SPOILER WARNING  The following notes give away some of the plot.

Agnès Varda came up the hard way. Starting as official photographer for the Théâtre National Populaire, she somehow managed to finance a featurette in 1954, La Pointe-courte, a co-operative production and one of the true ancestors of the nouvelle vague. The film, I thought, had all the faults of her set – an over-addiction to Giraudoux, accompanied by a compulsive need to inject her social preoccupations. Then came the shorts – Du côté de la côte, O saisons, O chateaux, and Opéra Mouffe, Brussels prize-winner. And now, free from almost all traces of preciosity à la Giraudoux, Cléo.

‘A bracelet of bright hair about the bone’: Cléo is a young singer who is suddenly faced with the possibility of death. In spite of her beauty, her talent, her lover, and her friends, she finds herself alone and defenceless. The film follows her from five o’clock on the longest day of the year to half-past six; from her anguished visit to a fortune-teller, to the hospital where she is to learn the results of a medical analysis. Follows her step by step: nothing is omitted, there are no ellipses. The film is at once documentary and subjective. The streets and cafés of Paris, the taxis and cinemas, are seen both as they really are, and also as they appear to the eyes of a woman who is tracked by death. But the real subject of the film is loneliness, not death, although it’s on a second viewing that this becomes clearer, when one gets away from one’s own pre-conceived responses and from the highly subjective reactions that such a theme is bound to evoke. Even more frightening than the thought of death is the wall it creates between Cléo and her friends. She can’t even bring herself to talk about it to her lover, for she realises it would only put him out, and with this comes the realisation that they are not in love. Her best friend, Dorotheé, reacts to the news with cries of ‘C’est affreux!’ and vague reassurances, and then goes off to her boyfriend with the parting shot of ‘Let’s keep in touch.’

Agnès Varda has beautifully succeeded in striking a balance between the frivolity of Cléo’s little group and the outside world – the streets of Paris, its shops and parks. And it is from this outside world that help finally comes to her. A chance meeting in the Parc Montsouris with a young soldier on his last day of leave from Algeria brings, not love, perhaps, but at least a kind of human contact, a kind of understanding which can only come from strangers. They may fall in love, and Cléo’s cancer may be curable but in any case by the end of the film Cléo has achieved a deeper understanding of what life is and of what human relationships can be. She has, in a sense, been converted to life.

The most important problem in making such a film was to render the visible world in all its beauty, thus increasing the poignancy of the idea of death, without falling into the trap of aestheticism. Largely shot in the street like a documentary, Cléo shines with some fantastically beautiful images – the long bus ride with the soldier, the shop-windows with their disturbing reflections, the elegiac sadness of the park in the late afternoon light: et ego in Arcadia sum. But Cléo is by no means just a ‘photographer’s film’. Corinne Marchand (Cléo) and Antoine Bourseiller (the soldier) are not, I dare say, great actors, but in Cléo they give great performances: which is perhaps the same thing as
saying that I think, as might already have been guessed, that Agnès Varda has made a sensational debut, and that we may expect even greater things from her.

Richard Roud, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1962

If one were not afraid of burdening this delicate and luminously beautiful film with quasi-religious labels, one might call it the record of a woman’s pilgrimage in search of her soul. For, if Cléo has found consolation by the end, it is not because she will be cured, or because she is in love (that old panacea for all ills) but because her two-way contact with another human being has drawn her out of her egotistical isolation, and shown her that the world of which she is part is a miraculous thing which exists in spite of her. This theme is casually introduced at the very beginning of the film, when the fortune-teller turns up her last tarot card (number 13 – and the last scene of the film is ‘Chapter 13’) to intone, ‘This means, not death, but a transformation of your whole being’. We are, in fact, invited to watch this transformation beginning during the two hours (actually, 90 minutes) of the film’s action. Cléo in private is isolated, in her enormous, handsome studio flat, with its canopied four-poster, its garden swing, thick rugs and fluffy kittens lolling round – beautiful, but icy cold. And Cléo in public is isolated, in the cheerful, steamy, jostling crowds of streets and cafés, student rags and public parks, street entertainments and shops – ugly, but warm. Gradually, she sheds the cocoon of superstitions with which Angèle shields her, the desperate need to be successful and liked in the song business, the distinguished lover who pops in when he can spare a moment; and she finds a world which is both warm and beautiful.

It is a fragile conception, fraught with dangers, but Agnès Varda miraculously avoids them all, and the brilliance of her direction is that she succeeds completely in making us share Cléo’s gradually sharpening perception of the world around her. From her initial visit to the fortune-teller to the moment when she walks away from the hospital with Antoine, Cléo’s every move is tracked as she sits in a café, rides in a taxi, buys a hat, talks to her lover, rehearses, walks through the busy streets. We watch how her mood is swayed, and how the slightest jolt brings her back to herself and her fears. At first her impressions are mainly of pretty objects which she can enjoy (the hats, the kittens), or of people who recognise her as a star (the modiste, the taxi-driver): the rest is shapes and noises, snatches of overheard conversations, people walking by. But after the crisis when she realises that she has been singing a lament for herself in the rehearsal, and changes into a black dress, her journey through the streets of Paris becomes a strange sort of descent into hell as she passes the street entertainers swallowing live frogs or sticking skewers through their biceps, a limbo in which she puts on one of her own records in the juke-box of a crowded café and no one listens, where hostile faces seem to reflect the death in her own, and where a file of passers-by suddenly takes on the air of a funeral cortège. Then suddenly the cold, listless beauty of the park turns into something shimmering and summery as she talks to the soldier and walks off with him to the gaiety and bustle of the bus-ride back; and now the glimpse of a baby in an incubator gives an impression, not of frailty and transience, but of the very miracle of living.

Both Corinne Marchand (after a shaky start when she has to cry in her first café scene) and Bourseiller are excellent. But it is Agnès Varda’s film, from beginning to end.

CLÉO FROM 5 TO 7 (CLÉO DE 5 À 7)

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Production Company: Rome-Paris Films, Paris
Producers: Georges de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti
Production Manager: Bruna Diriog
Unit Managers: Jean-François Adam, Edith Tertz
Trainee: Claude Laporte
Assistant Directors: Bernard Troublanc-Michel, Marin Karmitz
Script Girl: Aurore Paquiss
Scenarist: Agnès Varda
Camera: Jean Rabier
Assistant Camera: Alain Levent, Paul Bonis
Key Grip: Roger Scipion
Still Photography: Liliane de Kernadel
Editors: Janine Verneau, Pascale Lavérière
Art Director: Bernard Evenin
Make-up: Aïda Carange
Laboratory: GTC
Music and Songs [Music]: Michel Legrand
Lyricist: Agnès Varda *
Sound: S.I.M.O.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Persons
Mon 17 May 14:30; Fri 21 May 18:10; Sun 23 May 12:10; Wed 26 May 17:40; Fri 28 May 20:30; Sat 29 May 16:00; Tue 1 June 14:30

The Night of the Hunter
Mon 17 May 14:30; Fri 21 May 18:10; Wed 26 May 17:40; Sun 23 May 15:20; Mon 24 May 21:00; Thu 27 May 21:00; Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 25 May 20:30; Sat 29 May 16:00; Mon 24 May 21:00; Thu 27 May 21:00; Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 25 May 20:30; Sat 29 May 16:00

The Gospel According to Matthew
Mon 17 May 14:30; Fri 21 May 18:10; Wed 26 May 17:40; Sun 23 May 15:20; Mon 24 May 21:00; Thu 27 May 21:00; Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 25 May 20:30; Sat 29 May 16:00; Mon 24 May 21:00; Thu 27 May 21:00; Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 25 May 20:30; Sat 29 May 16:00

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Ammonite
From Mon 17 May
Sound of Metal
From Mon 17 May
Nomadland
From Mon 17 May
County Lines
From Fri 21 May
First Cow
From Fri 28 May
After Love
From Fri 4 Jun
Fargo
From Fri 11 Jun
The Reason I Jump
From Fri 18 Jun
Nashville
From Fri 25 Jun
Ultraviolence
From Sat 26 Jun

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THE TANGO LESSON

Touch of Evil
Tue 18 May 14:30; Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50; Sun 20 Jun 18:15

The Tango Lesson
Tue 18 May 20:45; Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by So Mayer, author of ‘The Cinema of Sally Potter’)

Citizen Kane
Wed 19 May 18:00; Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45

l'ecil (The Eclipse)
Thu 20 May 14:15; Tue 6 Jun 12:10; Tue 16 Jun 17:50

La Haine
Thu 20 May 17:50; Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00; Fri 16 Jun 20:40

The Last Picture Show (Director’s Cut)
Fri 21 May 20:30; Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45

Steamboat Bill, Jr.
Sat 22 May 12:00; Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30

Raging Bull
Sat 22 May 14:40; Sun 30 May 15:30; Tue 1 Jun 17:30

cleo from 5 to 7 (Cleó de 5 à 7)
Sat 22 May 21:00; Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

The Big City
Mon 23 May 12:10; Wed 23 Jun 17:40

The Gospel According to Matthew
Sun 23 May 15:20; Thu 24 Jun 17:40

The Night of the Hunter
Mon 24 May 14:30; Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Killers
Mon 24 May 14:30; Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

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