

The Feminist Awakening in the French New Wave: Cleo from 5 to 7

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Abstract: *Cleo from 5 to 7*, directed by Agnès Varda, represents a significant work within the French New Wave movement, reflecting feminist ideologies influenced by the second wave of feminism. This paper explores how the film transitions the protagonist Cleo from an object of the male gaze to an independent subject, embodying feminist and postfeminist concepts. Through analyzing visual metaphors, narrative structure, character development, and cinematic techniques such as location shooting, subjective camera angles, and innovative editing, this article demonstrates how the film advocates for women's self-awareness and autonomy.

Keywords: *Cleo from 5 to 7*, French New Wave, Feminism, Postfeminism, Male Gaze, Narrative Structure

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1. Introduction

Cleo from 5 to 7, directed by Varda, holds significant importance as a representative work of the influential French New Wave movement. Released in 1962, the film stands as a prominent example of feminist film with a non-linear narrative. Its exploration of society's perception of women and the transformative process from being an object of the male gaze to becoming the subject of observation to others. Ultimately, Cleo achieves an awakening of self-awareness. This discussion will delve into the themes of feminism in film and the distinctive of the French New Wave.

2. Historical Context and Feminist Influence

2.1 Second-Wave Feminism

During the film's production in the early 1960s, it coincided with the second wave of the feminist movement, which spanned from the 1960s to the 1980s. Director Varda was also a feminist. Influenced by the second wave of the feminist movement, this film also reveals the ideology of this movement. The second sex by Beauvoir was most influential in the second wave of

feminism and made an intellectual connection with the film. Beauvoir said, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." It means women only become women because of the circumstances of their society. Cleo, portrayed through the male gaze, exemplifies the film's engagement with Beauvoir's ideas. Thus, the film's core thematic elements align closely with Beauvoir's intellectual contributions^[1].

2.2 Postfeminism Precursors

Cleo from 5 to 7 is seen as a precursor to the postfeminism born in France in the late 1960s. Strictly speaking post-feminist ideas had not yet emerged at the time of the film's release, but many postmodern feminist ideas are reflected in the film. "Features of postfeminism included an emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency, a resistance to interrogating structural gendered inequalities." (Banet-Weiser, 2018) Feminism, with its emphasis on gender differences and confrontation between men and women, has exacerbated the damage done to women's dignity. The right way to fight for women's rights is by making them the main subject of

society and by fighting for their rights on a spiritual level. Cleo shows maximum characteristics of personality. The audience is led to perceive the world through her feminine perspective, while simultaneously avoiding any suggestion of hostility towards men or the elimination of gender differences. This aligns with the principal tenets of postfeminism^[2].

3. The Cinematic Depiction of Feminist Awakening

3.1 Visual Metaphors and Symbolism

The film opens with a colour close-up of the hand and the cards. As the camera pans away from the cards, the scene shifts from colour to black and white as Cleo sadly leaves the soothsayer's house. After this point, the entire film is narrated in black and white. This alteration in color can be interpreted as an external manifestation of Cleo's inner world, where the unease of death brings her into a black-and-white world of fear and sadness. This is a metaphor that Varda uses throughout the film: when the heart is overwhelmed by sadness, then the external world as perceived visually also assumes a mournful disposition^[3].

3.2 Gaze and Feminist Subjectivity

The film's story is broken down into three 'gazes': the gaze of the camera, the gaze between the characters and the gaze of the audience on the screen. (Muley, 1975) These three gazes are all related to the gaze of a man on a woman. In most films of the time, the male perspective was the dominant one. Audience with a male perspective to women. Women in this convention often acted as passive objects to be gazed at by men. On the other hand, Varda offers the possibility of an alternate space for women in cinema, in which women can occupy both the subject and object of the gaze, challenging the prevailing convention. According to Mulvey (1975) "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly." One of the

important ways for women to gain the affection of men is to objectify themselves, to become beautiful specimens for the male gaze. The motif of the mirror is recurrently employed throughout the film as a visual device to depict Cleo's feminist awakening. The mirror appears eight times in the film, on the first two occasions Cleo used it to check the appearance under the male aesthetic. The first appearance is when Cleo looks into the hallway mirror as she leaves the divination house. She needs to look in the mirror to confirm her beauty as a way of removing the fear of death. And this represents the objectification of the female self, a time when Cleo's subjectivity is also lacking. As she walks through the streets of Paris, she sees herself in the mirror again, and it becomes clear to her that she is not really herself in the mirror image, and she begins to see the world through her own eyes. It is not until later when the mirror is shattered that the persona molded by external forces dissipates. She realises that women should be able to create their value, and when she finds her true self, her sense of self as a woman is awakened. When she changes into a black dress and hat and returns to the street, Cleo becomes the observer and the film starts to use a lot of subjective shots to look at Paris from her female perspective. Prior to this change, she exists as the object of the male gaze. The unequal male gaze in this film comes from Cleo's boyfriend who only sees her as a "doll" without independent consciousness and the composer who writes songs for her but doesn't recognize her vocal talent. "In which they are stripped of will and autonomy. Woman is dehumanized by being represented as a kind of automaton, a 'living doll'." Cleo is initially depicted wearing a wig and an elaborate nightgown with feathers. Whether deliberately posing as a vehicle for male desire or not, she too internalizes this doll-like existence. Cleo's 'doll' appearance serves as a poignant example of how societal gender stereotypes subtly confine women. That's why her costume change is important in developing

Cleo's self-perception. As it was not allowed to wear new clothes on Tuesdays in France, Cleo has to insist on new clothes. This was the first time she had achieved resistance to the other and she began to question the way others saw her. This transformation serves as a catalyst for Cleo's liberation and marks the commencement of her journey towards self-discovery. As Beauvoir says, costume is so important to many women because they allow them to recreate the outside world and their inner selves by illusion. Cleo reconstructs her inner self by changing her clothes, which is also the visual expression of Beauvoir's idea in *The Second Sex*^[4].

4. Stylistic Features of the French New Wave

4.1 Location Shooting and Innovative Cinematic Techniques

One of the key signs that this film is a New Wave film is that Varda uses a lot of exterior location shooting in this film. The preference for location shooting is an important feature of

French New Wave films. The streets are where the majority of the film is shot on location, and Varda takes a direct approach to the streets of Paris with random shots of the streets, showing the citizens of Paris in the 1960s in a way that the protagonist wandering. Furthermore, Varda incorporates elements of the political and societal realities of the era, such as allusions to the Algerian War, thus intertwining the world's political backdrop with the film's narrative. The camera is placed in a female perspective to create the possibility of empathy with the protagonist's identity. Several tracking shots are used to follow Cleo along the streets of Paris. In one sequence she goes against the crowd. This is where Varda extensively uses subjective shots, close-ups, hand-helds and long shots. On the one hand, Paris is seen through Cleo's subjective perspective; on the other hand, Cleo's anxiety is shown. The utilization of handheld cameras to capture tracking

shots and the relationships between characters is also a clear sign of innovation in New Wave films.

4.2 Non-linear Narrative Structure

The whole film is divided into a narrative story of counterpoint, with 45 minutes as a dividing line. The film's non-linear narrative approach is novel. The time in narrative time is aligned with real film time, and this fusion of objective and subjective time allows for a new viewing experience for the audience. Cleo encounters a number of different people and scenes in the film, which do not appear and disappear in chronological order. Instead, they are presented fragmented, fused through editing. The narrative and editing style use a typical New Wave style of editing. It breaks the continuity followed by conventional camera cuts, omitting the process in time or space. Varda particularly emphasizes the portrayal of her characters' inner emotions. For instance, when Cleo comes down the stairs Varda uses three shots with jump cuts to show Cleo in a trance. The film also adheres to the New Wave tradition of concluding with an ambiguous ending, leaving the audience uncertain about whether Cleo has cancer. Cleo has found true freedom in this hour and a half^[5].

5. Musical and Emotional Resonance

The film's soundtrack is by the famous French composer by Michel Legrand, plays an active role in complementing Cleo's emotional fluctuations, contributing to the overall atmosphere and help to portray the characters' inner workings. For example, the din of the café matches the irritable state of Cleo, when she is still living in fear of death. After meeting Antony the music becomes soothing mirroring Cleo's newfound serenity. The two songs that Cleo sings at home in the film, both in tune and in the lyrics, present two very different states and emotional expressions, generating a poignant contrast. Cleo is the unreasonable child to them

during the first song, and in the second song she decides to escape from this bondage.

Conclusion

Overall, Cleo from 5 to 7 is a successful feminist film, the coherence between subjective and objective time allows the audience to experience Cleo's emotional and inner world as she completes her exploration of

self-knowledge. The transformation of Cleo from an object gazed at by others to a subject gazing at the world calls for a woman not to define herself through the eyes of others but to know the world through her own eyes. The director's unique New Wave style of filming and non-linear narrative make it an iconic work of the French New Wave.

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