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Cléo from 5 to 7: Agnès Varda's Landmark 1962 Film

The phrase "ahead of one's time" is one of the most widely used in the English language, often applied to artists—people whose vision of the world, in whatever medium, is believed to belong to a future time rather than their own. Such is the case with *Cléo from 5 to 7*, the first feature-length film by Left Bank auteur Agnès Varda. Released in the United States in 1962, it has been hailed, as film critic Adrian Martin writes, as "way, way before its time, already a complex 'postfeminist' portrait of a woman." Judging from the handful of American film reviews available from the time of its release, this assertion is correct: reviewers reacted to *Cléo* with indifference at best and hostility at worst, with only one—notably, Pauline Kael, one of the few female critics of the time—exhibiting a positive view of the film. Other American reviewers were clearly confounded by *Cléo*, failing to grasp either its thematic or artistic elements. After its initial release, a quarter-century would pass before anyone in the U.S. reconsidered it in depth.

Cléo was much more positively received in France than in the U.S., where second-wave feminism was still nascent and where film still, for the most part, reflected traditional gender roles and cinematographic techniques. For purposes of this essay, only English-language reviews and articles will be discussed.

It is disappointing to this writer that the only positive contemporary review of the film is a two-sentence encapsulation in *Films of the Quarter*, in which Kael describes *Cléo* as, "of recent film experiences, the most difficult to communicate to others; they will see it as banal and chichi. But, if I may steal from *Madame de*, I think it's only 'superficially superficial.'" In contrast, Kael's male counterparts, most notably Stanley Kauffmann, saw only artifice disguised as art. Writing for the *New Republic*, Kauffmann was particularly scathing, introducing the film thus: "An advertisement for a correspondence school of authorship begins: 'How do you know you can't write?' Well, for that matter, How Do You Know You Can't Be A New-Wave Director? Have you tried? Follow these simple steps and be the first in your gang to make an art movie" (28). He then proceeds to enumerate the steps one must take in order to do so, titling the fourth "Lay it on":

> "It" is the New Wave repertoire of stunts, camera techniques and cutting. Examples: Use freakish faces for minor characters (this is candor). Use a little nudeness (this is maturity). Include long walks through a city, preferably Paris; just long, pointless walks to show that you are as free of plot contrivances as Antonioni. Dwell on such *bizarrerie* as street performers who swallow and regurgitate live frogs or who push hat-pins through their biceps (this shows how ugly life is and how you are facing it). Let your microphone record snatches of irrelevant conversations at neighboring café tables (this wraps your story in a naturalistic web). Retain the footage where passers-by stare into the camera (thus you prove that you "stole" your film from the street and that you wear your *rue* with a difference). Do not omit Resnais backward jumps (cutting back to a moment just passed), as this expresses a mystique about time. Have your heroine sing a torch song, Judy Garlanded with *Angst*. And if you can work in some silent-film burlesque, à la Malle, you will demonstrate both your superiority to and your respect for early movies. (28)

What is stunning about this passage is that Kauffmann—who has written for the *New Republic* since 1958, and still contributes to the magazine at age 96—takes note of many of the most striking elements in *Cléo* while utterly failing to understand what they represent. The review would be humorous had it not been written by a top film critic; given that it was, this writer can only wonder how many viewers' perceptions of the film were irreconcilably altered by Kauffmann's caustic assessment. For example, how many lost out, as it were, on the silent-film references?

While a number of the critics and scholars cited in this essay acknowledge Varda's homage to the past, only two modern-day ones—Martin and Molly Haskell, both writing for the Criterion Collection—recognize the inspiration for Cléo's and Antoine's ride through the city. As Martin explains, "The quiet energy that passes between Cléo and Antoine on a streetcar near the end of the story could well be Varda's re-creation of the classic moment of love reborn between a husband and wife, traveling on a tramcar, in F.W. Murnau's masterpiece *Sunrise* (1927)—a reminder of a film loved by the French critics of the fifties, those same cinephiles who would become the new wave." Similarly, only one scholar—Elizabeth Anthony, in a superb

1988 essay—chooses to deconstruct the silent film Cléo and Dorothée see, and explain that it is much more than a whimsical nod to the past:

> The first part of the film recounts a tragic story about a man whose female companion dies from a sudden fall. He watches the incident from a nearby bridge. After the hearse whisks his companion away, the man takes off his dark sunglasses only to realize that they had made everything seem dark. All that is black turns white, and the narrative sequence is replayed, only this time, there is a happy ending. The actors' rapid movements and gestures suggest that this is a sped-up rendition of Cléo's story.

The sequence plays with the idea of film negatives in both the literal and figurative senses. The film-within-a-film is a "negative" of Cléo's story in that it truthfully mirrors the narrative, but black and white have been reversed: in the silent film "all that is black turns white," whereas in Cléo's story she divests herself of the white negligée—her false image—for the black sheath in which her real self will emerge. In addition, the sequence plays with Jean-Luc Godard's real-life affinity for always wearing dark glasses; like Cléo post-negligée, Godard post-dark-glasses sees the world in a whole new light. The interplay of darkness and light is integral to the film's vision, as expressed in its turning point—the musical rehearsal where, as Cléo sings the *Cri d'amour*, she perceives the trappings of her superficial life falling away from her person, and finds herself singing alone in the dark.

Of course, Cléo is not really singing alone in the dark; the darkness illustrates her emotional state. In similar fashion, both the conversation with the fortune teller and the film-within-the-film illustrate the narrative in condensed form, showing the arc of Cléo's emotional growth long before the viewer reaches the "end" of the film—which an astute observer will note ends at 6:30, not 7. Varda's plays on time and timeframes were entirely ignored by contemporary American reviewers, who did not recognize their intricacy and vital importance to the plot. As David Sterritt explains in a 2010 review of Steven Ungar's *Cléo de 5 à 7*, "As she waits for the test results… Cleo wants both to hasten time, wishing for certainty about her condition, and to slow time, because when the news comes it might be grim. The film reflects this double impulse by playing measured time and subjective time against each other like contrasting waves from a metronome and a violin, as Varda described the effect she was after."

At the time of its release, American critics were either perplexed or outright offended by Varda's cinematographic choices. Crowther wrote them off as "a fair example of the slick techniques of the French New Wave," before asserting that they pulled the viewer away from the story: "Generally, Mlle. Varda is so absorbed with her camera stunts, as she is in that scene in the hat shop or when she is screening that comedy short, that the essential concentration on the heroine is neglected and the interest lost. The character becomes incidental to the techniques by which it is being explained." Kauffmann opined that "the avant-garde trappings disguise nothing; it is Irving Berlin orchestrated by Stravinsky" (29). Even *Time*, which described the film as "a curiously, spuriously brilliant attempt to contemporize the legend of Death and the Maiden," somewhat derisively referred to the cinematography as "imaginative, if sometimes cute."

As with virtually all other aspects of the film, one must look to more recent critiques to understand Varda's choices. "While full of Nouvelle Vague trickery, [the cinematography] is never flippant or half-baked," Brannavan Gnanalingam wrote in 2009, "and perhaps this explains why the Left Bank filmmakers perhaps feel less dated than their counterparts." Martin goes further, explaining that "Varda has devoted a large part of her art to conveying not just what the physical world looks and sounds like but how it feels, how we process it internally in our mind, body, and heart"—a salient point that Anthony expounds upon:

> The use of jump-cuts, the periodic disengagement of sound and image, and the self-conscious or roving camera distance the spectator and make it difficult for him/her to forget that the film is a film. In this way, the spectator is invited to think and reflect upon the image of Cléo, as well as the images associated with her name. For instance, the name Cleopatra evokes a multitude of powerful notions: Egypt and the pyramids, the Nile, the sphinx, the barge, and the asp. She is a metaphor for feminine beauty, the woman's body, eroticism, passion, jealousy, and seduction.

Curiously, Anthony is the only reviewer or scholar who discusses the symbolism of names in the film. "Cléo—which is short for 'Cléopâtre'—severs her link with the Egyptian queen and becomes Flora, the goddess of flowers," she explains. "As her role shifts from 'fauna' to 'flora' Cléo's fears of withering and dying disappear. It is as if she discovers a new way to view time." The rich symbolism of her chosen name, and of her choice to reveal her given name of "Florence" to Antoine, is not lost on the soldier, who prefers her birth name: "Florence, c'est

Italie, Botticelli, la Renaissance, une rose," he tells her. "Cléopâtre, c'est Egypte, le sphinx, l'aspic, la tigresse… Moi je préfère la flore à la faune" (qtd. in Anthony).

It is interesting that Varda's main character chooses a different name for her public face, something Varda herself has done. In a 2009 essay, Stuart Klawans describes a poignant scene in her autobiographical film *The Beaches of Agnès*: "Varda scratches into the sand her original given name—Arlette—and watches the letters wash away." Given this fact, it is thought-provoking that in *Cléo* the least superficial people in the heroine's life, Dorothée and Antoine, are actually named after the actors who play them, Dorothée Blanck and Antoine Bourseiller.

And what about Angèle? Her role in Cléo's life has been interpreted in vastly different ways. In its 1962 review, *Time* describes her as "Cléo's manager, a hard-faced businesswoman who comforts her meticulously but unemotionally, as though smoothing a 500-franc note." In sharp contrast, in 2012 Roger Ebert characterized her as Cléo's maid. Anthony provides the clearest insight: "Although Cléo informs Madame Irma [the fortune teller] that Angèle, and not her mother, is a widow, Angèle is the only 'mother' in the film. Moreover, there is little doubt that she regards Cléo as her 'child.'" The latter is clearly evident in the first scene in Cléo's apartment, where the slightly older woman dotes on her. Writing in *Film Matters* in 2011, Emily Caulfield makes an astute observation: the "long shot of Cleo on the swing, slightly left of center, lines up exactly so that the pair of wings decorating the wall look as if they have sprouted from Cleo's back. Cleo is everyone's angel." The significance of the scene, where only Cléo and Angèle are present, is clear: the former may be everyone else's angel, but the latter, true to her name, is Cléo's angel.

While Cléo's relationship with Angèle appears to be the most misinterpreted in the film, her relationships with the other main characters are often misunderstood as well. Three of the four contemporary American reviews (examined by this writer) make the same fundamental mistake: they assume that Cléo's encounter with Antoine at film's end is the turning point in her life. "Eventually, while strolling sadly and alone through a peaceful park, she meets and talks with a poetic young soldier and is quickly soothed and reassured by him," Crowther opines. True to the mocking tone of the rest of his review, Kauffmann writes, "Towards the end she meets a soldier in the park and their compressed, months-in-a-minute romance burns with a hard, M-G-M-like flame." And McLaren concludes that the encounter changes not only Cléo's outlook, but

her entire being: “Then, as if you couldn’t guess, she meets a worthy man—a soldier—and is changed from a foolish trollop into a girl as full of charm and dignity as Dolly Madison.”

All of these critics credit Antoine, not Cléo herself, as the agent of change in Cléo’s life; in spectacularly sexist fashion, they fail to understand that the turning point for Cléo happens much earlier in the film—during the rehearsal session, when she sings the *Cri d’amour*—and that the subsequent change she undergoes is what enables her to connect with Antoine. To explore this idea further, we must once again look to modern analyses of the film. The scene “pivotal in the movie,” Caulfield writes, “is the moment when Cleo resists the gazes of those around her, after a very melodramatic and stylized performance in her loft.” “At this moment of insight,” Janice Mouton elaborates in a 2001 essay, “when Cléo recognizes that her femininity is indeed a masquerade, she literally propels herself out of herself—out of the false identity she has constructed and out of the room designed to reflect that identity—into a new world where her transformation begins.”

That the encounter with Antoine should have been viewed as the turning point for Cléo is most likely a function of the time in which the film was made. The modern women’s liberation movement was still emerging in the U.S., and “feminist film” was not yet recognized, much less critiqued. It is disheartening that even today, Varda is not nearly as well known as her male contemporaries. “Varda is [the] very soul [of the New Wave], and only the fact that she is a woman, I fear, prevented her from being routinely included with Godard, Truffaut, Resnais, Chabrol, Rivette, Rohmer, and for that matter her husband Jacques Demy,” Ebert wrote in August of this year. “The passage of time has been kinder to her films than some of theirs, and *Cléo from 5 to 7* plays today as startlingly modern.” It would be interesting to know if Kauffmann’s opinion of the film has changed in the last fifty years, considering his unfavorable comparison of Varda to her male colleagues: “Her [Cléo’s] behavior and the entire film seem almost a parody of the best things done by Truffaut, Godard, Resnais, [and] Chabrol,” he wrote in 1962 (29).

Given their apparent disdain of Varda as a girl playing in the boys’ club—someone whose work would not be worth addressing if not for her gender—it should perhaps come as no surprise that American critics also failed to credit Corinne Marchand for her performance as Cléo, or understand the pivotal role played by Blanck. “Nobody can deny that Miss Marchand is quite a dish, but whether her reactions to the portent of conceivable doom are worth our while is

quite another matter," McCarten wrote. Crowther inexplicably described her as "a large, ponderous blonde with an enameled and generally inexpressive face," while Kauffmann wrote only that she is "a voluptuous pop singer" (29). Of twenty reviews and articles read by this writer, only Ebert's addresses Marchand's acting. "The role is more difficult than it might appear, and Corinne Marchand better in it than she may have been credited for," he writes. "What she does here is as extraordinary in its own way as Anna Karina's unforgettable character in Godard's *My Life to Live*. It is tricky enough to play a sprite who skips lightly through life, but in doing that how do you communicate your awareness of mortality?"

Likewise, the essential role Dorothée plays in Cléo's life is completely overlooked in contemporary reviews of the film; one must look to later work for assessments of the character. As Anthony explains, Dorothée is both a literal and figurative model: "In Cléo's eyes, Dorothée seems to embody a more 'natural' type of femininity; she is at ease with her body and in her relationships with men." "Dorothée is by definition an object of the gaze, yet she is an object with a difference," Mouton adds. "'Oh,' she says when Cléo asks her about it, 'it's not me they see. It's a form, an idea.'" And film-music critic Royal S. Brown offers this piercing insight: "The final, long shot of Dorothée as Cléo watches her climb an outdoor stairway is accompanied on the music track by the piano accompaniment for the song 'Cri d'amour,' suggesting perhaps a depth of feeling between the two women that the film chooses not to further explore."

If American critics in 1962 were nearly oblivious to the symbolism in *Cléo*—from the film-within-the-film to the cinematography to the use of names—as well as the nature of Cléo's relationships with the people in her life, they were even more oblivious to the greater theme addressed in the film. Only *Time* touched upon it, but the magazine's reviewer remained unconvinced of both the film's central idea and its conclusion:

> And the fact of death in the midst of life is realized with horrible power in the image of the filthy cancer hidden in the glowing girl. But the film intends to show more than this. It intends to show a *crise de l'âme*, "a profound transformation of the being." It doesn't. For one thing, Actress Marchand's face is no more capable of transformation than a kewpie doll's. For another, Director Varda suddenly twists the heroine's harm into a happy ending which sentimentally suggests that every shroud has a silver lining.

Comparing Marchand to a kewpie doll, the critic implies that her subtle performance is unconvincing—does not carry the emotional heft of, perhaps, Audrey Hepburn's performance in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), another tale of female transformation, but one produced in Hollywood with Hollywood standards of story, acting, and photography. Furthermore, while he (this writer has, rather prejudicially, assumed that the critic is or was a "he") understands that the film's theme is "a profound transformation of the being," he mistakenly attributes that transformation to "the fact of death in the midst of life," instead of Cléo's newfound identity as subject instead of object. This is a grave mistake, for as Varda herself explains, "the whole dynamic of the film lies in showing this woman at the moment when she refuses to be this cliché, the moment when she no longer wants to be looked at, when she wants to do the looking herself. From the object of the look, she becomes the subject who looks" (qtd. in Anthony).

To understand how Cléo "becomes the subject who looks" one must, predictably, turn to modern-day evaluations of the film; contemporary American reviewers were entirely blind to this aspect of the story. *Time* did acknowledge that Cléo was "acclaimed in France as the most beautiful film ever made about Paris,'" and Varda once described it as "the portrait of a woman painted onto a documentary about Paris" (qtd. in Martin). Here, the filmmaker's background was instrumental in presenting a Paris radically different from the one filmgoers were accustomed to. As Eric Henderson explained in *Slant* in 2003, "Unlike her New Wave compatriots, whose talents were reared in part at film schools, Varda was trained in the field of photography and consequently films the city with a completely unique vision."

This "unique vision" is seamlessly carried over into the film's thematic elements as well. "Varda's photojournalistic instincts are apparent in the way she turns Paris into a hall of mirrors," Haskell writes in closing, "windows and faces that reflect the heroine back to herself. … Through an arresting use of Paris as both visual centerpiece and reflection of a woman's inner journey, Varda paints an enduring portrait of a woman's evolution from a shallow and superstitious child-woman to a person who can express shock and anguish and finally empathy. In the process, the director adroitly uses the camera's addiction to beautiful women's faces to subtly question the consequences of that fascination—on us, on them."

It would be easy to conclude, from examining American critics' reviews of *Cléo from 5 to 7* then and now, that Varda was the emissary of a time that postdated her film. But this conclusion would be both simplistic and facile. "No artist is ahead of his time," legendary dancer

and choreographer Martha Graham once said. “He is his time. It is just that others are behind the times.” This statement is strikingly true of *Cléo from 5 to 7*, a film that still “plays today as startlingly modern.” It is perhaps not surprising that Pauline Kael—like Agnès Varda, “the archetypal girl who crashed the big boys’ clubhouse” (Henderson)—was, in 1962, one of the few American critics who understood the film. Fifty years after its début, *Cléo* does not feel dated, in either theme or execution. It is a testament to Varda’s understanding of human nature—of the freedoms that have long eluded women, and of the roles they have long been forced to play—that her first feature-length film remains relevant in today’s society. And it is a testament to her craft that it still engages, surprises, and enthralls the viewer.

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