

Article

Sachin Chatte

Following the Footsteps of Cleo

Few cities in the world possess the cinematic allure of Paris. Its appeal extends beyond French cinema, captivating even Hollywood filmmakers. The city's charm does not derive solely from its iconic landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre Museum; the ambience of Parisian streets and cafes contributes significantly to its unique character.

A landmark film encapsulating Paris's essence is Agnès Varda's *Cleo From 5 to 7*, which unfolds in real time between 5 and 7 PM, predominantly in outdoor settings. Released in 1962, this cult classic solidified Varda's status as a cinematic icon, and her legacy endured following her passing at the age of 90. In 2018, a year before her death, she received an honorary Oscar and was nominated for her documentary *Faces Places*.

During my visit to Paris this year, following the Cannes Film Festival, one of my objectives was to trace the journey of the film's protagonist, Cleo. However, before delving into this cinematic exploration, it is essential to highlight Varda's background. Born in 1928, she pursued literature before transitioning to photography, which became her primary source of income. Her first film, *La Pointe Courte*, was inspired by her photographic work and was released in 1955. Notably, Varda had no formal training in filmmaking, nor did she work as an assistant to any established director. This debut is particularly significant as it predates the French New

Wave movement, often associated with films like François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960). Scholars and critics now recognise that Varda was ahead of her contemporaries, with *La Pointe Courte* embodying the foundational elements of the New Wave. Alain Resnais, known for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), served as an editor on Varda's pioneering film.

In the years that followed, she produced a few short films before receiving a modest financial offer to create a feature film. Producer Georges de Beauregard, known for his collaborations with notable directors such as Godard, Jean-Pierre Melville, Claude Chabrol, and Eric Rohmer, reached out to Varda with a proposal to craft an inexpensive black-and-white film akin to the works of Godard and those of her husband, Jacques Demy, whom she married in 1962 and remained with until he died in 1990.

Acknowledging the constraints of a limited budget, Varda recognised the necessity of selecting a theme that could be effectively realised within the confines of Paris, thereby minimising travel and allowing for a small production crew. For Varda, originally from Belgium, Paris evoked a sense of trepidation; upon her arrival, she described the city as a "grey, inhumane, sad" place that instilled in her a "frightful memory." This period also coincided with a prevalent anxiety surrounding cancer. Considering

the available resources, locations, and logistical considerations, Varda determined that the film should unfold over a single day. She refined this concept to depict events in real-time, aligning the film's duration with a typical feature, approximately 90 minutes. Although the film is titled 'From 5 to 7,' it spans only 90 minutes, covering the time from 5 to 6:30 pm.



Cafe La Dome then with the clock on top



Cafe La dome now

The phrase '5 to 7' carries a specific French connotation, suggesting an afternoon rendezvous. The film's most intriguing aspect, which inspired my exploration of Cleo's journey through Paris, is its adherence to real-time storytelling and the precise geography of the city. The narrative does not shift abruptly between disparate locations; rather, it allows for a continuous journey that could realistically be completed within the allotted time. While a few scenes feature a car and a bus, the major part of the film unfolds on foot, with meticulous attention to detail regarding bus routes, locations, and travel durations. Corinne Marchand, a striking blonde with an ethereal visage, portrays Cleo, a celebrated pop singer who may be facing a grave health issue.

The film commences in colour before transitioning to its primary narrative in monochrome. Tarot cards are laid out on the table as the fortune teller selects them individually; the cards are vibrant in colour, while the dialogue between the protagonists unfolds in shades of black and white. This artistic choice effectively contrasts the vividness of fiction with the starkness of reality. Cleo is unwell and possibly facing cancer, though the diagnosis remains uncertain. The mind can manifest peculiar fears, and the spectre of mortality has already taken hold of her, prompting a visit to the fortune teller. The cards she draws do not alleviate her concerns; instead, they reinforce her anxiety that some calamity is imminent, a burden that continually occupies her thoughts.

With this foundational concept established, Varda's genius is revealed through her treatment of time. Representing time in cinema—whether through compression or expansion—is a nuanced craft. Filmmakers employ various techniques, such as editing or slow motion, to manipulate the perception of time. However, how does one portray a time when events are occurring in real-time and in authentic settings? Varda presents two distinct yet interwoven contexts of time. The film is structured into chapters, each introduced by a title card indicating the chapter name and the corresponding time, such as Chapter 1 – Cleo 17:05 to 17:08 hours. With 13 chapters, viewers are frequently reminded of what Varda refers to as "objective time," represented by the ticking clock. Throughout the film, multiple clocks are visible, marking the passage of time in various locations, including streets and restaurants. In an interview, Varda mentioned that they even adjusted the street clocks to reflect the accurate time needed for the narrative.

In contrast, "subjective time" exists—the pervasive dread of death that looms over Cleo. She is filled with anxiety, devastated, and not entirely herself. This experience of subjective time resonates with all of us, as we encounter it during both joyous and challenging moments or simply in times of unease.

Varda compels the audience to engage with Cleo's experiences, fostering empathy for her struggles. This emotional journey unfolds within a concise 90-minute runtime, yet from Cleo's

viewpoint, it stretches into what feels like an eternity, a feeling that resonates with viewers as well.



Cleo hat shop then



Cleo hat shop now

Armed with Google Maps and several online articles detailing the film's locations, I embarked on a quest to retrace Cleo's path. The film's initial outdoor scene captures Cleo exiting the Tarot reader's residence, traversing a bustling shopping street populated by vendors. While this street retains its commercial essence, it has since evolved into a more upscale shopping district. Varda used a telephoto lens to capture Cleo's stroll from a distance. Subsequently, Cleo enters a café to meet her assistant, who inquires about her visit to the tarot reader. Regrettably, this café no longer exists; however, the subsequent scene featuring their hat shopping takes place in a building that remains standing, albeit transformed into a high-end clothing store.

The two women exit the shop and hail a cab driven by a female chauffeur as they make their way home, crossing a bridge and navigating various streets. The driver turns on the radio, coincidentally playing a song by Cleo, which she doesn't particularly like.

Throughout this journey, most shots are captured from within the cab, with the windows and windshield providing a clear view of the essentially unchanged surroundings. Some angles are taken from over the driver's shoulder, while others are from the passenger side, showcasing the vibrant city life as the trio engages in conversation. The radio broadcasts news of unrest in Algeria, the sentencing of a commander related to the situation there, a farmer protest in France, and the tensions between Khrushchev and Kennedy. As the cab approaches Cleo's residence, it passes a street clock, which, although not prominently featured due to the interior shot, indicates the time as 5:20 PM.

The film consistently preserves its geographical and temporal context. It was striking to observe that the exterior of the house they return to remains unchanged from its depiction in the film. The gate and the sign are the same. I attempted to inquire about its occupancy and the possibility of entering, but my efforts were unsuccessful. Within the narrative, Cleo spends time with her lover and fellow musicians, including the renowned composer Michel Legrand, who do their best to uplift her spirits. For a fleeting moment, she manages to set aside her burdens, only for them to resurface and trouble her again. As a young and attractive woman, she frequently admires her reflection in the mirror, with numerous scenes in the film illustrating this behaviour.

Following anger and disappointment, she leaves home, leading us back to the streets after the film's longest interior sequence. During a roadside spectacle, she witnesses a man swallowing frogs, drawing a crowd's attention. Overwhelmed by her preoccupations with mortality, she turns away in disgust. When she enters a café, she passes by a street clock prominently displaying 5:50 PM. The café, Le Dome, continues to thrive, although its seating arrangement has altered since the film's portrayal. To experience the ambience and get a sense of the place, I decided to indulge in a cup of coffee, which cost me approximately 10 euros, or Rs. 900, marking it the most expensive cup of coffee I've ever bought. However, the experience was worthwhile, if not the beverage itself.

In the café's jukebox, Cleo plays one of her songs, but, to her dismay, no one reacts, prompting her to walk out. Although it is not stated, the anxiety

and disillusionment associated with the prospect of becoming insignificant, both in her artistic endeavours and personal identity, are evident from her actions as she leaves the café.

Cleo encounters her friend, who poses nude for a collective of sculptors. Their dialogue regarding the vulnerability of exposing one's body provides a deeper understanding of Cleo's perspective: "I would feel more exposed than truly naked in front of those individuals. They might notice a flaw." This aspiration for perfection and the anxiety of self-exposure renders Cleo susceptible in various respects. In contrast, her friend asserts, "My body brings me joy, not pride."



Cleo Home then



Cleo Home now

Subsequently, they embark on a journey to deliver a canister of film reels to a cinema theatre. As the narrative nears its conclusion, Varda seeks to disrupt the serious tone of the unfolding events. She incorporates a comedic short film titled *The Fiancés of the Bridge Mac Donald*, featuring her friends Jean-Luc Godard and Anna Karina, which Cleo and her friend watch from the projection room.

Like many historic theatres around the globe, this one has since ceased to exist.

As Cleo exits the theatre, she catches a glimpse of herself in a shattered mirror, interpreting it as an ill omen. "I'm overcome with fear again," she remarks. Corinne Marchand embodies her character with remarkable finesse, exuding an aura of composure amidst the turmoil. However, during the film's 90-minute duration, she occasionally falters, revealing her vulnerability to life's unpredictability, particularly concerning her cancer test results.

Following her friend's departure, the narrative progresses toward its finale as Cleo hails a cab, once more showcasing the vibrant streets of Paris. This setting starkly contrasts the grim anxieties that plague her thoughts with the ordinary lives of those around her.

Throughout the film's outdoor sequences, numerous individuals look directly at the camera, some intentionally and others inadvertently. Cleo disembarks at Parc Montsouris, where the taxi driver, hesitantly navigating through the park, notes with dark humour, "If we get stopped, it won't be the death penalty." The park remains a lively hub, filled with children, families, and elderly visitors, although vehicular access is no longer permitted. Spanning 37 acres, it ranks among the largest parks in Paris, requiring considerable time to traverse from one end to the other. Consequently, pinpointing the specific locations within the park where the film's events transpire proved challenging. Additionally, the weather was overcast, with intermittent drizzles, and there was no shelter available should the rain intensify; fortunately, the rain gods were kind till I completed the journey of the park, after which the heavens opened up, forcing me to rush to a public restroom to take shelter.

Varda selected this park due to its proximity to her residence, making it a familiar and cherished locale. As Cleo strolls through the park, she playfully descends a staircase while singing, momentarily shedding her anxieties. At a now-dry waterfall, she encounters Antoine, a soldier preparing to depart for duty on the same night. They strike up a conversation that goes something like this –

Antoine: Doesn't it interest you to know that today's the longest day of the year?

Cleo: The longest! How true!

Antoine: Today, the sun leaves Gemini for Cancer.

Cleo: Stop talking like that!

The dialogue between the characters is animated, with Antoine observing, “You appear to be anticipating something, rather than someone.” Cleo responds sombrely, “Some test results.” Their exchanges reveal Cleo's growing comfort in Antoine's presence, reminding me of Pink Floyd's notion of two lost souls swimming in a fishbowl. This leads to the film's concluding scene, where Antoine proposes they visit the hospital for the test results. The scene is filmed at l'Hôpital Universitaire Pitié-Salpêtrière, which has remained unchanged since the film's release, with the nearby metro still operational.

instead, Cleo has learned to savour the present moment.

Varda, 32, during the film's production, later said, “It's not about being in love; it's about being together.” Following a prolonged period of anxiety, Cleo reflects, “It's silly to look for the doctor. It doesn't matter. I can phone him tonight.” The anxiety has persisted for approximately 85 minutes in real-time, yet it feels significantly longer, subjectively. With only a few hours remaining before Antoine departs for his train, Cleo remarks, “We have so little time.” As they discuss their plans for the evening, with Cleo suggesting they could have dinner on a rooftop restaurant, Varda skilfully transitions to a wide shot of them on the bench, with Cleo saying, “We have plenty of time.” Through the film, Varda illustrates the fluidity of time, which can shift dramatically instantly, feeling either fleeting or prolonged in the blink of an eye.



Bridge then



Stairs then



Bridge now



Stairs now

Despite its century-old architecture, the hospital is a significant institution in Paris, famously associated with Princess Diana when she was brought there after a tragic accident. The hospital features an expansive and picturesque garden, prompting Antoine to remark, “It doesn't resemble a hospital. It feels like an old château, complete with gardens for hosting gatherings.” After discovering that the doctor is unavailable, they settle on a bench in the garden. Cleo appears at ease, having calmed down and appreciating Antoine's company. There are no indications of a romantic connection developing;

Cleo encounters her physician outside in a serendipitous moment, during which he nonchalantly delivers her diagnosis before departing. Despite its straightforward composition, this interaction is followed by one of the most striking tracking shots. The camera retreats, allowing the audience and the

characters to absorb the weight of the doctor's revelation. Although this shot lasts only a few seconds, its impact remains indelible for viewers of the film. As the two characters exchange glances and proceed, the film concludes with Cleo saying, "I think my fear is gone. I think I'm happy." Her fears stemmed from the unknown and the prevailing uncertainty, which has now dissipated, leading to her newfound happiness.



Hospital – final scene then

Retracing Cleo's path involved several excursions, as I primarily navigated the city solo on foot, without the assistance of a guide, except Google.



Hospital – final scene now

On my final day in Paris, just hours before my departure to the airport, I visited the hospital setting. Navigating an unfamiliar city while trying to catch a flight can be stressful, yet being at that location provides a sense of tranquillity. I sat on a bench, reflecting on this profound film and the extraordinary woman who created it. It felt like time had frozen at that moment, rendering everything else insignificant, even as the clock ticked.

Like Cleo, I found myself enveloped in happiness.

Sachin Chatte is a Member of FIPRESCI.