

Cleo from 5 to 7 (1962)

Behind the deceptive simplicity of Agnès Varda's second feature lies a film of dizzying scope. Though the film is structured around a woman waiting to hear from her doctor about a potentially very severe diagnosis, these two hours of her life remain largely occupied with everyday activities and daily habits. The impending test results however throw all her senses out of balance. From the everyday beauty and strangeness of city life, to existential questions about death, identity, connection and desire, *Cleo from 5 to 7* leaves no stones unturned — and all this simply by filming the comings and goings of a society woman for two hours without interruption.

"Today everything amazes me. People's faces next to mine." Awakened from the slumber of habit by the spectre of illness and death, Cléo (Corinne Marchand) spends long stretches of the film wandering in the streets of Paris, and she absorbs it all. She becomes a flâneuse, someone who enjoys the act of *looking* itself, beyond what is being looked at. One of the challenges of being alive is of course to exist in this unstable gap between the small, innocuous and mundane; and the existential, fundamental and timeless. Cléo's situation brings her to an unusually intense awareness of those two dimensions, and of the lack of scale between them: the face of a woman in a bistrot and a landscape over Paris are as important and vertiginously full of life as one another.

At the beginning of the film, Cléo marvels only at her own beauty; she is a relatively famous singer, obsessed with her carefully constructed image. But as she waits for the doctor's call, her own reflection no longer brings her any comfort: her illness doesn't show, but she is worried that it might. When she tearfully repeats in the film's early scenes that being ugly is like being dead, her assistant Angèle (Dominique Davray) brushes off these morbid comments as those of a capricious child. But behind such bitter words lies a profound existential anxiety. Cléo is terrified of not liking what she sees in the mirror, because this would make visible the rift between her true self and her image — and thus, between who she truly is, and the way she is perceived, by herself and by others.

In reaction to her impending diagnosis, her outer image and her inner self come untied, and Cléo comes to notice how neglected her inner being has been — as opposed to her carefully groomed appearance. An early scene in a hat shop highlights the advantages Cléo gleans from her beauty: the admiration and flattery of others, and of herself. "Everything suits me," she boasts in front of the mirror. By contrast, in a later sequence, the young woman realises that her appearance cannot give her everything she needs. She already knows that not everyone perceives her as positively as the woman in the hat shop does — Cléo is many things, but she is not naïve.

What Cléo understands here better than she ever has done before is that most of those around her (especially men) only want her to be a pretty face, and do not care about the other, real Cléo. Rehearsing at home by the piano with her songwriter, she finally reacts to his usual patronising comments. When he implies that she doesn't have any talent, Cléo brutally ends the rehearsal and takes her wig off — a tangible symbol of the way society forces her to be something that she is not. Cléo comes to understand that her beauty is a double-edged sword, giving her advantages just as it limits her in the eyes of others, and even in her own.

This moment marks an important shift in our heroine and in the film's structure. Up until this point, Cléo seemed in a state of panic: terrified at the prospect of losing her charms, she believed that being beautiful was her only worth, and that her happiness relied on the compliments of others. This, of course, was not the case. A profound sadness would sometimes take hold of her, without her necessarily understanding its cause. These moments of intense melancholy were described by her entourage as a child's bouts of capricious crisis — after all, does she not possess everything a woman could hope for?

"Everybody spoils me; nobody loves me," the young singer laments just before the rehearsal. Whenever she would ask for something more than gifts and present, or have an opinion of her own, the men in her life would put her back in her place. Standing up to the songwriter, Cléo finally rejects this cage. The self-pitying panic that characterised her up until then evaporates. She becomes more determined and proud.

With her toxic narcissism gone, and this newfound awareness of the gap between perception and being blossoming, Cléo begins looking outwards. "I always think that everyone is looking at me, but I look at no one but myself. It wears me out." Walking on her own in the streets of Paris, the faces of people in bistrot terraces genuinely fascinate her,

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even though (or perhaps because) they are less pretty than her own. Later on, she even stops to stare at things that she finds downright repulsive, such as a strange street entertainer swallowing live frogs for the amusement of passersby.

She is disturbed by this man, but she acknowledges him. By contrast, the Cléo of the film's opening probably would not be wandering in the streets in the first place. She takes a risk. It makes her uncomfortable, and she walks away in disgust, but she does not run away from that experience. She keeps thinking about it, she talks about it with her friend. Cléo is naming the world for herself, and by herself — we are witnessing the (re)birth of her subjectivity. She becomes quite the opposite of the woman who ends up "alone, ugly and livid" when her lover leaves her in "Sans toi [without you]", the song that her songwriter gave her and which made her so upset. Cléo does not want to rely on a man in this way anymore. But thankfully, Varda is too nuanced to suggest rejecting the whole of the male species entirely.

The connection Cléo makes with the soldier in a park in the film's closing starts on shaky ground. Antoine (Antoine Bourseiller) suffers from a terrible case of compulsive mansplaining, and the worried Cléo has no time for it. But when she rebukes him, he does not walk away, insult her, or call her a capricious child. He does not assume that she is crazy, but understands that something is on her mind — and he listens. His torrent of knowledge and facts never stops completely, but he does care about Cléo's emotions and thoughts, and she can use the entertainment and company. Varda's camera emphasises the sense of equality between the two characters, their togetherness and mutual support: even though Antoine has to take the train soon, by the time Cléo learns of her diagnosis, she isn't completely alone anymore. She has found a real connection. She might never see Antoine again, but she knows that such communication is possible.

It would be tempting to focus on the radical feminism of a film entirely focused on a woman and on a woman's subjectivity — a film with all the "dull" bits left in, to reprise the famous quote from Alfred Hitchcock. Yet what is truly radical about this film and about Varda's work in general is not, to my eyes, that feminism itself, but rather the nonchalance that characterises it. Varda never draws attention to the progressive quality of her work, even though she has every right to. This relaxed attitude does not signify a lack of awareness, or an internalised misogyny. Rather, it shows that Varda is not responding to sexism — she is simply making the art that she wants to make. The casualness of her feminism paradoxically makes her films all the more radical.

Across her entire filmography and in interviews, Varda has demonstrated that she knows exactly what she is worth (note how she never apologises or rejects compliments the way women are often taught to). At 5, Cléo might believe that she is worthless on her own, and shy away from the more disturbing truths of her reality. But by 7, she has come to adopt Varda's own radically self-affirming attitude: she confronts the world head on, acknowledges all its parts, feels and validates all her emotions, and honours her own perspective.

– Elena Lazic

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