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Two Classics Of The French New Wave

By CYNTHIA GARRATT

The films of Agnes Varda, one of the pioneers of the French New Wave, will be featured in a retrospective this month at the Pacific Film Archive, with two of her best-known features showing this Friday in Wheeler: *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) and *Le Bonheur* (1965).

Cleo from 5 to 7, Varda's second film, shows us an hour and a half (the length of the film) in the life of a pop singer awaiting results for a test for cancer. Cleo's emotional needs on this day are not to be met by her shallow relationships with those who pamper and flatter her (maid, lover, songwriters), so she angrily removes her blonde wig and takes to the streets of Paris.

After visits to a cafe and an old girlfriend (there's a film-within-a-film sequence here, which includes a cameo by Godard), her sense of iso-

lation is only intensified. But by film's end, Cleo has found a real, if to be short-lived, relationship with a young man, bound that evening for the war in Algeria. This Cleo has come a long way from the frightened child-woman we first saw, who found comfort by looking in a mirror and telling herself, "As long as I'm beautiful, I'm alive."

Perhaps what is most remarkable about this film is that it provides an intense look at a few anxious hours in one person's life, but without the expected cathartic, emotional immersion of the audience. For Varda's style, with its frequently superb documentary touches (Paris streets, the people on them and in cafes), is cool and removed.

Her attention to form and detail has something to do with her earlier career as a photographer, but also with a philosophical stance — the

Brechtian idea of distancing the spectator, so that he objectively evaluates what he sees, rather than identifies with a character. This style is even more obvious in Varda's later film *Le Bonheur* (*Happiness*), where color and composition are given more attention than people or plot.

The story is of a 'happy' family of four. The pretty blonde wife dies (whether an accident or suicide is not made clear), and is replaced by the pretty blonde mistress. The new foursome picnics in the woods just as the old foursome did.

That *Le Bonheur* isn't cloying, despite the smiling faces, the candy-box colors and Mozart score, is perhaps to Varda's credit, but one still wonders *what* she's trying to say. In a recent interview, her reply to feminist critics (who generally prefer *Cleo*) was that she intended "to show the cliches of society," but also "to make the shape of the film so lovely and nice that if you don't want to face what it means you don't have to." But what *does* it mean? If *Le Bonheur* fails, it's not because it's not feminist enough, but because the complex details of psychology and society documented so well in *Cleo* are here totally absent.

Corrine Marchand in "Cleo From 5 to 7"



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