

constructs symbols – an egg inside a broken electric-light bulb, for example – these may be read as the logical extension into fantasy of the process of vision which the film is documenting.

L'Opéra-Mouffe is a specifically feminine exploration of the process of subjective or symbolic vision, the conversion of the everyday world into metaphors for feelings which, in some cases, are resistant to verbal explanation. Varda wrote:

J'étais contente d'avoir transmis cette émotion particulière à ma grossesse: un retour aux instincts (peur d'éviscération, attention et sensibilité décuplées, autoprotection) ... Contemporaine pour faire la respiration du petit chien, oui, mais primitive autant que se peut pour vibrer avec les sensations nouvelles. Et leur trouver une forme de cinéma, entre la vérité d'un Cartier-Bresson et les images de rêveries du cinéma dit marginal.⁵ (Varda 1994: 115)

L'Opéra-Mouffe was a project destined for the 'cinéma dit marginal', made for an exhibition of avant-garde cinema. This context, unusual in Varda's work, allowed her to explore her personal preoccupations very freely. As we shall see, the exploration influenced the larger-scale work which followed it.

Cléo de 5 à 7 (1961)

Cléo was Varda's first venture into the relatively mainstream cinema, under the aegis of the Nouvelle Vague and specifically of Georges de Beauregard, producer of *A bout de souffle*. It recounts, in 90 minutes of film, 90 minutes of the life of the beautiful Cléo Victoire, a relatively successful pop singer (a 1960s' Vanessa Paradis), during which she awaits the results of a medical test for

cancer. The film begins with a visit to a fortune-teller, who by confirming dramatic changes in Cléo's life crystallises her fears. The first half of the film follows Cléo and her secretary Angèle home from the fortune-teller's to her lavish flat/studio. In the second half, after abruptly breaking off a rehearsal when she realises for the first time the painful significance of the lyrics she is given, Cléo goes out into Paris again, to visit a friend and explore the Parc Montsouris. Here she meets a soldier at the end of his leave from the Algerian war and strikes up a conversation with him; he accompanies her to the hospital for the test results.

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (1996: 268–84) particularly has clarified in great detail the mechanism of the film and the way in which it explores the problem of female identity. Clearly, the Cléo of the first part of the film sees herself through the eyes of others, and allows this to determine who she is: she identifies herself with her appearance to such an extent that, looking in the fortune-teller's mirror, she can proclaim that 'Being ugly, that's death'. As she is clearly beautiful, the definition permits her temporarily to deny death, but it is manifestly unsatisfactory. In order to reassure herself of her existence she is obliged to check her appearance at regular intervals, either in one of the many mirrors which surround her or by using other people as her mirror. The problem, already apparent, is that her illness is both very real and quite invisible – a fact which both reassures and annoys her. Although she declares to her friend Dorothee that she is glad that her cancer 'doesn't show', she is still obliged to take account of this part of her subjectivity that most of her entourage are quite oblivious of. Even her lover does not take her illness seriously. Her knowledge of its existence therefore obliges her to see herself differently, to take account of her own awareness. None of the people around her really know her if they are unaware of something so fundamental. The thought drives her to assert her identity, complaining of the way her managers treat her as a doll unable to think for herself. In the second part of the film, instead of expecting others to look at her, she looks at her surroundings, and her meetings with Dorothee and Antoine contain a genuine exchange.

⁵ 'I was pleased to have transmitted the particular emotion of my pregnancy. A return to instincts (fear of evisceration, a tenfold increase in sensitivity and attention, self-preservation) ... I was contemporary enough to do breathing exercises, yes, but as primitive as can be when it came to vibrating to new sensations. And to have found a cinematic form for them, between the truth-to-life of Cartier-Bresson and the dream-imagery of the so-called marginal cinema.'

Henri Cartier-Bresson was a well-known still photographer working in Paris in Realist mode in the 1930s and 1940s.

The contrast between the two passages through Paris, in terms of both what is filmed and how it is filmed, illustrates this progress. On her way back to her flat, Cléo makes two pauses; once to sit with Angèle in the café where they meet, once to buy a hat. As Cléo walks to the café, the camera follows her, at a distance and from a slightly high angle, keeping her strictly in the centre of the frame. In the first sequences, Cléo is (as Flitterman-Lewis has pointed out) almost always surrounded by mirrors. These not only keep her own image constantly before her eyes; they also prevent her from seeing beyond them. As she tries on hats, she is seen through a maze of reflections, of mirrors glimpsed through the shop-window. As the camera, outside the window, moves around to keep her in frame, reflections of the life of the street are reflected on to Cléo. This is an excellent visual description of her awareness of that world – it has no substance in her life, other images are nothing but passing shadows over the all-important image of herself. This, of course, is not only how she sees her world, but how she imagines herself to be seen by others. The camera, in the first half of the film, goes along with this, scarcely losing sight of her for an instant.

In the second part of the film, on the contrary, the street is seen 'through Cléo's eyes' in two ways. First, the position of the camera in relation to the sights of Paris often corresponds to Cléo's position – the classic cinematic way of establishing point-of-view. Shots of her walking are much briefer, interspersed with images which correspond to what she sees, and she is frequently decentred. Also, as in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, the images themselves have a point of reference to Cléo's condition. The street showmen who entertain crowds by swallowing frogs or pushing hooks into their flesh become images of the body's fragility or of its invasion by alien, vaguely sinister objects and pain. They frighten Cléo; knowing what is preoccupying her, we lend them similar associations. Other images of the street reflect, by their selection, that their observer is preoccupied with death. This part of *Cléo* clearly owes much to the ideas of *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, with which it contrasts directly. The observer of *L'Opéra-Mouffe* was preoccupied with birth, Cléo with death (although both preoccupations have a

similar bodily location). And yet, while the images of *L'Opéra-Mouffe* are disturbing (transposed to Cléo, they would be truly nightmarish), the Parisian sequences in *Cléo* are much less so. The process of observation is a liberation for Cléo, and even the alarming symbol-images have a positive function, helping her to make sense of what is happening to her in her own terms rather than through someone else's inadequate eyes. Besides, they (as with those of *L'Opéra-Mouffe*) are interspersed with observation of people, and in this respect the selection, and the significance, of those observed is quite different in *Cléo*, although the first sequence of 'people-watching' is very similarly titled in both films ('quelques-uns' in *L'Opéra-Mouffe* becomes 'quelques autres' ('certain others')).

Cléo's first real awareness of others invades her in the Café du Dôme, a well-known meeting-place of the Left Bank chattering classes. The camera follows her (again, mostly at her eye-level, but keeping her in view) as she wanders round the vast café, listening to snippets of conversations before rapidly swallowing the drink she has ordered. The conversations are at once serious and trivial, as café conversations tend to be. At the bar they talk about politics, in a corner they discuss Sartre, a woman complains of the music. These are not the battered tramps of *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, but well-integrated, relaxed people. Their function in this film is not to be associated with Cléo's obsession, but on the contrary to distract her from it.

The one thing that is not discussed, indeed barely glanced at, is Cléo; and she does not seem particularly disappointed not to encounter herself among the observations she is making. Indeed she takes precautions not to be observed, putting on a pair of dark glasses to avoid any chance of recognition. While the sights of Paris provide her with a new set of images of herself, darker, more complex images than the 'visage de poupée' (doll's face) which has begun to irritate her, but images capable of reflecting what is really going on within her, the people that she encounters allow her to forget herself in other subjectivities, to look at alternative lives. It is this realisation which will make her encounters with Dorothée and Antoine so much more rewarding than those with

Angèle and the taxi-driver in the first part of the film (which they somewhat resemble).

Thus Cléo changes from object to be looked at to subject who looks and interprets what she looks at – from woman seen to woman seeing. This is very fundamental for Varda (who after all has based her whole life on her status as a woman seeing); although Cléo is afraid that she is going to die, paradoxically her fear makes her come truly to life, taking control of the elements of her own life by reacting authentically to them. In the second half of the film, Cléo (through the camera) is able to integrate the outside world into her consciousness, to begin with certainly as an extension of her consciousness of herself, but, by the time she meets Antoine, she is ready to turn her gaze entirely outward and find respite from herself in all the multifarious details of life which so fascinate Antoine. Her change of attitude is indicated in her attitude to Antoine. Previously, she says, she would have ignored him or thought him a nuisance (that is, seen him only in relation to the expectations he might have of her); now, she allows herself to be interested by him irrespective of his interest in her.

The film's progress is marked by two major sequences, visually and in tone apart from the rest, in which Cléo performs her own songs. These sequences mark turning-points in Cléo's career and also moments of climax in Cléo's perception of herself, since in performing she is representing herself, giving a version of her own identity to an audience real or imaginary. In both these cases, the audience is imaginary within the film-world (although while Cléo is rehearsing the audience is projected to be real some day); however, of course the performances are set up for the benefit of the film's spectators, and the *mise-en-scène* reflects this.

The performance of the song 'Sans toi' in Cléo's flat is the moment which decides Cléo that her current self-definition is not only inadequate but a deadly trap. The image changes as it progresses. As she starts to sing the surroundings are realistic, in the sense that however artificial the environment of Cléo's flat may be, we recognise that it is a credible place for this woman to live, and that it makes perfect narrative sense that she should be

there. She is actually less aware of her audience at the beginning of a rehearsal (when she is preparing for a finished performance) than when she is receiving José or even when talking to Angèle. However, as 'Sans toi' takes off, and as Cléo begins to hear what she is singing, the image changes, until Cléo stands before a dark background as if in an actual performance: she is no longer seen within her surroundings but brilliantly lit against the dark, like a singer on stage (plate 6). Ironically this move from rehearsal to performance means that the audience has disappeared, and Cléo is performing for herself (and us). Cléo really 'sees' herself as spectacle, and this moment is presented to the film audience as a *mise-en-scène* set apart from the realistic progress of the story.

This is a sophisticated method of marking Cléo's change from object to subject, which approaches a problem inevitable in cinema representation, and especially representation of women. To the cinema audience, even when Cléo becomes herself an observer, she is still there to be observed and therefore an object; the best we can do to mark the change is to observe outside objects as well, through her eyes. In order to observe Cléo herself through Cléo's own eyes (as soon as she stops looking at herself as an outsider, a beautiful object), some other strategy is needed, and Varda opts for a moment of theatre.

The second such moment occurs in the Parc Montsouris, as Cléo, quite alone, goes down a flight of steps as if performing on a glamorous stage, singing one of her songs which calls attention to her outside appearance. Although the environment in this case does not change, the effect is of a number in a musical comedy (such as the films of Varda's husband Demy). The performance has no audience, it is on one level for Cléo herself, on another for the camera. Cléo is announcing, to herself, the artificiality of her singer's image – which she seems to be enjoying, but in an almost detached way. The film audience receives this as a startling contrast to the Cléo we have been watching for some time. It is a return to the earlier glamorous image, but we no longer feel that this is the 'real' Cléo. The first song marked the moment where Cléo feels the urgent need to get away from the constructed image which seems to be all she is: the second marks a return to it from

the confident knowledge that she does indeed have a personal, subjective identity apart from it.

Varda has recently toyed with the idea of an American remake of *Cléo*, directed by herself, with AIDS substituted for cancer and starring Madonna. By 1997, nothing had yet come of this project, but it would be fascinating to see what differences the new situation would bring to the treatment of the subject. Madonna embodies already in her public image many of the contradictions which *Cléo* explores. She is herself, like *Cléo* but unlike Corinne Marchand who plays her, a star with a highly constructed public image; but, unlike *Cléo*, she has considerable control over her image (at least apparently), and has never hesitated to present herself as desiring as well as desirable. Clearly, the combination of Varda, Madonna and *Cléo* would not be a simple remake ... but what it would be can only be guessed at.