



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Cléo from 5 to 7

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 châteaux*, and *Opéra Mouffe*, Brussels prize-winner. And now, free from almost all traces of preciousness 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, Dorothee, 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.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1962

CLÉO FROM 5 TO 7 (CLÉO DE 5 À 7)

Director: Agnès Varda
Production Company: Rome-Paris Films, Paris
Producers: Georges de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti
Production Manager: Bruna Drigo
Unit Managers: Jean-François Adam, Edith Tertza
Trainee: Claude Laporte
Assistant Directors: Bernard Toublanc-Michel, Marin Karmitz
Script Girl: Aurore Paquiss
Scenario: Agnès Varda
Camera: Jean Rabier
Assistant Camera: Alain Levent, Paul Bonis
Key Grip: Roger Scipion
Stills Photography: Liliane de Kermadec
Editors: Janine Verneau, Pascale Laverrière
Art Director: Bernard Evein
Make-up: Aïda Carange
Laboratory: GTC
Music and Songs [Music]: Michel Legrand
Lyricist: Agnès Varda *
Sound: [Jean] Labussière, [Julien] Coutellier, [Jacques] Maumont
Sound Studio: S.I.M.O.

Cast

Corinne Marchand (*Cléo*)
Antoine Bourseiller (*Antoine*)
Dominique Davray (*Angèle*)
Dorothee Blank (*Dorothee*)
Michel Legrand (*Bob*)
José Luis de Vilallonga (*Cléo's lover*)
Loye Payen (*Irma, the fortune-teller*)
Renée Duchateau
Lucienne Marchand (*taxi driver*)
Serge Korber (*penpusher*)
Robert Postec (*Dr Valineau*)
Jean-Luc Godard, Anna Karina, Eddie Constantine, Sami Frey, Danièle Delorme, Jean-Claude Brialy, Yves Robert, Alan Scott (*actors in the burlesque film*) *

France/Italy 1962
90 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sat 14 May 14:45; Wed 18 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large

The River

Sun 15 May 15:10

El Sur (The South)

Mon 16 May 18:10

A Farewell to Arms

Mon 16 May 18:15; Tue 24 May 20:50

The Miracle Worker

Tue 17 May 14:30; Sun 29 May 11:20

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Tue 17 May 20:50; Sat 28 May 18:15

The Incredible Shrinking Man

Thu 19 May 14:30; Tue 31 May 18:20

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)

Thu 19 May 18:10; Wed 25 May 20:50; Fri 27 May 18:20

Daughters of the Dust

Fri 20 May 14:40; Thu 26 May 20:40

Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)

Sat 21 May 11:10; Wed 25 May 18:00

The Long Day Closes

Sun 22 May 12:30; Thu 26 May 20:50

Still Walking (Aruitemo aruitemo)

Mon 23 May 20:45

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Mon 30 May 18:20

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