

Analysis of Cléo from 5 to 7 Regarding the Gaze Theory

Kexuan Sha^{1,a,*}

¹Harrow International School, Beijing, 100102, China

a. lsha@harrowbeijing.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Before the 1960s, cinema was predominately focused on previous works of literature or the history before WW2 in France. A group of French directors in the late 1950s and 1960s, or the “nouvelle vague” (new wave), which can be directly translated to the new wave - contradicted this notion because they felt like this did not depict the realistic lives of people and produced films that countered the dominant cinema. Agnès Varda’s 1962 *Cléo from 5 to 7*, follows Cléo (Corine Marchand) in real-time on her journey through Paris, awaiting for the diagnosis relating to her cancer. This article argues that through the objectification of Cléo under the male gaze, the audience is sutured into Cléo’s perspective, allowing them to empathize with her emotions and understand the struggles that women face in a contemporary setting. This essay argues the point above by the detailed analysis of two particular scenes focusing on camera shots and the iconography of certain props and actions. By doing so, the analysis mirrors the social and political problems regarding gender of the film’s particular time of 1962.

Keywords: *Cléo from 5 to 7*, gaze theory, new wave

1. Introduction

From the 1950s until the 1970s, France witnessed a rapid economic prosperity, profoundly altering not only the populace's lifestyle but also key societal foundations, including manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism [1]. During this era, substantial sums were allocated towards leisure and luxury rather than the fulfillment of basic daily needs. Concurrently, the feminist movement experienced significant expansion, with women making noteworthy contributions during the Algerian War of the 1950s and 1960s, actively participating in combat alongside their male counterparts [2]. Nevertheless, they continued to grapple with the issue of objectification in their everyday lives, owing to the persistence of a patriarchal and male-dominated society.

Preceding the 1960s, French cinema predominantly revolved around adaptations of literary works or historical narratives predating World War II. This paradigm was challenged by a cohort of French directors in the late 1950s and 1960s, collectively known as the “nouvelle vague” or “new wave.” They believed that the prevailing cinematic approach failed to accurately depict the realities of people's lives and, as a result, produced films that subverted the prevailing cinematic norms [3]. Agnès Varda, a Belgian-born French director, is revered as the pioneer of the French new wave. Her debut film, “La Pointe Courte,” in 1954, served as a precursor to the new wave movement. Varda's work was infused with political commentary, inviting viewers to interpret her films through a feminist lens. Later in her career, she transitioned to documentary filmmaking [4].

In 1962, Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* offered a unique perspective. The film chronicles Cléo (played by Corinne Marchand) in real-time as she awaits a cancer diagnosis in Paris. The 90-minute film is divided into chapters, each marking the passing time as Cléo meanders through the city at her own pace. Audiences are immersed in Cléo's feminine perspective, allowing thoughts of mortality to permeate their consciousness. Over this duration, viewers witness Cléo's transformative journey, progressing from despair to acceptance, questioning her life and the incessant objectification she endures through the lens of existentialism.

This study endeavors to employ the concept of the female gaze and various cinematic techniques to dissect the fragments of Cléo's life, revealing the hidden effects beneath the surface. It seeks to elucidate why this portrayal of Cléo's experience holds significant sway over the patriarchal society of the 1960s.

2. Brief Summary of The Film

The film introduces us to its protagonist, Florence Victoire, known by her stage name as Cléo Victoire. She is a French singer who has achieved fame with three hit songs. Two days prior, she had experienced abdominal discomfort, prompting concerns about the possibility of cancer. In the narrative, the audience is poised to discover the outcome of her medical tests scheduled for 18:30 that day. The looming specter of a potentially fatal cancer diagnosis dominates her thoughts and profoundly influences her actions throughout the day.

Florence's interactions with acquaintances, close friends, and strangers shape her perceptions and actions. From 5 to 7, during an extended and captivating narrative divided into thirteen chapters, Cléo's emotional journey is witnessed as she grapples with the grim possibility of terminal illness. She spends over two hours in anguish, attempting to come to terms with her fate while wandering through the sunlit streets of the enchanting Parisian metropolis.

As previously mentioned, the film is set in the heart of Paris, and the city itself plays a central role in the narrative. The film accentuates the city's charm as Cléo's day unfolds. According to director Agnès Varda, it is "The portrait of a woman painted onto a documentary about Paris." [5] The city becomes the backdrop for the film, seamlessly weaving together the crowds at cafes, the bustling streets, the tranquil parks, the sterile hospitals, and the dimly lit cinemas. This meticulous attention to detail creates a sense of naturalism that immerses the audience in Cléo's world, enveloping them in the essence of Paris.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) [6], contends that cinema is structured to cater to the male gaze, relying on voyeurism and fetishism as its foundational principles. Before delving into the concept of the male gaze, it is imperative to clarify the notion of "the gaze." In media and film studies, the gaze signifies a lens of perception and consciousness. Jonathan Schroeder, a Visiting Assistant Professor at Brandeis, elucidates that the gaze transcends mere observation; it signifies a psychological power dynamic in which the observer holds superiority over the object of scrutiny. In essence, the gaze denotes how one can be seamlessly integrated or "sutured" into the perspective of a character portrayed on screen.

The male gaze, as defined, is the mode of looking that empowers the male viewer while rendering the female subject passive, reducing her to an object of observation [7]. Throughout the annals of cinematic history, the film industry has remained inherently phallogocentric, propagating the dominance of males, and relying on the fetishization of female characters. However, in the 1970s, Laura Mulvey introduced the groundbreaking concept of the female gaze, heralding a transformative era for the film industry. The female gaze does not represent a binary opposite to the male gaze; it abstains from

objectifying or dehumanizing male or any characters on screen. Instead, it provides an authentic portrayal of how females perceive the world and each other. This perspective rectifies the historical dearth of complexity and emotional depth in female characters in cinema, ultimately illustrating the female identity as a multifaceted spectrum that cannot be reduced to the objectifying lens of the male gaze [8].

This essay employs the gaze theory to scrutinize two primary facets: a close examination of various camera shots and a dissection of each image to establish Cléo's female gaze, while simultaneously questioning the male gaze through the lens of a female character. It is essential to acknowledge that the female gaze had not yet been introduced during Agnès Varda's time. Therefore, this analysis predominantly draws from modern theoretical perspectives, viewed through the prism of a contemporary audience.

The application of the gaze theory in this essay not only exemplifies the historical objectification of female individuals in 1960s cinema and their subjugation by the opposite sex throughout history but also underscores the persistent gender equity issues in the modern society [1]. It serves as a poignant reminder that the film industry's portrayal of gender dynamics continues to mirror the broader societal challenges and inequities that persist today.

4. Analysis based on the Theory

Cléo from 5 to 7 though, is prior to the establishment of the female gaze, but intriguingly displays this idea throughout the duration of the film. The form of *Mise-en-scène* is used by Varda throughout the film to highlight the male gaze of other characters on Cléo. *Mise-en-scène* refers to everything that is presented in front of the camera, including the actors, location, lighting and set. Cléo's huge apartment, its wide and large structure filled with free space and clustered symbolic props reflects her mental state and self-conflict on her journey to self-discovery. The camera is situated on the top corner of the ceiling of the apartment, so the audience is introduced to see the whole room, medium shots and close-ups of her facial expressions and actions follows the establishing shot. The apartment can be seen as her oasis, a place to go when she wants to escape and the objectification from the male-dominated and patriarchal society. The idea of a patriarchal society is further emphasized by the close-up shot where Cléo examines the different accessories on the wall and observes herself in the mirror. Because of her actions, the viewers can question why she has to value herself through her beauty and possibly infer that she has a narcissistic ego. When access to public space for women was limited, women were seen by others through a lens of beauty and objectification, to some extent, as an object of scopophilia. Scopophilia is the pleasure of observing, an infantile instinct in Freudian psychology [9]. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey defines scopophilia regarding the male gaze's supremacy in classical Hollywood films as the satisfaction gained from observing the bodies of other individuals as (particularly, erotic) objects without being seen by other characters on screen or by audience members [9]. Mulvey claims that cinematic apparatus – A term from the 1970s film theory of Jean-Louis Baudry that describes the entire “arrangement” of cinema that creates a cohesive, coherent story world – encourages both the voyeuristic dehumanization of female characters and the narcissistic identification with an idealized persona portrayed on screen. In this scene, Beauty is where Cléo finds her sense of self-esteem. The white and silky robe in which Cléo wears resembles an angel is significant as it represents how Cléo longs to be gazed as she swings in her apartment, although this can also allude to the idea of death that permeates the entire movie. The symbol of swinging within her apartment exemplifies her desire to be the focal point of attention when observed, reflecting her wish to hold such a position in a broader context, namely society. She takes pleasure and satisfaction in representing femininity as a commodity, engaging in actions and purchasing items that do so. Herself and the people around her are drawn to her by her beauty, one witnesses Cléo

struggle with the ramifications of perceiving herself and being observed by others through a prism of feminine beauty, which casts her as foolish and fragile throughout the film.

In both her fictional and factual work, Varda frequently centers on women [4]. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when male protagonists and implicit patriarchal beliefs ruled the film industry, this was a bold and revolutionary decision [3]. The auteur theory was primarily advanced by the film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*: it is believed that directors played a significant role in shaping their creative works, enabling them to convey their perspectives and manifest their artistic vision through film – a concept that originated from the cinematic theories of André Bazin and Alexandre Astruc [10]. Before the *nouvelle vague* movement, movies were perceived as a collaborative effort within the Hollywood system, where directors were considered as just one more member of the production team. Varda and other directors embraced this theory, creating films imbued with their unique 'voice' and distinctive style [3]. In this particular film, Varda is more concerned with her audience's engagement in the issues faced by Cléo within her social and political environment, rather than seeking their empathy for the protagonist. The opening scene plays a huge significance in understanding Cléo's character. The close-up of the tarot card reading session is the only scene that is filmed in color. This sharp comparison with the black-and-white setting of all the other scenes in the film allows her and the audience to be submerged in despair. The jump cuts between Cléo's facial expression, and the dark hallway of the building creates a sense of tension that is almost suffocating and claustrophobic. Another scene that shows a similar concept is when Cléo is in the taxi with her assistant. In a shot-reverse-shot manner, the audience sees a close-up shot of Cléo's face following the view outside the taxi window establishing Cléo's female gaze. Thereafter, the viewers see two men in another car verbally assaulting Cléo in a sexual manner. This highlights how she is not a stereotypical feminist heroine under the male gaze, as she deals with the difficulties that women would encounter in a male-dominated society. However, one could argue that she is, to some extent, a feminist heroine as she opens a door for the audience to perceive the daily struggles which women face, emphasizing (or arguably introducing) the crisis of female suppression in society. The male gaze is infinitely expanded as the audience can experience the objectification from the perspective of a female character, opening a door for the viewers to comprehend her emotions. In the film and this scene particularly, Cléo deals with the tensions and inconsistencies that women experience in patriarchal societies, following the beginning of the 'Third Wave' feminism in the 1960s, raising questions on women's place in society [11]. The use of shot-reverse-shot is crucial to depicting the power relations and Cléo's struggles in this scene; it is from here where Cléo begins to decipher the fetishizing gaze of men. Cléo sees Paris via a female lens, as Varda portrays the males in Paris as superficial. Wherever Cléo wanders to, the sexist male gaze is constantly there, serving as fundamental themes around the film.

5. Influences on Society

The core of this essay is based upon the notion of the gaze, and this is not only a significant element through the entire film, but it also acts as a mirror to reflect the problems regarding feminism in 1960s France, and in our society today [1]. The second wave of feminism arose following the Second World War [11]. Comparable to what took place in America, there were increasingly frequent protests concerning feminism and racism in France in the 1960s. As mentioned in the movie consistently through the uses of the diegetic sound of the radio and the encounter with Antoine, the Algerian War of Independence played a significant part in the rise of women participating in activities of revolutionary level: assisting male counterparts on the battlefield, communication, transportation, administration, and more [2]. Moreover, the portrayal of Cléo's growth as an independent could also be an indication of the movement for women's equality, where women have been more outspoken than ever as they worked to topple sexist hierarchies by initiating protests.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Varda's skillful portrayal of objectification is woven seamlessly into the fabric of the 90-minute film, while Cléo's female perspective is deftly integrated into the audience's experience through a variety of cinematic techniques, leaving them deeply immersed in the concept. Cléo's transformation from a self-centered and pampered individual to one of self-realization is meticulously portrayed as the audience follows her throughout her day. Varda adeptly conveys Cléo's emotions and inner thoughts, offering a window into her world and, in turn, shedding light on the societal and political gender dynamics of 1962.

By presenting objectification through the eyes of a female character, the film widens the scope of the male gaze, allowing viewers to empathize with her emotions. As Cléo awaits the results of a diagnostic procedure and contemplates her future, identity, and role in society, the mundane events of everyday life take on profound significance.

This research is rooted in interpretations of the original film and insights from previous film reviews and critiques. However, it is important to acknowledge that this research is inherently subjective, and the interpretation of blank spaces may vary according to individual perspectives. This exploration of this groundbreaking cinematic masterpiece is intended to serve as a foundation for future film scholars to delve into a multitude of analyses and perspectives.

References

- [1] Drinkwater, J.F., Elkins, T.H., Shennan, J.H., Wright, G., Weber, E., Bachrach, B.S., Blondel, J.F.P., Bisson, T.N., Higonnet, P.L.-R., Popkin, J.D., Woloch, I., Bernard, F., Fournier, G., Flower, J.E., & Tuppen, J.N. (2023). France. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/France>
- [2] Petruso, M. (2020). *Propaganda, nationalism, and feminism: Algerian women in the French-Algerian War*. Undergraduate Thesis, University of Pittsburgh. (Unpublished).
- [3] Ostrowska, D. (2008). *Reading the French New Wave: Critics, writers and art cinema in France*. Wallflower Press.
- [4] Varda, A., Marchand, C., Bourseiller, A., & Davray, D. (1962). *Cléo de 5 à 7* (p. 9). Paris: Gallimard.
- [5] DeRoo, R. J. (2018). *Agnès Varda between film, photography, and art*. Univ of California Press.
- [6] Stefanovic, P., & Parać, A. G. (2021). *Male Gaze and Visual Pleasure in Laura Mulvey*. *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies*, 343-362.
- [7] Ellerman, J. (2022). *What is the Male Gaze*. Sep 07, 2022.
- [8] Sassatelli, R. (2011). *Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, gaze and technology in film culture*. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(5), 123-143.
- [9] Mulvey, L. (2013). *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. In *Feminism and film theory* (pp. 57-68). Routledge.
- [10] Sarris, A. (2008). *Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962*. *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, 35-45.
- [11] Thornham, S. (2004). *Second wave feminism*. In *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism* (pp. 25-35). Routledge.