

History of Art and Architecture Lecture

Unhappily Ever After: Visual Irony and Feminist Strategy in Agnes Varda's *Happiness*

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Friday, February 17, 2012

3:00 PM

Room 202 Frick Fine Arts



Although Agnes Varda is recognized as an early avatar of feminist filmmaking, her 1965 film *Happiness* remains a misunderstood work, frequently criticized for its ostensibly anti-feminist message. This lecture excavates specific sources of imagery from French women's magazines that idealized the daily drudgery of the housewife and explains how Varda applied this imagery to her characters to challenge feminine ideals. This lecture shows that *Happiness* expands visually and thematically on two influential texts: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). As a director making feminist films in an unreceptive climate, Varda employed a sophisticated strategy of visual irony in *Happiness* that disputes the film's narrative and traditional notions of domestic harmony. We can thus discern new depths in postwar feminism and appreciate Varda's contribution to a complex, trans-Atlantic dialogue about the structure of domestic life.