

The Strong Female Lead: Disempowerment as Liberation

by [Sofia Goorno](#)

“A male orgasm,” filmmaker Brit Marling says, reminds her of the hero’s journey: an inspiring arc deeply ingrained in storytelling, consisting of the inciting incident, rising tension, explosive climax, and denouement. Marling’s comparison makes sense. The classic narrative structure of the hero’s journey tells a story of growth, and change as a lead character realizes his potential and comes into himself. What is most fascinating to me is the underlying entrenchment of male pleasure and desire in this culture of storytelling, and the accompanying imbalance in representation of male and female pleasure. Despite the acceptance and popularity of the hero’s journey, this can’t be the only way to tell a story.

The stakes of finding alternative narrative structures are high: art reflects and displays culture, but also shapes and impacts it. Children learn fundamental lessons from art, which shapes the way they view themselves and their communities, impacting their language and the way they treat others. Why else would parents censor ‘inappropriate’ art from their children? Such fear stems from art’s shaping power. The impact of the French New Wave on cinema – and by extension, culture – is therefore immeasurable. French filmmakers, beginning in the late ‘50s, frequently explored existential themes using new, subjective approaches to visual style, editing, and narrative. This sense of experimentation had a lasting impact on cinema around the world. Realism is another dominant of the French New Wave, inviting a new sense of ambiguity that left the viewer pondering questions not fully answered in the film (Morrey 2-5). Director Agnès Varda was an important contributor to this elegant style of realism, especially with her 1961 film, *Cléo from 5 to 7*, in which the title character exemplified a French New Wave emerging female lead – and a different way to tell a cinematic story.

As a self-obsessed, glamorous pop star who frequently looks at herself in mirrors, Cléo seems to exist in order to fulfill the male gaze. And yet, Varda’s film is often regarded as feminist. Over the film, which takes place approximately in real time, Cléo interacts with different people as she awaits the results of a biopsy. As she moves through this emotional journey, Cléo becomes empowered in a way a person might over any given two hours of their day: a subtle sense of contentment after interacting with a stranger,

an aura of confidence suddenly found in one's own company, the catharsis when suppressed emotions break through to the surface. Cléo's empowerment is significant because it is realistic, human-scaled, and not classically 'cinematic.' This empowerment may go away in two days or two seconds; it is a journey that extends far beyond 5pm and 7pm. Cléo's development ultimately comes not from transformative growth, but from the audience's identification with her realistic ambiguity and subjectivity. Cléo's progression through the film is dictated by starts and stops that suggest something positive in the end, but the grand climax and denouement of the hero's arc are never brought to fruition.

If the hero's journey reminds Marling of the male orgasm, Varda's arc of subjective realism reminds me of the female orgasm. The female orgasm – or its lack – claims the same unpredictable intensity and emotional fervor that Cléo's narrative portrays. By using a new format and visionary style, characterized by temporal and spatial continuity, and *cinéma-vérité* style shots, Varda invents a new narrative that allows for a female lead who does not conform to the male-oriented narrative of the hero's arc so culturally standardized in cinema. Varda's cinematic structure speaks to the underrepresented, unexplored mystery that is female sexuality and pleasure: not the female 'sexuality' commonly portrayed in film actually subject to the male gaze, but the frustration and struggle of honest, liberated female pleasure. Cléo never reaches that dramatic climax or the relief and freedom that comes from a fully fleshed out denouement. She never seems fully liberated. She is trapped within a cycle of short-lived rising tensions, climaxes, and denouements, as she grapples with the emotional wave of these two hours – never fully liberated, still a woman.

As a woman, Cléo is constantly looked at through a lens of pleasure and desire, even as Varda's narrative structure works against the male-oriented cinematic standard. Laura Mulvey speaks of this kind of complexity in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she argues that, despite an emerging avant garde cinema, heterosexual male pleasure and misogyny in film are systemic. Mulvey claims that film's patriarchal structures can be analyzed by examining sexual difference, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle through a psychoanalytic lens. She writes, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. . . . In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (808-809). She argues that traditional filmmaking sexualizes and objectifies female characters as "an indispensable element of spectacle" (809). Initially, Varda portrays Cléo as a pop star who enjoys the gaze of others. In her tightly-fitted polka-dot dress, Cléo is looked at by various men, store workers, and masked people, an evident object of visual pleasure. But Cléo is eventually empowered by learning to see herself. As she begins to observe the world around her, she conceals herself, putting on a black dress and sunglasses. She drops and breaks her mirror, signifying a shift from seeing herself as a surface to developing a

deeper sense of self. In this, Varda complicates the sense of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” We come to understand that once a woman is actively looking, the sexual imbalance of men as active and women as passive might be altered.

Still, the oppressive system that visually and structurally tears down femininity goes beyond narrative, to the character. Trying solve the problem of female objectification in mainstream cinema, artists have advanced tropes of the “strong” or “empowered” female lead. Brit Marling, in her article, “I Don’t Want To Be a Strong Female Lead,” takes issue with the trope of the empowered female lead. “What we really mean when we say we want strong female leads,” she claims, “is: ‘Give me a man but in the body of a woman I still want to see naked’” (Marling). This well-known female character is characterized by societally-deemed masculine traits while still possessing classic feminine beauty and appeal. Created ostensibly to represent real strong women, she is still confined to ingrained desires of male viewing. She is a man in a woman’s body, lacking the fears, strengths, desires, softness, hope, and needs of a real woman. In the end, she is still fulfilling the male gaze. Marling argues that “It’s difficult for us to imagine femininity itself – empathy, vulnerability, listening – as strong. When I look at the world our stories have helped us envision and then erect, these are the very qualities that have been vanquished in favor of an overwrought masculinity.” Such female leads present strength in a traditionally masculine way: through strength, domination, and conquest, suggesting the perverse idea that traits culturally assigned to femininity are weak. But when there is no onlooker, other than the camera, the act of filmmaking can reveal the parts of a woman that aren’t acted, performed or put on display. An empowered female lead can be strong while being vulnerable, empathetic, delicate, and arduous, exhibiting traits that make her not necessarily strong or weak, but human.

However, even this idea is complicated by *Cléo’s* ending, which to me acts like a double ending. The first ending comes twenty minutes before the film ends. The camera has been tracking Cléo in a medium long shot as she strolls by a park full of children; the mise-en-scène is full of motion. Eventually, the camera stops as Cléo walks away from the scene, toward a staircase that almost looks like a bridge, a well known symbol of transition and change (1:07:22-1:08:20). The next shot is from below the staircase: a long shot of Cléo walking down. She is completely alone. As she gets further down, kittenishly strutting, she twists and turns her body and extends her arms outwards and upwards. She is confident and bold; she moves with a feminine sensuality. She begins singing, “My precious and capricious body/ The azure of my daring eyes/ My alluring figure is the bait/ That will never deceive/ Everyone longs to taste/ The flavor of my lovely lips” (Cléo 1:08:22-1:08:56) The camera tracks focus to stay on Cléo as she moves through space. She is making a spectacle of her own sexualization and feminine beauty. It seems to give her power, though nobody is around her. The sense of to-be-looked-at-ness is not from a male viewer. Rather, Cléo seems to gain strength and empowerment from her own desire for herself. As distinct from the beginning, in which Cléo relies

upon the gaze of others, Cléo now wears a simple black dress, strutting for her own enjoyment and pleasure, a spectacle only for herself. In this moment where the character of Cléo has no audience to perform to, the camera sees her basking in the sensation of her own looking.

But this empowerment is not the film's real ending. The second finale comes at the end of the film. Right after Cléo's scene on the staircase, she meets a man with whom she will spend the rest of the film (1:10:00). Once again, she is being looked at, this time literally by a male in pursuit of her. Here, Varda reintroduces the male audience, complicating Cléo's arc once more with a sense of disempowerment. It is while standing next to this male stranger that she finds out she has cancer. As the man who delivered the news drives away, a dolly shot from the car's point of view shows the two aghast figures as they grow smaller and smaller, eventually framing an extreme long shot (1:28:37-1:32:00). The next shot is a medium close-up of Cléo and the man as they walk. He glares at her and professes how he is sad to leave her. As her focal point shifts between him and what is ahead, she says that her "fear is gone" (1:28:00). Her last words – and the last of the film – are spoken as she looks forward, her eyes tracking the world before her: "I think I'm happy" (1:29:00-1:29:30). The last thing we see is Cléo and the man looking at each other. Cléo is not performing here as she was at the start of the film, yet her declaration of happiness happens as she finds herself once again the subject of male desire.

Varda's subjective realism opens up ambiguities that complicate such crucial moments. Cléo emerges as a unique kind of hero. She does not reach an objective ending of empowerment and strength, but this second disempowerment makes for a more mature and realistic portrayal of a female character than any final glorious ending or archetype could. Varda's narrative style and visual techniques make Cléo a female character who is of her own breed – ambiguous, fearful, starry-eyed, flirtatious, and independent. She fulfills her own desire of to-be-looked-at-ness, and in the end, she is not the desirable spectacle she once was, for the spectacle does not have to do with her stylised fashion, her body, or the way she moves. The spectacle is her: her face, inches from the viewers, as she declares her happiness. The spectacle is her humanity.

Works Cited

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