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Movies by Metronome

FILM can play curious tricks with time, and time can also play curious tricks on film. It is the latter that happens to Agnes Varda's "Cleo from 5 to 7," which, untrue to the title, follows from 5:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. a beautiful young woman who is faced with the strong possibility that she has an incurable cancer. Miss Varda, who directed from her own script, presents the young woman's reactions to her fears and forebodings over an actual ninety-minute time span. Although there is no clock ticking off the seconds, the movie avoids the conventional arrangement of dramatic time, no leaps forward or backward, no change of scene that would not be literally possible for the heroine (played by Corinne Marchand). But perhaps it would be fairer to allow Miss Varda to explain her intentions.

"The duration," she states, "is real (the camera does not leave Cleo for the entire time of the film); her little journeys are also real (a spectator could at leisure retrace Cleo's steps and find on his route, in real places, what she saw)." Miss Varda goes on to say that, although ideally, the filming should also have taken ninety minutes, it required two months, and "we filmed it in order and with a chronometer." Obviously faced with something of a paradox here, Miss Varda comes up with phrases like "orchestration in two simultaneous tempos" and "equal value given to violin and metronome."

The French critics, some years ago, drafted Miss Varda as one of the charter members of the New Wave, principally because of her unusual short films, among them "L'Opera Moffe," a somewhat surreal half hour spent with a pregnant Parisian woman wandering through her quarter of the city. Unfortunately, in Miss Varda's first feature-length film, the metronome is more prominent than the violin, for the film's chief interest lies in the use of a device that gives a form to Cleo's rather abstracted ninety minutes. Flashed on the screen is: "Chapter Three, Cleo from 5:12 to 5:17." Five minutes later to the dot, we see superimposed on the screen: "Chapter Four: Cleo from 5:17 to 5:21."

This division of the story's progression into "chapters" soon seems as arbitrary as the choice of the method itself, since it is difficult to find any particular reason for assigning five minutes to one "chapter," or four to another. The girl visits a fortune teller who confirms her fears; she drinks coffee to steady her nerves; buys a silly hat; returns to her apartment; spends a few minutes with a lover who rushes in, pays his respects, and rushes out; auditions some songs (she is a popular singer); visits a friend who is modeling in the nude; takes taxis; wanders in the Bois de Boulogne; and meets a stranger, who talks to her of botany and who, strangely, heartens her.

I'm inclined to suspect that Miss Varda is more eloquent as a film theorist than as a film writer and director, for the fact must be faced that Cleo, while pretty, is a dull girl, her reactions more vacant than troubled, her perceptions commonplace. Much is made of her being haunted by death while in the full bloom of magnificent and desirable health, but this irony is blunted by the heroine's obvious inability to find anything important in her existence. She does not love strongly, for instance; neither does she feel strongly.

The trick played by time is that Cleo's ninety minutes seem much longer than that for the audience. It is with surprise that one glances at one's watch and finds that, really, only four minutes have gone by. As soon as one becomes conscious of time it has a way of lengthening. Miss Varda's method is not satisfactory, mainly because here it provides a dilated rather than an intensified experience. Further, it can easily occur to us (at least it did to me) that no matter how real the backgrounds, how grainy and grimy the photography, this is not a real Cleo we are seeing, but a creature of a film author's invention and imagination. If a documentary quality is being employed, its use (in the fictional film) should provide a greater conviction, and, where Cleo is concerned, a closer intimacy.

But this doesn't happen, for Miss Varda has failed to tell or show us very much about Cleo, nor has she made it clear why we should be so intensely interested in her. It may be that this talented young director's pursuit of originality, her attempt to convey a more luminous reality, has led her to neglect her story. This hardly means that she ought to abandon her experimentation and rely on established film conventions; it merely means that she hasn't brought off what she has tried in this first large film attempt. Her idea is intriguing, a good deal more so than what she has made from it.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.