

Talking Dolls: The New Wave Look and Language of Female Subjectivity

By Adela Burke

Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, and Francois Truffaut are three founding filmmakers of the French New Wave, and their films *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), *Le mépris* (1963), and *L'histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975) are exemplary of this movement's cinematic and social aims, to break with conventional (bourgeois and capitalistic) representation. The female protagonists of these films represent the changing relation of women to the classical look of Hollywood cinema, the spectator and self, in which women exist only as the passive object of an active and subjective male gaze (which coincides with that of the spectator), either voyeuristic or fetishistic in its visual pleasure, as deconstructed by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Consequent to the breaks with conventional form made by these filmmakers, each female protagonist therefore gains access to language and her own subjectivity. One can trace this change in female representation through Godard's and Varda's respective deconstruction of Camille and Cléo as fetishized objects, as well as Varda's reconstruction of Cléo as a desiring subject who is both self- and socially conscious. In representing women's relation to the look and language, Truffaut takes his construction of Adèle one step further, and situates her as a desiring creative subject who descends into a poetic madness over a male love-object. Throughout these films, the filmmakers break from the classical cinematic form, in technical terms of camera shots and lighting, but in essence, of looking, that creates conventional images of women as objects in the cinema. By rephrasing female images these filmmakers indicate that it is control over language that ultimately defines this new female subjectivity.

The conventional mechanism of the look in cinema is countered in all three of these films by the filmmakers manipulation of the direct/indirect gaze of the female protagonist and the

spectator through close-ups, lighting and mirrors. To begin with, each film stars a female whose doll-like beauty, Brigitte Bardot as Camille, Corinne Marchand as Cléo, and Isabelle Adjani as Adèle, is easily tied, as will be demonstrated by my initial analysis of the opening scene of Godard's *Le mépris*, to the idealization and narcissism associated with femininity. Dolls, of course, are beautiful playthings with no speech of their own. Varda calls her introduction of her character, Cléo, the "chapter of the tragic-doll" (Flitterman-Lewis). Therefore, by casting such conventionally beautiful women the filmmakers make their deconstruction of their doll-like image all the more convincing.

Godard's film begins with a quote attributed to André Bazin, the French film theorist and founder of the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, whose criticism influenced, amongst many others, the filmmakers that would become the New Wave: "The cinema substitutes for our gaze a world more in harmony with our desires." Visually, Brigitte Bardot (Camille) may be the ideal embodiment of conventional beauty and an object of desire in the entire New Wave period, due to her famously voluptuous figure, full lips, . Godard works to break down the conventional fetishization of her beauty throughout the film, and establish a relation of equality between Camille and her partner Paul. However, because of his representation of the limitations of human relationships generally, both Camille and Paul are incomplete subjects constructed by narratives beyond their control. This is reflexive for Godard as a filmmaker, for he was forced to include footage of Bardot nude at the command of the film's producer, Carlo Ponti. However, Godard's treatment of Camille's body in this opening scene, and throughout the film, is both conventional and exceptional, revealing her body (as a sexual object) in order to reveal the unnatural mechanism which requires her objectification as a female (fetishization by the patriarchal look). Godard's techniques in this scene, discussed below, such as stylized use of colour, darkness and

camera movement, and particularly self-aware/unconventional dialogue, are used in all three films to achieve essentially the same disruptions of conventional narrative.

Unlike the typical passive female, Camille actively fetishizes her own body with her words. Stretched out on a bed with her face towards her lover Paul, but not visible to the spectator, we hear her ask if he (and the spectator) likes her body, part by part, to which he assents easily. In a single long take, the only camera movement is a slow tracking zoom towards her feet and then back towards her bottom, breasts and finally, her face and each of its features. Godard uses colour tints, red for the footage of her body and blue for the footage of her face, as screens, preventing us from merely relishing our look at her body. The tints are also counterpoints to the full-colour footage in which her body is fragmented, cut off from her head, a complete fetishization. This complements Camille's statement: "Then you love me totally," to which Paul adds, "totally, tenderly, tragically." Camille replies, "Me, too, Paul," as she is shot close-up and in profile. Godard uses self-conscious fetishization to promote the initially equal terms of desire and love between the young couple. It should also be noticed that Camille suggests Paul look at her body through a mirror that is out of our sight. The use of unconventional lighting, profile shots and mirrors are indirect means of looking which redirect the look of the spectator and, in these films, that of the female protagonist herself.

Mirrors, symbolic of narcissism generally, represent a specifically female narcissism in the contexts of these films. Both Camille and Cléo are repeatedly shown looking at themselves in mirrors as they self-consciously manipulate their image to attract attention from men. Truffaut even shows Adèle looking at herself in a mirror in a similar state of self-conscious beautification when her beloved Lieutenant Pinson calls on her. In contrast to Cléo's solipsism, Godard shoots Camille in long-shot, crouched down, adjusting her chic black wig in a mirror on the floor. She is

overwhelmed by the space surrounding her, just as circumstances overwhelm the couple. Varda's film presents the most complete transformation of the female image through the manipulation and fragmentation of mirrors. Cléo initially sees her beauty as the only true reflection of her self. One can trace her progression from spectacle to subjective being, simply through Varda's close-ups of Cléo looking in a mirror. Cléo is deliriously self-absorbed by the wholeness and beauty of her image as she tries on hats, oblivious to the outside world reflected in the shop window. She primps in a hand mirror for her lover (a similar shot to one of Camille in the flashback/fantasy montage spurred by Paul finally arriving and her belief in his infidelity) in an apartment full of mirrors and a vanity. However, after Cléo's self-confrontation while singing "Cri d'amour" (a love song that she essentially sings to herself), she realizes that the beauty of her image is not fulfilling. She glances in her vanity and tears off her wig. She stops to look in a mirror on the street, but the Chinese characters written on it, as well as other people passing by, disrupt the wholeness of her reflection. Her compact mirror later shatters on the pavement; her eye alone is reflected in a fragment. Her superstition and self-centredness cause her to see it as an omen of her own death, but a stranger is killed instead. Cléo finally sees and understands: "my unchanging doll's face...I can't see my own fears. I thought everyone looked at me...I only look at myself."

As with the use of mirrors, the profile shot in cinema mediates a direct look between the spectator and subject. Initially, Godard tends to show Camille's face in profile, as he establishes in the opening sequence. He uses this technique to guard her from the gaze of the spectator, but as the film progresses it seems this is a self-conscious act on Camille's part to guard her emotions and thoughts from Paul. In addition, the profile shot promotes a semblance of equality between Camille and Paul, as in the climax of their conversation about their plans to travel to

Capri. The slow tracking back and forth between them, regardless of whom is talking, presents the couple as existing on the same plane physically even though their dialogue may be picking apart their respective positions emotionally. The same technique is used by Varda to represent the final conversation between Cléo and the soldier Antoine that she meets, establishing the couple as equals in the final frame as they share a look of total subjective reciprocity. The profile shot can also be understood as a partial exclusion of the spectator's gaze, allowing us to be party to a moment of intimacy without full disclosure. This works reflexively to make the audience aware of our own subjectivity as separate from the characters' subjectivity. This creation of an active audience is another aim, both aesthetic and political, of New Wave cinema.

As Paul and Camille's relationship deteriorates, however, their verbal (and sometimes physical) confrontations continue to spark greater subjective responses from Camille, which Godard eventually presents in more direct close-ups of Camille's face and gaze. In turn, these close-ups confront the audience, which has been peeping at her from the side in profile shots. By using the direct gaze of the female protagonist, Godard effectively evokes the audience's awareness of our own role in the representation of passive females. Both Cléo and Adèle are also frequently shot in close-ups and address us directly with their gaze, the former most significantly in her singing of "Cri d'amour." Adèle, on the other hand, as the most consistently active subject, addresses the audience directly over and over, as she does with both her father and love-object.

All three directors use darkness to signify the state of these females within patriarchal discourse, which inherently assigns them either/or roles and the status of an enigma outside of language. As Adèle writes, "I want to think of my sisters who suffer in bordellos, and of my sisters who suffer in marriage." The women's appearance in partial or entire darkness is thus also tied to their silence within this discourse. In *Le mépris*, after Camille storms out on Paul in

response to their disagreement, she is shot in a dark close-up in the backseat, turned away from him, almost in profile. Following this, she is shown in the dark of the theatre when Jerry asks why she is quiet. She replies, “I have nothing to say.” Cléo’s fear of speaking about her as-yet-undiagnosed illness is also tied to darkness. The first person she speaks to somewhat openly about it is her friend, Dorothée, (who Varda introduces in the context of her job posing nude as an artist’s model, a foil to Cléo merely by being comfortable in her own skin) and Cléo only reveals her secret in the dark of a tunnel.

Truffaut’s representation of Adèle, which reverses the conventional look entirely because she becomes a voyeur in pursuit of her male love-object Lieutenant Pinson, also uses darkness. She is shot in a close-up, half in darkness, as she perversely takes pleasure in watching him make love to another woman. *Adèle H.* is a thoroughly dark film. Adèle both writes and dreams in darkness broken only by candle or moonlight (she has a recurring dream of drowning like her sister). Truffaut uses fade-outs throughout to convey a sense of Adèle’s mental, and physical, disintegration. For, just as Adèle is losing perspective in her desperate pursuit of Pinson, she is also losing her eyesight. Her obsession with Pinson is only matched by her obsession with writing about her experience, in letters and in her journals, at all hours of the day and night and thus her beautiful blue eyes (the one feature especially pointed out by her landlady to Pinson) are ruined. Her eyes also seem to be afflicted in association with her sister’s death, as in Adèle’s one waking dream, she screams about her eyes in relation to the sight of her sister’s wedding dress being displayed in their home after she has drowned.

Sunglasses function similarly to Adèle’s deteriorating eyesight in Godard’s and Varda’s films, literally providing a veil of darkness during the daylight to separate the women from the direct gaze of others, and also to allow them to look freely without others knowing the

direction of their gaze. Just as Camille wears sunglasses on the boat when she and Paul's trust is tested for the final time, Cléo too wears sunglasses as she goes to a café to test out her own subjective significance, through the playing of her song on the jukebox. Both women find themselves cast adrift. Cléo is forced to confront her insignificance, but is also freed from her fear of others seeing her flaws. Camille's attempt to free herself is fatal however. This presents an interesting comparison to the short film Cléo watches at a theatre, in which Godard himself makes an appearance in Varda's film, playing "l'homme aux lunettes noires," who mistakes his living "white" girlfriend for a "black" girl who is killed, because of his "damned dark sunglasses." The play on white and black as life and death reflects Varda's use of black and white film for Cléo's story of confrontation with death, and consequently her discovery of her desire to live for herself. This revelation of course, begins when she sings "Cri d'amour," in which Varda slowly tracks in with the camera until Cléo is isolated against a black curtain, her eyes fixed directly on the spectator as she expresses her own despair at being "sans toi," without herself. Later in this scene, she completes a physical transformation to match her emotional revelation and emerges from behind another black curtain, changed into a plain black dress, unadorned and determined to be on her own.

In contrast, the opening and only colour sequence of *Cléo*, the tarot card reading, is determined by Cléo's belief in fate. Varda's use of colour here serves a similar purpose to Godard's in the opening scene discussed previously and in a fantasy sequence in which Camille's body is posed against sensuously coloured rugs. These images of fetishization are partially determined by the dominance of a patriarchal view held by the film's producer. Superstition, on the other hand, can be seen as a feminine overriding of reason and often a source of female empowerment, but Cléo's superstition is tied to a very real fear of death. Her fear is manifest in a

symbol of both masculine scientific rationality and man's mortality (and impotence), the medical test result. Significantly, one bright spot in the dreary tarot reading is her predicted meeting with a "bavard," a bigmouth, and so it will be language, a fundamentally social activity, that fully frees Cléo from her fears.

Each of the female protagonists in these films ultimately uses language to express her subjectivity in an attempt to free herself from oppressive circumstances caused by patriarchy. Camille, Cléo and Adèle are frequently treated as children, alternately idealized and spoiled because of their dependence on others. Initially, Camille and Cléo let others make decisions for them, and Adèle is forced to accept other's decisions instead of her own. Their attempts to speak their minds are often ignored, if not derided, by the men in their lives. Paul asks Camille at one point, "Why the thoughtful air?" to which she replies shortly: "Maybe because I'm thinking of something." She swears in frustration at their lack of communication, and he tells her vulgar language does not suit her, to which she replies with a string of profanities. The total failure of their spoken communication is demonstrated in the final sequence of the film. Instead of seeing the car we hear crashing, Godard shows a close-up of the closing of Camille's letter, her handwritten, "Je t'embrasse. Adieu," and with the fatal silence, finally, "Camille." Her silence is now total, and she is an enigma now excluded forever from language and life itself.

Cléo's career as a singer also places her on the borders of language, as music communicates beyond language, but men write both the music and words of her songs. Even the names of her pop songs are patriarchal characterizations of her feminine "caprices" (which Bob, her piano player, refers to repeatedly): "Wayward Girl," "Inconstant Girl," "The Girl Who Lied," and "Playing." There is great irony in the two men singing these words they have written about woman's capriciousness. However, it is Cléo's talent for true emotional expression that is derided

by Bob and which sparks her powerful rendition of “Cri d’amour,” in which the combination of music and language moves her (as it did me) to tears. But Cléo reveals both Bob and Angèle’s complicity in her capricious behaviour. “You make me capricious! Soon I’ll just become a talking doll,” which, of course, she is until this moment of self-realization.

The “H.” in the title of Truffaut’s film is also telling, as it underscores the importance of Adèle’s famous surname, Hugo, a name that is predetermined by patriarchy (as the daughter of French writer, Victor Hugo), in her pursuit of her own desires and independence. It is her father’s reputation, based upon his literary works, that leads him to reject Pinson’s petition for Adèle’s hand in marriage in the first place, and his right as a father that allows him to overlook his daughter’s own desires in the process. At home, his reputation would always overshadow her own writing. It is only in her break from her father and family that she is able to create freely on her own.

Interpretation and translation are demonstrated to be roles of transformation through language as well. Filmmakers are keenly aware of this power because it is their own, translating written words into visuals and speech, one text into another. It is significant then that Godard uses a female character, Francesca, as the translator (and mediator) of the desires of the three “creative” males: the French writer, the German director and the American producer. This reveals her own creative power of interpretation, which can even override the others’ and their limited linguistic capabilities. Camille and Paul’s problem is fundamentally one of interpretation, for it is the difference in their way of viewing and understanding a single car ride that causes the disintegration of their relationship. Ironically, the last words of *Le mépris*, spoken by a man, are: “Silence. Silencio.” In Godard’s film, translation, between languages, between two individuals, is overdetermined and doomed, and thus fails Camille and Paul both, replacing their words (her

letter and his script) with the image itself. In Truffaut's *Adèle H.*, Adèle's bilingualism not only superficially compares to Francesca's creative power of translation, but her entire life is a series of creative interpretations of reality, which she manages to be in control of almost to the end. She alternately constructs one tale for her father, one tale for her love-object and another tale for herself (revealed in the closing of the film as written in her own secret language). Adèle refuses to accept the overdetermined language of fate, and despite her doomed romance her words and writing remain.

The most moving language of any of the films comes from Adèle Hugo, whether it be Truffaut's interpretation of her journals, or her actual words. The pivotal phrase is her own: "This incredible thing that a young girl whose only bread today depends on her father's good charity...this thing I will do. This incredible thing that a young girl should step over the ocean, pass from the old world to the new and join her lover...this thing I will accomplish." The feat is incredible because her social position as a female forces dependence upon males (both her father and Lieutenant Pinson). But it is her articulation of her desires and experience that remains as her great accomplishment. Her speech is also what threatens Pinson, and he repeatedly attempts to silence her on the subject of her feelings. She writes to him: "Don't be surprised if you see me in the street someday, speaking out my love to you." Her endless pursuit of her desire, despite the resulting exclusion from society, prevents her from ever being a passive victim. It is also significant that once Adèle has lost her mind, no longer even able to recognize Pinson, the object of her desire, it is a letter in the words of Madame Baa that ultimately provides for Adèle's survival, though it is written by a man (because as a poor black woman Madame Baa is not taught to write). Madame Baa voices the words of her letter, just as Adèle does throughout the film. Adèle returns to France, writing until the end of her days.

Varda, Godard and Truffaut all explore the relationship of women to lighting, the look, and language, through technical, aesthetic, and ideological breaks from conventional cinematic form. The result is multiple representations of modern women as active subjects. Godard's deconstruction of a bombshell can be seen as a primary step towards Varda and Truffaut's striking visual constructions of creative female subjectivity that is central to the narratives of life and cinema itself.

Works Cited

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