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“Une transformation profonde”: Decay and  
Beauty in *Cléo from 5 to 7*

Susan Garver

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

“Une transformation profonde” : Decay and  
Beauty in *Cléo from 5 to 7*

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*Cléo from 5 to 7* is perhaps the most famous work of influential French filmmaker Agnès Varda, who is often called the “Grande Dame of the New Wave”. The depth of symbolism, the richness of imagery, the beginnings of *cinécriture* (a Varda-ism describing cinema as a form of writing that uses all the tools available to a filmmaker, not just words), and the charm of the story have guaranteed *Cléo*’s popularity with scholars and audiences alike.

Current scholarship has tended to focus on a few aspects of *Cléo*, including her role as a *flâneuse*, the use of mirrors and the theme of gazing, time and the division of the film into chapters, the female gaze, and femininity. I will examine the thematic of decay, nature, and beauty in *Cléo*. Beginning by linking it to her more contemporary documentary *The Gleaners and I*, I will analyze how Varda undermines conventional ideas of health, youth, and beauty by deconstructing Cléo’s world through the threat of disease, only to show how Cléo regains autonomy and control of herself by learning to embrace the inevitability of decay in nature, and in her own body. I will rely on the theories in Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain to show how Cléo’s changing relationship to her body constitute the profound transformation mentioned at the beginning of the film. I will also examine Cléo’s cancer in light of Susan Sontag’s essay *Illness as Metaphor*. We will see how Varda uses *cinécriture* to express these ideas, especially in regards to the dialogue between characters, visual symbols, and the use of space.

Keywords: Agnès Varda, Cléo, decay, Gleaners and I, cancer, flânerie, female gaze, Susan Sontag, Elaine Scarry, body, Paris, Parc Montsouris

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## Preface

I chose to author this article in order to fulfill the thesis requirement. I was inspired to study *Cléo from 5 to 7* after having seen it in the Urban Cinema class taught by Dr. Daryl Lee and Dr. Rob McFarland in winter of 2011. After many subsequent viewings, I was intrigued by Cléo's troubled relationship to her own body, which is of course the most obvious subject of the film, as well as the healing effect that being in nature seemed to have on her. Being a single, college-age woman, the question of how women feel or perceive their own health and beauty, and how such are felt or perceived, is the source of endless anxiety and mental effort for me and my friends. After researching the scholarship on *Cléo* for the final paper in the Urban Cinema class, I realized that there was a dearth of research on these themes, and that such a project would make for a good thesis

After consulting with Dr. Lee, he recommended that having done most of the research myself, I might as well write the article myself. After a bout of severe depression in the winter that forced me to leave school, I took up the project again, and have worked in the past few months on finding more theoretical support for my arguments. This experience actually helped me to better understand *Cléo*, because I was experiencing many of the same things as Cléo: pain, alienation, fatigue, and the fear of death. Working on this thesis has helped me to come to the same place of peace as her. After this experience, I felt an even greater desire to understand this film. Elaine Scarry's work *The Body in Pain* influenced me to analyze the role that Cléo's pain changes her. I have kept in contact with my thesis committee via phone and email, and their suggestions and corrections over the year have been incredibly helpful. This project has taught

me so many things, including how to research, how to analyze a film, and how to translate first impressions about an artifact into a paper or a lecture.

## Introduction

When Agnès Varda made her first film in 1955 called *La Pointe Courte*, she had scarcely seen many movies, let alone been involved with the making of them. She was a twenty-something with formal training in photography. This lack of formal training, coupled with her background in portraiture, would help to shape the style of an oeuvre that spans decades and that, quite simply, defies typology.

Despite this, she has been called the Grande Dame of the New Wave, the Grandmother of French Cinema, or at times is linked more accurately with the Left Bank school. Considering that the late 50s and early 60s was a period when almost no women directed films, in France or elsewhere, and considering that films of the New Wave overwhelmingly favored the male gaze, Varda stood out. Her work has especially interested feminist film scholars, as she often examined themes of special importance to women: pregnancy, abortion, the use of sexuality and beauty for gain, for example, are all areas that Varda has explored with her wandering camera. She has directed (and usually written, too) everything from documentaries to full-length fiction to short documentaries, covering a huge variety of subjects. Varda coined the term *cinécriture*, or cinema writing, to describe her work. Instead of making films that are simply “well-written,” as the cliché goes, she aims to use all elements of the filmmaking process to craft a sort-of film document. She seems to never bore of discovering the world through a lens, and at the spritely age of 84, she continues to work.

Perhaps her most famous work is a 1962 film called *Cléo from 5 to 7*. In it we follow a beautiful young recording artist named Cléo Victoire around Paris as she awaits the results of a

biopsy. When we first meet her, she has gone to a tarot card reader hoping to find out in advance the news that she must wait in agony for the next 90 minutes to find out. Varda uses the cards to cleverly foreshadow the rest of the film. We meet her personal assistant and we discover that she will meet another man soon. When Cléo pulls the death card, we discover the mystery that propels the whole movie: will she die of cancer? Sensing Cléo's panic, the reader reassures her that the death card may simply represent *une transformation profonde*, that she will change in a dramatic way. From 5 to 6:30 (what happens until 7 is up to the viewer) we watch Cléo as she watches herself and the world, wandering the streets of Paris looking for some solace. Where she finds it is a surprise for Cléo and the audience.

Throughout the film, images of death and sickness, of nature at its most disgusting, seem to haunt Cléo. She sees a broken mirror and interprets it as an omen of her demise. A street performer who vomits up frogs, and another who sticks a needle through his arm, deeply disgust her. She marvels at her friend Dorothee, who is a nude model for artists, because Cléo feels nudity is like sickness. But gradually over the course of the film, Cléo becomes more comfortable with herself, with her situation, and with nature. This culminates, unsurprisingly, when she stops to enjoy a beautiful park. From this point onward, Varda depicts a Paris filled with trees and bustling with friendly life. Even the hospital where Cléo receives the news about cancer is a cultivated garden. Varda uses all aspects of *cinécriture* to tell Cléo's story.

In this paper, I argue that the film hinges on Cléo's *transformation profonde*, from doom at the beginning to happiness at the end, and that this transformation is primarily an acceptance of the reality of decay in nature. Cléo learns to accept this, and even to find the beauty in it.

## Annotated Bibliography

### *Primary Sources*

*Cléo from 5 to 7*. Dir. Agnès Varda. Perf. Corinne Marchand. Ciné Tamaris, 1962. Film.

*Cléo* follows a young singer named Cléo Victoire around Paris for 90 minutes as she awaits the results of a cancer test. The title is a play on the French idiom “de 5 à 7”, which refers to the hours when lovers meet. The opening credits foreshadow what will pass in the film: as Cléo has her fortune told by a tarot card reader, we learn that Cléo is an artist, that she has a rich and generous lover, that she is attended to by a widow who is very close to her, and that the death card is in her future. This upsets Cléo, but the reader reassures her that the death card may only mean a profound transformation of her person. Cléo leaves in distress. She is afraid that cancer will ruin her beauty, and of course, kill her. She goes to a café and shopping with Angèle, her personal assistant. They return to her apartment to prepare for a rendez-vous with José, her rich lover, and to rehearse with her musicians. The central scene, both emotionally and temporarily, of the film occurs when her musician give her a new song to practice called “Cri d’amour,” the deathly poetry of which overwhelms Cléo. This inspires her go off on her own. During her journey, the city excites and bothers her. She eventually finds her way to the Parc Montsouris where she makes friends with Antoine, a young soldier. Feeling a new sense of calm and happiness, she is able to handle the news that she indeed does have cancer, but the doctor is confident that she’ll be alright. The film is in real time and is divided into “chapters”. Most known

for its innovative *cinécriture*, and free, documentarian style, Cléo has remained a popular favorite of the French New Wave.

*The Gleaners and I*. Dir. Agnès Varda. Ciné Tamaris, 2000. Film.

This self-reflexive documentary was released in France in 2000, and entered in the Cannes Film Festival the same year. The title refers to the two subjects of the film: the many gleaners of produce and knickknacks, and Varda herself, who “gleans” images and ideas with her digital camera. She travels throughout France meeting with the gleaners, trying to understand their lives and motivations. The tone is generally light-hearted, but the film also comments on the wastefulness of contemporary society. The film has proven to be very popular with critics and audiences alike, winning top awards at the Chicago International Film Festival, Boston Society of Film Critics Awards, the European Film Awards, the French Syndicate of Cinema Critics, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards, the National Society of Film Critics Awards (USA), the New York Film Critics Circle Awards, Online Film Critics Society Awards and the Prague One World Film Festival.

### *Secondary Sources*

Anthony, Elizabeth M. “From Flora to Fauna in Agnès Varda’s Cléo de 5 à 7.” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26.2 (1998): 88-96. Print.

In this article, Anthony examines the “goddess” comparisons in *Cléo*. We see Cléo move from her Cleopatra self-idolatry, to the cheerful goddess of Roman mythology. For Anthony, the ways Varda plays with visual and mythic metaphors lies at the heart of the film: “By blurring images of a fictive Parisian singer of the 1960s, a legendary

Egyptian queen, and a goddess from Roman mythology, Varda raises questions about representations of women and how they conform to the ideals and values of a particular society.” (94)

Archer, Neil. “Sex, the City and the Cinematic Possibilities of Female Spectatorship in Claire Denis’s *Vendredi Soir*.” *French Forum* 33.1-2 (2008): 245-260. Print.

Neil Archer discusses this film in terms of “feminine” space, understanding that such a gendered term is useful only insofar as he wants to examine the ideas of feminine desire and subjectivity. Although the protagonist, Laure, drives, the film presents a surprisingly positive vision of the modern infrastructure of roads. Archer’s main argument is that “the solitude of spectatorship contains its own liberating possibilities, in a way that the film genders as female.” (247)

Biró, Yvette and Catherine Portugues. “Caryatids of Time: Temporality in the Cinema of Agnès Varda.” *Performing Arts Journal* 19.3 (1997): 1-10. Print.

Biró and Portugues argue that time is the primary theme of Varda’s films (several of which they analyze in detail), a vital, impenetrable force that serves as a catalyst for her characters. Many of her films deal with temporality in an obvious fashion, breaking the fourth wall and directing the viewer to the problems of the stories. Biró and Portugues rightly identify the blend of fiction and documentary as a defining characteristic of Varda’s *cinécriture*. “Varda serves up flexible, jerky prose, mere trifles of rhapsodic thought, at once penetrating and light, suggesting a profound and terrible truth... everything –place, object, body—is marked by the passage of time.” (10)

Conway, Kelley. “ ‘A New Wave of Spectators’: Contemporary Responses to Cléo from 5 to 7.”  
*Film Quarterly* 61.1 (2007): 38-49. Print.

Kelley Conway discusses the cultural phenomenon of the French *ciné-club*, bi-weekly gatherings to watch and discuss films, that flourished from the mid-1940s through the 60s. The *ciné-club* has often been identified as a root of the New Wave. An entire generation learned to think critically about film. Conway then examines the results of a questionnaire given out at the inaugural meeting of the Ciné-Club des Avant-Premières, where around 2000 spectators were asked to comment on *Cléo*. Conway concludes from their responses that the main goals of the *ciné-club*, namely to create a more demanding viewer, had been met.

Decock, Jean and Agnès Varda. “Entretien avec Agnès Varda sur *Jacquot de Nantes*.” *The French Review* 66.6 (1993): 947-958. Print.

Jean Decock conducted an interview with Agnès Varda herself around the debut of a biographical film about the childhood of her husband, Jacques Demy. This is a particularly enlightening article for Varda scholars because we hear her take on her own works in her own words. She discusses some of her general ideas about film, especially in *Cléo*, before the discussion of *Jacquot*. A particularly revealing quote: “Notre petite tête perçoit toutes ces choses, tout ce chaos, et l’accepte, très curieusement, alors que dans les films on demande de l’ordre, de la logique et une conclusion.” (948)

Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. *To Desire Differently*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

This book is an excellent starting point for a discussion of feminist theory in French film, or in any film, for that matter. Flitterman-Lewis poses the question, “Does feminist cinema posit a way to *desire differently?*” (2) She explores this broad question through the specific lens of three French women filmmakers of different periods: Germaine Dulac, Maris Epstein, and Agnès Varda. Although she discusses each filmmaker individually and situates them in their historical and cultural context, she does so with the broader aim of establishing “that there is a difference in women’s filmmaking... and that this can only be understood by means of a theoretical grasp of both ‘femininity’ and its representations.” (26)

Hottell, Ruth. “Including Ourselves: The Role of Female Spectators in Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur* and *L’Une chante, l’autre pas*”. *Cinema Journal* 38.2 (1999): 52-71. Print.

Hottell offers a theoretical introduction of feminist film theories, more specifically the concept of female viewers as Other, before addressing *L’Une chante, l’autre pas* and *Le Bonheur*. She focuses on bell hooks’ analysis of the attitudes of black women viewers in the Hollywood system that caters to white men. She argues that “other” viewers are constantly forced to decide whether or not to “shut down our interpretive faculties in return for traditional narrative pleasure or learn to... blow the whistle on the authorities.” (55) Hottell then analyzes how Varda uses *cinécriture* in these films to question dominant paradigms of film and give a voice to her female characters.

Jackson, Emma. “the eyes of Agnès Varda: portraiture, cinécriture and the filmic ethnographic eye.” *Feminist Review* 96 (2010): 122-126. Print.

In this short article, Jackson examines how Varda uses an “ethnographic” eye to portray depth and detail in her films. Even in features like *Cléo from 5 to 7* and *Vagabond*, where the narrative is fiction, her characters often find themselves in the role of listener, observing the streets and everyday people like a documentarian would. Jackson believes that though an *auteur* for turning down Hollywood, Varda maintains a kind of “vulnerability, thoroughness, and sense of responsibility to the subject.” (96)

Kuhlken, Pam Fox. “Clarissa and Cléo (En)Durée: Suicidal Time in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7*.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 45.3 (2008): 341-369. Print.

Pam Fox Kuhlken compares the temporal journeys of Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Cléo in *Cléo from 5 to 7*. There are some obvious similarities in their wanderings: they each face a crisis and undergo a transformation, and each meets with a male counterpart, forming a yin and yang dichotomy. Kuhlken argues that their respective transformations involve a liberation from traditional fictions of time: *temps*, or masculine time; and *durée*, women’s time. They defy this “suicidal time”, castrate Father Time, and find themselves “transformed, finding their consummation in the androgynous yin and yang romantic idealists —Clarissa and Septimus, Cléo and Antoine— are animated by the thought of authentic relationship and meaningful tomorrows.” (368)

Marie, Michel. *The French New Wave: An Artistic School*. Trans. Richard Neupert. Padstow, Cornwall: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.

Michel Marie is an excellent cinephile and scholar of French cinema, and this guide is a useful tool for the in-depth scholar, or anyone who wants to learn more about the New Wave. He sets forth a nine-point criterion for what constitutes an artistic school, and whether or not the New Wave qualifies. Then he traces the history of the New Wave (identifying Varda's *La Pointe Courte* as the beginning of a certain tendency in the new cinema (29)), then analyzes the New Wave from aesthetic, technical, thematic, and productive angles.

Mouton, Janice. "From Feminine Masquerade to Flâneuse: Agnès Varda's Cléo in the City."

*Cinema Journal* 40.2 (2001): 3-16. Print.

Janice Mouton argues that Cléo's involvement with the city triggers her "transformation from feminine masquerade to flâneuse." (3) She highlights the opening scenes, especially as she tries on hats, as establishing Cléo's *masquerade* of typical femininity. Jump cuts, shots of mirrors, and fetishized objects, like the hats, combine to emphasize Cléo's shattered nature. Mouton links Cléo's journey through Paris to past *flâneuses*, namely George Sand and Virginia Woolf. As she wanders the streets, without the desire to shop but the desire to simply experience, Mouton argues that Cléo "has discovered the curiosity and courage to feel her own subjectivity—to become a flâneuse." (14) Cléo evolves from an object that is looked at to a subject who looks.

Nelson, Roy Jay. "Reflections in a Broken Mirror: Varda's Cléo de 5 à 7." *The French Review*

56.5 (1983): 735-743. Print.

Roy Jay Nelson provides good starting ground for a technical analysis of *Cléo*. He “define[s] the relationship (between viewer and motion picture) in terms of the innovative techniques that produce it.” (735) Nelson argues, as do most scholars, that the film is most obviously about time. He also insists on the role of varying perspectives in the film. For example, each chapter is “told” from a certain perspective. Beyond that, Nelson documents specific instances where camera work emphasizes differences in character (738). Finally, Nelson highlights what he calls the “simultaneous analogy” of the film. Like most New Wave films, *Cléo* is “highly analogical”, finding symbolic meaning in a variety of objects, but the analogy simultaneously shows the relationship between observer-observed and transformer-transformed (741).

Quart, Barbara and Agnès Varda. “Agnès Varda: A Conversation.” *Film Quarterly* 40.2 (1986-1987): 3-10. Print.

Barbara Quart conducted this entertaining interview with Varda around the time of the release of *Vagabond* in America. The film had already been a critical and financial success in France. Quart begins with an introduction to Varda and *Vagabond*. A few highlights of the interview include her views on women directors in America (“I never spoke with an American woman director who had thought about what is the cinematic writing” (4)), her experiences with the feminist movement (6), the personal experiences that influenced *Vagabond*, and the role of money in filmmaking (“But still they (filmmakers in France) do films to make money. Very few people are involved in creating that pile of pieces of films as you do paintings.” (10))

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

This is a landmark and highly original work, and essential to anyone interested in the topic of human pain. Drawing from a wide range of sources, including literature and art, medical case histories, documents on torture compiled by Amnesty International, legal transcripts of personal injury trials, and military and strategic writings by such figures as Clausewitz, Churchill, Liddell Hart, and Kissinger, Scarry posits that human pain “unmakes” the world by destroying language. She begins by analyzing the inexpressibility of pain, a phenomenon documented in both fact and fiction. The second half of the book describes the behaviors and artifacts that “make” the world in face of pain and oppression.

Simmel, Georg. “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” (1903) in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson eds. *The Blackwell City Reader*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell: 2002.

“The Metropolis and Mental Life” is a widely read work by the German sociologist. It began as a lecture on all aspects of city life, given at the Dresden city exhibition in 1903. Simmel had been asked to talk about the role of the mind in big city life, but ended up talking about the role of the big city in the mind. He puts forward many now-common ideas about the urban landscape, including the concept of *flânerie*, but most importantly the idea the definitive struggle of modern man is to struggle against being swallowed up in the current mechanisms of technology.

Smith, Alison. *Agnès Varda*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

This book is part of a series on French film directors aimed at an anglophone audience, and designed “for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.” (from the foreword) A great introduction to Varda, covering some familiar ground in any critique of her work, including *cinécriture*, time and memory, and women’s images.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1990.

This book compiles two of Susan Sontag’s most famous essays. *Illness as Metaphor* is a combative, astounding text, written as Sontag was suffering from cancer herself. She traces the historical and cultural attitudes of two principle diseases, tuberculosis and cancer, demonstrating how both diseases were considered as resulting from the patients personality, especially from repressed passions, when they ought to be considered as simply diseases. She then analyzes how language reflects and encourages the view of cancer as a monstrous, fateful thing. She concludes that “Our views about cancer, and the metaphors we have imposed upon it, are so much a vehicle for the large insufficiencies of this culture: for our shallow attitude toward death, for our anxieties about feeling, for our reckless improvident responses to our real ‘problems of growth,’ for our inability to construct an advanced industrial society that properly regulates consumption, and for our justified fears of the increasingly violent course of history.” (87)

Temple, Michael & Michael Witt, ed. *The French Cinema Book*. London: BFI Publishing, 2004.

This is a survey of French cinema from the 1890s to the present. It provides historical, social, and cultural context for French cinema, and provides case studies for individual films, and suggestions for further reading. The book is intended for anyone interested in French cinema, at any level.

Ungar, Steven. *Cléo de 5 à 7*. London : BFI Publishing, 2008.

This book, part of a popular series about “classic films” published by the British Film Institute, is probably the best basic guide to *Cléo*. Each volume in the series justifies the film’s “classic” status. Ungar situates *Cléo* in its cultural and historical space, and then gives a highly-detailed analysis of the film, chapter by chapter.

## Conclusion

I discovered many possible paths to follow while researching this article, paths that some scholar will hopefully explore someday. One of the themes of the film is superstition versus reason. The story begins at a tarot card reader's and ends at a hospital. Future articles could explore the symbolism of both superstition (like the broken mirror) and the symbolism of science, and maybe the way the dichotomies are compared or dissolved. Perhaps an argument could be made that Cléo's journey takes her from superstition to reason. Many scholars mention this is passing, but I've not seen an essay dedicated solely to this.

The role of cancer in the film definitely merits its own article. It is such a common disease, and the power it holds over our collective conscious is impressive. Again, while some scholars have discussed this, especially the moment when Antoine tells Cléo that the zodiac is passing into cancer, the image of cancer as a crab, or as an infectious, unbeatable thing is intriguing and has not been examined sufficiently.

The frog-eater and the comparison between Antoine and the frog prince is another area that, if time were limitless, I would have explored. Also worth examining is the historical context of the film, and whether or not this impacts Cléo, especially considering that historical time is often gendered as "masculine". I would love to see more research on Varda compared and contrasted with other New Wave filmmakers, or whether or not she is part of the New Wave. I hope that this article inspires others to take new interest in *Cléo*, if not to investigate these ideas, than others.