



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Cléo from 5 to 7

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: Aida Carange
Laboratory: GTC
Music and Songs: 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*)
Dorothée Blank (*Dorothée*)
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

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SPOILER WARNING

 The following notes give away some of the plot.

When was this immaculate feature film, Agnès Varda's essay on time and space, love and death, ever not on our minds?

Arriving with the first surge of the French New Wave, *Cléo from 5 to 7* crackles with the energy and modernity of that *cinophile* movement, but it's ultimately an introspective piece, characterised by the philosophical preoccupations of Varda's Left Bank peers. Corinne Marchand plays Cléo, a blonde pop singer whose vanity relaxes as her anxieties swell. As the film begins, she visits a tarot reader, hoping for good news about the medical test results she is awaiting – but the cards spell only death, and transformation.

While Cléo's mind is fixed on the future, Varda's camera captures her in the present tense, killing time in Paris as she ponders her own decay. Echoing Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, Varda dissects a trip down the stairs to emphasise the moment as it passes, one we would otherwise have missed. As Cléo, a Parisian Mrs Dalloway, walks the streets of her city, Varda also captures a broader sense of time, an era in history: Paris in the early 1960s, with its crowds, cafés, shops, music, fashion and cinema. The geography is precise: Varda called the film 'the portrait of a woman painted on to a documentary about Paris'.

The film shifts from colour to black-and-white to remind us that this is what cinema does – it transforms life. A film within the film turns the idea into a joke: life makes no sense in monochrome. But Cléo is transformed by the film, by these 90 minutes and the images of herself and her future that confront her everywhere. In real time, Cléo becomes more real, more subject than object, more human, more in tune with the city. She discards her whipped-cream wig and polka dots for a simple black shift. She performs less and feels more.

With the kind of playfulness that Varda enjoyed so much, we could call this ticking-clock film timeless. From the feminist analysis of a woman's commodified beauty and a celebrity's self-regarding narcissism to the vulnerable heroine acting out her messy emotions in public, the spectre of war and the fear of disease darkening a midsummer day, *Cléo from 5 to 7* feels pertinent to the modern moment. It always will. Marchand's Cléo was pinned in a point in time, but the film marches on, playing on a loop in our imaginations.

Pamela Hutchinson, bfi.org.uk

Contemporary reviews

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.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The 400 Blows (Les Quatre cents coups)

Thu 1 Jun 18:20; Tue 13 Jun 20:30

The Big Lebowski

Fri 2 Jun 20:30; Sat 17 Jun 18:10

La dolce vita

Sat 3 Jun 17:00; Tue 13 Jun 13:30; Sun 18 Jun 17:30

Boyz n the Hood

Sat 3 Jun 20:40; Fri 30 Jun 18:10

Vertigo

Sun 4 Jun 15:30; Tue 20 Jun 20:40

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Mon 5 Jun 20:45; Fri 16 Jun 20:40; Sat 24 Jun 12:00

The Third Man

Tue 6 Jun 20:40; Wed 21 Jun 18:10 (+ intro); Sun 25 Jun 12:30

The Long Goodbye

Wed 7 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Tue 27 Jun 20:35

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Mon 12 Jun 21:00; Thu 29 Jun 18:30

Of Time and the City

Wed 14 Jun 18:30 (+ intro); Thu 22 Jun 20:50

Taxi Driver

Sun 18 Jun 18:30; Fri 23 Jun 20:45

Get Carter

Mon 19 Jun 18:20; Mon 26 Jun 20:45

La Haine

Wed 21 Jun 21:00; Sat 24 Jun 20:40; Wed 28 Jun 18:15 (+ intro)

Don't Look Now

Sat 24 Jun 16:00; Fri 30 Jun 20:45

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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

'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. 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.

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