

Cléo From 5 to 7

(Agnés Varda, 1962)

Component 2 – Section D: Film Movements – Experimental Film

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: Aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts of film**

Specialist study areas:

- **Narrative**
- **Auteur**

Rationale for study: *Cléo From 5 to 7* is one of the only films of the French New Wave directed by a woman, Agnès Varda. It shows two hours in the life of a young pop star as she waits for a possibly life-changing diagnosis, and her journey from narcissism to self-realisation. *Cléo From 5 to 7* was voted the second-best film directed by a woman in a 2019 BBC poll. It also has fresh relevance in the age of social media influencers and the ‘selfie’.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

Hat shop and taxi: 11:50 – 17:46

Cléo’s apartment; reflections on love and death: 23:45 – 31:48

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS – Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Varda uses a whole range of different visual styles during the film. Sometimes it seems like we are observing Cléo from afar (e.g. on the street, or through a shop window); on other occasions it feels like we are following her from an intimate distance (e.g. inside the taxi or car journeys). Sometimes we are completely immersed in her POV, seeing exactly what she does, which in sequence two includes her thoughts.

Mise-en-scène

- The main location is Paris itself. The streets, the cafés, a cinema, a park, a hospital. Lightweight cameras, mounted on vehicles, track alongside characters as they walk through a real-world environment. This is one of the key technical and aesthetic features of the French New Wave.
- The middle section of the film, in Cléo’s huge chic apartment, is littered with symbolic props that could be seen as a manifestation of her inner state (see key sequence analysis below).

Editing

- The film unfolds in almost real-time (though between 5 and 7pm is two hours, the film is only 90 mins long – you may want to consider where half an hour is ‘cut’)
- As Cléo walks the streets and the parks of Paris, the film cuts between the POV of other passers-by and Cléo’s own perspective. This is especially relevant after she leaves her apartment

upset and unable to use mirrors to strengthen her self-image.

Sound

- Most of the sound is diegetic (including the two occasions where her own songs are played), creating a naturalistic, *verité* feel to the narrative.
- There are two instances where non-diegetic music is used. The first is during her performing of the ‘Sans Toi’, when the diegetic sound of the piano and Cléo’s voice is supplemented by an orchestral accompaniment, taking us into the protagonist’s intense identification with the song. Another is when she first enters the park. Consider why Varda has used non-diegetic music in these two scenes.

Performance

- Corinne Marchand is in every scene, and effectively portrays Cléo’s journey from spoilt, flippant to contemplative and wise. These transformations happen in the space of two hours, as she awaits her medical diagnosis. The scene where she dances down the steps in the park, pleasing just herself instead of performing for the gaze of others, is both luminous and moving.



Image by Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS – Meaning and response

Representations

- *Cléo From 5 to 7* is considered a feminist film that dissects the way women are objectified in society: how they may become caught up in

the views of other people, and how they can transcend the gaze of others. The protagonist is treated like a pretty doll by her lover, and like a spoilt child by her assistant, Angele, and her musical collaborators. It’s only when she confesses her existential crisis to Dorothee and Antoine that she is treated as a proper, vulnerable human being.

Aesthetic

- The film is mostly in black and white, except for the tarot reading section at the start, which basically fills in Cléo’s backstory and foreshadows the events of the next two hours. Consider why Varda chose to film this sequence in colour.
- The visual style moves between *verité* street photography, symbolic set design in Cléo’s apartment, and expressionistic montage as her existential crisis deepens.
- One key motif is the use of mirrors. At the start, Cléo uses her beautiful reflection as a source of strength. But in the second half of the film, the mirrors are broken, her reflection is fragmented, and she begins to lose her sense of self. In the final act, after she meets Antoine, she uses *his* view of her as a source of strength and stability.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social/Cultural/Political

- The 1960s French New Wave were responding to the time of political and cultural upheaval in France (and other European countries). France was occupied by the Nazis during WWII and the post-war culture was centred on reinforcing national identity. Cinema was usually based around classic French literature or pre-war history. The *Nouvelle Vague* felt this didn’t reflect the lives, dreams and frustrations of young people, and their films aimed to challenge this status quo.
- France was also involved in a bloody war to maintain control of Algeria – we hear references on the radio, and this is where Antoine is heading to fight, though he seems cynical about the war’s meaning.

- The 1960s were also the beginnings of ‘Third Wave’ feminism, questioning women’s role in society. You should consider the difference between Cléo and Angele’s life (which despite modern trappings seems no different to a noble woman and maid from history) and the bold, brave, independent figure of their taxi driver.
- Though Cléo is the main protagonist, the narrative regularly ‘eavesdrops’ on the conversations of other Parisians, hinting at a much bigger world beyond Cléo’s life and worries.

Auteur

- The phrase *auteur* (author) was first used by writers at *Cahiers du cinema* (the main journal of the French New Wave). This term described filmmakers that have a very distinctive ‘voice’, and who displayed a significant level of creative control over their work. Today we often speak of directors almost as their own individual genres (e.g. Tarantino-esque) but, before the New Wave, directors were seen as just part of the crew, and films were seen a collective product in an industrial system (Hollywood). Directors like Varda, freed by technology and cultural change, sought to become *auteurs*, to develop their own ‘signature’ and ‘voice’ in the style of a novelist.
- One notable thing about *Cléo From 5 to 7* is that it women are central to the narrative, with male characters portrayed as quite shallow. (Cléo’s lover can’t be told her medical condition because “men hate weakness”.) Critics have praised the film for deconstructing the objectification of women and adding a much-needed female perspective to the male-dominated *Nouvelle Vague*.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

Cléo’s apartment; reflections on love and death: 23:45 – 31:48

- During this extended sequence, Cléo and her assistant/maid Angele go to her lofty apartment. The set design can be seen as symbolic of many of the film’s themes, or even as an expression of Cléo’s inner states.
- Consider the various props and set decorations. There are mirrors on almost every wall – what does this tell us about Cléo’s narcissism and need to define herself through her beauty? How do the clocks and vase of dying flowers undermine this sense of self?

Institutional context

- Varda is considered one of the key figures (and one of few women) in the French New Wave film movement. This was a group of filmmakers who aimed to challenge traditional French cinema with unusual aesthetic, narrative and ideological material. Some of the most distinctive features, such as extended tracking shots, jump cuts, improvised performances, and disassociated dialogue, were also the results of financial restraints. Part of the *Nouvelle Vague* credo was to reject the established French film industry, but that also meant rejecting their resources. Independent New Wave directors couldn’t afford studios, or big-name stars, so they opted to film in public spaces like bars, cafes and on the streets themselves. A necessity was to keep the actors moving before the filming was interrupted, which resulted in the famous extended tracking shots in *Breathless* (Godard, 1960) and in *Cléo From 5 to 7*. These were achieved by mounting a lightweight, portable camera on moving vehicles, or even, in Godard’s case, on a wheelchair. In this way, much of the *Nouvelle Vague* aesthetic was the result of economic necessity.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

Narrative

- *Cléo From 5 to 7* has a loose and free-wheeling narrative, typical of other *Nouvelle Vague* films like *Breathless* (Godard, 1960). These films often follow modern, young people wandering the streets, questioning their own lives and values in an ‘existential’ manner. (Existentialism was a form of philosophy that originated in France in the 1940s, asking big questions about the meaning of life in a God-less or morally bankrupt universe.)

Cléo's apartment; reflections on
love and death: 23:45 – 31:48

- Her lover is a self-proclaimed “very busy man”. What are your opinions of the way he treats Cléo? Contrast with Antoine in the last part of the film – how does Antoine seem to be interested in Cléo beyond her beauty? What do you think Varda is saying about men, women, and their relationships?
- Both Angele and the musicians comment on Cléo being like a “spoilt child”. What other childlike imagery is used in this sequence to emphasise the way these characters see her?