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To Desire Differently

Feminism and the French Cinema

Expanded Edition

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TEN

From *Déesse* to *Idée*: *Cleo From 5 to 7*

Strictly speaking, such women love only themselves with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. . . . The importance of this type of woman for the erotic life of mankind must be recognized as very great. Such women have the greatest fascination for men, not only for aesthetic reasons, since as a rule they are the most beautiful, but also because of certain interesting psychological constellations. It seems very evident that one person's narcissism has a great attraction for those others who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are seeking after object-love; the charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and the large beasts of prey.¹

THROUGH ITS CENTRAL PROBLEMATIC of woman-as-image, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), one of Varda's most interesting, accomplished, and beautiful films, offers a critical examination of reified categories and definitions of woman while proposing the necessary inscription of sociality in constructions of femininity. The film traces the process by which Cleo, the woman-as-spectacle, becomes transformed into an active social participant, rupturing the oppressive unity of identity and vision and appropriating the gaze for herself in a new appreciation of others in the world around her. In the course of the film's ninety-minute running time, and its two hour diegetic time, Cleo undergoes "a profound transformation of [her] entire being."² This transformation is intimately bound up with processes of self-reflection. But, whereas self-

reflection means narcissistic self-absorption in the first part of the film, it means self-recognition—mediated by an awareness of others—in the latter half.

The film concerns a pretty blond pop singer, Cleo Victoire, who passes two anxiety-ridden hours of a long summer day awaiting the results of a medical examination determining whether she has a possibly fatal illness. In Varda's words, *Cleo From 5 to 7* is "about a woman facing a great fear, and that fear makes her think about herself. She discovers that she is a little doll, manipulated by men, a little girl who makes no decisions, *who sees herself only through other people's eyes*. And in that hour and a half she starts to relate differently."³ Cleo's internal evolution from egoism to communication is thus formulated in terms of a visual problematic: she ceases to be an object, constructed by the looks of men, and assumes the power of vision, a subjective vision of her own.

Cleo's transformation hinges on the turn of a phrase: "How do I look?" This question, traditionally connoted as feminine, is displaced from its passive, objectified meaning ("How am I seen, how do I appear in the eyes of the world?") to its active complement ("How do I see, how is the world viewed by me?"). This shift is hinted at in a subtle yet engaging way fairly early in the film by means of a simple pun. As Cleo and her secretary-companion Angèle get into a taxi, a little repartee ensues:

Cleo: C'est une déesse, j'aime ça. [It's a "goddess," I like that.]

Driver: C'est pas une DS, c'est une ID. [It's not a DS, it's an ID.]

Angèle: Une idée comme une drôle d'idée? [An idea, like a funny idea?]

Driver: Oui, c'est ça. [Yep.]

The letters *DS* and *ID* refer to two different models of Citroën; Cleo and Angèle participate in a short play on words, a game which was, in fact, encouraged by the auto manufacturer at the time. But beyond the double entendre of sounds and initials, the significance of the words (*déesse*/goddess; *idée*/idea) predicts Cleo's emotional trajectory on that summer day. From an alluring female goddess, objectified in the eyes of men (her pianist prefaces a song with a musical paean: "Cléopâtre, je vous idolâtre" [I worship you]), to a reflective individual with a healthy curiosity (Cleo muses near the film's end, "I always have a question for everything. . . . Today, everything amazes me"), Cleo has made the journey from object to subject of vision. And, along the way, Varda has explored traditional conceptions of the woman's (self-) image in an analysis that underlines their social origins.

The textual process of the film traces Cleo's development in terms

of a movement from narcissistic containment to a burgeoning awareness of and empathy for others. Typically, Varda analyzes this movement along feminist lines, situating Cleo's crisis within the feminist problematic of the woman's image. In so doing, she interrogates the conventional notion of female beauty not by a radical contestation or an aggression on visual pleasure, but by dissecting this image into its constitutive parts, and by equating love with an acceptance of others—a turning away from the self (the antinarcissistic move) which dialecticizes the image of homoerotic unity. By examining the “narcissistic woman” as a construction, Varda begins the critical exploration into sexuality and femininity as transformable processes, thereby initiating a fundamental questioning of patriarchal definitions of woman.

The turning point of Cleo's transformation occurs during a song rehearsal session in which lyrics evoking absence, lack, and death force Cleo into a sudden recognition of her identity, a recognition concomitant with both a new social awareness and a rejection of established definitions of her. In fact, this sequence occurs at the exact temporal middle of the film, making it possible to trace Cleo's radical change through an analysis of the corresponding differences in each half of the film. The narrative is divided into chapters that delineate both the chronological time elapsed and the different characters' points of view; “they color the story, or rather the angle in which the portrait of Cleo is painted.”⁴ Thus in its very narrative structure, the film's format foregrounds the intersubjectivity of identity, revealing both the image and the self-image of Cleo as functions of vision. It is precisely Cleo's awareness of this that triggers her new understanding: “Caprice, caprice, that's all you say . . . but it's you who make me capricious. Soon I'll be an idiot, incapable, a talking doll. . . . You exploit me.”

The chapter headings themselves, which appear as titles in the film, provide an outline of Cleo's actions in the period between five and seven, at the same time that they sketch a revealing profile of her psychic and emotional growth:

- I. Cleo from 5:05 to 5:08
- II. Angèle from 5:08 to 5:13
- III. Cleo from 5:13 to 5:18
- IV. Angèle from 5:18 to 5:25
- V. Cleo from 5:25 to 5:31
- VI. Bob from 5:31 to 5:38
- VII. Cleo from 5:38 to 5:45
- VIII. Some others from 5:45 to 5:52
- IX. Dorothee from 5:52 to 6:00

X. Raoul from 6:00 to 6:04

XI. Cleo from 6:04 to 6:12

XII. Antoine from 6:12 to 6:15

XIII. Cleo and Antoine from 6:15 to 6:30

After a visit to a fortune-teller who confirms Cleo's fears by predicting that “profound transformation” (Varda labels this the film's “Prologue”),⁵ Cleo meets her secretary-companion, Angèle, in the Cafe Ça Va Ça Vient. Cleo and Angèle then stop in a hat shop on the rue de Rivoli, take a taxi across the Pont Neuf to Cleo's apartment on the rue Huyghens, and prepare for a rehearsal session. In her apartment Cleo receives, first, her lover José, then her composer (Bob) and lyricist (Plumitif); one song provokes Cleo's shock of recognition, and her outburst propels her into the Parisian streets, alone, newly contemplative, aware. She wanders through the Cafe Le Dôme, then visits her friend Dorothee at the Académie de Sculpture where Dorothee has just finished posing. They deliver a film to Raoul, Dorothee's lover (a projectionist), and after watching a short silent comedy, Cleo takes a cab to the Parc Montsouris. There she meets Antoine, a friendly, inquisitive soldier on leave who is about to return to the Algerian front. They establish a warm rapport, and he accompanies her to her doctor at the Salpêtrière hospital in exchange for her promise to see him off at the Gare de Lyon.

The disturbing song that Cleo sings in chapter VII is the pivot of the film's bifurcated textual structure. As such, it marks the turning point that permits the contrast between the chapters that precede and follow it. In the chapter titles leading up to this point, there is a strict alternation between Cleo and another character habitually present in Cleo's ordinary routine (either Angèle or Bob); the first chapter title that comes immediately after the song is called “Some Others”—the only title in the film not anchored to an individual character. In addition, Dorothee and Raoul are not a customary part of Cleo's daily existence, and Antoine is an entirely new character in her life. The strict alternation between Cleo and another person that characterizes the chapter headings of the first half of the film, a structure that makes Cleo a recurring reference point, is thus now replaced by a linear sequence—“Some Others,” “Dorothee,” “Raoul,” “Cleo,” and “Antoine.” Ultimately, the final chapter is entitled “Cleo and Antoine,” and is, significantly, the only chapter in the film designated by the names of two characters. Thus the chapter headings themselves trace Cleo's movement from self-absorbed isolation to intersubjective relations, and chart the redefinition of desire that it is the film's project to accomplish.

In the textual work of the film, the viewer is made to experience the

force of Cleo's transformation—from object to subject of desire—through the intersecting processes of narrativity, continuity, and identification. Thus, the cinematic depiction of Cleo changes as she assumes the power of a subjective vision; we see Cleo differently as she comes to see (things and others) differently herself. The first half of the film installs and reinforces a conventional, fetishized image of female beauty in ways that objectify Cleo as a spectacle for erotic contemplation. But as Cleo's new vision of herself and the world takes hold, her image is progressively inserted into a social context; at the same time that she is given the power of a subjective point of view, the latter half of the film portrays her as only one face in a multiple texture of human relations.

One of the most striking ways in which this transformation can be traced is through the contrasting functions of mirrors in the first and second halves of the film. Chapter I, appropriately identified as Cleo's (Varda calls it the "chapter of the tragic-doll"),⁶ initiates the fiction with the reassuring coherence of multiple reflections, asserting the importance of Cleo-as-image. As she leaves Irma the fortune-teller, Cleo pauses before a hallway mirror which, through a corresponding interplay of reflections, offers a seemingly infinite reiteration of her image (actually, the image is visibly repeated seven times). Then the spectator is made to participate even more strongly in the contemplation of Cleo's face when the camera zooms in on an unmediated close-up, the edges of the hallway mirror having disappeared. Confirming her identity as image, the spectacle of self, Cleo muses in voice-over: "Being ugly, that's what death is. As long as I'm beautiful, I'm alive, and ten times more than the others."

When Cleo enters the Cafe Ça Va Ça Vient, once again mirrors provide her with a unified image; faced with a distorting join in the mirror, she adjusts her position until the image in its totality satisfies her. Then, as she worries to Angèle about whether her fear is visible on her face, a further narcissistic reduplication occurs. Seated with her back to the cafe's mirrored wall, Cleo's image is repeated three times (the cafe itself is a hall of mirrors). In fact, the whole first portion of the film abounds with mirrors and other signifiers of narcissism. Cleo's self-absorbed display as she contemplates the purchase of a hat provides a further illustration of her association of beauty and existence. And her apartment, "a universe over which she presides like a queen,"⁷ is a fulminating world of the archetypal feminine. Mirrors, necklaces, feathers, flowers, and—most important—cats proliferate in this veritable panoply of masquerade, vanity, narcissism, and femininity. In chapter V, as Cleo prepares herself to receive José,

Varda's directions make this quite explicit: "She moves about on her bed, more feline than her cats, checks her beauty in the mirror, then smiles when she recognizes her lover's voice."⁸

Thus, at this point, mirrors offer Cleo a reassuring image of coherence, continually providing her with a sense of her own being. Identity and mirror image are firmly united, establishing Cleo's sense of her existence as synonymous with her beauty. And it is from this conception of female character as *image* that Varda begins to explore the parameters of constructions of the feminine. In the second half of the film—after Cleo's critical moment of recognition—the mirrors no longer provide her with this confirmed identity as beautiful object. The first mirror she encounters in her flight from the apartment is one whose surface is disturbed—it is traced with the painted Chinese letters of the Restaurant La Pagode. In a striking contrast to its counterpart, the multiple reflections in the fortune-teller's hallway, this mirror surrounds Cleo's image with the reflected images of other people on the street, offering rupture, dispersion, and fragmentation where unified repetitions had previously prevailed.

Cleo's thoughts on looking at this new reflection extend the contrast: "This doll's face, always the same. And this ridiculous hat. I can't even read my own fear on my face. I've always thought everyone was looking at me, and I only look at myself. It's tiring." Here at La Pagode the first images that greet her eyes are informed by this fresh vision, this heightened consciousness. As the camera moves in to Cleo's mirrored reflection, her face is caught among others in a literalization of the new social view of herself. This prefigures Cleo's final words of recognition and resolution, spoken to Antoine near the end of the film: "Today everything amazes me. The faces of people, and mine alongside them."

Perhaps even more emblematic in terms of Cleo's evolution from woman-as-spectacle to woman-as-social-being is the image that designates chapter XI—the fragmentary shards of a broken mirror. In the scenario, this chapter, the last belonging entirely to Cleo, is prefaced by Varda's description: "She is no longer the heroine of a melodrama, but a woman who is aware of her fear and who feels alone."⁹ As Cleo bends down toward the scattered pieces of a pocket mirror that Dorothee has accidentally broken, the only portion of her reflected face visible in these jagged fragments is her eye. This is the last image of a mirror to appear in the entire film; significantly, it announces that this image has ceased to function for Cleo as a reassurance of identity as it confirms the priority of her own vision of the world.

The two cafe scenes, one before and one after the pivotal rehearsal

sequence, are also highly indicative of Cleo's transformation. Immediately upon leaving the fortune-teller's, Cleo is shown, in a high-angle shot of long duration, walking on the rue de Rivoli to meet Angèle. The extra-diegetic strains of the theme of Cleo's pop song (later identified by the lyrics with her capriciousness and coquettishness), as well as her boldly patterned dress, achieve Varda's desired effect: "In the street, in the cafe, she is the focal point for all eyes."¹⁰ She enters Ça Va Ça Vient with an evident awareness of the eyes of others. Chapter II, which begins with Angèle's internal monologue ("She needs to be taken care of, she's like a child"), offers the busy social milieu of the cafe as mere background to Cleo's self-absorption. Primarily filmed in crowded long-shot, the sequence is highlighted by two parallel conversations emphasized on the soundtrack above the bistro's noisy din: One is about sex, the other about death.

In contrast, when Cleo enters Le Dôme after her *crise de conscience*, the chapter of "Some Others" begins. Camera position and Cleo's viewpoint coalesce as the subjective vision of social reality imposes itself. Varda's directions could not be more to the point: "Cleo walks forthrightly. She looks. And her curiosity gives others importance. This chapter is like a short documentary on the people who frequent the cafe Dôme and the quarter. We see them with her, faces in the street, serious, closed in on themselves, mysterious or preoccupied. . . . Often the camera is substituted for Cleo's gaze."¹¹

A Baudelairean flaneur, Cleo glides through the cafe, hearing snatches of conversations (references to the Algerian war, to artists Miro and Picasso, to children, to memories of the past, and so forth) as she tries to see the impact of her own song, her selection on the jukebox. (Earlier it was this song, "La Belle P.," which had evoked Cleo's narcissistic comment on the quality of the recording when the female cab-driver had played it on the radio. Here in Le Dôme her interest is not in the song itself, nor in her performance, but rather in the *effect* of this song on other people.) The anonymity she craves—the better to observe others around her—is facilitated when she puts on dark glasses. Here dark glasses become the instrument of vision, of insight: By becoming anonymous, Cleo thus sees, and in seeing others, she begins to understand herself. Because in this sequence the camera coincides so often with Cleo's point of view, the spectator now takes Cleo's position as subject rather than object of vision. By making the look of the camera conform to Cleo's gaze, Varda transforms the viewer's position from its characteristic passivity, its contemplation of the object. And, the activity of vision no longer objectifies Cleo as a

fixed image. Instead, a productive vision is conferred on both spectator and character alike.

Structurally paralleling and thereby contrasting Cleo's first objectified walk from the fortune-teller's to Ça Va Ça Vient is her walk from Le Dôme to the Académie de Sculpture. The amplified sounds of Cleo's footsteps against a heavy silence replace the extra-diegetic musical theme accompanying the first walk. Likewise, rather than an image of Cleo *seen*, highly marked as the object of the gaze, this second walk conveys the process of Cleo *seeing*. Her subjective vision is rendered by an alternation of past, present, and imagined images, an alternation that intercuts people on the street, seen from her point of view, with remembered images of Bob, Angèle, and José; others from the street and the cafe; and fantasy images of her wig, dressing table, and clock. The chapter ends with the pure subjectivity of unmediated vision, rendered as anonymous as possible to emphasize the fact of seeing: six shots of exceptionally fluid camera movement are highlighted by intense silence broken only by the scraping of sculptor's tools. Varda thus uses a cinematic equivalent—a purely visual and aural construction—to render the theoretical and philosophical transformation of subjectivity. A meditation on vision, femininity, and culture, the film finds its emblematic representation in this pivotal moment at the center of the text.

Significantly, Cleo's new self-awareness is also manifested in her attitudes toward other women. Here, too, we find a contrast between the two opposing halves of the film. The reciprocity of mutual female friendship seems absent from Cleo's life with Angèle. The overtones of a vaguely maternal rapport between them are actually more characteristic of the relationship of servant and mistress. Shared confidences are presented in the stylized form of classical theater. In Cleo's apartment, duenna and charge discuss the vagaries of romance in a camera style that is intentionally flat, distanced, and theatrical. In two frontal tableaux, the two women discuss José's visit in clichés that stereotype both attitude and self-image (Angèle: "All men are egotists"; Cleo: "I'm too good for men"). In addition, Cleo's comments about the woman cab-driver reveal her lack of female solidarity:

Angèle: What a character, that woman.

Cleo: You said it. It's revolting.

Angèle: I found her courageous and charming.

However, once Cleo's self-recognition and social awareness are triggered, her connections with other women—as demonstrated by the

sequences with Dorothée—are strengthened. Dorothée is a woman without pretenses whose simplicity is grounded in a healthy acceptance of life. Of her modeling she says, “I’m happy in my body, not haughty. When [the artists] look at me, I know they’re looking at something besides me—a form, an idea, I don’t know.” In other words, for her, identity as a woman is not produced by the looks of others. In the film she introduces the idea of nudity (as opposed to sexual exploitation), a theme later discussed by Antoine. Dorothée’s salutary attitude is further rendered in her affectionate exchange with Raoul (Raoul: “Voilà ma poupée” [There’s my doll]; Dorothée: “d’amour” [Of love]), which illustrates the way in which reciprocal terms of affection can replace objectifying epithets.

Cleo’s car ride with Dorothée is filmed in the aleatory, free-flowing manner typical of the New Wave. The two women talk intimately, like school friends whose shared past provides an enduring bond. Thus when Dorothée playfully utters a familiar reprimand (“You really are a spoiled child”) it is said with genuine affection, and balanced by a real appreciation of Cleo’s beauty and her talent. Likewise, when at one point “Dorothée looks at Cleo, searching her face for some sign of calm,” an implicit contrast is drawn between the woman who looks in the mirror for a reassurance of identity—Cleo in the first part of the film—and the woman who looks into a friend’s face out of concern for another’s well-being. And Cleo now begins to return this communication in the small gesture of giving Dorothée her hat, significantly a symbol of her vanity in the first part of the film.

As previously mentioned, Cleo’s “profound transformation” occurs during a rehearsal session in which lyrics awake in her a sudden perception of mortality and solitude, triggering a new self-awareness which is fundamentally social. As Cleo sings the haunting lines of “Cri d’amour,” the camera slowly swings around and tracks in on her until, in an apotheosis of the fetishized woman’s image, it isolates her out of all diegetic context of the apartment; a frontal medium-close-up of her face is framed by a black curtain, which now fills the entire background. She begins:

With its doors open,	[Toutes portes ouvertes
Drafty air running through,	En plein courant d’air
I am an empty house	Je suis une maison vide
Without you, without you. . . .	Sans toi, sans toi. . . .]

and as these last words are sung, the camera begins its circular movement while on the soundtrack Bob’s piano music suddenly becomes

transformed into a full extra-diegetic orchestral chorus. She continues, now without the aid of printed words or sheet music:

Beautiful to no avail	[Belle en pure perte
Naked in the heart of winter	Nue au coeur de l’hiver
I am a starving body	Je suis un corps avide
Without you, without you. . . .	Sans toi, sans toi. . . .]
And if you come too late	Et si tu viens trop tard
They will have buried me	On m’aura mise en terre
Alone, ugly, pale,	Seule, laide et livide
Without you. . . .	Sans toi. . . .]

The accompanying music, as well as her voice, are dramatically amplified, while the lighting changes from naturalistic to theatrical, as if Cleo were singing on a stage or in a cabaret.

The hypnotic effect that the song has on Cleo is mirrored and reinforced for the spectator by means of procedures that isolate and enhance Cleo’s performance. Varda calls this sequence “the hinge of the story,” explaining that “the circular movement which isolates Cleo is like a huge wave carrying her off. Her voyage begins after the black curtain of the intermission. She strips herself and changes her appearance.”¹² In effect, Cleo explodes in rage at her songwriters, rebelling against the image that they have constructed for her: “You didn’t teach me the *soffeggio* just so that you could make me dependent on you. Everybody spoils me, nobody loves me.” She then tears off the traditional attributes of stereotypical feminine beauty—blonde wig and feathered satin peignoir—and thereby activates her transformation from object to subject through a change in image. In order to leave the world of those who have defined her as a cliché (lover, composers, secretary-companion), she now puts on ordinary-looking clothing (a black dress, simple jewelry) and with a violent sweep of a black curtain (the time compressed by a jump-cut) she emerges, changed.

“Cri d’amour” is a constellation of signifiers of loss; its lyrics are heavy with the burden of absence, death, mortality. As such it is a crucial textual hinge in another important way. Cleo’s development in the film can be understood in terms of a movement from reciprocal narcissistic enclosure, through the painful perception of lack and absence (“without you”), to an acceptance of the necessary intersubjectivity that structures all relations of culture. From the reassuring coherence of identity, in which Cleo is capable of loving only her (reflected) self, Cleo is propelled by an awareness of separation and death into

an understanding of the social constitution of her (self-)image. Thus the fundamental sociality at the basis of identity is graphically demonstrated by Cleo's process of coming to consciousness.

Once again this can be traced by contrasting two episodes in the different halves of the film. The first occurs in chapter III, Cleo's confirmation of her beauty as she tries on hats. In a visual tour de force, Varda captures Cleo's image in a maze of reflecting mirrors, sinuous circular camera movements, and plate-glass shop windows that pick up reflections and details from the street outside. In fact, this whole single-shot-sequence can be read as a literalization of the woman-as-image caught up as the pivot within the cinematic apparatus. Varda's directions indicate precisely the effect that binds the spectator to this image: "Passersby perceive, across the large showcase windows, a dream-like creature who glides as if in an aquarium."¹³ And, as if she gathers force from this reassuring play of looks and coquettish poses, Cleo says in voice-over internal monologue immediately preceding this shot: "Everything suits me; ah, I could become intoxicated trying on hats and dresses."

The corresponding sequence, or emblematic image, occurs in chapter XI. Someone has just been shot through one of the plate-glass windows of *Le Dôme*, and as Cleo and Dorothee pass by, they are seen through the cobweblike configuration caused by the bullet-hole. As they stand and stare, snatches of conversation from the surrounding crowd disclose that a man has been killed. In contrast to the hat-shop image, this new depiction of Cleo's face, associated with others and transected by the jagged lines of shattered glass, corresponds to her new social perception of herself. Whereas in the first half of the film, windows had offered up Cleo's own image in a reflection redolent with narcissism, here she is included with a crowd of others, the unity of the reflected image shattered by the trace of death. In the kind of visual economy that we have come to see as typical of Varda, this image points to the necessary social mediation between self and others which is the basis of all culture, and the inscription of femininity in its social definition finds a stunning cinematic image in this sequence of events.

Ultimately, the social foundation of Cleo's self-recognition finds its best expression in the relationship she develops with Antoine. This rapport is established as a reciprocal, human, and nonobjectifying type of sharing unknown to Cleo at the outset of the film. As the fetishized, stereotyped, conventional image of feminine beauty, Cleo has previously been able to engage with men only in terms concomitant with this image. But Antoine presents a different modality of relationship: "With him she can be herself. It is not the grand passion. It is simply

a dialogue between a man and a woman which might facilitate mutual understanding and perhaps love."¹⁴

Antoine, in many ways the masculine counterpart of Dorothee, is secure in his identity. (In fact, Cleo's car ride with Dorothee, depicted for the most part in shots that frame them in a dual relationship, surrounded by the car window, prefigures this rapport.) Inquisitive, curious, gloriously open to the life around him, he represents the opposite of narcissistic containment with its need for a reassuring vision of the coherence of identity (he says, "I believe without seeing"). He begins a conversation with Cleo out of simple gregariousness, refusing to see her as the glamorous doll of her accustomed image.

This is established textually in a striking way. Immediately preceding Antoine's appearance on the wooden bridge in the Parc Montsouris, Cleo engages in an unseen "performance" of her rock song, "La Belle P." She assumes characteristic *femme fatale* poses as she mouths the words, unaccompanied and unamplified, in what results in a parody of the conventions of female beauty:

My precious	[<i>Mon corps precieux</i>
And capricious body,	<i>et capricieux</i>
The blue of my	<i>l'azur de mes yeux</i>
Audacious eyes.	<i>audacieux.]</i>

Only snatches of the lyrics are audible on the soundtrack ("my eyes . . . charms . . . favors . . . my heart-shaped mouth . . ."), highlighting the fragmentation necessary to fetishization. The significance of the song itself has become modified in the course of the film: whereas Cleo's first reaction to it in the taxi was a self-referential critique of the recording, and in *Le Dôme* it served to illustrate the ephemeral nature of a mere song, now she mimes it in a manner that foregrounds exactly what it is—a representation of femininity. The gestures and postures of coquettishness are no longer operative for her. The first part of the film had naturalized these gestures by contextualizing them in a notion of character development; now Cleo—and the spectator—understands these attributes of femininity as elements of a constructed image.

In chapter XII, "Antoine imposes his presence with kindness, gently . . . their meeting is natural. The sequence is as well. The chapter is filmed in a single shot, like a deep breath."¹⁵ However, this "natural" is transected by a profound sociality; for Cleo it is not the return to a natural feminine essence of woman, but a retreat from the stifling, objectifying conventions of femininity to a more social form of human relation. Their conversation in this chapter is one of sharing—experi-

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Summary)



Ciné-Tamaris



Museum of Modern Art



Ciné-Tamaris

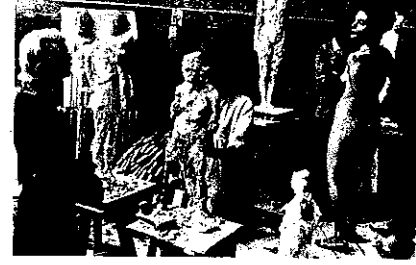


Ciné-Tamaris

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Summary, cont.)



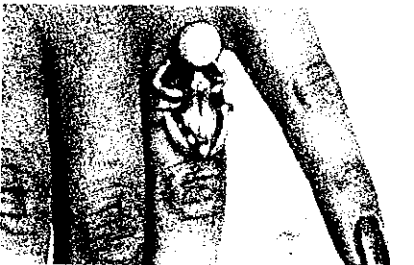
Ciné-Tamaris



Ciné-Tamaris



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ences and observations about life, love, and death. In a sense, they complement each other: Antoine says he would like to die for love; Cleo admits that she is afraid to love.

This shared communication has been triggered by Cleo's pronunciation of the dreaded word: Cancer. As soon as she verbalizes her fears, the freedom and openness of this relationship with Antoine is made possible. The transformation hinges on a linguistic formulation of absence, death, and loss, which is, paradoxically, the moment that the profoundly social recognition occurs. Thus, the movement is traced from the first recognition of absence installed by the song ("sans toi . . ."), through the verbal utterance of the world signifying death, to this final liberation which entails a social acceptance of others. Visually this is connoted as a positive thing by Varda's use of an emphatically bleached, sunlit image, and by the amplified noise of birds and other "summer sounds" on the soundtrack.¹⁶

Ultimately, the film's final chapter, "belonging" to Cleo and Antoine, is one of conciliation. In accepting the possibility of death, Cleo accepts life, and in accepting herself, Cleo begins to accept others. Varda's description of how this last chapter was to be filmed is quite revealing of the intent to depict Cleo's new self-awareness as a social awareness: "The shots are long (in duration) but are very clearly drawn; the interest is equally dispersed on the two characters and on exterior elements."¹⁷ As they walk through the park, then board a bus ("It's more fun than a cab"—sociality over isolation) for the Salpêtrière hospital, Cleo and Antoine discuss a range of topics from nudity to botany; Antoine's enthusiasm for life ("My know-it-all side. Window shopping.") has a salutary effect on Cleo. In addition, the musical theme that had been clearly identified with separate characters and points of view up to this point in the film are now integrated into a harmonic orchestral accompaniment on the soundtrack, assimilating and consolidating musical material in a way that highlights the movement "from conflict to integration."¹⁸ And once they find the doctor, who confirms the illness and refers to a cure, Cleo is able to say, reflectively, "It seems to me that I really feel happy." That this self-reflection is matched by a reciprocal caring for others is rendered visually by the film's last shot. As Cleo and Antoine stand gazing into each other's eyes, the camera zooms back; when it stops, the music starts as the film's final image portrays Cleo and Antoine looking at each other. Thus Cleo has evolved from the compulsion of seeing her own reflection in a mirror to having her gaze now returned by Antoine, this friend, this other.

Finally, the ring Cleo wears (a small golden toad clutching a large

pearl) provides an excellent emblematic formulation of the association of vision and motivation underlying the feminist problematic in Varda's film. Early on, Cleo's lover José had referred to her (among other conventional epithets) as "my pearl": Cleo objectified in traditional definitions of feminine beauty. Then once her sudden awareness of life is triggered by the song, Cleo observes a street performer swallowing frogs: Cleo now "sees" reality. But it is ultimately Antoine who condenses these two meanings in his interpretation of the ring's significance: "Pearl and Frog—You and me." He thus makes of this ring a symbol of their rapport, giving the ring a new meaning that combines Cleo's former identity as beautiful object with her new vision of the social world. In this film which exposes traditional meanings conventionally attached to femininity, relations of power are associated with vision. In assuming a vision of her own, Cleo assumes the power to direct her own life—and the power to construct her own image as well. For a woman in patriarchal culture, the two are inextricably related.

This film demonstrates a concern with questions of identity, sexuality, and vision that substantially predates their contemporary status as the currency of critical debate. It is Varda's particular talent to have found a discursive visual language to express these concerns in a way that is at once original, articulate, and profoundly cinematic. Refusing to renounce narrative altogether, and equally committed to the erotics of the gaze, Varda tells a cinematic story that is extremely pleasurable to watch, a story of femininity and its social representations that reveals as much about the character as about ourselves and the culture in which we live. The following analysis of *Vagabond*, a film made twenty-five years later, will demonstrate just how consistently committed to these issues Varda has been, and how brilliantly she has articulated them in a contemporary form.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, "A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis" (1912), in *General Psychological Theory* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 70.

2. This line of dialogue is pronounced by a fortune-teller at the film's start. All translations from the French are my own. Unfortunately, *Cleo* is not in distribution, but it is currently available on video-cassette. Occasionally the film gets shown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Alliance Française, or universities. The film has been re-released in Paris, where enthusiastic crowds recognized how profoundly ahead of its time the film was in 1961.

3. Agnès Varda in Jacqueline Levitin, "Mother of the New Wave: An Interview with Agnès Varda," *Women and Film*, nos. 5–6 (1974): 63; emphasis added.

4. Agnès Varda, "Avant-propos," *Cléo de 5 à 7* (scenario) (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1962), p. 8.

5. Varda, "Avant-propos," p. 15.

6. *Cléo de 5 à 7* (scenario), p. 21.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

14. Agnès Varda, publicity release from the distributor of *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Rome-Paris Films, 1961.

15. Varda's directions, Scenario, p. 89. Actually, the chapter is composed of two long (duration) shots, joined together by a cut that violates the 180-degree rule by crossing the imaginary line and filming from the opposite direction.

16. This sequence was actually filmed at 6 in the morning in order to achieve the desired lighting effect.

17. Varda, Scenario, p. 94.

18. Claudia Gorbman has provided an excellent, highly detailed analysis of the music in her article "Cléo from 5 to 7: Music as Mirror," in *Wide Angle* 4:4 (1981): 38–49.