

Document Citation

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Title | Cleo from Five to Seven (1952), Lion's Love (1969), Agnes Varda |
| Author(s) | Barbara Bernstein |
| Source | <i>Women in Film/Chicago</i> |
| Date | 1974 |
| Type | program note |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | 13-14 |
| No. of Pages | 2 |
| Subjects | Varda, Agnès (1928), Brussels, Belgium |
| Film Subjects | Cléo de 5 à 7 (Cleo from 5 to 7), Varda, Agnès, 1962 Lions love, Varda, Agnès, 1969 |

Cleo from Five to Seven (1952), Lion's Love (1969), Agnes Varda

Distributor: Contemporary-McGraw-Hill

The French New Wave—that anti-traditional way of making movies more spontaneously, self-consciously, and with different kinds of narrative and visual devices than anything that had ever been done before—began in 1954 with a film called *La Pointe Courte* by Agnes Varda. This full-length film juxtaposes the deteriorating relationship of a couple with life in the fishing village in which they find themselves. The look at the fishermen of *La Pointe Courte* makes an affectionate documentary, but the story of the lovers is flat and symbolic, with no psychological or emotional depth. In 1954 it was a new kind of film. Its editor, Alain Resnais, said at the time that it was uncomfortably close to the kinds of films he hoped to make some day.

Agnes Varda, who had been born in Brussels in 1928, was a still photographer of some renown. She was the official photographer for the Theatre Nationale Populaire in Paris but had no filmmaking experience at all. While most of the New Wave directors lived, breathed, and slept movies, Varda had seen only twelve in her whole life. The main influence on *La Pointe Courte* was literary—Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*. "I didn't know what the cinema was," Varda has said. "I still don't understand how I came to make a film."

It happened somehow, and a career and a movement had begun. The New Wave flourished, but it was several years before Varda could find backing to make a second feature. In the interim she made several shorts. Two of them—*O Saisons, O Chateaux!* and *Du Cote de la cote*—were commissioned by the French National Tourist Office. Though apparently neither project interested Varda particularly, both do show the decorative composition and use of antitheses that are her trademark. A third film, *Opera Mouffe*, records the varied images of Paris' teeming Rue Mouffetard as seen through the eyes of a pregnant woman. Varda was pregnant herself at the time she shot the film (sitting on a little chair at the side of the road day after day

Varda directing *Le Bonheur*



aiming her camera at passers-by), and, in the words of a critic, "the true unity of *Opera Mouffe* is provided by . . . the way in which the images and rhythms reflect the contradictory thoughts and feelings which dominate a woman at such a time."

In 1961 Varda directed her second feature, the film presented at FILMS BY WOMEN/CHICAGO '74: *Cleo from Five to Seven*. The story of how it came to be made illustrates how things were in the Paris film world in those days. Georges de Beauregard produced Jean-Luc Godard's first feature, *Breathless*. It was so successful and had been so inexpensive that Beauregard asked Godard if he had any friends who made the same kinds of movies. Godard recommended Jacques Demy; Beauregard produced Demy's lovely *Lola*, and then asked Demy if he had any friends to recommend. Demy, who was and is married to Agnes Varda, sent her. "You have carte blanche," Beauregard told Varda, "if you can make me a feature for 50,000 francs." That tiny budget," said Varda, "forced me to shoot in Paris with a small cast. Since I don't like Paris, I chose a subject that wasn't terribly cheerful."

The subject she chose, an appropriate one for a Paris setting, is isolation. Cleo is a famous young singer who may be dying of cancer. In the hours while she waits for the results of lab tests, she finds less and less comfort in her friends, her luxurious white apartment, her talent, her beauty, her accomplishments. Eventually she leaves it all for a walk in the park and meets a young soldier on leave from Algeria. He goes with her to hear the test results, which are promising.

Cleo is a strong heroine, but she isn't very attractive or interesting, at least not initially. As usual, Varda is not interested in psychology or in encouraging audience sympathy. For all its melodramatic plot, *Cleo* is dispassionate. As Cleo gradually discards many of her props and

Features and Directors

Cleo from 5 to 7



affectations, we do come to feel more and more satisfaction with her.

Interestingly, though the movie follows Cleo minute-for-minute from the time we see her with a fortune-teller at 5:00, it is only 90 minutes long. It ends at 6:30, not at 7, so it's open-ended. Cleo and the soldier may fall in love; her cancer may be curable. All the possibilities are there, but it's not clear as the film ends what the next half-hour will bring.

Varda reports: "I went to the Parc Montsouris at 10 a.m., at 8 a.m., at 5 a.m., until the light on the grass formed a deliquescent whiteness which interested me. (The scenes which appear in the film were shot early in the morning.) It's this sort of thing, the relationship between the light and the feeling of a place, that I work on a lot. In *Cleo*, white is tragic. White is not the obscurity which invades life, it is the clarity which dissolves existence. Each time Cleo strongly feels the chill of death, her house becomes all white."

When *Cleo* was released in 1962, *Cahiers du cinema* called Varda "a female Zola" who "creates, like Sternberg, her own light." "For the first time," it said, "a woman is presented in terms of sadness and liberty and not of Sunday supplements."

Since *Cleo*, Varda has made a number of shorts and documentaries, including a tribute to Cuba and a reportage on the Black Panthers. She has also made three features: the controversial *Le Bonheur*, *Les Créatures* and, in America, *Lion's Love*. This last, very complex film stars Viva, Shirley Clarke, James Rado and Gerome Ragno (the authors of *Hair*), with a guest appearance by Eddie Constantine. In it a woman director comes to Hollywood hoping to make a film "using stars as real people." The studio heads (played by themselves) refer to

"this girl" from the "new wave" who "does something different with films." In the film this filmmaker is called and played by Shirley Clarke, but, of course, she is Varda as well. At one point, when Clarke isn't playing a scene right, Varda steps into the frame from behind the camera to demonstrate. *Lion's Love* is an intricate, intriguing, very full movie, highly recommended.

Lion's Love is all about Hollywood and the old hierarchical ways of making films. It brings to mind that most venerable and respected of the old Hollywood "women's directors" who shakes his head in non-comprehension when Agnes Varda is mentioned and says, "That woman is a real ball-buster."

Barbara Bernstein

CLEO FROM FIVE TO SEVEN—Writer-Director: Agnes Varda. Cinematographer: Jean Rabler. Production Design: Bernard Evein. Music: Michel Legrand. Editor: Janine Verneau. Production: Rome-Paris Films. Actors: Corinne Marchand, Antoine Bourseiller, Dorothee Blank, Michel Legrand, Dominique Davray. France.

FILMOGRAPHY—*La Pointe Courte*, 1954; *O Saisons, O Châteaux!* (short), 1957; *Du Cote de la cote* (short), 1958; *Opera Mouffe* (short), 1958; *Les Fiances du Pont Macdonald* (short), 1961; *Cleo de cinq a sept*, 1962; *Salut les Cubains*, 1963; *Le Bonheur*, 1965; *Elsa* (documentary), *Les Créatures*, 1966; *Oncle Janco* (short), 1967; *Lion's Love*, *Black Panthers*, 1969.

Barbara Bernstein, an alumna of Doc Films at the University of Chicago, is in the midst of her first film, a documentary on W.P.A. art. She was once a publicist for Twentieth-Century Fox in Paris and now writes for a living.