

DAVID STERRITT

Cleo de 5 à 7* by Steven Ungar**8½* by D. A. Miller**

The history of cinema books is littered with series that didn't last. My shelves hold decades-old specimens of the Cinema One series from Viking Press, the Focus on Film series from Prentice-Hall, and the Filmguide series from Indiana University Press, among others, all less long-lived than they should have been. A happier fate has attended the string of small-format books that the British Film Institute started producing almost twenty years ago. Now comprising some 130 titles, the product line has undergone two significant changes in recent times. What were originally two parallel series, BFI Film Classics and BFI Modern Classics, have been consolidated into a single imprint under the BFI Film Classics name, eliminating a needless borderline between pictures made before and after 1970. And the books themselves have gotten longer, presenting more extensive and well-illustrated treatments. They tend to be less pithy, but they've gained in capacity and scope.

When it comes to actual reading, of course, the overall value of the series is less important than the quality of the book under one's nose. In this case the categories overlap, because BFI Film Classics all use the same template: each discusses a single "classic" of world cinema, taking account of production and reception as well as content and style, and the interpretive chapters usually analyze the film in sequence, reading it from beginning to end. Variations on the pattern have occurred—a few volumes deal with trilogies instead of individual films, for instance—but general adherence to these guidelines has produced an admirable collection with a clear, consistent mission.

The latest entries continue to uphold the standard. *Cleo de 5 à 7*, a well-written study of Agnès Varda's second feature by Steven Ungar, supplements close analysis with extended discussions of Varda's background—her experience as a photographer, her earliest films—and the movie's mixed reception. Better still is D.A. Miller's book about the Federico Fellini masterpiece *8½*, which gets off to a shaky start, then finds its balance and soars to amazing heights.

Some critics group Varda with the French New Wave auteurs, but she was closer to Left Bank filmmakers such as Alain Resnais and especially Jacques Demy, whom she married in 1962, the year *Cleo de 5 à 7* (*Cleo from 5 to 7*) premiered. Its title character is a pop singer (Corinne Marchand)

who goes about her usual business one afternoon—shopping with a friend, meeting with her lover, consulting with fellow musicians, and the like—while awaiting results from a medical test that may confirm her fear that she has cancer. Walking in a park near the end of day, she begins talking with an affable young soldier who's also feeling dazed and confused, knowing he's about to leave for combat duty in the Algerian war. Although their conversation is light and casual, it's the most authentically human contact Cleo has had since we first saw her, so routine and superficial are the other activities and acquaintances we've observed. Varda then closes the story with a delicate grace note, choosing a simple two-shot of Cleo and her new companion—not cheerful, not fearful, just calm and contented for the moment—as the final image. It's an inspired conclusion.

Cleo from 5 to 7 is sometimes misdescribed as a story told in real time, with two hours of narrative equaling two hours of film. It actually runs ninety minutes, divided into a prologue and thirteen chapters, and its handling of chronology is extremely sophisticated. As she waits for the test results, Ungar points out, Cleo wants both to hasten time, wishing for certainty about her condition, and to slow time, because when the news comes it might be grim. The film reflects this double impulse by playing measured time and subjective time against each other like contrasting waves from a metronome and a violin, as Varda described the effect she was after. Lest these semi-abstract factors reduce the film's realistic ambience, Varda anchors it in Paris geography "with an attention to spatial detail that [is] close to topographic," as Ungar puts it, very much in the spirit of recent New Wave pictures (*The 400 Blows*, *Breathless*) that had opened up a mobility and immediacy almost unprecedented in narrative film. She also invests the urban scene with intermittently glimpsed objects, images, and figures that Cleo's anxious imagination links to the illness and death she dreads (34–35).

Ungar illuminates these and other themes, tropes, and techniques, and offers a nuanced view of Varda's early-1960s feminism, which is manifested more by her subversion of gendered cinematic conventions than by the story's characters and events. The film's division into chapters suits it well for the sequential analysis favored by the BFI series, and Ungar diverges from this when appropriate. My quibbles with the book are minor. It's fine to contrast Varda's quasi-ethnographic style with Hollywood soundstage filming, for example, but comparing her film to Alfred Hitchcock's non-naturalistic *Marnie* rigs the argument (72–73). And how I wish Ungar had more to say about the sidewalk entertainer

Varda shows, swallowing live frogs for the amusement of shoppers and flaneurs. This has stuck in my craw (so to speak) for decades, and likening it to “medieval Paris violence” (70) is less than enlightening. There is material in Varda’s film for many more books to come.

D. A. Miller is a prolific and versatile writer, but at times he has struck me as more interested in tossing ideas around than carefully thinking them through. The beginning of his book on *8½* led me to expect this again. He mourns the disappearance of the film’s original cultural context (7–8), as if that weren’t the fate of *every* artwork, and he neglects the productive side of this phenomenon, as new audiences in new contexts create new meanings that may surpass the old ones. Nostalgia strikes again when he speaks of Mondrian canvases grown “cracked and discoloured” (8), making me wonder what ghastly museums he has in mind. Other dubious notions follow.

A few pages in, however, everything changes. Suddenly shifting gears, Miller embarks on a dazzlingly original reading of Fellini’s tour de force about a filmmaker (Marcello Mastroianni) who’s unable to make a film, and he sustains the excellence to the end of the book. Starting with the title *8½* as pictured in the movie’s logo, he identifies it as a portent of the “monstrous hybrid” (11) constituted by Federico Fellini, the director of the film, and Guido Anselmi, the director *in* the film, whom Miller calls FF and GA, respectively. They are semi-conjoined doppelgängers whose mirror-image relationship is bodied forth by the two circles in the title’s 8, and by the ovals in the centers of those circles, and by the infinity sign (or Möbius strip) that the larger circles form, and by the ½ alongside them, which foregrounds the ambiguity between 1 and 2 implied by the double-circled figure 8 . . . and on Miller goes, wittily, inventively, ingeniously.

Is this mise-en-abyme an exercise in absurdity? Yes, but a brilliant and deliberate one; as Miller notes, the film’s original title was “A Fine Confusion” (10). I will add that absurdism (going strong in the early 1960s, courtesy of Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and others) is writ even larger in the uproariously useless spaceship gantry that GA has built for his production, which is still an amorphous mess in his frozen imagination. Some images and sequences in *8½*—the opening scene, for example, where GA finds himself momentarily airborne over a traffic jam—are geared to arthouse audiences, Miller observes, inviting cinephiles to parse their inner meanings. But its most exhilarating elements, such as the logo and the freewheeling shots of the spa where GA stays, have an effervescent energy that seems to be “doing a lot of nothing, and doing it as zealously as possible,”

evidently bent on “depriving us, if not of our senses, of our sense” (83). Absurdist cinema has never been better described.

Absurdity also informs GA’s most revealing statement: “I have nothing to say . . . but I want to say it anyway.” Finding this a rhetorical keystone of the film, Miller posits three ways in which “nothing” serves GA well. First, it signals GA’s refusal of the artist’s “obligation” to make art. He isn’t so much in crisis as on strike, embracing vacuity so ferociously that “it amounts to an actual purpose: to blight the culture machine with crazy-making sterility” (36), thus subverting the system that is driving *him* crazy. Second, it affirms the genius’s right to bide his time until inspiration grants him the makings of a masterpiece; the “nothing” he cleaves to is “his interim placeholder for *everything*.” Third, it plays into GA’s neediness, whereby he says he has nothing to say and awaits the reassuring reply, “But of course you do.” And of course he does, which makes him an auteur whose status and destiny are anything but empty. What he presents as a blank imagination is, in fact, “the blank he is reserving for totality” (38).

Although he gracefully follows the sequence of the film, Miller pursues his interpretations wherever they lead, supporting them with cinematic, biographical, literary, linguistic, and historical ideas. He is objective about FF’s career—no apologies here for the sad decline after *8½*—but his love for this film is radiantly clear. And nowhere more so than on page 63, which contains a detail that Miller himself may not realize is there. Describing the film’s magnificent finale, when all the once-intimidating characters come marching down the gantry to join GA’s boyhood self in celebration, Miller expresses his own powerful feelings about the scene, writing that “the viewer’s joy at this sight may be so acute, and his relief so profound, as to bring him to sobs. For if the ‘others’ are now indifferent to DA, by the same token they are no longer harassing him; his once petrifying social relations have been made spectacularly easy.” Note the upper-case letters there. Are they a mere typo? Or a Freudian slip? Or is Miller saying something to us, perhaps even to himself? Whatever the answer, I am sincerely moved by those initials, which place D. A. Miller into the film as Guido Anselmi’s phantasmal twin. For one amazing instant, DA and GA are the same. © 2010 David Sterritt.

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