

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 114

Valerie Orpen, *Cléo de 5 à 7*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xi + 111 pp. Appendices, bibliography and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03217-2. \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-252-07458-5.

Review by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Rutgers University.

Agnès Varda's New Wave classic, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), is a film about which I thought almost everything had been written. Happily, I was disabused of this illusion by Valerie Orpen's carefully researched, endlessly insightful, and highly readable analysis of the film, part of Ginette Vincendeau's excellent French Film Guides series. Each book in the series looks closely at a single film in several comprehensive contexts: production history (including contemporary events), structural and thematic analysis, and reception (including both critical and popular views of the film). Orpen's volume is a masterful demonstration of the richness of this format: she has literally covered every source imaginable, from obscure contemporary reviews in French periodicals to literary texts suggested by certain critical sources, to the philosophical underpinnings of some of Varda's themes, to virtually all of the analyses of Varda's career. (I should note that while Orpen refers in very favorable terms to my own book, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, my enthusiastic assessment of her study is impartial, my appreciation notwithstanding.)^[1] Beyond serving as an astute reader of the filmic text, Orpen is a born teacher in the best sense of the word. The structure and aim of her book are pedagogical: she always clarifies, analyzes, and theorizes with an eye toward her reader's comprehension—something that makes this sophisticated and perceptive analysis a very enjoyable read. And Orpen adds a significant dimension to the study of this film by carefully assessing the debates over Varda's feminism. *Cléo de 5 à 7*, after all, was made by the only woman of the New Wave at a time predating (by almost twenty years) the formative discourses on feminine identity, vision, subjectivity and desire.

It is this last part of the book that I will deal with first, for Orpen provides a lucid overview, in condensed form, of the evolution of feminist film theory by way of a discussion of the contradictory reception, by feminists, of Varda's film. Prior to this specific discussion, Orpen notes that *Cléo* was very formally innovative—even groundbreaking—for its time, and yet it has succeeded in aging well; this might be the key to both its immediate and its continuous reception by those interested in feminist issues. Orpen shows how a chronological review of the film's critiques describes fluctuations indicative of different feminist eras, and she starts her discussion by citing those scholars and critics who, despite scant critical recognition of Varda by mainstream critics and historians at the time, acknowledged the feminist legacy of her films from the outset. English-language books focused on Varda's feminism and gender issues, French critics discussed Varda's status as *auteur*, and the two English-language monographs devoted specifically to Varda's work itself (i.e., not overview assessment books) combine both gender and authorship issues in their analysis.^[2]

With the necessary historicity, Orpen notes that in the early 1970s one of the pioneers of feminist film theory, Claire Johnston (I must note the volume's unfortunate misspelling of Johnston's name which does not end in "e"), in her seminal 1973 essay "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," criticized Varda as having an essentialist and ahistorical conception of femininity. Although Johnston refers mainly (and incorrectly) to *Le Bonheur* as an example of Varda's reiteration of the myth of the "eternal feminine," Orpen rightly points out that Johnston never mentions *Cléo* at all, and suggests that Johnston's

argument relies not only on a misunderstanding of Varda's irony, but on a misattribution (pp. 87-88). Orpen then delivers an elegant and concise definition of essentialism—a real gift to those of us who teach feminist theory—and goes on to characterize the feminist debate about *Cléo* along these lines. The central interpretative point for most reviewers of the film, Cléo's transformation from object to subject of the gaze, thus carries the weight of the feminist interpretation, for the liberation and empowerment that come from this transition are at the core of feminist inquiry. Orpen quotes Varda herself: "*Cléo* expressed—and still expresses in my view—the search for one's identity, and that's the first step towards any kind of feminist intervention" (p. 90). Orpen surveys all of the current scholarship on French film and concludes that while Varda's challenge to the audience of *Cléo* is typical of New Wave and European art cinema, its feminist difference is in the invitation to see the world and ourselves differently, to assume possession of the gaze, and to rearticulate the terms of the visual field for ourselves.

I want to return to the format of the book and its particular usefulness for an understanding not only of the film *Cléo de 5 à 7* but of the culture surrounding its production and reception, a category that includes our own contemporary readings. We are immediately greeted by a map of Cléo's trajectory around Paris, taken from Varda's annotated screenplay (Orpen has put to good use the two major sources of Varda's own words—aside from her many interviews—this screenplay from the early days of her career and the more recent annotated visual autobiography, *Varda par Agnès*).^[3] The map resembles the shape of the human heart, an extraordinary entry into the analysis of the film, and a choice by Orpen to situate this journey of self-realization in very human terms. As documentation to her study, Orpen has added an appendix outlining the thirteen chapters into which the film is divided, a list of the eighty-four different films cited in her study, and a comprehensive bibliography. Orpen divides each section of the book into subheadings, another clarifying device that also maps her own journey through the film.

The plot, such as it is, concerns the two-hour wait of Cléo Victoire, a superficial and coquettish pop singer, for the results of a medical test that may or may not disclose a fatal illness. On this longest day of the year in the middle of June, Cléo travels through Paris, from the apartment of a fortune teller on the Right Bank of the Seine, across the Pont Neuf to the student-filled streets of the Left Bank, down to the artist's quarter in Montparnasse, to the Parc Montsouris, and finally to the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital. Along the way she abandons the narcissistic frivolity associated with her career, embraces the vibrant world of popular Paris, and discovers friendship and healing along with a fresh vision of the world and of life. Thus the first section of this study, "Production Contexts," gives us a picture of what this world was for Varda in 1961. Orpen carefully analyzes what I would call Varda's pre-career formation up to *Cléo* (her background in photography and the arts), noting the early appearance of two consistent Varda themes, the passage of time and the dialectic of subjective experience and objective description. She then situates the film firmly in the context of the French New Wave (and challenges the persistent masculine emphasis of its main practitioners), explaining and documenting how the film amply fulfills both technical and stylistic descriptions of that film movement. And, with stunning precision and artful conciseness, she gives us crucial historical information on the backdrop of the Algerian War (significant in that while its actual presence in the film is very subtle, its centrality to the film's meaning is indisputable). In this section brimming with concrete details and little-known facts, Orpen provides a rich context for the film that goes beyond specific production data to the cultural referents that outline Varda's career-long political and social commitments.

Of course the bulk of Orpen's study is to be found in the central section of her book, "Structure, Style and Themes." But even here she goes beyond the standard rubric division, guiding our reading with such imaginative categories as "An unusual narrative structure: thirteen chapters in 'real' time," "A 'subjective documentary': focalisation, character interiority and realism," "The Spoilt Child, the Maid-cum-Madam and the Chatterbox," "A Filmic illustration of the Existentialist zeitgeist," "The loneliness of the *flâneuse*," "Paris: city of enlightenment," "Nature and death," and "Nudity and costume, truth and

masks.” In each chapter, Orpen starts from a concrete observation about the film, grounded in a thorough knowledge of Varda’s career and aesthetic, and then combines the close readings with background drawn from film theory, narratology, philosophy, art history, literary scholarship, photography, and the occult. She thus uses the sequence of images as a starting point for the richly associative work that amplifies the literal meaning of the text. If one follows Orpen’s own trajectory through the film, a perceptive new reading of this New Wave classic emerges. The film, which opens firmly anchored in Cléo’s subjectivity and her concern with time and mortality, ends on a celebration of a woman’s power to define her life, to take charge of how she is seen. Orpen’s analysis demonstrates how Cléo reverses the superstitions that had controlled her existence, allowing a new understanding of human connection to guide her transformative vision of life. Orpen cites the film’s trailer in her last chapter of this section: “[...] it’s about a woman caught between questioning and self-discovery, between coquettishness and angst, between appearance and nudity, thus pitting appearance and surface against nudity and truth” (p. 70). The stages of Orpen’s analysis provide an interesting parallel to the film’s design, from an internalized discourse of subjectivity to a critical analysis of those people surrounding Cléo, through a timely assessment of the existentialist philosophy popular among Left Bank intellectuals (and the New Wave), to a vivid evocation of Paris as the site of *flânerie* (here Orpen provides a thoroughgoing explication of this concept and its history both in literature and cinema), and finally, to a wonderful and detailed discussion of costume as signifying force, one whose symbolic meaning amplifies on Varda’s perpetual concern with nudity and truth (echoes of Paul Éluard here).

In the conclusion to her book, Orpen states, “*Cléo de 5 à 7* is a deceptively simple film. The more closely I examined it, the more meaning I discovered, and the more I was impressed by its precision, its concision and its sophistication. I never tired of viewing it again and again; I always found something new, something different, something I’d missed” (p. 95). Her analysis is itself open to the same observation: the more I read Orpen’s book, the more I was taken by surprise and set on my own path of reflection about this film. Just to take an example, Orpen notes that Varda had distributed an audience questionnaire when the film was first released. To the question “Will Cléo die?” an eighteen-year-old film enthusiast by the name of Serge Daney replied, “AUCUNE IMPORTANCE” (of no importance whatsoever). Daney, Orpen points out, went on to become a well-known film critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* (I would add that he was one of the most important film theorists of our time, starting his own film journal, *Trafic*, after having written about television and film for *Libération*). At a memorial after his premature death in 1992, one critic commented on his “liberation to be oneself, to be receptive to the voice of others.”[4] To come back to *Cléo*, if this formulation does not in itself uncannily return us there, Orpen uses this anecdote to emphasize the film’s challenge to the classical Hollywood enigma/resolution structure. She points out that while this question is indeed the film’s MacGuffin (a short definition from Hitchcock ensues), this is not a traditional feature fiction film. “Cléo’s existential angst at the beginning and her journey towards serenity at the end” might seem like an alternative reading of this pattern, but the film’s real meaning(s) lie elsewhere, in “a journey...that forces us to reappraise the world and ourselves” (pp. 29-30). Valerie Orpen’s book provides us with many possible journeys, and alongside its mappings, this book is all you need for a comprehensive introduction to Agnès Varda and her world.

NOTES

[1] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[2] The English monographs are Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently*; and Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[3] Agnès Varda, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962); and *Varda par Agnès* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma,

1994).

[4] Jonathan Rosenbaum, citing Sylvie Pierre, in "Daney in English: A Letter to *Traffic*," *Senses of Cinema*, 2001 (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/13/daney.html>).

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis
Rutgers University
sweetsod@aol.com

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172