

CHAPTER TWO

Feminism and *Cléo from 5 to 7*

The roles of women

Released in 1962, Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*Cléo from 5 to 7*) appeared before the majority of the developments of feminist theory that I've discussed in the previous chapter. As we will see in the following filmic analysis, however, the film remarkably addresses many of the issues still being debated today. The practice of feminist film theory can take many forms, as is evident in the plethora of feminist ideas and approaches already discussed. The following feminist filmic analysis, however, will concentrate specifically on the key analytical approaches developed in the previous chapter, namely analyzing the framing of the female body, the way spectator engagement is created, and the female auteur. Varda is a female auteur whose films dwell on the contradictions of ideal female beauty, expectations of women, and social definitions of women. In this way, her films not only are an excellent example of feminist filmmaking but they also mirror the investigations of feminism itself as they express in their aesthetics the contradictory roles that women are caught between. The exploration of these contradictions is, in Varda's cinema, the central feminist political project.

Varda's films work to engage the spectator to think through the questions that the films raise from the starting point of these antagonisms that women face within the definition of femininity. In other words, this cinema presents its own contradictory relations (between objects in the frame, between genres within one film, between surrealism and realism) in order to highlight the tenuous place of women in society.

One of the exciting aspects of filmic analysis is that for as much as the theorist brings thoughts and ideas to the text, the text also speaks to and broadens those ideas or challenges them. No theory escapes from a textual analysis unscathed. In addition, one of the key aspects to filmic analysis is linking the text to its historical and cultural moment, which allows further understanding of the film itself and provides a moment for current theory to intersect with past artistic expressions. In this way, feminist film theory works to bring past experiences of women, present concerns, and future goals together with the feminist insights that have come out of these moments especially as they might engage a single film or a group of films, which allows us to see the conflicts and contradictions underlying these expressions. "Engage" is a key word here because it indicates an interaction between the film and theory rather than simply an imposition of the theoretical idea. Engagement strengthens and advances the theoretical investigation.

The first gesture of feminist film theory here is to choose *Cléo from 5 to 7* as the film of study and by extension Agnès Varda. Feminist theory works to tackle the experience and philosophical questions of femaleness and femininity as they are located in society. The questions that feminist theory asks are often born out of historical moments of inequality for women as well as the way women are caught between contradictory ideals in society. Thus, part of the project of feminist theory is to theorize the position of people who, though they make up half the population, are often erased from history, politics, and culture.

When feminism acknowledges moments in which women are purposely unacknowledged or barred from participating in an aspect of society, it is also laying bare the very structure of patriarchy. Feminists thus point out that if women are relegated to certain roles in society, this implies that men are not immune to corresponding roles. Men are similarly caught in this trap of patriarchy, and even though they seem to benefit from it, they also lose the freedom to stray too far from what patriarchy expects from them. Thus, many men identify themselves as feminists and engage in feminist theory when they analyze films or culture. Male feminists want women to have equality and adopt the feminist mantra from this concern, but they also recognize the limits that patriarchy puts on masculinity itself.

Nonetheless, even with all the feminist film theory being performed by men and women, it is still rarer for female directors or the films that they make to be written on or taught in classrooms. Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Akira Kurasawa, and Jean Luc Godard, for example, have had many books written about them and often appear on syllabi. This is why feminist film theory must concern itself with the disproportionate number of female filmmakers who gain scholarly consideration. Even the most famous female auteurs, such as Jane Campion, Katherine Bigelow, Julie Dash, and others, still rarely receive scholarly or pedagogical attention. It is still a feminist act to choose to study and write on a female directed film.¹

This does not mean that female directed films are by any means ideologically pure. It just means that their voices are still often unheard so that we don't even have an opportunity to grapple with them, agree with them, or challenge them. Illuminating female-directed films continues to be just one aspect of feminist film theory, which can just as easily analyze any kind of film for its feminist or patriarchal ideas and the way that women are forging their identities in the midst of the contradictory ideals within the social order. Here, however, I will be concentrating on Agnès Varda and her film *Cléo from 5 to 7*.

Agnes Varda was born in 1928 in Brussels, Belgium, but moved to France at an early age and has spent the rest of her life in France. For this reason, despite her birthplace, she sees herself as a French filmmaker, and this is how critics conceive of her as well. She began as a photographer, and her first serious artistic position was with the Théâtre National Populaire. As a photographer at this vibrant important theater, Varda worked with actors and staged photos for plays and advertising. Her approach was to make photos that were performative and creative rather than just documentary in nature. This early experience, along with her background in art history, had a formative effect on her approach to film. She had not actually seen many films when she made her first film, but her involvement in aesthetics and composition had already been significant. Over the course of her career, she has made more than twenty feature films and just as many short films, as well as several made for television films. Her feature films have been both fiction and documentary, as have her shorts.

Varda's relationship to feminism

Varda has been a politically concerned person all her life. She has often discussed her passion for equality for all people in interviews. At times, she articulated her feminist views more overtly—such as when she publicly signed a protest against anti-abortion laws—but other times these views were just part of her own worldview that fueled her creative choices. Putting women at the center of her narrative films and her documentary investigations was an obvious choice for her because it expressed her own interests and desires to explore a woman's adventures and experiences. And yet, in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this was a radical choice that had political ramifications, since the majority of the films produced during that period had

male protagonists and expressed a patriarchal worldview. Wanting to reach the largest audience possible, however, Varda purposely made her main characters more apolitical and likable to the mainstream even while infusing the form of the film with flourishes that asked the spectator to question how this character's identity was formed. Even though she made these choices, her films were still far from mainstream, and this made it difficult for her to secure funding. She did at one point make her way to Hollywood, but her feminism and artistic sensibility (one of experimentation with a focus on contradiction) made her an unlikely match for a Hollywood studio. The opportunity came about because of her husband, who was also a filmmaker.

Varda met her husband Jacques Demy in the early 1960s, and they had two children. While they were both filmmakers, their films were very different: he made musicals, and she made more experimental fiction and documentary films. Demy received a contract for a film from Columbia Pictures and as a result, Demy and Varda went to California for three years. While there, Varda tried to find funding for films from studios. As Alison Smith explains: "Varda herself never secured a major studio deal, despite a number of efforts and near misses; the disappointment was probably mitigated by the relative liberty that she had in her work."² Some feel that it was during this time in California, however, that she had more explicit contact with radical US feminism, which made her own work more explicitly political. Her work that she did in California, in fact, was some of the most explicitly political work that she had done to date. For example, she did a documentary short on the Black Panthers (*Black Panthers*, 1968), another on the Vietnam War (*Loin de Vietnam*, 1967), and a short film critical of the fascist regime in Greece (*Nausicaa*, 1970). Varda herself contradicts the idea that California politicized her in her response to an interviewer who suggested that her relationship to feminism changed in the 1970s. Varda says: "I've been a feminist since I was nineteen years old, fighting for serious rights, for the same

wages, for contraception. I started early, early, really.”³ In this same interview, she also comments that she never met a US female director who wanted to talk about filmmaking in the way that she was interested in talking about it and in the way that she was able to talk about it with European female filmmakers (such as Margarethe von Trotta or Chantal Akerman).

This is an important point because it suggests that Varda was interested in how to express ideas about women on the level of form and not as interested in story or overt political activism. In this way, Varda’s feminism seemed different from a feminism based in story alone or one that relied heavily on dialogue while relying on a more conventional visual address. Varda’s approach meant that it was more difficult to receive funding, even in France where she was well known. In the same interview cited above, Varda explains that she had to fight for the money for every film that she made. And when she couldn’t find the money, she says: “I make shorts sometimes just to keep alive in my own research.”⁴ Varda’s commitment to her own vision and the life she set up for herself in France allowed for her to make decisions about the films she would make.⁵

Varda’s personal and filmic life was certainly influenced by her feminism. Varda’s artistic and political ideas come together in her own unique way—one that is experimental and focuses on the contradictions women face in their existence. Though much celebrated now, Varda was most often not included in a central way in the general history of French cinema.⁶ Feminist film theorist Cybelle McFadden points out that in order to right these historical wrongs, Varda began writing her own history, especially in *Les Plages d’Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnès*, 2008), a film about her own life and her films. McFadden explains: “Varda takes the task into her own hands: her curatorial inscription in *Les Plages d’Agnès* claims her place in French cinema, filling in the gaps left by film historians and critics.”⁷ There is one section in this film in which she specifically addresses her relationship

to feminism. In this section, she discusses—through voice-over and documentary footage—signing a protest against anti-abortion laws. She also interweaves snippets of her own film *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1986) with documentary footage of feminist protests and news of the women who publically signed this protest against anti-abortion laws along with her. In this way, Varda highlights her personal involvement in the feminist movement and suggests that *Vagabond* especially was an expression of her own feminist ideas—an expression of the anger women experience in the face of oppression.

Varda as auteur

The Beaches of Agnès also reviews Varda's long-held theory about her philosophical approach to filmmaking itself and her vision of herself as an auteur. Articulating a philosophy about your own filmmaking is, of course, not necessary for a filmmaker. There are many who make films without spending time reflecting on the process. But Varda views the formulation of her own aesthetic as part of the filmmaking process. She believes that separating the roles of writer, director, and cinematographer doesn't make sense. As the director, she contends, she expresses her ideas for the film through the writing, the shooting, the editing, and the direction of the actors.

While she often wrote her own screenplays, she felt as director she still metaphorically "wrote" the film visually even when she did not actually pen the screenplay. Thus, she coins the term "cinécriture," filmic writing, to describe her approach. She feels that cinécriture better suggests the integrated process of filmmaking that she employs. Clearly, it also positions the director as author of the film—and thus constitutes Varda's own independently developed version of auteur theory. Considering the lack of women in filmmaking at this time,

asserting her position as the director whose vision shapes the entire film also asserted her right to make those decisions. Whether for her own benefit or for those she worked with, this theory about filmmaking had feminist ramifications because it allowed her to better understand and assert her role as director in a predominantly male world.

It also allowed her to focus on exploring her ideas on every level, from the image, to sound, to editing and narrative structure. One of the notable aspects of Varda's work throughout her career is her willingness to experiment and follow her desire wherever it may lead. Ideas for Varda find their expression in a wide variety of forms. The form may be the feature length narrative *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1961), the short documentary *Black Panthers*, or a video installation piece *My Shack of Cinema* (1968–2013), which was on display in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition "Agnès Varda in Californialand" in 2013. While her choice of format was also tied to the material changes in her own life, her philosophy of seeing film as cinécriture allowed her to consider everything she made as a total expression of her ideas.

To understand Varda as an auteur and to better analyze *Cléo from 5 to 7*, it is imperative to investigate her films before and after she made *Cléo from 5 to 7*. I will do this as I explain some of her stylistic and thematic concerns that express her vision, even though this vision changes over time. Her theory of cinécriture itself reveals her intense interest in the way that form itself can express ideas. These ideas do not have to be specific to the plot but are often broader and philosophical. One stylistic and theoretical interest of Varda—inextricably tied to her feminism—is the power of contradiction to reveal deeper meaning about people and their communities. For Varda, this can be contradictory images, storylines, genres, camera movement, and so on. For example, in her first film *La Pointe Courte* (1955), she combines two different stories that do not necessarily go together. In an interview, she explains that she based the film formally on William Faulkner's *The*

Wild Palms, in which one chapter tells the story of a couple and the other chapter tells the story of two escaped prisoners.⁸ The novel moves back and forth between the two storylines, and they never intersect. *La Pointe Courte* also has two stories that run throughout the film, one about a couple whose relationship seems in question and one about the inhabitants in the village where they are staying. The loose link between the stories is that the man is from this village, but other than this tenuous connection, the two story lines do not engage each other. Instead, the engagement happens in the way the viewer experiences these two stories as they alternately unfold. When talking about the form of this film, Varda says, "It could be seen as the clash between private life and social life, which can never be joined. It's a contradiction that's inherent in our lives and that I think everyone understands. I tried to express it on film, calmly, abstractly."⁹ She does this by showing two different ways of seeing, as she puts it, that embody the two different worlds which exist together but can never come together.

One of the ways she expresses this is by staging and shooting the actors differently in the separate story lines. The storyline about the couple is much more theatrical and stylized. They stand or sit while they talk to each other, and sometimes the film positions them quite unnaturally toward each other as they say their lines. Varda instructed them to say their lines flatly and not to try to put too much emotion into the lines, so the acting also comes off as unnatural. The storyline about the village, however, is shot in a much more documentary-like manner as the camera wanders around the village. Additionally, the actors employ a much more naturalistic style and indeed Varda even employed local townspeople to essentially play themselves. And while it expresses the story, this engaging film also expresses Varda's theories about the inherent clash between private and public life—the contradiction between these two modes of existence.

The spectator generates the meaning of the film that arises from the clashing of these two different story lines and Varda

is particularly interested in this engagement. She comments: "I tried to avoid taking the easy way out when you tell a story you explain everything and then its over. I'm more interested in trying to find something that forces me to find a new filmic language that continually sets up new relationships between the person who envisions and creates the film and the person who sees it. I'm always thinking of the viewer."¹⁰ In this way, Varda actively works to create an engagement between the viewer and her films in which the viewer is part of the meaning making process.

Varda's idea of actively engaging the viewer leads to her approach of employing many different styles of filmmaking often within a single film.¹¹ Or she chooses two styles that normally directors don't use together, as she does in the contrasting storylines in *La Pointe Courte*. She often combines narrative conventions with documentary conventions or with performance art tropes, and the effect is that she confounds genre expectations. She does this with more complexity as she matures as a filmmaker, but even her early films reveal that she does not feel constrained to just one idea of narrative filmmaking—and certainly does not feel constrained to abide by traditions and expectations followed in Hollywood mainstream cinema. But the result is not chaotic films or films that fail to satisfy the viewer. Instead, Varda is able to combine approaches in a way that engages the viewer. In this sense, Varda's approach functions as an example of privileging spectator engagement over identification. Varda is not as interested in the spectator's identifying with a character in a particular way as she is intent on the spectator engaging in actively seeing the links between the contradictions or the mixed styles and shots.

Varda is especially known for her pioneering films in which women take center stage. Simply by placing women at the center of her narratives, she defies the traditional narrative approach. For example, *Cléo from 5 to 7* depicts a popular female singer as she deals with waiting to hear a cancer diagnosis; *Vagabond* depicts the day in a life of a homeless

woman before she dies; *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000) stars Varda herself as she investigates whether the practice of gleaning excess from crop harvests still exists in France. And in films such as *La Pointe Courte*, the women constitute a central part of the town and an equal part in the relationship.

Varda's characters challenge traditional depictions and the way Varda frames the female body contributes to this non-patriarchal approach. For example, Varda investigates pregnancy in her film *L'Opéra Mouffe* (*Diary of a Pregnant Woman*, 1958). Instead of depicting a glowing happy pregnant woman, Varda explores the contradictions in pregnancy and even the philosophical questions it might bring up. She shoots the pregnant woman's body naked at times but presents the pregnant body to be analyzed in relationship to the rest of the environment. For example, she includes a shot of a huge pumpkin that the spectator can't help but relate to the pregnant belly. In analyzing this film, film theorist Delphine Bénézet remarks: "Varda's determination to question the corporeal and her desire not to limit herself to stereotyped versions of female subjectivity shows that *L'Opéra Mouffe* is as feminist as De Beauvoir's writing."¹² Clearly mainstream images of women and of pregnant women are also corporeal insofar as their main focus is the female body itself, but Bénézet suggests that Varda's way of depicting the pregnant body puts her work on par with the French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir because it provokes the spectator to think about how that body is treated by and situated in the social order. This is the polar opposite of romanticizing the pregnant body.¹³

Varda's filmmaking style and subject matter, however, do not fit comfortably into a portrait that all feminist activists or theorists might paint of a feminist filmmaker. This is not a contingent fact but a conscious choice on Varda's part. She felt that overt feminist topics or types of characters would reduce the potential number of viewers, and thus she prefers to locate the feminism into the form of her films. By

emphasizing spectator engagement through an eclectic style, Varda promotes a thoughtful spectator who would not only be engaged by the beauty of the image and the emotion in the story but also by the feminist associations that the filmmaking style promotes. As a result of this political decision, Varda often confounds feminists and non-feminists alike. She thwarts critical expectations and produces a feminism of form rather than content.

Varda and the French New Wave

Varda was not alone in the creation of an eclectic filmic style in the 1950s and 1960s in France. She was part of an exciting movement of young filmmakers eventually called the French New Wave, which refers to a group of films and filmmakers in France who overthrew existing cinematic traditions. Shooting on the streets with handheld cameras for lower budgets and often with young actors, the French New Wave experimented with new topics and styles. Scholars often say that the French New Wave movement began in 1959 and ended in 1963, but films inflected by the New Wave exist both before and after this period. Influenced by both Italian Neorealism and Hollywood films, the French New Wave brought together realist techniques (such as shooting on location in ambient light) with fictional stories of intrigue, crime, and youthful rebelliousness.

The films often brought together a sense of humor with poignant tragedy. The legend of the formation of the French New Wave is that a handful of young men—specifically, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette—who didn't know each other began to see each other at a movie house that screened an eclectic variety of Hollywood and international films. They became friends and began to write for a journal called *Cahiers du Cinéma* under the tutelage of film theorist André Bazin.

Within the pages of this journal, they analyzed films, proffered theories about filmmaking (such as the auteur theory), and considered the formal qualities that they valued and disdained in the films they had seen. Eventually, they began to make their own films and these films make up the French New Wave. Except for the films of Jean Renoir and a few others like him, the French New Wave rebelled against French cinema, which consisted largely of historical dramas and sex farces with elaborate spectacular sets along with predictable plotlines. The French New Wave was something wholly different. It brought an experimental attitude to the cinema that would define much of European cinema for years to come. When one hears the legend, the question of Varda's position within it inevitably comes up.

The legend of the formation of the New Wave doesn't include Varda, and yet Varda herself made one of the first French New Wave films. *La Pointe Courte*, made in 1955, has all the features of what would later become the French New Wave. The film was not shown publically until 1957, when many of the stalwarts of the nascent French New Wave were in the audience. This was before any of the five greats of the New Wave had made a feature film of his own. It might be too much to say that Varda herself founded the New Wave and that her film shaped the subsequent debuts of filmmakers like Truffaut and Godard, but it is the case that she merits a place in the legend.

The story of the genesis of the New Wave also excludes Alain Renais and Chris Marker, two other male French filmmakers whose initial work appeared before the most famous French New Wave films. Like Varda, their films resemble the other more famous New Wave films that would follow in their wake. Critics often call Varda, Renais, and Marker the Left Bank filmmakers of the French New Wave. They worked in a similar vein and started a little earlier, but they were not part of the *Cahiers du Cinema* group. Even still, Renais and Marker often receive more attention than Varda in film history, though more recently the accounts have corrected this oversight.

Varda's second feature length fiction film, *Cléo from 5 to 7*, falls directly in the middle of the French New Wave movement both in terms of chronology and in terms of style and theme. Varda's initial exclusion from the legend of the French New Wave and her progression into that history in the last couple decades is indeed a good example of recent attempts to correct film history that ignored female filmmakers. This type of historical reclamation is a project that a diverse group of feminists have been working on since the 1970s. There are stories like Varda's throughout the history of film in which women filmmakers were forgotten simply because of a male-oriented view of that history.

Varda's own experience of the other French New Wave filmmakers was cordial and supportive. They all were very positive about both *La Pointe Courte* and *Cléo from 5 to 7*. But Varda still felt like the odd woman out in that group. She tells about Alain Renais bringing her to meet the *Cahiers* group for the very first time and her feeling marginalized as the only woman there. About that evening, she says, "They quoted thousands of films and suggested all sorts of things to Resnais, they all talked fast, chatted brightly, and sat everywhere including on the bed. I seemed to be there by mistake, feeling small, ignorant and the only woman among the guys from *Cahiers*."¹⁴ After this, however, she did work further with some from this group. For example, Jean-Luc Godard acted in the film within the film in *Cléo from 5 to 7*.

Nonetheless, it's important to recognize that Varda made films in this environment of experimentation and risks in filmmaking. Even though she was not part of the boys club, their thought and films allowed her to do the work she did, just as her own work opened doors for their films. In many ways, they set the stage for each other, but Varda was still often the only woman on the film crew and the only woman filmmaker in the room asking for financing, which put her at a disadvantage. The fact that she was the rare woman in a male-dominated industry shaped Varda's career as a filmmaker. That said, she also carved her own path and made films that

expressed her ideas and artistic interests without catering too much to mainstream acceptance or acceptance by the male filmmakers surrounding her.

Nowhere is her unique cinematic vision more fully elaborated than in *Cléo from 5 to 7*. Even though this is just her second fictional feature, all of Varda's formal inventiveness manifests itself in this work. She creates one of the greatest feminist masterpieces in the history of cinema by enacting the contradictions of femininity and forcing the viewer to experience these contradictions without any means of escape. To watch the film properly is to recognize that the contradictions of femininity point us toward those of society—and in this way *Cléo from 5 to 7* enables us to see that feminism is not just a project of female emancipation but an emancipatory project for all of society.

The beautiful trap

Cléo from 5 to 7 opens with a scene that reveals a beautiful and famous singer, Florence “Cléo” Victoire (Corinne Marchand), may have cancer. She spends the rest of the film wandering between the people in her life and the shops, art studios, and streets of Paris as she contemplates how she feels about this news. In her wanderings, she confronts existential crises and many unanswered questions. At times, it is difficult to feel sympathy for this main female character because she is so enamored with her own image and so coddled by her entourage that she seems simply unlikeable. The film does not present Cléo as a feminist hero with whom we should identify—that is not Varda's brand of feminism—but rather uses her to demonstrate the contradictions of femininity. It is with these contradictions that the viewer must engage in order to recognize the film's version of feminism.

The most intense of these moments of contradiction occur when Cléo is the most uncertain about her own

identity—specifically, when Cléo is attempting to study her own image in mirrors that she finds throughout her journey. Varda reveals Cléo's image in the mirror as becoming more and more fractured as the film progresses. These interactions with her mirrored image are both the moments of Cléo's greatest pain and anxiety, but they are also the strongest moments of engagement for the spectator with an otherwise unappealing heroine. These moments are also some of the most existential moments in the film as Cléo explicitly wonders who she is and how her beauty relates to her identity. The course of Cléo's travels also formally brings her beauty into contact with other people's expectations and with the social fiber of Paris itself. As a result, the film is a rich text to explore the incongruent contours of female identity through feminist analysis.

Cléo from 5 to 7 is about a woman who seems to enjoy and embody her femininity as object. The film investigates the relationship between her beauty as commodity, her enjoyment of her beauty, her enjoyment of consuming products that signify femininity, and her anxiety over a possible diagnosis of cancer. It is on the level of form, however, that the film suggests the potential meaning that could come out of these relations. As the title suggests, the film is about Cléo's day from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. On the one hand, the film's title marks the time of day during which the events in the film take place. On the other hand, the title refers to French slang (a "cinq à sept") that suggests a sexual affair deriving from the time that such affairs usually took place. Despite this possible allusion in the title, Varda's film is not about Cléo having an afternoon sexual liaison but rather about Cléo having a brief but intense affair with the possibility of death. It begins with a tarot reader seeing the death card in her future and the sure diagnosis of cancer, which the tarot reader doesn't tell Cléo but is absolutely clear to the tarot reader herself. The rest of the film is about Cléo's wanderings through the city of Paris and interactions with several friends and colleagues. Each new experience is broken into chapters, as if the film had the structure of a novel.

Cléo's beauty as an anchoring aspect to her identity is announced visually at the beginning of the film but also constantly by Cléo herself. A few scenes later, we discover that Cléo is a well-known singer with several hit singles. Nearly everyone she meets (except the final man she makes friends with) comments that she is beautiful but that she is also a spoiled child (though they don't say this to her face). They all profit off her beauty (her maid, the song writers, her boyfriend) except her friend Dorothee (Dorothee Blanck), who is a model, and the friend she makes at the end of the film, Antoine (Antoine Bourseiller).

Before considering how the film investigates Cléo's beauty, it is worth taking a detour to discuss generally how society commonly thinks about and discusses beauty. When we perceive women as beautiful, we tend to link this beauty to their biology. One of the reasons the idea of female beauty is such a strong ideological idea is that it is tied to the body. One often hears: "she is lucky because she was born beautiful," or "her beauty was a curse to her," and so on. The ideology of female beauty suggests that some lucky women are born beautiful and others are not. What no one proclaims, however, is that female beauty is as much a system of signification as anything else in society. That is, ideal female beauty has its own set of social signifiers or symbols. It functions just like a language. The truth is that most women know this even if they don't articulate it. This is why women obey the customs of their culture with regard to how women should dress, wear their hair, shave, wear make-up, wear jewelry, position their body, and use their voice. As much as society would like us to believe that female beauty is just biological and some women are just lucky, there are a multitude of body and behavior modifications that signify ideal female beauty, and one must adopt these signifiers in order to gain the appellation "beautiful."

These modifications in and of themselves should cancel out the ideological strength of the idea of an inherent female beauty, but this is not the case. For example, consider the

role that celebrities play in the ideology of female beauty. A photographer will catch a photo of a female celebrity with no make up on or who is unshaven or who looks heavier than she usually does in films, and magazines will present these photos with headlines about the celebrity's decline or her inability to take care of herself. Rather than undermining the ideological link between beauty and biology, such proclamations work to solidify the average woman's belief in keeping up the rituals of beauty (such as wearing make up, shaving, or dieting).

Certain women's biology may coincidentally match the ideal beauty of their culture and historical moment, but this only serves to strengthen everyone's belief in this ideal beauty and thus strengthen women's devotion to the customs of dress and body modification that women feel they have to perform to look beautiful. Certainly, there are many people in society who overlook or see beyond this ideology. They find people beautiful for a vast number of reasons or they feel themselves to be beautiful even if society has deemed them not to be. But it is clear to anyone who looks through the internet sites, magazine pages, films, television series, and advertising that ideal female beauty is still fully operative in popular culture. It is used to sell products and it is used to influence women's behavior. It also suggests that a woman's worth is dependent on her luck to be beautiful or her devotion to the dress and body modification that signify beauty. Additionally, adhering to ideas of ideal beauty also puts women in the position of being looked at rather than looking.

The recent *Cinderella* (Kenneth Branagh, 2015) provides a contemporary yet traditional example. When Cinderella (Lily James) arrives at the ball in this and most versions, everyone turns to stare at her and is dazzled by her beauty. She walks or floats through the ball and the crowd parts while staring at her, and the prince (Richard Madden) meets her on the dance floor. As they start to dance, she says to him: "They are all looking at you." And he replies: "Oh believe me, it's you they are looking

at.” Here, Cinderella’s symbolic identity is defined completely by how others, and this means everyone in the kingdom, looks at her. And while the Prince might look quite handsome, he is not defined by how they are looking at him, and he clearly takes up the position of the one looking.¹⁵

Cléo from 5 to 7 ties these questions of beauty, looking, and women’s place in culture and popular culture to questions of death, existential crisis, and subjectivity. In doing this, Varda powerfully interrogates how ideologies of beauty shape subjectivity. To do this, she initially presents Cléo as a natural beauty in a way that seems wholly ideological. She is tall, blond, thin, and has a model’s face. Varda solidifies this by repeatedly showing people’s reactions to her beauty. They turn to stare at her on the street, and people constantly comment on her beauty. She wears flattering stylish dresses and has her hair up in a dramatic fashion. But in various scenes, Varda begins to probe this idea of Cléo’s beauty.

Varda calls the most attention to the accoutrements of Cléo’s femininity and beauty in a scene at Cléo’s apartment. The staged and nearly ridiculous nature of this scene works to counter Cléo’s physical beauty, or rather it works to emphasize all that is necessary to create this beauty. This scene stands out as the most fantastical in the film and the one in which Cléo’s beauty and her rituals of femininity seem completely staged rather than natural. The provocative aspect to this performance of femininity is that it occurs not in public but in her private home. While it is clear that Cléo performs her femininity in public or at least expects the public to notice her beauty, this scene at her house indicates that she also has to continue performing her femininity when people aren’t looking. It is significant that when she comes to a place of self-recognition at the end of the film, she is in a public space—a large park—rather than in a private space like her own home.

By locating Cléo’s authentic self-recognition in public and by emphasizing the performance that occurs in private, Varda reverses our typical conceptions of public and private. The

private world ceases to be a respite from illusory presentation of one's self and becomes instead the place of a primordial self-deception. The public world, in contrast, functions as the site where one can undergo an encounter that could collapse the performance of female beauty.

In the scene in her apartment, Cléo and her maid, Angèle (Dominique Davray), have returned from their outing (which I discuss later), and they enter Cléo's home. When they enter, we see a large white room and a large black bed. It resembles a stage rather than an apartment. Several scenes occur in the apartment that inform the spectator's understanding of Cléo's relationship to her beauty and her identity. While they are in the apartment, various people visit—Cléo's boyfriend and her songwriters. When the latter visit, Cléo practices singing her new songs with them. During these visits, Angèle cares for all her needs. When Cléo and Angèle first walk in, Cléo kicks off her shoes, and Angèle comes with slippers and helps her take off her dress to reveal a beautiful slip. In these scenes, the maid pampers Cléo like a doll or child, which is a standard way of imagining how beautiful wealthy women are treated. The clothes she wears are extremely feminine. They include a lush housecoat, which is white satin with many layers and feathers around the collar and large sleeves, as well as slippers topped with large flowers. The housecoat acts as one of the main props in the ensuing scenes, providing an interior frame within the shot of her face that signifies femininity. After stretching for two minutes, Cléo goes to lie down on her bed and requests a hot water bottle for her stomach. Angèle brings the bottle, which is in the shape of a kitten. Going along with this kitten-shaped water bottle, there are actual kittens playing in the room and on the bed.

The doorbell rings, and Angèle cautions: "Don't say you're ill. Men hate illness." With this piece of advice, Angèle acts as Cléo's femininity coach. Indeed, Angèle's job relies on Cléo's success as a popular singer and thus on her feminine beauty. As Cléo awaits her visitors, the camera frames her

in a sexual way, mimicking how a Hollywood film shoots a starlet. Varda here emphasizes the performance of femininity not only with Cléo's costume but also with camera work and with music. Cléo moves sexily on the bed, picks up a kitten and kisses it, while the white flounces of the housecoat frame Cléo and the kitten. The endless whiteness further emphasizes Cléo's type of beauty. In this shot, she resembles more a model on an advertising set than the star of a French New Wave film. Varda brings together different types of cinema in order to engage the spectator and highlight the contradictions in the creation of beauty. In other words, Varda uses the form—the set, props, camera movements, lighting, and editing—to indicate a predominant trope of female beauty. Rather than highlight this in the dialogue or the plot, Varda employs different filmic styles to engage the viewer in thinking about and questioning how the female must become beautiful.

Varda's positioning of the camera exposes Cléo's concern for constituting herself as beautiful. She keeps the camera on Cléo while Angèle shows her boyfriend in. Cléo settles herself into the bed and picks up a hand mirror to check her face, which indicates her incessant involvement in producing her beauty. She then puts the mirror down and assumes a pouty sexy look while her boyfriend walks up to her. Varda overlays a track of sentimental music that one might find in a popular romantic film, and this reveals to the viewer the clichéd nature of Cléo's actions.

Cléo takes Angèle's advice about the illness and does not reveal to her boyfriend the nature of the problem. Instead, she plays the coquette. When he finds the water bottle and asks if she's sick, she says yes. He tells her: "You're strong. Your beauty is your health." This startling line indicates that her lover openly values beauty above all other aspects of Cléo and even sees it as a magic power giving her the ability to triumph over any ailment. Her boyfriend is a successful businessman who has a lot of money, and he thus functions as the ideological complement to the beautiful woman. But due to the excessive

and fantastical presentation of this scene, Varda authors a thoroughgoing critique of both figures in this couple.

The subsequent scenes in the apartment similarly investigate the expectations that others have of Cléo and reveal that everyone considers her through the lens of her attractiveness. These scenes continue in a similar vein by including other performances of femininity. Steven Ungar points out how this occurs during the sampling of songs that she rehearses in the apartment. He says: "As they move through bits and pieces of songs, each successive composition evokes a different female persona—the woman of a thousand faces, the gold digging liar, the flirt—that Cléo seems to sample, much as she had tried on hats."¹⁶ Eventually, however, Cléo is overwhelmed by everyone's expectations of her behavior and she abruptly leaves. With this depiction, Varda underlines the oppressiveness of female beauty.

Before she leaves, Cléo abandons the markers of beauty. She changes to a simple black dress and she pulls her wig off. Underneath, she has blond hair, but it is short, cut to her chin. As she pulls it off, she says: "I wish I could pull my head off as well." This is the first moment that she articulates an adversarial relationship to her own beauty. Angèle offers to come, but Cléo says that she wants to be alone. She does stop to take a necklace and her new hat and put it on along with a shawl, which shows that her new proclamation does not extend to all her accessories of beauty. Yet this scene does mark a turning point in Cléo's ability to see how the markers of beauty that provide social status also erase her subjectivity. She leaves and immediately encounters a mirror.

Mirroring the subject

Mirrors in *Cléo from 5 to 7* serve simultaneously as symbols of femininity and sites of encounter. Cléo cannot begin to overcome her own investment in the ideal of female beauty until

she stops looking at herself in mirrors. And yet, her encounters with mirrors also seem to precipitate this emancipation as well. Looking into the mirrors, Cléo finds the ideal beauty that she works hard to attain, but at the same time she also often sees a distortion within that image. The film suggests through the framing of the female body that the distortion is her beauty itself: beauty functions as its own distortion as much as it functions as an ideal.

Cléo endeavors to see herself in the mirror, but in the end she sees only her beauty, which both defines her and obliterates her at the same time. It defines her because it provides symbolic status, economic stability, and male attention. It obliterates her because it is an ideological fantasy that does not include her own subjectivity. This antagonism at the heart of female beauty between symbolic identity and the erasure of subjectivity manifests itself in distortions in the mirror images. There are several scenes throughout the film that involve mirrors, and their appearance follows a logical progression. In other words, each mirror scene moves to a new type of distortion that adds insight into Cléo.

Mirrors play a crucial role in femininity in the contemporary world. Women spend much more time scrutinizing themselves in front of mirrors than men do, as they carefully craft their own image to fit (or possibly challenge) the social conception of ideal beauty. It might appear that the ultimate challenge to ideal beauty would be never to look in a mirror again. While various iterations of feminism (especially in the 1970s) would certainly appreciate this gesture, it might not actually address the underlying issues of beauty and femaleness in our society. This is because the mirror is not simply a mirror of ideology. They are also the site for an encounter with ideological contradictions. Varda focuses on mirrors as a way to precipitate this encounter while at the same time exposing how women are beholden to their mirrored image.

Varda's own relationship to mirrors in her filmmaking suggests that her focus on mirrors was not just a gimmick in

this one film but rather part of a lifelong investigation. Mirrors turn up often in Varda's films, and this culminates in *The Beaches of Agnes*. This film is autobiographical, and it begins with Varda on a beach that she visited often as a child. Varda has numerous mirrors of all kinds set up on the beach. The film reveals the crew setting up the mirrors and Varda telling the crew where to put the mirrors in the sand. Varda also shows herself shooting the mirrors with both still and video cameras. She takes abstract shots that often depict one mirror reflecting into another, framed by the sand and water.

In one shot, Varda faces away from the water shooting the beach and the dunes under the gray and windy sky. A well-placed mirror in the lower third of the frame, however, reflects not only the beach but also Varda filming the scene. The image offers a glimpse of Varda's own self-investigation. The mirrors here both act as reflections of real life and as beautiful art objects that abstract the landscape and thereby add something new to the scene. This is, I think, what Varda is after in her attention to the mirror.

The mirror provides a secondary source of reflection in the world, one which both doubles and abstracts from the objects it reflects. In this way, the mirror has some relationship to the movie screen, which also doubles the object that it presents. These images appear as reflections of real life, but they are also distortions of it. Women live in a world of mirrors and screens, which define a certain kind of femininity. Varda's use of the mirror questions the role that the distortion of reality plays in our lives, but her answer to this problem is not a simple rejection of the mirror image. As she sees it, one can only find the truth of one's situation through the doubled distortion of it. The distorting effect of the image must, however, become evident for the truth to manifest itself. Varda shifts and tilts the mirror, or she divides it and cracks it, in order to reflect the everyday in a new way. This allows her to create even more distortion in the mirror image. The mirror tells the truth not when it reflects perfectly what is in front of it but when it creates a revelatory distortion.

The first mirror scene comes at the beginning of the film just after Cléo has received the bad news about her future from the Tarot card reader. She stops at the lobby mirror on her way out and looks at herself. In an interior comment she says to herself: "Don't rush away, pretty butterfly. Ugliness is a kind of death. As long as I'm beautiful, I'm alive and ten times more so than others." (In French she says: "Minute beau papillon : être laide, c'est ça la mort. Tant que je suis belle, je suis vivante et dix fois plus que les autres.")¹⁷ Cléo sees her beauty as vitalizing; it renders her much more alive than others. Clearly this statement, made while looking at herself, indicates her belief in both her own beauty and the power of ideal female beauty. Cléo seeks out mirrors to confirm her beauty or to see if her beauty is dying in the way that she fears her body is. She also equates losing her beauty with death.

Cléo is fully embedded in the ideology that proclaims female beauty as the essence of a woman's identity. In this scene, she asserts her beauty's power to make her superior to others, and she looks to the mirror to deflect the prediction of death. The shot itself, however, makes another kind of commentary. The dark shadow that covers half Cléo's face undermines the confidence of her assertion. It also suggests that this very point of confidence is also the point of Cléo's erasure. Her ideal beauty elides her subjectivity. The structure of the shot challenges the imaginary validation that we want the mirror to provide. Varda shoots this scene in such a way that the mirroring effect goes on to infinity. Cléo's encounter with her own image is repeated again and again into the infinite depth of the mirror because there is a mirror on either side of the hall. Varda films Cléo looking in one mirror, but it reflects the mirror across the hall catching this action thus reduplicating her image over and over. The infinity of the mirror image reveals both its illusoriness and its distorting effect.

This repetition provides an excess of Cléo's image, an excess that turns the scene into a question instead of a reassurance of beauty. The scene is reminiscent of a similar scene of an image

of Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) endlessly repeated in a mirror when he is aging and alone in his palace in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). At the moment when he has lost everything he cares about and has given way to his anger and desperation, Welles films Kane as he walks by a mirror opposed by another mirror. The repeated image that results symbolizes the dissolution of Kane's symbolic identity and his inability to feel in control as death looms imminent.

This infinite mirroring sheds light on the repeating image in *Cléo from 5 to 7*. The two differ in that Cléo's infinite mirroring scene comes at the beginning of the film, but it also signals a crisis in her identity and the approach of death. For Cléo, the question of female beauty has a central role in the infinite mirroring in a way that it doesn't for Kane. In patriarchal society, ideal female beauty guarantees symbolic status, a status that signifies life for Cléo but which begins to seem inconsequential in the face of potential death. The repeated image here provides her comments about her vitality with a visual counterpoint that throws her assertions into question. The excess of the mirroring punctuates ideal female beauty with a contradiction that points to its eventual loss.

Mirrors themselves seduce us into believing that we can see subjectivity, that we can see ourselves in the process of seeing. They offer the illusion of unmediated insight into ourselves. But this scene makes clear that there is no such thing as pure seeing: our psychic structure and our social investments always mediate how we look, even when we look straight into a mirror. Through the excessive repetition in the mirror, Varda hints at the fantasy that women engage in when they check on their beauty in the mirror. Rather than encountering just the reality of their image, they instead encounter a thoroughly mediated version of themselves. The ideological fantasy of female beauty shapes what one sees in the mirror. But the key to ideology is that we don't notice it, especially when it is at its strongest. Thus, a woman concerned with seeing ideal beauty in the mirror cannot see the way that her seeing operates through an ideological fantasy. This is what Varda is slowly trying to

unpack in *Cléo from 5 to 7*. Varda employs distortions—here in the form of an infinite mirroring—to engage the viewer's investment in the ideological fantasy of ideal beauty.

The distortion reveals that the ideal of female beauty is not hiding a true self waiting to emerge from beneath it. If one could rip the ideological ideal of femininity away, one would not find some more authentic female subject. But this is not particular to femininity; it reflects the nature of subjectivity itself. Subjectivity is neither the symbolic identities we cling to nor the void beneath them but rather the way we are situated between the two. Subjectivity is the failure of the woman to see herself in the ideal of female beauty.

In *Cléo from 5 to 7*, to paraphrase Joan Copjec, the mirrors functions as a screen that reveals femininity to be precarious.¹⁸ Even though the mirror provides a vehicle for an ideological fantasy, it also reveals the split in subjectivity. The distortions of the mirror lead to insight for the viewer but not necessarily for Cléo within the diegesis. Varda's concern is for the viewer to see the disjunction between beauty and subjectivity. At the moment that beauty seems to affirm subjectivity, it erases it. The film exposes this contradiction in order to allow the spectator to grapple with the problem of femininity and beauty.

Another mirror scene follows directly after the one of infinite mirroring. Cléo enters a café to meet her maid Angèle but she can't cheer up because she cannot shake her existential dread. She looks into a mirror at the point where it connects to another mirrored panel, and the seam between the mirrors distorts her face. She asks her maid Angèle if death is written on her face, while the spectator sees the seam dividing her face from itself and thereby disturbing the image of female beauty. Staring at the mirror, Cléo says, "If it is, I'll kill myself." She turns to a mirror to find the image of female beauty that will anchor her, but instead she sees a distortion of her face split in two by the seam of the two panels. It is as if the distortion is death itself interrupting her beauty and, consequently, her identity. But in a few moments, a coffee and attention from the waiters relieves her feeling of dread. After she calms down

and they leave the café, Cléo and Angèle walk along the street and discover a hat shop whose window display catches their attention.

When they go into the shop, Cléo immediately brightens up. In this scene, Varda emphasizes another aspect of female beauty operative in most advanced capitalist countries—consumerism. Ideal beauty has an intrinsic connection to the act of consumption. The woman invested in ideal beauty must know how to shop for the proper beauty products (for hair, face, nails, legs, and so on) and proper services in order to maintain her adherence to the ideal. But women's relationship to consumption is dual. On the one hand, companies use women's bodies to sell products. They display the woman's body as a sexual object that the consumer identifies with the purchase of the product. In advertisements that display a woman's body, the body itself becomes the product being sold. But on the other hand, a large percentage of advertising aims at women themselves, trying to convince them to invest themselves in the ideal of female beauty. Advertising attempts to persuade women that the proper commodity will allow them to attain ideal beauty, even though the ideal exists only insofar as no one can attain it.

This message often comes in the form of ideas about the female body: that it should be skinnier, hairless, blemish-free, and wrinkle-free. Advertisements promoting ideal female beauty have been prevalent throughout the history of advertising, and they were certainly in the air when Varda made *Cléo from 5 to 7*. For instance, the tagline for the 1954 ad for Lustre-Crème Shampoo reads, "Lustre-Crème Shampoo Never Dries—it Beautifies." The advertisement suggests that dry dull hair falls short of ideal beauty and that this product will ensure that one's hair doesn't fall short. The advertisement features the celebrity actress Jane Powell, whose blond hair, blue eyes, flawless skin, and perfect make-up constitute the image of ideal beauty that Hollywood put forth in the 1950s. Stars such as Maureen O'Hara, Doris Day, Elizabeth Taylor, and Ava Gardner all appeared in similar advertisements. In an

advertising campaign such as this, it is easy to see the connection between advertising, ideological ideas of female beauty, and filmmaking. Marketing products using the female body and marketing products to women to better beautify their own bodies both reinforce the idea that women's bodies are linked to products to be bought and sold. Cléo herself embodies both sides of this dichotomy: she luxuriates in the act of shopping for a hat, and, as a popular singer, she functions as an object used to sell commodities.

The film explores the pleasure that we associate with consumerism during the scene in which Cléo and Angèle shop for hats. The first shot of this scene occurs from inside the store looking out so that the many hats in the display window frame Cléo and Angèle. Varda then cuts to close-ups of both women as they look with pleasure and interest at different hats, which Varda then reveals in reverse shots. The montage of their looks and the hats in question, along with the emotional response from the women, suggests a familiar female ritual in which women bond over their love of shopping for feminine objects. In another shot, looking dreamily at herself in the mirror while trying on a hat, Cléo says to herself: "Everything suits me. Trying things on intoxicates me." As she says this, Varda shoots a close-up of her face as Cléo puts her hands on either side and looks dreamily at herself in this hat. In this way, she acts as the epitomé of ideal beauty so much so that not only do the products make her but she makes the products: everything looks stylish and beautiful on her. Shopping almost provides a high that erases momentarily the existential crisis that Cléo had been feeling moments beforehand.

The scene poses the question whether shopping actually gives Cléo agency and thus makes her into a subject rather than an object. How might consumerism be both oppressing women and liberating them at the same time? Is this possible? Varda's investigation into this foreshadows a trend in television and film in the 1990s and 2000s that suggests that women were in fact subjects with agency when they enjoyed their consumerism and when they earned their own money

to consume these products. Varda shows this possibility but critiques it at the same time.

Contemporary versions of this idea, however, tend to glamorize this consumerism and reinforce that female empowerment meant the power to consume the products that would make you more feminine. The television series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) represents the apex of this type of feminism. Some critics celebrate the series for investigating female sexual desire, but it always manages to fold this desire into an image of ideal femininity. In analyzing this series, feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie says, “the resolution of these possibly transgressive desires into a straightforward endorsement of the joys of consumption, made possible through the female wage, re-secures a scenario of gender normativity, merely adjusted to take into account the various advantages to the social order which come about through this independent economic activity.”¹⁹ Shows like *Sex and the City* as well as films, advertising, and magazines often present consumerism as both a freeing act and one that will lead the woman back to ideal femininity. This empowered approach to achieving ideal femininity continues to reinforce older patriarchal tropes in which society encourages women to spend their energy fitting within the limited role of ideal femininity rather than abandoning this role altogether.²⁰

Varda does not celebrate this female consumerist pleasure nor does she simply denounce it through the film. Instead, she encourages the viewer to engage with the pleasure of consumption by creating a visually complex environment with mirrors that comment formally on Cléo’s shopping. Varda also comments on it narratively by placing the shopping scene next to scenes about her death and by eventually leading Cléo away from the consumerist environment at the end of the film. Varda approaches what for feminism is a very political topic—ideal female beauty and its relationship to capitalism—through the form and plot structure rather than through overt dialogue. In this way, she asks the spectator to think through this rather than telling the spectator what to think. Nonetheless, Varda

still presents an argument through the way that she poses the question: the contradictions of ideal beauty become apparent as the question of the pleasure that one takes in it arises.

In the shopping scene, Cléo strikes feminine poses for Angèle as she tries on the hats. Angèle adds another layer to the consumerist scene—that of the female viewer. Cléo's enjoyment is not just based on her enjoyment of her looks and the way the hats look on her but also on the fact that Angèle is watching her try them on. Often after putting a hat on she turns and displays it for Angèle, who nods approvingly. Angèle especially looks pleased with the way the shopping has cheered up Cléo. In this shot, Varda considers the way that ideal female beauty is as much cultivated by communities of women as by men.

The store has various square mirrors placed strategically for shoppers to admire themselves in. But they also provide added layers of signification. On the one hand, we see Cléo's reaction. On the other hand, the mirrors create an abstract landscape of female commodities, and Cléo is embedded into this landscape. Here, the distortion at the heart of beauty comes in the form of the fractured commodified female image that exists alongside the hats in the store. As Cléo wanders through the store, her image becomes increasingly fractured until a shot at the end reveals her image completely taken apart. In this shot, the reflection in a mirror shows a manikin's arm protruding through the middle of the square mirror with Cléo's face occupying the upper left corner and a small parasol she is carrying taking up the bottom left. Surrounding the square mirror are other aspects of the shop—a curtain, another mirror, a flower, as well as blurry items in the background—none of which come together in any meaningful way. The frame within a frame has no wholeness, and this indicates the fractured nature of Cléo's identity. Her face is just a small part of this collage of femininity that has no inherent coherence.

After this scene, Cléo and Angèle take a taxi and then go back to Cléo's apartment. There, they meet Cléo's boyfriend

and the musicians. But after these interactions, Cléo takes off her wig, puts on a new hat, finds a simpler dress, and heads off by herself. This marks a significant change in Cléo's relationship to the ideal of female beauty, and this change becomes apparent through her interaction with a mirror.

Just into her walk, Cléo encounters herself in a mirror on the side of a Chinese restaurant. She says to herself: "My unchanging doll's face. This ridiculous hat." In this scene, the mirror plays the opposite role than the one that it played earlier in the film. The mirror here enables Cléo to begin to see her beauty as a negative rather than as the foundation of her vitality. Her unchanging beauty that so pleases her earlier and that her boyfriend assures her is the key to her health now is as ridiculous as the hat she purchased earlier. She has lost affection for both.

The Chinese lettering on the mirror acts as the obstacle that stands in the way of Cléo's direct access to herself. But this obstacle is not an external one; it is inherent to subjectivity itself. The subject can only see itself through the obstacle or distortion, and in this sense, the Chinese lettering reveals the true function of the mirror, despite their apparent contrast. Looking in the mirror, Cléo takes off her hat and says: "I can't see my own fears." This seems like a strange statement until she subsequently reveals her appearance as the source of her fears. She says: "I thought everyone looked at me. I only look at myself." These last lines express a crisis rooted directly in the ideology of beauty within patriarchy. She realizes here that the social order that she endlessly prepares herself for does not really exist. There is no one to look at her, and even when people do look at her, they see ideal beauty rather than Cléo. They see an ideological fantasy. This gives her status, but it also completely erases her at the same time.

The mirror in this scene reveals that Cléo has no one to see her and that she herself cannot be seen. Her looking in mirrors earlier in the film now becomes clear: she was always just looking at herself. The distortion of this mirror that emerges through the Chinese lettering allows Cléo to

see what she couldn't see in the earlier mirrors—the truth of her subjectivity. For the spectator, the fracture of Cléo's subjectivity also becomes apparent. Rather than existing as a whole on the screen, Cléo appears divided in the image because Varda places the mirror behind the glass windows of the restaurant and surrounds it with white curtains that obscure the image of Cléo. Unlike earlier in the film, this scene enables the spectator's experience of Cléo's divided subjectivity to coincide with Cléo's own.

In this scene with the mirror at the Chinese restaurant, the film reveals again its attitude toward female beauty. Rather than embracing beauty or rejecting it, Varda argues for engaging this ideal in order to recognize what it can reveal. The point is to engage female beauty as an ideological fantasy in order to experience the inherent contradictions within it. Ideology offers every woman this split of being looked at and being erased by this very look. In each mirror scene, Cléo actively looks for herself, and this act of looking reveals her subjectivity—the fact that she is the only one who really sees what is happening to her, while everyone else just sees an ideal.

Dorothée and the final mirror

The next important mirror scene in *Cléo from 5 to 7* involves Cléo's friend Dorothée. Dorothée functions as a point of comparison with Cléo because she also makes money from her appearance by posing nude for art classes. And yet, there is a difference. Cléo comments multiple times that she couldn't do such a thing, that she would be too afraid that everyone would see her flaws, and that she finds posing nude too immodest. While on the one hand she embraces profiting from her own beauty on the other hand she can't embrace Dorothée's version of this. Dorothée, however, seems more carefree. She comments that she enjoys her body instead of being proud of it. This

comment is a critique of Cléo since it is clear that she is quite proud of her looks and that they are the foundation for her symbolic identity.

In the way that she films Dorothée's nude body, Varda creates several layers of engagement for the spectator. Varda frames Dorothée's body in a way that emphasizes her nakedness as a mode of gesture, as an expression of subjectivity, rather than as a mode of turning the female body into an object. The effect of this is to mediate Dorothée as a sexual object to be looked at and thereby shift the traditional patriarchal way of looking at the female body. There are two ways Varda shapes the spectator's engagement with and frames Dorothée's body.

The first way begins before we see Dorothée. The camera leads the spectator through a room filled with sculptures that artists have created of people in various poses. The sculptures don't have small details and are instead created with broad strokes. Their emphasis is the gesture of the naked body. Here the camera is ostensibly from Cléo's point of view, and it moves in a slow traveling shot as Cléo walks through the room while encountering these large sculptures in different poses. One sculpture, for example, shows a woman swimming. On the sound track during this shot, one hears only Cléo's footsteps as she walks quietly through the room. This unbroken traveling shot forces the spectator to consider these unrealistic yet expressive sculptures of the human body as Cléo does. Through this shot, Varda already has the spectator engaging the body in a way that bypasses the traditional mode of objectification.

The second way Varda shapes the spectator's engagement with the female body in this scene occurs as Cléo enters the next room. The original traveling shot continues a bit further through the door into the room where the sculpture class is being held and where Dorothée is modeling. As Cléo steps through the door, the film cuts to a reverse shot of Cléo looking around for her friend. The shot again reverses, and Varda employs another traveling shot that is meant to

approximate Cléo as she moves around the room to catch her friend's attention. This is again a quiet scene: the only sounds come from Cléo's shoes and the artists sculpting with chisels. This quietness of the scene allows the spectator to focus on the complexity of the visual field. The shot depicts a group of fifteen students with their teacher, as well as Dorothée modeling naked for them. As the shot moves, it reveals Dorothée suddenly when the camera passes one of the larger sculptures. She is standing on a block in the center of the room and is posing classically with one hand clasping the other behind her back, her hair up in a bun, and her left foot angled out just a little. It is a pose that clearly signals classical sculpture.

Varda frames Dorothée in a full shot so that the spectator sees her entire body from head to toe. In the shot, the spectator can plainly make out Dorothée's buttocks, the outline of her breast, and the profile of her face since she is turned just slightly. Additionally, the many sculptures that the students are making of Dorothée flank her in the shot. Some sculptures are close to the camera and obscure part of the view, while others are right next to Dorothée. But all of them reproduce Dorothée's body. This repeats the earlier scene in which the mirror provides an infinite repetition of Cléo's image. Here, the female body repeats multiple times, but the emphasis on the body is very different. In the mirror scene that repeats Cléo's body, the many iterations of Cléo's body suggest the signifying practice of beauty as well as the fracture within this practice. In this scene, Dorothée's beauty is a gesture of her body that is inspiring artistic expression. It is significant that the repetitions of Dorothée's beauty are not exact like mirror images. They do not treat her body as a consumer object but as a point of departure for artistic speculation. Framing Dorothée's nude body among the sculptures allows the spectator to engage in a comparison of her body and the artists renditions so that the spectator must spend more time evaluating the art than seeing Dorothée's body as the main spectacle.

In addition, the students, who are both men and women, look into the camera as Cléo passes them. They just briefly look at her as she passes, but they don't make note of her in the same way the men on the street do. When Cléo is finally standing in front of her friend, Dorothée turns and looks directly into the camera and tells Cléo that she will be finished momentarily. At this point, Varda includes the next chapter title—Chapter Nine: Dorothée from 5:52 to 6:00 p.m.—and reveals what Dorothée is thinking at that moment. This further frames Dorothée as a subject rather than an object by giving her direct address into the camera, naming her in the title, and allowing us to hear her thoughts (that she is happy Cléo has arrived). Dorothée gets dressed and prepares to leave. Though she exchanges goodbyes with the students and teacher, they do not focus on her body. We hear the teacher critiquing one of the students work, but it is the work he critiques, not Dorothée's body.

As Dorothée and Cléo walk out to her car, Cléo confesses that she could never do what Dorothée does. During this conversation, Varda further frames the previous nude shot of Dorothée by allowing Dorothée to explain her own feelings about being seen nude and being made into an art object. Dorothée says: "My body makes me happy, not proud. They're looking at more than just me ... a shape, an idea ..." Dorothée embraces the concept of her body as a shape and an idea but doesn't see that as defining her subjectivity.

Here, Varda frames the female body in multiple ways. She does this through introducing the sculptures first, employing a traveling shot that includes the sculptures and the students as well as Dorothée, and she wraps this visual investigation with a narrative element that allows Dorothée's character to explain how she sees herself. Varda's choices here emphasize engaging the female body through a mediation that is very different than the mainstream patriarchal objectification of the female body. This scene and the two after it function as turning points after which Cléo's journey and her engagement with her own identity begins to change.

Following this scene that introduces Dorothée, she drives along with Cléo to where Dorothée's boyfriend is projecting films. During the drive, Cléo confesses that she is sick and waiting for a diagnosis. Dorothée expresses concern but doesn't change her attitude toward Cléo. They arrive at the projection booth of the cinema and see Dorothée's boyfriend who also knows Cléo. He tells them that he is about to show a short and that they should watch it because it is amusing. The women look out the projection booth window, and Varda transitions to the film that is playing.

We see a silent short based on the style of Buster Keaton. Jean-Luc Godard, another member of the French New Wave, plays the main character. In the short film, the male character waves to his girlfriend who is running down the stairs. He then puts on sunglasses, and instead of just running down the stairs, she runs, trips, and dies. But at the end of the film, the male character takes off his sunglasses and realizes that he was seeing his life too bleakly. He sees the scene again, but this time his girlfriend just trips but doesn't die. The short film clearly pokes fun at Cléo's depression. The women turn away from the short film when it is over laughing and continue smiling as they leave the cinema. This is one of the few times we see Cléo smiling with pleasure. It seems the diversion of cinema has really lightened her mood, but this is short lived.

As Cléo and Dorothée leave the theater, Dorothée's purse spills and a mirror of hers falls to the ground and smashes. Cléo is horrified. She claims that the smashed mirror signifies death, and she finds herself immediately back in her existential dread. As Varda moves the camera in to the shattered mirror on the concrete, the spectator can see that Cléo's eye is reflected in one of the pieces. This is the final mirror scene, and it is the most fractured. Cléo's face is no longer just distorted but entirely obliterated, as only her eye remains staring back out of the fragments. This most fragmented mirror signifies a turning point, and the eye visible in the fragment of mirror is the key to the scenes that follow. In this light, Alison Smith argues that

the first half of the film is about Cléo being looked at but the second half is about her looking. She says: "Cléo changes from object to be looked at to subject who looks and interprets what she looks at—from woman seen to woman seeing."²¹ To add to Smith's point, we can note the way that the mirror is in many ways what signifies and even causes this turn.

Varda employs mirrors here because they are metaphorically at the center of the feminist question about ideal female beauty and its relationship to individual women. And rather than advocating eliminating mirrors altogether, Varda contends that our relationship to mirrors can change. She employs mirrors to add layers of visual information that prompts new interpretations from the spectator while at the same time symbolizing the fluctuations in Cléo's own relationship to femininity.

The mirrors also act as a way to frame the female body and redouble its presence in the visual field. What might start out as a traditional view of the woman's beauty—like in the hat shop—quickly turns into a distortion of the traditional view. Besides creating striking images, this has the effect of allowing the spectator to interpret the scene in a way that moves beyond just traditional expectations of enjoying her beauty. The scene prompts the viewer both to explore the new meaning that comes out of unusual juxtapositions of objects as well as to critique Cléo's relationship to her own beauty. She clearly seems somewhat narcissistic, but Varda doesn't allow the spectator to entirely dismiss Cléo, even when her narcissism is evident. This is important because it allows Varda to engage the spectator beyond identification and to prompt the spectator to see her own investment in the idea of ideal beauty.

Le Dôme Café and its indifference

Though mirrors are not a central focus of the scene that takes place in *Le Dôme Café* in Montparnasse, Paris, this scene fits alongside the mirror scenes because of its focus on looking

or being looked at. In fact, it is a very strange moment for Cléo and one that unsettles her as much as her encounters with mirrors. She heads to Le Dôme after she leaves her own apartment (where she visits with her boyfriend and rehearses her songs). She enters the café wearing her sunglasses as if she is afraid to be recognized and just wants to be left alone. This is a legitimate fear since wherever she goes, people either stare at her for her beauty or fuss over her because she is a popular singer. Her fame and popularity seem to be as much tied to her voice as they are tied to her good looks, which fit into the patriarchal ideology's ideal of female beauty.

The scene in Le Dôme is strange, however, for the singular reason that no one looks at her. This is not something that the spectator notices right away. If anything, Cléo might notice this before the spectator. But as she walks around and around the café supposedly looking for a place to sit, finding someplace, changing her mind, walking more and finding another place, the spectator becomes increasingly aware of the people at the café not noticing Cléo. It is almost as if she purposely keeps walking closely by the tables to see if anyone will either recognize her or at the very least look at her for her beauty, but no one does either.

Varda shoots this scene with a lot of movement as she follows Cléo. The shots flow back and forth in moving shot/reverse shot sequences to record the people Cléo is passing and her response to them. As Cléo passes each table, the spectator hears snippets of the people's conversation. This visual aesthetic is different than in earlier scenes, and it is a difference that engages the spectator to consider why things have changed. As Steven Ungar says, "whereas the visual perspective in the earlier film was often fixed in one spot, the fluid camera movement in this chapter simulates Cléo's gaze as she walks in the café and down the streets that surround it."²² In this way, the spectator has many clues to believe that she is seeing what Cléo is seeing.

While normally theorists would talk about identification here, the scene that unfolds provides enough layers that

identification with Cléo becomes more of a multilayered engagement involving the interpretation of the visuals, dialogue, and response of Cléo to the people in the café. Either Cléo seems to be registering what the people in the café are saying or Varda is actually directing the snippets of conversation at the spectator. The conversations in *Le Dôme* are either about art, politics, or relationships, and they seem to represent an array of topics important to France at that moment, including modernist painting and the Algerian War. Hearing these conversations has the effect of diminishing Cléo's own concerns. Her worries do not take center stage amid the myriad problems that the patrons of the café discuss.

Cléo goes to the jukebox and plays one of her songs in an effort to garner attention. But no one seems to notice except one young woman who says that the loud music prevents her from paying attention to the conversation. Thus, the only attention Cléo can elicit from the crowd at the café is negative, though the predominant response is indifference. In the middle of the sequence, she sits at a table that is near a pole covered with little mirrors. Her face is reflected in all these fragments, but this time she does not notice. In the first café scene, she attracts a lot of attention, and the waiters pamper her. And yet, she turns around and tries to find herself in the mirror there. But in this scene where no one notices her, she does not worry about finding herself in the mirror or worry about the mirror reflecting her image back in a fractured manner. The juxtaposition between these two scenes and how the attention Cléo receives affects her own anxiety about her image provokes a philosophical and feminist question.

Not receiving attention makes Cléo restless. She clearly notices the lack of attention, but it also does not provoke the kind of crisis that she experienced earlier. Film theorists Alison Smith and Steven Ungar—in their two different books on Varda and *Cléo from 5 to 7*, respectively—both see this scene as one that emphasizes Cléo's looking rather than being

looked at and that this is the significant difference in this scene. Smith argues: "The people that she encounters allow her to forget herself in other subjectivities, to look at alternative lives."²³ Smith then suggests that this continues even more as she meets with her friend Dorothee and encounters Antoine at the end of the film. It is certainly correct that in this scene at Le Dôme, Varda embeds a different emphasis, one of Cléo looking and not being seen, into a visually rich environment with compelling dialogue that enables the spectator to engage with the film on multiple levels. But it is not clear that Cléo has overcome the fact of being looked at or that overcoming being looked at functions as a feminist ideal.

While watching this scene, the spectator can consider how Cléo's identity is shaped by her interactions with the people and environment around her, as well as focus on Cléo's own thoughts and desires. The film here foregrounds the question: how is our identity formed between the balance of our relationship with other people and our internal experience, thoughts, and desires? What does it take to shift or change the way we think of ourselves or the way others think of us, and how much is looking and being looked at a part of this? Is being looked at an inextricable part of looking? As much as Cléo is worried about cancer, this prognosis of potential death sends her into an investigation that has as much to do with her relationship to ideal beauty and her relationship with other people, as it does with the cancer itself.

On location shooting and the streets of Paris

Another space in which looking and being looked at occurs regularly are on the streets of Paris. In fact, the streets of Paris play a key role throughout the entire film. There are scenes interspersed throughout the film depicting Cléo on her own

or with her friends walking or driving in Paris. These scenes provide Cléo passage from one space to another, for example, the streets are featured when Cléo goes from the first café to the hat store and from one interior space to another, but they themselves also are important scenes in their own right. The street scenes provide a site where Varda can demonstrate how looking and being looked at take place.

The streets for Cléo are a place for contemplation and observation, a place where she can think about herself while looking at others. She tends to look to the hustle and bustle on the streets to calm herself and occupy her mind in order to quiet her existential angst. While on the street, she is not shopping but instead watching people and being looked at. The people on the street not only look at Cléo but also look directly into the camera lens. This indicates that those who react to Cléo on the street are not actors in Varda's film. They are just people who happen to pass by at the moment when Varda films the various scenes, and this fact gives the film a documentary flavor.

Varda's use of location shooting with actual crowds places *Cléo from 5 to 7* firmly in the aesthetic of the French New Wave movement. One of the main tenets of this movement was that location shooting allowed for a more realistic look that countered the glamorous lighting of the studio popular in commercial French cinema. Unlike Italian Neorealism, which privileged realism above all else, the French New Wave saw realism as part of its overall aesthetic. Realism was not a goal in itself.

New Wave directors juxtaposed the realism of location shooting with formal innovations that had the effect of disrupting realism rather than augmenting it. This juxtaposition creates a unique style that provokes spectator reflection on the reality depicted in the films. For her part, Varda employs a version of these aesthetics when she uses jump cuts when Cléo is driving or formally distorts the mirrors in the image. She also positions radically different scenes next to each other in the film's chronology.

The stylized scenes from Cléo's apartment sit side by side with the realist street scenes. The experience of moving between these two very different styles can be jarring or at the very least demands interpretation from the spectator. Through this juxtaposition, Varda engages spectators by asking them to create the link between these different styles of filmmaking. In the one scene, it seems as if we could be watching a melodramatic romance or women's film, and then in the very next scene it's as if we are in an Italian Neorealist film or a documentary. Popular cinema generally tries for consistency of style in order to hide the seams of the film and keep the spectator ensconced in the film's plot. In other words, this cinema creates form that is subservient to content. But the French New Wave in general and Varda specifically develop a form that acts as a commentary on the content. The spectator learns as much from the form as from the movement of the plot. In Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, the formal juxtapositions continually highlight the tension within ideal beauty between looking and being looked at. Varda shows that this ideological fantasy of female beauty develops on the basis of Cléo's idea of herself as much as by the way the social order treats her.

Varda's choice to leave the people looking at her camera in the film is particularly revealing. People stare at Cléo, and they stare at the camera. Sometimes they first look at Cléo and then look at the camera, and sometimes they seem to look at Cléo because they notice the camera following her. This leads them to scrutinize the camera itself and the camera operator, whom the spectator can't see. Popular cinema avoids showing this type of activity because the fear is that these looks will pull the spectator out of the story itself and make her aware of the camera and the production process as a whole. But this is not what happens in Varda's film, and she does not aim at producing alienation in the spectator by including these looks at the camera. Varda concerns herself instead with how the looks might further engage the spectator rather than distance the spectator. As spectators, we are also in the system of

looking and being looked at that envelops Cléo. We participate in looking, as we would in any film, but we also find ourselves as part of the visual field. The spectator experiences the look and the being looked at.

In this way, Varda creates a tension in which the spectator is identifying with both the subject and object position. Being caught in between these two positions allows her to see the antagonism of subjectivity itself. Looking and being looked at are how we figure out the difference between subject and other. In other words, looking signifies the subject and the experience of being looked at signifies the existence of the other. But looking and being looked at can never overlap. We both look and are looked at, but we can never occupy both positions at the same time.

Varda highlights the interaction of looking and being looked at by making her film about the complex system of looks. People have a more direct relationship to looking, even though looking is not a pure act but one mediated by the psyche. We seem to know intuitively what constitutes looking. And at the same time, we have no idea how we are being looked at, except in our fantasy about how others see us. But without the sense of being looked at, we would not be able to look. Our looking depends on the fact that we are seen, and our being seen depends on our looking, even though the two acts can never coincide. This is the foundational antagonism that defines subjectivity, and it is also at the center of Varda's film.

Being looked at can be traumatic—it can also be pleasurable—because we cannot know how the other is looking at us. The other's look at us is a blank spot in our psychic world, but our subjectivity depends on it. For women this is especially fraught because patriarchy as an ideology puts women in the position of being looked at. As much as feminists from different moments in history have wanted to, we cannot destroy this aspect of femaleness because it is an essential aspect of subjectivity as such. Nor can we simply take it up as a banner under which to march and claim that we revel in our objectification, that we actually

enjoy it. We can, however, shift the contours of how we define “to be looked at.” Varda participates in this process by including the looks of the people on the street. As the film progresses, she also includes more of Cléo’s point of view of the people on the street, which becomes another marker of Cléo’s own sense of awareness.

Varda employs a complex system of mainstream and experimental looks to emphasize the nature of the patriarchal system women are caught in as well as to gesture toward ways to question it. She engages the spectator to see the intersections so that the tenets of ideal beauty can begin to fall apart. The ideal of female beauty relies heavily on the idea that this beauty will transform her into a precious object that everyone will cherish. This leaves little room for women to look themselves. Popular cinema has a real paucity of examples of women looking in connection with being looked at. By depicting Cléo both looking and being looked at, as well as including the startling looks at the camera itself, Varda engages the spectator and prompts her to consider their role in this process.

On the streets of Paris, Cléo has several encounters that highlight the intersection between looking and being looked at. Most often, these encounters shock Cléo, and they emphasize the trauma of being looked at. But Cléo clearly wants the other’s attention. Her popularity and financial success depends on other people adoring her. On the other hand, Cléo’s encounters with strangers—the very strangers she relies on to like her songs—are not pleasant, and even the non-traumatic encounters leave her indifferent.

Two of the encounters are with street performers. Different times while walking, Cléo sees people crowded around a performer. The first performer is eating live frogs. When she recognizes what he is doing, Cléo stares fascinated and disgusted. Varda provides several close-ups of his face with the frog legs sticking out. Cléo walks away upset and then walks into Le Dôme, where no one looks at her. Afterward, she walks away from the café and heads to see her friend Dorothee. On the way, she runs into many crowded spaces and then notices

another street performer. Rather than eating live frogs, this one is sticking a huge nail through his bicep. Cléo stays for less time to see this; she experiences the event itself as an attack and runs away from the crowd with a horrified look on her face. The enjoyment that the crowd finds in these horrific events, an enjoyment that makes no sense to Cléo, traumatizes her. The fact that the spectators find enjoyment in bodily mutilation proves especially troublesome for her. They activate her own fears about her body betraying her by becoming cancerous.

Another important encounter happens more toward the beginning of the film with a taxi driver. Angèle and Cléo take a taxi after the hat shop and discover their taxi driver is a woman. Having a woman working in a predominantly male job represents a significant choice on Varda's part since it emphasizes female independence. While in the taxi, Varda includes shots of Paris (again all documentary in style since the crowds are the real crowds of Paris not actors), while we hear the conversation with the taxi driver and the news on the radio. One of the first things to occur during their taxi ride is that two men in a car start to pass them, notice Cléo, and then whistle at her. One of the men even tries to reach out and touch her. This sequence highlights Cléo's objectification because it occurs while she is in the seeming privacy of a taxi. She is used to this kind of attention, however, and laughs it off. Nonetheless, the moment further drives home the way that the social order constantly reinforces her identity.

The taxi driver turns on the radio and one of Cléo's songs envelops them in the car. Cléo complains bitterly about the quality of the recording and asks the taxi driver to turn it off. This moment further enhances not only the idea that Cléo really is quite famous but also that the public is a place where she constantly encounters representations of who she supposedly is—a beautiful talented singer. The men whistling in the car and the song on the radio reveal that she is seen in a particular way by the social order.

Cléo also works to perpetuate how she is seen, but the security of how the social order sees her breaks down

throughout the film. The possible diagnosis of cancer, which Cléo is sure she will hear at the end of the day, has thrown this all askew. Now she looks at herself in the mirror and sees distortions rather than perfections. She begins to wonder who she is and why she is not seen as she wants to be seen. Feeling distanced from her own song on the radio continues this sense of alienation from her public image.

The discussion with the taxi driver highlights Cléo's increasing distance from her own position as a woman being looked at. Angèle comments that being a taxi driver is dangerous for a woman and the woman agrees that it is sometimes dangerous but that she likes it nonetheless. Cléo says, "Aren't you afraid at night?" The taxi driver asks what she would be afraid of, but then goes on to tell a story about being attacked the past winter. She explains that two students wouldn't pay so she ran after them, but they turned to attack her. She locked herself in her car and radioed for help. Two colleagues answered the call and scared them away. Cléo responds with, "Weren't you scared to death?" and the taxi driver replies, "I'm not the fearful type." This exchange is the most overtly feminist moment in the film. The female taxi driver is taking a job in a mostly male profession. It is also a profession in which you are alone with all kinds of people and potentially vulnerable to them.

This exchange emphasizes that one aspect of being a woman, which Cléo is clearly attuned to, is vulnerability and potential physical harm. But it also suggests that the taxi driver doesn't have any fear and can confront potential threats when they arrive. Cléo and the taxi driver appear as polar opposites in the way that they take up femininity. The film doesn't condemn either approach, but it clearly presents the female taxi driver as a kind of hero on the streets of Paris. The taxi driver mentions that the entire incident made the newspapers and thus indicates her response to feminine vulnerability, though a minority position, has made its way into the public realm.

The taxi driver represents a clear challenge to Cléo's attempt to embody the ideal of female beauty and to accept the

vulnerability that accompanies it. Varda includes this scene in the film to show the spectator that Cléo's approach is not the only possibility and that the alternatives are easily thinkable. After Angèle and Cléo leave the taxi, Angèle comments that the taxi driver was quite a character, and Cléo expresses her shock at what the taxi driver said. Angèle counters by noting that the taxi driver had courage. But Cléo cannot avow this because the taxi driver challenges her being in the world through her different approach to femininity.

Just after the taxi driver recounts the story of the robbery in the taxi, she turns on the radio. The rest of the ride consists of the shots of Cléo and Angèle in the cab, the street scenes they are looking at, and the sound of the news program and commercials. Varda includes this lengthy ride with no dialogue and no plot development in order to provide a contemplative moment in which the spectator can mull over the taxi driver's story along with Cléo's response to it. During this moment that Varda sets aside for reflection, the first item that we hear on the radio is an advertisement for shampoo. The advertisement announces a new shampoo for American women made of whisky. It says, "Whisky revitalizes the hair." As it says this, Varda cuts to a shot of Angèle patting her hair. This nod to the way that advertising reinforces conceptions of ideal female beauty comes directly in the wake of the story of the very courageous female taxi driver in order to suggest the myriad of opposing responses to the feminine ideal. Varda uses this juxtaposition to encourage the spectator to see the incongruities, to see the gaps between the way we see and the way we are looked at, or to see the distinction between ideological messages and lived experience.

The signs of Algeria

The conflict between opposed responses to the ideal of femininity takes place in *Cléo from 5 to 7* against the background of a geopolitical conflict occurring at the time.

This latter conflict makes its presence felt in the film during the taxi ride. After we hear the shampoo advertisement, the rest of the radio program playing during the taxi ride focuses on the French war in Algeria. The Algerian War was a war between Algeria and France from 1954 to 1962, which led ultimately to Algeria gaining its independence from France. The anti-colonial uprising and the brutal French response involved terrorism, guerilla warfare, and barbaric torture. The end of the war marked the end of France's colonial rule over Algeria that began in the 1830s.

The brutality of the French colonial forces turned the Algerians completely against them and even led a large part of the French population to oppose the war. Intellectuals spoke out against French activities in Algeria, and artists used their works to demonstrate their outrage. Several French filmmakers critically addressed the Algerian War, including Jean-Luc Godard in *Le Petit Soldat* (*The Little Soldier*, 1960). Because Godard's film depicts French cruelty and shows torture occurring on both sides, authorities banned the film from public screening until 1963. Alain Renais made *Muriel ou le Temps d'un retour* (*Muriel, or the Time of a Return*) which was also released in 1963, a film that, like *Cléo from 5 to 7*, contains oblique references to the war. The film depicts a man haunted by participating in the torture of a woman named Muriel during the war. Renais had also been one of the signatories of the *Manifesto of 121*, a group opposed to the military's actions in Algeria. The members of the group included Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, Guy Debord, Marguerite Duras, Claude Lanzmann, Jean-Paul Sartre, and François Truffaut. The group published their manifesto and names as a protest on September 6, 1960 in the magazine *Vérité-Liberté*.

In the future, Varda would make overtly political documentaries, such as her film on the Black Panthers and her short included in *Loin du Vietnam* (*Far from Vietnam*, 1967), in which seven filmmakers made films against the American war in Vietnam. She remained convinced, however, that this

was not the way to get a large portion of the public to think about the issues. In an interview with Varda in 1977, journalist Gerald Peary asked her about her approach to her film *L'une chante, l'autre pas* (*One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, 1977). She explains, "Make it clear, simple, not too complicated. If I put myself on the screen—very natural and feminist—maybe I'd get ten people in the audience. Instead, I put two nice young females on the screen, and not too much of my own leftist conscience. By not being too radical but truly feminist, my film has been seen by 350,000 people in France. It's better if they all got half the message than to have 5,000 people seeing a courageous 16 mm film."²⁴ This makes it quite clear that Varda's project is trying to reach the largest possible audience. Thus, her use of the form to articulate a point was both a measure of her artistic vision and a way to approach politically charged issues without alienating her potential audience. And this is exactly how she approaches the Algerian War, which has a presence that is woven throughout the story of Cléo, in *Cléo from 5 to 7*.

The topic of the Algerian War does not have a primary position in the narrative of the film but appears in snippets in unexpected places. The radio sequence in the taxi is one of these places. The news report in fact goes through several aspects of unrest in France at the time: the Algerian War, a strike and protest by farmers, and 4,000 protesters shouting "Liberate Breton" (advocating for Brittany to be its own country). The news report about the Algerian War mentions that there was more rioting in Algeria and gives the casualties for that day (twenty dead and sixty wounded). Then the report mentions a military tribunal. The presentation of this report suggests that the French experienced details about the war on a daily basis and that this horrific information became a routine part of daily French life.

The question for Varda is what relationship do we take up to this kind of information. The Algerian War took place far from Paris, but nonetheless its implications bore on everyone

in France and interrupted Parisian life. Cléo seems utterly unaffected by the news report, but later when she meets and bonds with Antoine, a soldier about to return to Algeria, she becomes more emotional and begins to have an opinion about the war. During the taxi ride, however, she and her ideal beauty seem undisturbed, as she listens to the collage of the radio program that puts Cléo's own song side by side with a shampoo commercial and a news report of the deaths taking place in Algeria on that day.

There is another aspect of this scene that comments on France's relationship to Algeria and to Africa in general. Earlier in the taxi ride, Cléo looks two different times out the window and sees stores specializing in African art and artifacts. In the window of the first store, the film shows traditional African masks, and rather than showing the masks from the distance that Cléo sees them, Varda shoots them in a close-up. This is slightly different than the treatment of the rest of the street scenes, which Varda shoots from the passenger's point of view. The next instance is similar and occurs a little later in the ride. Cléo looks out the window and again sees a store with African artifacts. The camera initially shoots this from inside the cab, and Varda then shows Cléo look out the window. Cléo subsequently turns and looks forward, so that she is not looking at the store any longer. Varda emphasizes that Cléo looks away before she cuts to a close-up of the masks in the second storefront window. This unmistakably indicates that Varda positions the two close-up shots of the masks that follow for the spectator's look rather than Cléo's.

There are multiple racially charged implications at work during this sequence. Though these news reports and visual sightings seem to be in the background, the film has already established that what happens around Cléo bears on her own struggles. The external world in the film is separate from Cléo, but it constantly impacts her and reveals what she hides from herself. In this case, Varda links racial prejudices to Cléo's struggle with the ideal of female beauty. France's

ideological commitment to its superiority to African colonies has its complement in the ideal of white female beauty, which feeds the fantasy of this superiority as well as the fantasy of a vulnerability that then requires violent defense. Varda sets these ideologies side by side to prompt the spectator to see the connections, and she uses this formal juxtaposition rather than explicit denunciation in order to engage rather than alienate the spectator.

The masks play a crucial role in the film's critique of the Algerian War. They show that while France is involved in the brutal colonization of African countries, it at the same time fetishizes African artifacts. The fetishization serves as the ideological background for colonization and enables it to continue. This observation about colonial ideology appears in a later film from Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène. In *Black Girl* (1966), often considered the first African feature film, Sembène shows how the love for African artifacts is used in the service of the oppression of actual Africans. The film is about a young Senegalese woman, Diouana (Mbissine Thérèse Diop), who moves to France to work for a French family as a nanny. She looks forward to the excitement of France but instead is treated harshly by the couple. They force her to work as a maid rather than as a nanny and thus completely alienate her. Throughout the film the image of an African mask that Diouana gives the family when she first arrives, recurs. The couple hangs the mask on their wall along with other pieces of African art. During a dinner party in which the couple has her serve them, Diouana realizes that she herself functions as another artifact for the family to display in order to impress their friends. In the end, she takes the mask back and kills herself. This tale of the devastating effects of colonialism appeared four years after the end of the Algerian War. Even though the films depict different countries and circumstances, the commonality remains for the effects of colonization. Varda's inclusion of the African masks and the news about Algeria also suggests that for the French people the countries in

Africa blur together as part of a general refusal to see past their own racist assumptions.

Varda also includes a similar reference in a scene in *Le Dôme*, which Cléo enters after this taxi ride, where two men discuss the Algerian War. The café is known as a hangout of artists and intellectuals, and the scene in the café is the most diverse scene in the film. It depicts people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, bohemian fashions, and at least three different languages spoken. But even here, the discussion of the Algerian War is oddly ambivalent though revelatory. It occurs when Cléo is choosing a song on the jukebox. Varda keeps her in the shot the entire time in the background of a medium long shot that encompasses two men at a table and Cléo in the background at the jukebox. This is an important inclusion because it further suggests that Varda wants to link Cléo to the issue of the Algerian War. One bohemian older man says to his friend, "This Algerian craziness ... you don't know where you stand." The man seems genuinely depressed and anxious, as if the Algerian War has moved him into a state of existential crisis. Cléo looks at them, puts her sunglasses on, and moves on. She attempts to leave the issue behind her, but it recurs just like the cancer diagnosis.

In fact, the film links the cancer diagnosis with the war. Both represent potential imminent death, and both interrupt the fabric of everyday life. Cléo desperately tries to return to her former everydayness, but the anxiety that cancer brings with it prevents this. It has begun to unravel her carefully crafted ideal femininity and provoked her into a state of questioning antithetical to her former sense of her self. In the same way, French society cannot escape the background of the Algerian War and the death transpiring there. The Algerian War reveals to France the cost of the culture that it so prizes. Much of French belief in its own superiority had its basis in the colonial relationships it had with African countries. But the Algerian War, the torture, and massacres brought the violence of these relationships to the public fore and could no longer be ignored. Varda does not show protestors or radical action; instead, she

tries to link the existential angst of France itself to that of Cléo, revealing the tenuousness of both.

Feminism, as Varda practices it in *Cléo from 5 to 7*, involves seeing how the contradictions that inform femininity manifest themselves in other aspects of the social order. One cannot insist solely on the feminist struggle while turning a blind eye to the violence of the Algerian War or the ramifications of French racism. As Varda conceives it in her film, there is a direct link between the ideal of female beauty and the vicious racism that the French practice toward Africa. But the struggle against this oppressive conjunction cannot be a straightforward one. The filmmaker interrupts the conjunction of sexism and racism rather than confronting it directly, and this interruption implies a distortion of chronological temporality.

Narrative structure and time

Prior to *Cléo from 5 to 7*, Alain Resnais had begun to experiment with alternative temporality in his films, most famously in *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961). Resnais's film shows the past constantly intruding on the present, so that eventually the spectator cannot tell when the events on the screen are taking place. Varda's film does not interrupt temporality in quite so dramatic a fashion, but she nevertheless indicates that a chronological conception of temporality misleads us into thinking that events have an unbroken narrative thread that they do not have.

The basic structure of *Cléo from 5 to 7* is rigidly chronological. It is a chronological presentation of two hours in one woman's life. The guideposts for the narrative are the chapter titles presented as subtitles throughout the film. The chapter titles—for example, "Cléo from 5:05 to 5:08" ("Cléo de 17 h. 05 A 17 h. 08")—are often a character's name and the amount of time the scene will last. In this way, Varda calls

attention to the idea that the film is shot in real time or that the narrative will be responsible for real time. The spectator is thus aware of the relationship of Cléo's inner struggles and to the passage of time. Cléo does not necessarily have an aim. She does not have an appointment at the end of the two hours, though she is supposed to check in with her doctor around the end of the day.

While the titles keep us aware of the time, there is not a literal ticking clock that would make us feel a sense of urgency to time. No one in the film checks the time very often or comments that they must hurry or says that time is running out, as is common in films that emphasize the time as essential to the plot. Real time urgency has become a more common staple in very contemporary television shows and films such *24* (2001–2010) and John Badham's *Nick of Time* (1995). In the 1960s, this was relatively rare as a narrative device. One famous example in early cinema is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). But the central concern in *Rope* is the minimization of the cuts—creating the illusion that the film occurs without a cut—rather than creating a film in real time. Real time was a side effect of shooting without any obvious cuts. The result is a film that uses time to dramatic effect: even though there is no clock ticking as in *24*, time runs out for the main figures in *Rope* just as it does for the federal agents in the television series.

In *Cléo from 5 to 7*, however, real time does not serve to create tension. Instead, the film revolves around the interactions between Cléo and her friends. Though the time of Cléo's life may be running out due to the cancer in her body, the clock in the film does not remind the spectator of her impending death. Instead, it seems to regulate the events of Cléo's day, to provide a rigid separation between the different events that she experiences. The clock is not ticking in the film, despite the constant indicators of time passing.²⁵

As I mentioned earlier, the phrase "cinq à sept" ("5 to 7") in France has a colloquial meaning of a reference to an afternoon love affair. In this case, Cléo is having an afternoon affair with the possibility of death. Varda leaves the spectator to question

whether the title is trivializing this turn that Cléo takes with existential crisis or whether this is the affair that changes everything for Cléo and breaks her out of her ideological unawareness. Rather than present the narrative of this real time story as abiding by a ticking clock, Varda presents the story as small packages of time that make up Cléo's late afternoon, and each chapter has the potential to disrupt that time, even if they do also follow the clock. The clock itself serves to remind the spectator of time itself, and an individual's relationship to time as existential as well as practical. At the conclusion of the film, there is a disruption, and it seems that the accumulation of experiences, rather than one specific experience, causes it. The temporal disruption occurs when the film ends. The title promises a film transpiring between the hours of 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., but Varda does not finish the two hours. She actually ends the film after ninety minutes. This abrupt ending that breaks the promise of the title works to emphasize the ruptures that have happened in her life during these past wanderings.

The early ending is another disruption that connects to and highlights the rest of the disruptions in the film. It also shows Varda's adherence to the aesthetic of the French New Wave, which celebrated thwarting traditional expectations of film endings and resolutions. The title sets up our expectations of following *Cléo from 5 to 7*, and by thwarting this expectation Varda prompts the spectator to engage with the experience and consider why it ended early. The early ending deprives the spectator of a clear resolution, just as it deprives Cléo of a clear diagnosis and prognosis for her disease. By ending the film early, Varda indicates that while alive the narrative that we experience is always on the verge of being interrupted, and we must be ready for interruption.

In part, the experience of time in this film has to do with the varied types of editing and filmic styles that Varda employs. She does not rely solely on continuity editing or long takes. Instead, she provides a variety of editing styles dependent on the mood and characters of each scene. The beginning of the film signals this approach and sets the stage for the way the

spectator begins to think of her engagement with the film. The most notable aspect of the beginning of the film is that it is in color while the rest of the film is not. One rarely sees the juxtaposition of color photography with black and white, and when it appears, it always has a clear thematic significance—such as distinguishing between the fantasy world and reality in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939).

In the opening sequence, the tarot cards appear in color. Varda also shows us the reader's hands and Cléo's hands in color, but when the film cuts to their faces, it also cuts to black and white. This marks the only moment of color photography in the entire film. Varda employs color to represent the prediction and possibility rather than reality. As the film unfolds, we realize that this possibility of death pervades every gesture and experience for Cléo so that the tarot card reading becomes Cléo's lived fear. The color scene at the beginning of the film suggests a rupture of Cléo's identity, which the rest of the film depicts her attempting to integrate.

The turn from color to black and white at the beginning of the film has garnered considerable critical attention. Commenting on this switch, Steven Ungar suggests, "The contrast is coded as a mark of difference between the symbolic order of the tarot and the physical world of daily life in which Cléo has come to consult the fortune teller Irma."²⁶ One way to see how these worlds affect each other is in the way that the tarot reading, its suggestion of death, invades the rest of the film. The shift to black and white combined with the few shots that follow to make up this first sequence signal the nontraditional nature of this film's form and presentation of linear time. The film may stay carefully within the real time precept, but its shot structure is an untraditional way of representing time. This creates an inherent contradiction in the film, one which Varda is carefully crafting. In Varda's later film *The Beaches of Agnès*, she comments on this very tension in *Cléo from 5 to 7* when she says, "I wanted the film to combine objective time, as seen on the omnipresent clocks, and subjective time as Cléo experiences it during the film." Thus, Varda concentrates on this

contradiction between private experience and public time as a way to express her character's questioning journey in the form itself. It is a contradiction that emphasizes the contradictions between the individual and the expectations of the social order. And in the case of *Cléo*, this very much revolves around the social order's expectations of female beauty and her own lived experience of her contradicting desires and anxieties that come into contact with these expectations of the larger society that she encounters as she travels through the city.

After the film changes from color to black and white, *Cléo* leaves the tarot reader's apartment. As she walks down the building's stairs, Varda shoots this with three repetitions of the same shot in the middle of her movement down the stairs. The insertion of this repetition immediately signals a creative use of reality and prompts the spectator to engage with what this might mean about *Cléo*'s state of mind rather than just a document of her passage out of the building.²⁷ The repetition of the scene shows time as interruptive rather than chronological. The beginning of the film combines the switch of color to black and white with the single shot repeated three times, and the scene ends with *Cléo* looking into a mirror that reduplicates her image many times. These elements all prompt the spectator to contemplate what the form is suggesting about *Cléo* herself. Is she lost? How is she affected by the tarot reading? What do her beauty and her idea of herself have to do with her ability to take in this news? And why does the news lead to her need to assert her beauty? Varda suggests these questions by employing unusual choices even though under the aegis of documenting the minute-to-minute movement of *Cléo* from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Cléo and Antoine

The conclusion of the film thwarts the spectator's expectations because *Cléo* seeks solace by isolating herself in a park and ends up finding it in the company of a stranger named Antoine.

In this final segment of the film, many of the themes from throughout return but in a seemingly different environment, which suggests that Cléo herself is beginning to see things differently. She goes to the park to be alone, and she chooses the paths that are mostly empty to walk on. At this point, the film's *mise-en-scène* and pacing present a new calm that Cléo seems to feel. When she stops at a stream to contemplate her problems, Antoine walks up to her. He leans in close to her and begins to make small talk. She tries to be polite but also to deflect the conversation. At one point, Antoine points out that it is the longest day of the summer and that the sun is moving from Gemini to Cancer. Just hearing the word cancer upsets Cléo and she sharply asks him to stop talking.

This response alerts Antoine that something is wrong, and he gently asks her several questions in order to understand. Answering one of his inquiries, she says that she's not waiting for anyone, and he replies that he isn't waiting for anyone either. She replies, "But all men wait for women. Then they speak to them. I don't usually reply. Today I forgot. My thoughts are elsewhere." This exchange suggests that for a moment she was not thinking of herself as a woman who is a beautiful object that men would want to possess. Normally, she suggests here, she is very aware of this and does not respond to this male attention unless she wants to, but in this case she was thinking about death so Antoine caught her off guard.

It is a moment that reinforces the question of one's relationship to female beauty that runs throughout the film. Varda seems to suggest that death naturally disrupts the ideology of beauty and throws it into relief. This prompts the person to recognize the structures that they had before been living in unquestioningly. In other words, the encounter with death prompts a questioning stance toward ideology. For Cléo, it allows her to forget her object status and expose herself to the other. Though this leads to her being open to her encounter with Antoine, the encounter with Antoine ends up leading back to ideology since his attention to her remains somewhat

traditional: he appreciates her beauty and wants to protect her. Once Antoine understands that she is afraid of a diagnosis of cancer, he offers to go to the hospital with her if she will come and see him off at the train station where he will return to his tour of duty with the French Army in the Algerian War. Cléo agrees to this arrangement.

The scenes with Antoine are split into three separate scenes or spaces: the park, the bus, and the hospital grounds. In the park, Antoine convinces Cléo to his deal of accompanying each other on their rather sad errands. On the bus, Antoine asks Cléo for her photo so that he can look at it while he is at war, and she gives it to him. On the hospital grounds, Cléo asks Antoine for his address so that she can write to him and he gives it to her. These exchanges, along with the many looks, physical touching, and jokes that they share, suggest that Cléo is attracted to Antoine. She begins to fall for him and to rely on him emotionally.

But this sequence of events contradicts what the film has been leading up to. That is to say, the previous segments of the film all detail bouts with existential angst, the disruption of Cléo's mirror image, and traumatic encounters with strangers and friends. These events lead her to question whether people really see her or care about her at all, but at the end of the film, she envisions herself being saved by a man who reminds her how pleasurable it is to be adored as a beautiful woman and taken care of. Considering all that has come before, Varda seems to have veered far from feminism with this ending.

As feminists have pointed out, narratives about women often have few options for endings. One of the primary resolutions that popular narratives offer is that women find romance, and this solves many if not all of their problems. In this sense, the end of *Cléo from 5 to 7* seems to fit perfectly within patriarchy's assumptions about women. After an hour and half of self-investigation and some steps forward in which Cléo begins to take up the position of looking rather than only being looked at, it seems odd to finish the film with Cléo

finding a man who makes her feel better by asking for her photo and devoting himself to her. This does not, however, encompass the entirety of the ending since the spectator is also aware of other aspects that contradict this neatly contrived romantic ending.

At the very end, in fact, the appearance of the doctor radically undermines the notion that romance solves Cléo's problems. Even though Cléo can't manage to find the doctor in his office, he miraculously drives up alongside the bench that Antoine and Cléo are sitting on. He tells them not to worry and he says, "Two months of treatment should put things right. Come and see me tomorrow at eleven to plan the rest." Really this isn't much information, but it does confirm that Cléo has cancer. It doesn't suggest what kind or how severe and so on. From the doctor's response, the spectator might feel that certainly the diagnosis must not be fatal or he wouldn't be so confident. On the other hand, the diagnosis must be serious because he is recommending two months of radiation treatment.

Cléo and Antoine react with concern and confusion. In a shot now famous in French New Wave history, Varda emphasizes their concern through the form of the film in a rapid traveling shot. Varda frames Cléo and Antoine looking concerned at one another as the doctor's car begins to move, and then very quickly the camera backs away from them as if it is connected to the back of the car. In this rapidly moving shot, Cléo and Antoine recede in the distance. Two aspects about this shot hold significant meaning for the film. The fast paced pullback almost prompts a physical response in the spectator since it is quite unusual, even in light of the variety of shots that Varda has employed thus far. It takes the spectator by surprise in the same way that the news takes Cléo by surprise. Additionally, Cléo and Antoine become very small very quickly in the vast frame, which emphasizes the enormity of the news. But this fast paced receding shot also symbolizes the failure of the answer that she just received. The answer was in a sense a non-answer. It was an answer that provided something, but not enough to resolve her doubts one way or another.

This suggests that any answer, no matter how detailed, would always still leave something that is not graspable. That something is the very nature of life and death. No matter how much we reflect on our existence, we cannot find a secure answer to our questions about it. The shot reveals that the doctor's answer is inevitably undermined by the fact that Cléo's questions about her existence, her beauty, and her identity, can't be answered even if she knows when she will or how she will die—or if she knows that she will live. This is the ungraspable aspect of subjectivity that Cléo confronts at the end of the film, and this is what the lack of a substantial answer from the doctor leaves open. But the acknowledgment of this ungraspable aspect of subjectivity is freeing in some way to Cléo.

After the fast pull back, Varda cuts to a tight medium shot of Cléo and Antoine side-by-side looking very nervous. Cléo says, "Why?" But her look of concern dissolves when Antoine says that he is sorry to be leaving and that he'd like to stay with her. Cléo smiles and says that he is there, meaning there with her at that moment. Cléo and Antoine remain together in the moment with the difficult news they are facing. They are strangers each facing uncertainty and possible death—she with a cancer diagnosis and he going back to a war he doesn't believe in—but part of Cléo's relief is the acknowledgment of this uncertainty. At the very end she says, "It seems to me that I'm no longer afraid. It seems to me that I'm happy."²⁸ The interaction with the doctor and the way the ending is filmed suggest that simply having found Antoine to reassure her of her ideal female beauty is only a small part of this ending. Instead, it is a much more complicated ending.

Cléo seems happy in accepting the tenuousness of her situation, in accepting the uncertainty as a way of existing as a subject. This is very much in keeping with the endings popular in the French New Wave at the time. François Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (400 Blows, 1959), for example, follows a troubled young boy who has always dreamt of escaping

his problems and going to the ocean. At the end of the film, he does just this, but instead of being a triumphant moment, Truffaut ends the film with a freeze frame of him on the beach looking uncertain, having found neither joy nor suffering in reaching his dream. These endings served to highlight the importance of acknowledging our own existential uncertainty. They also were a direct attack on mainstream narratives that wrapped up all the problems presented in a film with a clear resolution. This lack of a resolution or rather this new kind of ending allowed the filmmakers to present the questioning stance itself as the new awareness at the end of the film. Questioning—or the lack of a resolution—becomes a form of resolution in the French New Wave. This acceptance of questioning over answers is what appears at the end of *Cléo from 5 to 7*.

It's important to point out that Cléo herself may have learned to accept her own questions, but the film does not present her having totally transformed. Her acceptance and enjoyment of Antoine's attention certainly attests to this. Thus, in the end, it is the spectator who might have more awareness after engaging in Cléo's travels and the film's formal interventions, not Cléo herself. Part of the spectator's own awareness comes from engaging the contradictions that Varda nurtures throughout the film. Certainly one of the contradictions is between a feminist awakening (questioning her ideological constraints as well as understanding her own investment in them) and a patriarchal resolution (in which heterosexual romance and ideal female beauty solves everything). The film reveals and holds onto this contradiction until the end and purposely does not provide an answer, except by emphasizing the importance of seeing the contradiction and thus developing an overall questioning stance. This questioning stance is a final feminist gesture. Even if the film doesn't end with a feminist resolution, it remains a feminist film in its devotion to both revealing ideology and keeping a questioning stance rather than providing a comfortable ending. The questioning stance is itself the ultimate feminist position.²⁹

Notes

- 1 Christina Lane's *Feminist Hollywood* provides one example of scholarship that investigates the situation of women directors. Her book looks at female directors that have moved from being independent directors to working within Hollywood. As independent female directors, according to Lane, they initially developed feminist alternatives to Hollywood but had to curtail these concerns and techniques as they moved into the Hollywood environment. See Christina Lane, *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000).
- 2 Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 8.
- 3 She also comments, "I was naturally involved in fighting whatever was prejudicial to women. So we started in France—I'm speaking about '48, '49, '50—going with other groups to the government, making petitions." Barbara Quart and Agnes Varda, "Agnes Varda: A Conversation," *Film Quarterly* 40.2 (1986–1987): 6.
- 4 Quart and Varda, "Agnes Varda: A Conversation," 10.
- 5 In *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda tells a story about trying to get a Hollywood studio to finance her film. She finds and interviews the producer who was interested in the film, and he recounts a story of Varda slapping a studio executive because the executive pinched her cheek. Varda sloughs this off by saying that she is not a child and that the issue was who would receive approval of the final cut of the film. But it's a revealing story since it suggests that Varda believed in being treated as an equal rather than being objectified or infantilized. This politically assertive side of her personality is not as privileged in her films, in which she intends to prompt the spectator into thinking through the issues for themselves.
- 6 In 2015, Agnès Varda received an honorary Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. She is the first female to be awarded this honor.
- 7 Cybelle H. McFadden, *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maiwenn* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 38.

- 8 Ironically, fellow French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard has a character quote the famous concluding lines from this novel—Patricia proclaims that she prefers “grief to nothing”—in his debut feature film *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1961).
- 9 Interview from 2007 done in her offices and included as an extra on the *La Pointe Courte* DVD.
- 10 Interview from 2007 done in her offices and included as an extra on the *La Pointe Courte* DVD.
- 11 This is very much the case in her film *The Gleaners and I*. See Hilary Neroni, “Documenting the Gaze: Psychoanalysis and Judith Helfand’s *Blue Vinyl* and Agnès Varda’s, *The Gleaners and I*,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27.3 (2010): 178–192.
- 12 Delphine Bénézet, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 19.
- 13 Bénézet’s *The Cinema of Agnès Varda* concerns itself with Varda’s unique style and approach to filmmaking. She argues that Varda’s approach can be understood through its elements of resistance and eclecticism. For Bénézet, this is also a key part of Varda’s feminism.
- 14 Quoted in Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 6–7.
- 15 Feminist theorists have noted this element of femininity from Simone de Beauvoir to bell hooks to Naomi Wolf. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953); bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981); and Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: William Marrow and Company, 1991).
- 16 Steven Ungar, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 57.
- 17 The English subtitles of this interior monologue on the Criterion DVD miss the crucial concluding phrase. According to the subtitles, Cléo says, “Don’t rush away, pretty butterfly. Ugliness is a kind of death. As long as I’m beautiful, I’m alive.” Her comparison to other people simply drops out, and as a result, the viewer fails to grasp the motivation for Cléo’s investment in the ideal of female beauty.
- 18 Copjec contends that film theory wrongly considers the film screen as a mirror and instead that we should adopt “the more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as a screen.” Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 16.

- 19 Angela McRobbie, "Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention," *Cultural Studies* 22.5 (September 2008): 542.
- 20 For more on consumerism as empowerment, see Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009); Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (New York: Sage, 2012); Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Sue Thornham, *Women, Feminism and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
- 21 Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 100.
- 22 Ungar, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, 65.
- 23 Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 99.
- 24 Gerald Peary, "Agnès Varda," *The Real Paper* (Boston, October 15, 1977).
- 25 Varda does stay true to the concept of the title, however, since the few clocks that are shown throughout the film carefully reflect the proper passage of time.
- 26 Ungar, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, 41.
- 27 This early assertion of the film's formal innovative nature also prompts spectator engagement far more than it attempts to set up spectator identification. Varda neither creates a form that totally alienates the spectator from Cléo nor does she try to have the spectator completely identify with Cléo. Instead, she lays out a complex form in which the spectator can engage Cléo, enjoy her, contemplate her, criticize her, and go on her own complicated journey.
- 28 The English subtitles for the DVD instead reads like this: "My fear seems to be gone. I seem to be happy." While this is a only a slightly different translation from what I have provided ("It seems to me that I'm no longer afraid. It seems to me that I'm happy."), the slight difference in emphasis is significant because it brings out the tenuousness of the statement.
- 29 One might expand the point and suggest that the basic gestures of the French New Wave and the questioning endings of the films that make up this movement were fundamentally feminist in orientation. It still remains true, however, that Varda's films are the only ones among them that put a female protagonist and female concerns at the center of the narrative.