in 2007, and acquired for rerelease by The Criterion Collection in 2018. Preservationist Ross Lippman's restoration from the original film rolls revealed that *Wanda*'s aspect ratio was 1:33:1, not the 1.66:1 of a pre-restoration U.S. DVD release, and filmed in "stunning color," in a color palette perhaps not seen since Loden and Proferes first reviewed their dailies. As Loden described to Ruby Melton: "Unless you have your own laboratory, it's difficult to control the quality of the color. In our original print the color looked extremely good, but later prints made by different labs were not such good quality." Restored to match Loden and Proferes' intentions, and now accessible to a wider audience, in the last several years *Wanda* has generated unprecedented levels of interest. In 2022 *Wanda* was voted #48 on *Sight and Sound*'s Greatest Films of All Time poll, the first time it has made the list. In addition, *Wanda* has been the subject of new writing and scholarship, including work by Léger, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, Kate Zambreno, Elena Gorfinkel, and Anna Backman Rogers, who describes how "*Wanda*, as an encounter between spectator and screen, engenders an affectively political cinematic community." As Gorfinkel suggests, "Feminist cinephiles seek the filmmaker Barbara Loden in the ephemera of her existence, in the traces of her image, charting signs of the *Wanda* to come in the Loden before *Wanda*." As I have researched *Wanda* and developed this video essay, I have noted with interest how much of recent scholarship and creative work about the film includes the presence of the author, as if the inscrutability of the film's protagonist, and a perceived autobiographical connection between Loden and *Wanda*, invites self-reflexivity. With this video essay, I join *Wanda*'s "cinematic community," combining images and sounds from Loden's film, her performances in *The Ernie Kovacs Show* and Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass*, other films of the period, and my analysis, to investigate and reexamine her directorial approach. "Dear Barbara Loden: Reconsidering *Wanda*" emerges from my interest in how Loden and the character of *Wanda* have been conflated, and my desire to engage with Loden's film in a way that acknowledges my complicity in this misunderstanding and considers the film anew.

## References

- Andrew, Geoff. "Interview with Isabelle Huppert." *Sight and Sound*, October 5, 2013.
- Álvarez López, Cristina & Adrian Martin, "*Wanda (Barbara Loden, USA, 1970)*," *Film Critic: Adrian Martin*, March–April 2016 (Updated January 2019; March 2019).
- Backman Rogers, Anna. *Still Life: Notes on Barbara Loden's Wanda (1970)*. Punctum Books, 19–20
- Basinger, Jeanine. Personal interview with the author. September 15, 2021.
- British Film Institute, "*The Greatest Films of All Time*." December 6, 2022.
- Duras, Marguerite and Elia Kazan. "*A Conversation on Wanda by Barbara Loden*." *Comparative Cinema* 4.8(2016): 12–13.
- Gorfinkel, Elena. "Wanda's Slowness: Enduring Insignificance." in *On Women's Films: Across Worlds and Generations*, eds. Ivonne Marguiles and Jeremi Szaniawski, Bloomsbury, 2019: 29.
- Greenspun, Robert. "Young Wife Fulfills Herself as a Robber." *The New York Times*, March 1, 1971.
- Kael, Pauline. "Eric Rohmer's Refinement." *The New Yorker*, March 12, 1971: 136.
- Kazan, Elia. *Elia Kazan: A Life*. Alfred A Knopf, 1985.
- Labrouillère, Isabelle. "*Barbara Loden's Recovered Voice: From Wanda's Mutism to 'Pensiveness'*," *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, October 5, 2023.
- Léger, Nathalie. *Suite for Barbara Loden*. Dorothy, A Publishing Project, 2016.
- Lippman, Ross. "*Defogging Wanda*." *The Film Foundation*, March 25, 2019.
- Montañez Smukler, Maya. *Liberating Hollywood*. Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Phillips, McCandlish. "Barbara Loden Speaks of the World of *Wanda*." *The New York Times*, March 11, 1971: 32.
- Reed, Rex. "Watch Out for Barbara's *Wanda*." *The Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1971: 52.
- Reynaud, Bérénice. "*For Wanda*." *Senses of Cinema* 22, October 2002.
- Taubin, Amy. "*Wanda: A Miracle*." *Criterion.com*, March 19, 2019.
- Taylor, Kate. "Driven by Fierce Visions of Independence." *The New York Times*, August 27, 2010.

## Biography

Sadia Quraeshi Shepard is a filmmaker, writer, and Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Wesleyan University. Her documentary films have screened at the Sundance Film Festival, LA Independent Film Festival, and others. Her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Kenyon Review*, and other publications. Her video essay "Shadow Self: On Agnès Varda's *Documenteur*" is forthcoming in *ASAP/J*.

### Review by Eva Álvarez-Vázquez, University of Massachusetts Amherst

In this epistolary video essay, Shepard reads a letter to Barbara Loden, presenting her research in a way that involves the audience in her process, discoveries, and personal reflections. Unlike other (love) letters to Loden (Bergeson 2020) or to *Wanda* (Chloe 2018), which function as any other review, this letter-video-essay speaks directly to Loden—not to Wanda. This is precisely the point from which the video departs, with Shepard’s confession to a Loden who will never be able to respond: like previous critics, she too mistakenly conflated Loden with the character she created in *Wanda* (1970).

“I have underestimated you as a director,” says Shepard, proceeding to elaborate on why she is reevaluating *Wanda* and the decisions Loden made as director, writer, and actor of her only film, while also introducing other media objects that serve as metaphors, comparisons, and anti-comparisons. And what better way to approach this task than through the video essay? Shepard engages with a transgressive film through a transgressive critical language that creatively combines explanatory narration with film images that, though already saying much on their own, gain additional depth and an emotional and intimate nuance through the author’s epistolary voice.

At the critical point in her reconsideration, Shepard revisits the scene at the beginning of the film where Wanda leaves her life behind, as a small white dot disappearing into the vastness of the dark coalfields. This allows the author to share some thoughts that underscore the complexity of this long and monotonous scene, mainly by providing further insights into Loden’s life. Like Shepard, I am also drawn to this scene when reflecting on *Wanda*. Like Wanda, I too come from a coal country where opportunities for women (and, post-deindustrialization, for any young person) have historically been limited. And, like Loden, my origins also inspire my work and shape my thoughts throughout this scene and the film as a whole. *Wanda* embodies some aspects of Loden, of Wanda, me, and many other women. This video essay goes beyond the Wanda-Loden metonymy to reconsider and vindicate Loden’s contributions as an artist. And ultimately, while we continue to watch Wanda disappear into the coal mountains, it opens a space that invites the audience to also (re)consider *Wanda*.

### References

- Bergeson, Hailey. “[She is WANDA: A Love Letter to Barbara Loden](#),” in *Merry-Go-Round-Magazine*, September 1, 2020.
- Chloe, Christina. “[A Love Letter to Wanda](#),” in *Talkhouse*, August 6, 2018.



### Review by Libertad Gills, Università della Svizzera italiana

The past decade has seen the slow but steady increase in academic and artistic interest in the enigmatic filmmaker and actress Barbara Loden and her first and only feature-length film. As Adrian Martin and Cristina Álvarez López document in their review of the Blu-ray release of *Wanda* in 2019, it took far too long for Loden to begin to get the recognition that she deserved. In fact, the film print, which was found by chance in 2007, restored by Ross Lipman of the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and released in 2010, had to wait nine years for a Criterion Blu-ray release. For a long time, Bérénice Reynaud's "For Wanda" published in *The Last Great American Picture Show* (1995) was the only text available on the film. Then in 2015 Martin and Álvarez López published an article in the academic journal *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema* reconsidering Loden's work within a particular continuum of female actor-directors, as well as a video essay titled "Woman in a Landscape: Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970)" for *Fandor* in 2016. Published in 2016, Nathalie Léger's book *Suite for Barbara Loden* is a mix of novel, biography, and criticism inspired by *Wanda*. In 2018, Elena Gorfinkel published a chapter on *Wanda* in the book *On Women's Films: Across Worlds and Generations*. The 2019 Blu-ray was accompanied by an article written by critic Amy Taubin and 2022 saw the publication of the book *Still Life: Notes on Barbara Loden's Wanda (1970)* by Anna Backman Rogers. In 2022, three years after the Blu-ray release, *Wanda* finally made *Sight and Sound's* *Greatest Films of All Times* list at number 48.

Sadia Quraeshi Shepard's "Dear Barbara Loden: Reconsidering *Wanda*" is the latest contribution to this growing scholarship. She approaches *Wanda* and Loden like many of the critics and scholars before her: with both fascination and intrigue. But Shepard is also careful about a potential danger in the reason for her curiosity. Structured as an imagined letter to Loden in a first-person voice-over narrated by Shepard herself, the video essay begins with a confession. She, like so many others before her, has conflated Loden's character in *Wanda* with Loden herself. "I have underestimated you," Shepard admits. After a pause, she adds, "as a filmmaker." With this misunderstanding out of the way (or at least made transparent), the author sets out to affirm Loden as a filmmaker. She uses split and multiple screens, screen swipes, and zooms into and out of frames, to draw attention to Loden's particular directing style and to compare *Wanda* to Barbara Kopple's observational documentary *Harlan County USA* (1976). In one especially striking sequence, using multiple screens to show four simultaneous shots from the film, Shepard focuses on *Wanda's* meagre belongings: her curlers, handbag, and wallet containing photos of her husband and children. What is the fate, she asks, of a woman who owns almost nothing? *Wanda*, concludes Shepard, "is a film about loss, lack, denial, refusal ... it's a story of passivity as an act of survival." Through this video essay we come

to understand Wanda not as an isolated figure in an arbitrary landscape, but rather as a woman outlier who refuses to conform to an alienating U.S. society, loses everything as a result, and whose very passivity (why Kael called her an “un-protagonist”) makes her, well, a protagonist.

And yet even after recognizing Loden’s contributions as a director, Shepard admits to conflating these two women once again, a confusion which in the end she accepts as “inevitable.” Even if this merging may potentially reduce Loden, it is also an inevitable assumption about a director who died too young and who was unable (for lack of support) to make a second film. That the filmmaker/actress and character can be conflated has preoccupied critics concerned that doing so would be an injustice to Barbara Loden as a “serious” filmmaker. “Dear Barbara Loden” suggests that the fact that this has occurred is proof of Loden’s abilities as a filmmaker to effectively navigate fiction and documentary and where these two meet, blur, blend, and finally become one.

Shepard’s video essay digs into images from *Wanda*, searching for hidden meaning. In the two-minute scene of Wanda walking and about which Loden said that she wanted to show that it took a long time to get from there to there, the author finds an expression of Loden’s artistic determination. After all, this is also what video essayists do: we dig into specific scenes, shots, gestures, with the tools available on the editing table, looking for an idea, a clue, an invisible trace. Perhaps the inevitable conflation of the two women is due to the incredible screen presence of Loden herself whose minimalist performance leaves space for the viewer’s imagination. For this reason alone, *Wanda* is a wonderful and enigmatic subject for the video essay form. Shepard’s one-sided epistolary video opens scholarly and artistic avenues to continue to explore the elusive, expansive, and shifting place that *Wanda* holds for audiences today

## References

Álvarez López, Cristina & Adrian Martin, “*Wanda (Barbara Loden, USA, 1970)*,” *Film Critic: Adrian Martin*, March–April 2016 (Updated January 2019; March 2019).

---

