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Reflections in a Broken Mirror: Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7*

by Roy Jay Nelson

In the richness of its themes, as well as in the elegance and intricacy of the bonding between technique and structure, Agnès Varda’s film, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, deserves a place among the classics of the French New Wave. It is a film about the female experience, but it has, quite properly, been overshadowed on that count by Varda’s subsequent *L’Une chante et l’autre pas*. For, in a broader sense, it is a comment upon the human experience, in which camera movement, editing technique, and what I shall call “simultaneous analogy” in shot composition cooperate to create an unusual relationship between viewer and motion picture. These pages will seek to define that relationship in terms of the innovative techniques that produce it.

The film’s central character is Cléo Victoire, a rising young singing star with three 45 rpm records to her credit. She has an abdominal tumor, and she is awaiting the results of a biopsy to learn whether or not it is malignant. We will live with her the last ninety minutes of her waiting, until the diagnosis from the doctor at the film’s end. We follow her from 5:00 until 6:30 p.m. (the title, “from 5 to 7,” is surely an intentional misnomer) on 21 June 1961 from the apartment of a fortune teller (who sees dire things in the cards), through the streets of Paris to a café, to a hat shop, to her own apartment for a rehearsal with her music director, to a visit with a friend, and to a lonely walk in the Parc Montsouris, where she meets a pleasant young man named Antoine, who accompanies her at last to the hospital.

This simple story is undergirded by a number of structuring antitheses, some of which speak to us on a highly philosophical level, such as the apparent conflict between time and Bergsonian duration and the opposition of art, film, and fiction on the one hand to reality on the other. Antitheses are present on a more practical level, too: the film opposes superstition to science as predictors of reality, as we move from the fortune teller’s parlor at the outset to the hospital at the end; it also sets the artificial in opposition to the natural in the contrast of Paris street scenes to shots in the Parc Montsouris. On this level, Varda creates a series of visual relationships, notably involving clothing, which function as symbols. These relationships are created in mirrors, which are strikingly omnipresent in the first two-thirds of the film and totally absent from then on. The means selected for revealing these antithetical relationships are highly original.

Most obviously, this is a film about time. About every five to seven minutes, a
title is flashed on the screen to tell us what time it is in Cléo’s world. By their semiotic separateness as “symbolic” signs (in the Peircian sense) in what is essentially an iconic and indexic medium, these titles seem a direct message from the scenarist herself, an indication that measured time for Varda is identical with measured time for her heroine. What is more striking is that Cléo’s time coincides precisely with projection time, with spectator time. Her ninety minutes of waiting are our ninety minutes of anticipating the same disclosure. Thus the time titles and our watches perform an identical function, providing an objective, mechanical measurement. But waiting is not a mechanical function; sometimes time drags for us (and Cléo, when reminded that this 21 June is the longest day of the year,
replies, “Le plus long, c’est bien vrai”), while on other occasions time seems to fly. Cléo lives her ninety minutes, not by the watch, but in a kind of subjective duration that, like the title of the film, is a vague and variable period. Since our questions and our interest in Cléo parallel her questions and interest in life, we experience the film in a similar subjective time, which the time titles reinforce by being apparently (but not really) too soon or too long in coming. Near the midpoint of the film, we watch with Cléo a little movie, shot at sixteen frames per second and projected at twenty-four. The apparently rapid gestures of the actors remind us that time speed is a matter of perception.

The precise conjunction between fictional time and “real” or “spectator” time is but one facet of the larger antithetical coincidence of reality and fiction. Varda uses nothing but natural settings: real Paris cafés and apartments, the real Parc Montsouris, and above all the real Paris streets that make up Cléo’s itinerary. And, just as the constant reminders of objective time make us aware of our subjective duration, so the recognizability of the settings awakens us to the subjectivity of our perceptions. At one point, for example, as Cléo rides the bus to the hospital, we perceive a funeral parlor in the background. Is it a portent of doom, or is it simply a real component of the street being filmed? It is, of course, both. We know that fictional contexts influence our perception, but we are also aware that real-life contexts affect us similarly: like time speed, our reality and our fiction are what we perceive them to be, and perception is a function of mental context, or “mind set.” The film uses other techniques to make us aware of the relativity of the distinction between art and reality. The credits tell us that Michel Legrand is the musical director of the film, and then we recognize him on the screen in the role of Bob, Cléo’s musical director. In the little film we view with Cléo, we spot Jean-Luc Godard and Anna Karina in starring roles, along with Jean-Claude Brialy, Eddie Constantine, and Allan Scott: Cléo lives among the same “real” actors as we do. When Cléo listens to the radio news, we hear verbatim with her the “Europe N° 1” newscast from 21 June 1961 (p. 46). The line between fiction and reality blurs as the news blends with Cléo’s story: we discover that singer Edith Piaf is beginning to recover from a serious illness, and the reported events of the Algerian War seem to foreshadow a fact that we will learn later—that Antoine is a soldier about to return to the fighting. Thus, as the distinction between fiction and reality fades, the relationship of context to perception appears ever more nearly identical on both levels.

Perception, of course, differs with the individual, and Varda’s characters provide a number of differing perceptions. The fortune teller sees disease in Cléo’s cards, and her mind set places the discovery in a melodramatic, fatalistic context. She tells an accomplice: “Les cartes disent la mort. Et moi j’ai vu, j’ai vu le cancer. Elle est perdue” (p. 20). At the end of the film, the doctor, the man of science, sees cancer too, but in his world, nothing is sure: he foresees a possible cure. His tone is far from melodramatic: “Il ne faut pas vous inquiéter outre mesure,” he says to Antoine. “Elle aura un traitement un peu fatigant, mais je pense qu’après deux
mois de rayons, tout ira bien” (p. 104). Superstition and medical science are two contexts from which to view reality, and the film gives them equal validity. Whether or not the fortune teller’s predictions “come true” in the film depends upon the individual viewer’s interpretation of them, and that interpretation is a function of his or her own mind set, of the context in which the film is viewed.

But the film is far more subtle in evoking individual differences in perception. The recurring time titles divide the film into thirteen “chapters” (Varda’s term, p. 8) and a prologue. Each title gives us not only the time, but also the name of a character: “Cléo de 17h 25 à 17h 31” or “Bob de 17h 31 à 17h 38.” The camera style varies depending upon the personality of the character named, as if we are experiencing the moment with his or her psyche. Only occasionally is the camera totally subjective (placed in a character’s position). Usually it is camera movement and distance that provide a key to the character’s personality. In those chapters that express the viewpoint of Angèle, Cléo’s motherly secretary, maid, and old friend (notably chapters 2 and 4), the camera moves little, with the exception of a taxi ride seen through Angèle’s eyes, and views the action from some distance. Shots are distinct and descriptive, allowing us to understand each character’s relation to the surroundings. Within this stable framework, Cléo seems to dash about aimlessly, so that the camera helps us to judge her as capricious, just as solid, stable Angèle views her. Chapters representing Cléo’s personality, however, are filmed with sinuous tracking shots, now close in, now far off, in which zooming and panning combine. We are at times disoriented, unsure where we are going next, ill at ease in the film as Cléo is in her world (chapter 3, Cléo’s purchase of a hat, is an excellent example). At other times, the camera transports us to an imaginary world. In chapter 7, Cléo belts out a love song in rehearsal with such feeling that we know she is imagining herself singing in concert; the camera tracks around her in a slow, tight semicircle, with its eye ever on her, so that she acquires for us the dramatic presence of a nightclub singer on stage: we share her fantasy. Bob, the music director, is a cocky, self-centered humorist; in his chapter, the camera bounces about as if casually hand-held, and there are frequent noticeable cuts. This lack of respect for audience sensitivity reflects his lack of regard for others. Thus, in defining each chapter by camera behavior, Varda makes us aware of the coexistence of various perspectives.

This emphasis on multiple perspectives serves to focus our attention on a specific kind of seeing: the perception we have of ourselves. Indeed, Cléo’s self image is the fundamental subject of the film. In its development, clothing is important, and mirrors play the central role.

For the first twenty minutes of the film, Cléo wears a bright, sleeveless frock, with big, whimsical polka dots, over a dark underskirt. This costume makes of her the very caricature of a starlet, calling attention to her bright, “anything-goes” personality and to her gender-related physical characteristics. The fact that the audience is aware of the mental anguish that neither the dress nor the cupid’s-bow mouth can conceal makes the clothing stand out as a costume, quite separate from the person beneath. When, in a hat shop, she picks out a little, pointed, fur-trimmed bonnet, the costume is complete: she is a female clown. For the second
twenty minutes, during which she spends a few minutes with her lover and then rehearses her songs, Cléo is at home, and she wears a hip-length lace slip and a feather-trimmed négligée, fastened only at the bust. She retains the blond coiffure she has had from the beginning: a bouffant style, with ram’s-horn curls on the side and a braid up the back of her head, spilling out in flippant ringlets across the top and a few errant bangs in front. This excessively styled creation, in conjunction with the frilly, revealing négligée, produces another caricature: the sex kitten—and the numerous real kittens that frolic on her bed reinforce the message. But Cléo’s self-image is changing, and the anger that bursts forth at the end of the rehearsal, when she shouts, “vous m’exploitez!” (p. 59), again points up the distinction between person and costume. Now Cléo will move to harmonize her personality and her attire. She removes the ridiculous wig, revealing shorter, blond hair, which she combs back, leaving a simple curl over the left ear. She puts on, for the second half of the film, a simpler black dress, with a pleated skirt, an elegant matching stole, and a pendant. For 1961, this is natural urban apparel, and the effort to be natural, to understand what “natural” means, will accompany Cléo as she spends time with her friend Dorothee, a sculptor’s model, with whom she sees the little film; as she walks in the natural surroundings of the Parc Montsouris, where she meets Antoine, who seems to know so much about nature; as she rides the bus to the hospital, where, in a little garden, she will finally face the doctor. Thus Cléo’s costumes divide the film into two vaguely symmetrical segments—forty minutes of demeaning costumes and fifty minutes of natural refinement—as Cléo, like a modern-day Alice, returns to reality through her psychic looking-glass.

But it is the film’s visible mirrors that connect the clothing motif to the theme of perception. They abound in the first half of the film, and Cléo seems to depend upon them for reassurance. At the fortune teller’s, she is already adjusting her hair before a mirror as she wipes away a tear. But it is in the vestibule of the soothsayer’s building that the first striking mirror photography occurs, a technically difficult mise en abyme, in which we see Cléo looking at herself in a glass, reflected in a mirror opposite, so that we observe an apparently endless succession of Cléos gazing at an infinite parade of reflections of herself. As Cléo adjusts her appearance in one mirror, the second glass performs the function of an external observer, and we thus obtain our first clue to the significance of mirrors in the film. For Cléo is not merely looking at herself, putting on a brave face for herself; she is observing herself as perceived by others as well. Indeed, her courageous expression is created for what she believes others will expect of her. She is becoming other people’s perception of her, as others influence her to change so as to influence others, in an endlessly repeating pattern like that of the mirrors.

Later, in the hat shop, a startling array of mirrors allows us to see Cléo full-face and in profile at the same time. Each mirror is another eye, as it were, reminding us that Cléo makes clothing choices ostensibly for herself (full-face mirror), but really for her public (in profile). Here again, with Cléo as observer of herself being observed, she becomes increasingly aware of the function others have in the creation of her being. This awareness, revealed to us by the mirrors, will shortly
lead her to see those who are managing her career as exploiters. By insisting upon selecting all of her music, Bob is creating a public image of Cléo, which, however profitable it may be for her, is artificial, since it does not spring from her own nature. After her rebellion at the rehearsal, she returns to the streets in the black frock, only to catch sight of herself in a restaurant mirror; this time she reflects (voice over): “Cette figure de poupée, toujours la même . . . . Je ne peux même y lire ma propre peur. Depuis toujours je pense que tout le monde me regarde et moi je ne regarde personne que moi. C’est lassant” (p. 61). Then, in the Dôme café, where mirror-covered pillars refract her image in their multiple facets, she plays one of her records on the juke-box and notes the total absence of public interest. As she leaves, in the film’s only series of flashbacks, she sees faces that have looked at her on that day—the fortune teller’s melodramatic stare, Bob’s sharp, proprietary look, her lover’s romantic eyes, wide-eyed leers of old men in the street—and the viewer becomes consciously aware with Cléo that the true mirrors of our existence are the eyes of others.

But there are many eyes, as the series of flashbacks suggests, and Cléo projects many images, each of which is conditioned less by the real Cléo than by the mindset, or “context,” of the viewer. At three points in the film, the fragmentation of our being by the multiple judgments others pass on us is suggested by mirror images. In the first café, where Cléo meets Angèle, the walls are covered with paneled mirrors. Cléo and the spectator see her image broken by a joint between two reflecting panels. She quickly moves, so as to become a whole image in a single panel, and we may read the shot as suggestive of her body, broken by illness. But the faceted mirrors in the Dôme are clearly the forerunners of the flashbacks: Cléo’s identity is fragmented, too. Now the two ideas blend: her self image is fractured by the multifarious demands those who know her make upon her, and her desire to fulfill these demands is a cancer of uncontrollably dividing cells within her brain, splitting her personality as surely as the physical cancer is breaking her body. Finally, while she is with Dorotheé, the model drops her purse, and the hand mirror shatters on the stairs. As Cléo stoops to pick up the pieces, we see several reflections of her own eye in the broken glass. Bad luck? For superstitious Cléo, yes. But, since this is the last mirror we shall see in the film, the event contains an inherent suggestion that Cléo has broken free of her enslavement to mirrors. She had enclosed herself figuratively in a protective glass incubator, like one we are pointedly shown late in the picture; it had become the “cercueil de verre” mentioned in a song of hers (p. 58). Now the glass is broken, and she will spend the last half hour on the screen free, learning how to be herself in a fragmented, ambiguous world.

The little film-within-the-film, in which a man commits a grotesque error because he is wearing dark glasses, provides a first lesson: the costumes we don to protect ourselves from exterior harm change our own perception of the outside world. If Cléo has been dressing in order to influence others (and she once wears sun glasses in a ridiculously unnecessary effort to remain incognito), it is partly because she is too self-centered. Others are best seen as people, not as mirrors. Dorotheé provides a second lesson, in her willingness to share Cléo’s superstitious
fear, although she herself is not superstitious. After a frightening shot, filmed through a bullet-splintered pane of glass in the Dôme café, Dorothee explains, “j’ai peur de la peur des autres” (p. 83), and her awareness of differing mind sets underscores the unreliability of human “mirrors.”

The third lesson comes from the young soldier, Antoine, in the Parc Montsouris. He accosts Cléo near a waterfall, and, although we see only distorted reflections in the stream, it is the nearest we come to a mirror in the final third of the film. In her introductory notes to the hat-shop sequence, Varda writes that Cléo moves about among the mirrors as if in an aquarium, adding, “L’eau + le cristal = le miroir” (p. 29). If the broken pane of glass at the Dôme represents the destruction of the superficial crystal, then the stream in the park may be the living water underneath, in which Cléo discovers her natural self. When she learns that Antoine will soon return to the Algerian fighting, she understands that many others, besides herself, may be on the way to an early grave. Antoine’s conversation, full of cheerful trivia, will help her live the last hour of this day of the summer solstice, when the sun passes from the House of Gemini into the House of Cancer. Viewing him as a human entity and not as a mirror, Cléo sheds her role of starlet and tells him her true name, Florence, which he immediately associates with flowering nature. His conversation is a continuous lesson on the beauty of our many-faceted world. Nudity for him, for example, is both erotic (flesh as desirable) and touching (flesh as mortal, pp. 96–97). Learning from him to accept antitheses as merely two simultaneous perceptions of the same reality, she can now believe in both superstition and science; she can now accept her physical beauty and her physical mortality, and she can live both in subjective duration and in measured time, telling Antoine first, “Il nous reste si peu de temps” (p. 102), and then, “On a tout le temps” (p. 103). For herself, she is no longer a reflection, but a work of art, a living sculpture, perhaps, or a cubist painting in which all her facets are visible at once.

Like most examples of French New Wave cinema, this film is highly analogical. We discover symbolic value in real mirrors, items of clothing, store fronts, and trees, not because these objects or any objects are of themselves symbolic,2 but because their relationship to other objects that compose their context transforms them into symbols. Usually such relationships are posited sequentially. So it is with the funeral parlor in Cléo, as we have seen. So it is with Truffaut’s symbolic reverse-angle intercutting throughout Les 400 Coups; so it is with the recurring, symbolic hands and hair in Resnais’s and Duras’s Hiroshima mon amour, where these images unite the three spatio-temporal zones of the film. With Varda’s mirrors, however, the symbolization is immediate, for the relationships observer-observed and transformer-transformed coexist in the same shot, indeed in the same frame. Now the analogy is simultaneous, an instantly symbolic reality. In the mise en abyme, we ourselves are drawn into the analogy as observers of the observer: instantly we are part of the signified, and the metaphor is applied to us.

To demonstrate this simultaneity in Peircean terms, we may note that photographic images of Corinne Marchand in the role of Cléo are iconic: they resemble her. But her reflections also have indexic properties since there is a causal link between the presence of a person or object reflected and the existence of the reflection. The union of index and icon in a single image, where each creates a context for the other, renders reflections immediately metaphoric. When we look at ourselves in a mirror, the face we see (icon) becomes expressive of our intent (index), while the index (the fact that we are present and looking) confers symbolic meaning on the result (our icon in the glass). Upon this concept may be superimposed the indexic characteristic of all filmed images, since the existence of a photograph points to the presence of an observing camera. It is this secondary indexic characteristic of photography that draws the spectator into the mise en abyme: when Corinne Marchand as Cléo looks at her reflection before a camera, our presence as viewers is presupposed. Since the icon effectively represents the indexic functions, the analogy is simultaneous. The mirror image becomes an objective correlative of what Cléo imagines others see in her, and through the mise en abyme we become the others.

The conjunction of fictional time and spectator time in this film—a temporal unity even more rigid than the one harsh old Boileau demanded of classical dramatists—reinforces the principle of simultaneity. Here too, time loses its importance in the film-viewer relationship, just as identical values in either end of an equation cancel one another. But simultaneity is not unity. Varda’s film represents the coexistence of multiple viewpoints, born of numerous contexts and mind sets. Her antitheses are not self-destructive but indeed strengthen the contradictory poles of their existence. Roy Armes’ concept of the “ambiguous image” is fully applicable to this film.

In an absurd world, then, the film itself becomes a metaphor for the human condition. The film-within-the-film enhances this impression, for we observe Cléo standing in relation to a motion picture just as we are related to the film of which she is a part, and we learn from Varda’s film as she learns from Godard’s. We comprehend from the film what Cléo begins to perceive in the mirrors: that she is an actress in life, playing a role created by a male-dominated society. Since Cléo is a real actress (Corinne Marchand) from our world, the film-within-the-film creates a mirror-like mise en abyme: an actress playing an actress watching an actress playing a role. As we gaze into this abyss of repeated images, as we watch recognizable elements of our own, real Paris acquire symbolic significance in the filmic context, the screen becomes our mirror, in which Varda holds up to us our own role-playing life. And she seems to be encouraging us to shatter the mirror: from 6:30 (Cléo’s time), when the screen goes black, until 7:00, the hour promised by the title, we are on our own, without a mirror, in search of our natural selves.


These tightly unified metaphors may be too nearly perfect; it would be hard to imagine another simultaneous analogy like that created by mirrors, and one may doubt whether directors will often seek again to equate character time with projection time. Just as Racine ended French classical tragedy by perfecting it, Varda surely, with this film, put a nail in the metaphorical coffin of the French New Wave. Still, with its Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass symmetrical structure and its cubistic, kaleidoscopic, simultaneous ambiguity, it creates an unusually powerful bond between the “fictional” subjectivity of the director and the “real” subjectivity of the spectator.