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Top 100 films directed by women: What is the ‘female gaze’?

By Anna Smith

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Female directors offer a different viewpoint on adolescence, poverty – and seduction, argues Anna Smith, exploring the films that topped our poll of 368 critics.

What happens when women tell stories? Diverse and wonderful things, according to BBC Culture’s survey of film experts. It asked 368 journalists, critics, film programmers and academics to name their favourite films from female directors, and the results made fascinating reading. Jane Campion’s Oscar-winner The Piano made it to the top spot, shortly followed by Cléo from 5 to 7, the real-time drama from the late great Agnès Varda. Also featured were cult filmmaker Chantal Akerman, controversial French director Claire Denis – who’s known for her defiantly individualistic, often explicitly erotic work – British working-class heroine Andrea Arnold and Hollywood greats Sofia Coppola and Kathryn Bigelow.

The most popular genre was drama, with romance – an area women are stereotypically relegated to – falling far behind. This is about films that have resonated with critics, rather than topping the box office – there’s no Wonder Woman (Patty Jenkins), Twilight (Catherine Hardwicke) or What Women Want (Nancy Meyers). The closest thing to a superhero movie is the Iranian film A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night (Ana Lily Amirpour), in which a female vampire preys on exploitative men. The highest rating comedy is not a rom-com, but the farcical, surreal Toni Erdmann, directed by Maren Ade.

The top 10 is populated by misfits, outcast and women – occasionally men – who are struggling to communicate and connect, just as their creators are trying to. The wider 100 includes slum children (Salaam Bombay!, Capernaum), a female vagrant (Vagabond) and a travelling hustler (Desperately Seeking Susan). It’s small wonder that these disenfranchised characters appeal to female filmmakers in a patriarchal society. And then there are the women whose apparently ‘normal’ daily lives are rendered utterly fascinating, partly because they are so rarely shown on screen. Two of these are filmed more or less in real time: Agnès Varda’s Cléo from 5 to 7 and Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles.

This is, by degrees, to become involved in the pattern of a life, to come to recognise the inventiveness needed to cope with dreadful confinement – Adam Roberts

“Jeanne Dielman is famously long, and famously concerned with the minute details of an ordinary housewife’s life,” says Adam Roberts, who founded with Joanna Hogg the collective A Nos Amours (dedicated to programming over-looked cinema) and curated a complete retrospective of Chantal Akerman’s films. “She peels potatoes in real time! But this is no mere treading of some aestheticised treadmill; this is, by degrees, to become involved in the pattern of a life, to come to recognise the inventiveness needed to cope with dreadful confinement. The creativity needed to hold the centre, amid such isolation and dehumanised life, is so very moving. A crisis looms of course, as the patterns fall apart, but by now we are hopelessly implicated in this vivid life: her life is our life, her crisis our crisis.”

In turn, Cléo reveals another viewpoint. “Varda’s point of view feels like that of a wise outsider because she was a photographer first. Her identity developed in a very male space,” says Mia Bays, who screens female-led films around the UK as part of the Birds Eye View ‘Reclaim The Frame’ programme and firmly believes in a ‘female gaze’. “It is the lodestar of the work of Birds’ Eye View. For us, it means who decides what goes in the frame, so that means who writes, directs or wrote the underlying story. Those have to be the work of female creatives or it’s not the female gaze.”

Bays thinks this is particularly relevant to the coming-of-age film. “The female experience, especially individuation and coming of age, is often so much more resonant when told by a conscious enlightened female gaze.” You only have to look at the many examples in the top 100 to see her point. Andrea Arnold’s Fish Tank and American Honey; Céline Sciamma’s Girlhood, Greta Gerwig’s Lady Bird – all demonstrate a seductive depth of understanding of burgeoning female sexuality and identity. Meanwhile, with Winter’s Bone and Leave No Trace, Debra Granik concerns herself with young girls who’ve had responsibility thrust upon them, and Lynne Ramsay embraces the complexities of traumatised working-class women in Morvern Callar, as Andrea Arnold does with Red Road – something Bays also applauds.

“I love Ramsay and Andrea Arnold,” she says. “I admire their visual ambition; their leaning into art (usually not allowed for the working class – we’re supposed to be ‘entertainers’); and their unpredictable choices.” Film critic Pamela Hutchinson agrees. “Working-class representation in the film industry is so painfully low at the moment, that it’s so important to see women from less privileged background out there working, and also doing really great, exciting work.”

The number of non-white directors in the top 100 is also relatively low, with Iranian Forough Farrokhzad (The House is Black) and African-American Ava DuVernay (Selma, 13th) represented at numbers 24 and 26/55 respectively. Unsurprisingly, these women offer a fascinating perspective on race and culture, as does Mira Nair with the more comical Monsoon Wedding (number 29).

The concept of the ‘female gaze’ could be seen as a response to feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey’s term, the ‘male gaze’, which represents the gaze of a heterosexual male viewer along with the male character and the male creator of the film. According to Time Out’s global film editor, Phil de Semlyen: “I find the female gaze easier to define in terms of what it isn’t than what it is: it’s not

about objectifying the female form or replacing fully-realised female characters with loose avatars for male sexual fantasy; it's not framing sex scenes with tropes common to pornography aimed at men; it's not about automatically relinquishing power and control to men in storytelling."

The female gaze is a mighty tool for subverting genres that have traditionally been male-driven – thrillers, in particular – in really interesting ways – Phil de Semlyen

He goes on to mention the rape revenge genre, represented at number 91 by Julia Ducournau's horror Raw. "The female gaze is a mighty tool for subverting genres that have traditionally been male-driven – thrillers, in particular – in really interesting ways. So we're seeing revenge thrillers like Revenge and The Nightingale. You could also compare and contrast the Clint Eastwood and Sofia Coppola versions of The Beguiled for a case study in how a female and male filmmaker take the same source material and do radically different things with it – with Coppola finding far more resonance and topicality by retelling the story from females' perspectives."

Women tackling masculinity is a theme we frequently find ourselves discussing on my podcast Girls On Film, and the BBC Culture top 100 contains numerous examples, including Claire Denis' Beau Travail. There are several from Kathryn Bigelow, still the only woman to have won the best director Oscar for The Hurt Locker, which comes in at number 7. "Hollywood loves its own and Kathryn Bigelow did her apprenticeship there," says Bays. "She has 'assimilated' the male gaze, then given an expert female spin on hyper-male subjects/genres, so I think she's been an outlier because of this." While playing within the Hollywood system, Bigelow also tackled male mental health in Point Break (number 15), vampires in Near Dark (41) and criminals in Strange Days (59). With its story about bootleg virtual reality machines that literally put customers in other people's positions, the latter is an interesting example of a film that specifically tackles the notion of seeing, or the gaze, echoed by the closed-circuit surveillance in Andrea Arnold's seminal Red Road.

One of my personal favourites is the period drama Portrait of a Lady on Fire, which concerns a woman who's hired to paint a portrait of another, and who finds her a tantalisingly elusive subject. I think director Céline Sciamma captures the intensity of sapphic love far better than Todd Haynes' much-celebrated Carol. There is barely a speaking role for a man, and yet the spectre of arranged marriage looms ominously, inescapably, in the background as two women forge a heartbreakingly intense bond.

Truly seeing is truly knowing in Sciamma's film, which hasn't even come out yet in the UK. It's rightfully earning comparisons to our number one, Jane Campion's The Piano, which was voted for by 43.5% of respondents. The story of a non-speaking pianist who is sold to a man, but gradually uses her musicality and sexuality to control the men around her, The Piano is also about communication, or the challenges thereof. "It's interesting that she's a female artist, and yet can't communicate in a straightforward way," says film critic Pamela Hutchinson, who specialises in silent film. Bays points to The Piano's other charms. "It's about sex and eroticism and is about a woman caught between two men who we watch self-actualise – what's not to like?!"

Eroticism and seduction are explored through distinctive lenses in other charting films: The Night Porter, India Song, Le Bonheur, Eve's Bayou, and The Meetings of Anna. Marital infidelity seems to concern many female directors, some because they have been directly affected by it: Sarah Polley's documentary Stories We Tell asks who her real father is. While several films tackle single parenthood and paternity, pregnancy is a subject that comes up surprisingly rarely in this survey, although there have been distinctive recent releases, such as Alice Lowe's comedy horror Prevenge, which she shot while eight months' pregnant, and Seahorse, Jeanie Findlay's documentary following a trans man's pregnancy. Several films in the poll directly explore trans issues, from Boys Don't Cry to Orlando, and in so doing, these speak to the female experience, exploring the concept of gender and the pros and cons of identifying as a woman or a man in a specific society.

While The Piano was widely liked by both sexes in the poll, a few films had a noticeable divide: Penny Marshall's Big was almost twice as popular with men as women. It's hardly surprising that men identify more with the story of a young boy who wakes up in a grown man's body: this is arguably a case of a female director adopting a man's point of view, right up to the dubious moment when he loses his virginity to an unknowing female colleague. Yet as Hutchinson says, "Women look at everything, we're everywhere – there's no subject a female director can't tackle."

And it looks like the studios – who traditionally put more fiscal trust in male directors – are finally listening. While just four of last year's top 100 grossing films in the US were directed by women, that number looks set to have risen to 14 in 2019. There are direct efforts to raise the number of female directors in Hollywood. Stars including Tessa Thompson have taken the 4% challenge, committing to announcing one project with a female director in the next 18 months. Universal and MGM recently became the first studios to sign up to the same pledge, meaning that in a few years' time, our voters should have even more wonderful female-led films to choose from. And here's hoping that one day, female directors will have become so commonplace, it won't even be a conversation at all.

BBC Culture polled 368 film experts from 84 countries in order to find the best films from female filmmakers – here's the top 100.

There was one stark statistic that jumped out from the results of last year's BBC Culture poll to find the 100 greatest foreign-language films of all time: just four out of that 100 were directed by women. And the same paucity of female directors has been a feature in each of our annual surveys: in 2017's poll of the 100 greatest comedies there were four. Twelve films from female directors made it into the 100 greatest films of the 21st Century in 2016, but none of those films featured in the top 20. And in our first poll of film critics, to find the 100 greatest American films – just two were co-directed by a woman.

So in 2019 we set out to focus the spotlight firmly on women directors. The result is BBC Culture's biggest and most international poll yet: 761 different films were voted for by 368 film experts – critics, journalists, festival programmers and academics – who came from 84 countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. We asked the same number of women to contribute as men to create a gender-balanced poll, with 185 female voters, 181 male voters, one non-binary person, and one who preferred not to say. Each voter listed their 10 favourite films directed by women, which we scored and ranked to produce the top 100 listed below.

The result is a stunning collection of films that demonstrates the power, creativity and diversity of cinema made by women around the world, from Lois Weber's silent film Shoes (1916) – right up to 2019 highlights The Souvenir (Joanna Hogg) and Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Céline Sciamma). The majority of films on the list were made since the 1990s, and although the US, France, UK, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Canada were the most popular countries of production, films from Argentina, Iran, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, India, Tunisia and the Czech Republic all appear in the top 100. The late, great Agnès Varda was the most popular director overall, with six films in the top 100, followed by Kathryn Bigelow, Claire Denis, Lynne Ramsay and Sofia Coppola. Jane Campion's masterpiece, The Piano (1993), was a worthy winner, with nearly 10% of critics placing it as the top film on their ballot. In her essay on the winning film, Hannah Strong praises its uniquely New Zealand sensibility and difficult, real female characters, in "a piercing fable that speaks to the universal desire to love and be loved".

So what's on the list? A film of a mute piano player rediscovering passion sits alongside the existential crisis of a Parisian girl-about-town; a subversive surrealist Czech comedy banned in its home country; three days in the life of a single mother in Belgium; repressed sexuality and jealousy in the French Foreign Legion and an odd-couple friendship between an ageing film star and a young graduate in a Tokyo hotel – and that's just the top five. In the coming days, BBC Culture will publish a series of features that reflect on the results, the genius of women directors and the power of their storytelling. First of all, you can read more about the winning selection as international film critics argue why each film in the top 25 deserves to be there.

As ever, we don't expect this list to be definitive but a starting point for discovery, discussion and debate. Tell us what you think – and what you think is missing – using the hashtag #100FilmsbyWomen on BBC Culture's social channels. We hope you are as inspired by this list as we are; it's a celebration of the brilliance and remarkable variety of filmmaking by women.

100. The Kids are All Right (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010)

99. The Souvenir (Joanna Hogg, 2019)

98. Somewhere (Sofia Coppola, 2010)

97. Adoption (Márta Mészáros, 1975)

96. The Meetings of Anna (Chantal Akerman, 1977)

95. Ritual in Transfigured Time (Maya Deren, 1946)

94. News From Home (Chantal Akerman, 1977)

93. Red Road (Andrea Arnold, 2006)
92. Raw (Julia Ducournau, 2016)
91. White Material (Claire Denis, 2009)
90. Fast Times at Ridgemont High (Amy Heckerling, 1982)
89. The Beaches of Agnes (Agnès Varda, 2008)
88. The Silences of the Palace (Moufida Tlatli, 1994)
87. 35 Shots of Rum (Claire Denis, 2008)
86. Wadjda (Haifaa Al-Mansour, 2012)
85. One Sings, The Other Doesn't (Agnès Varda, 1977)
84. Portrait of Jason (Shirley Clarke, 1967)
83. Sleepless in Seattle (Nora Ephron, 1993)
82. At Land (Maya Deren, 1944)
81. A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014)
80. Big (Penny Marshall, 1988)
79. Shoes (Lois Weber, 1916)
78. The Apple (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998)
77. Tomboy (Céline Sciamma, 2011)
76. Girlhood (Céline Sciamma, 2014)
75. Meek's Cutoff (Kelly Reichardt, 2010)
74. Chocolat (Claire Denis, 1988)
73. On Body and Soul (Ildikó Enyedi, 2017)
72. Europa Europa (Agnieszka Holland, 1980)
71. The Seashell and the Clergyman (Germaine Dulac, 1928)
70. Whale Rider (Niki Caro, 2002)
69. The Connection (Shirley Clarke, 1961)
68. Eve's Bayou (Kasi Lemmons, 1997)
67. The German Sisters (Margarethe von Trotta, 1981)
66. Ratcatcher (Lynne Ramsay, 1999)
65. Leave no Trace (Debra Granik, 2018)
64. The Rider (Chloe Zhao, 2017)
63. Marie Antoinette (Sofia Coppola, 2006)

62. Strange Days (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995)
61. India Song (Marguerite Duras, 1975)
60. A League of their Own (Penny Marshall, 1992)
59. The Long Farewell (Kira Muratova, 1971)
58. Desperately Seeking Susan (Susan Seidelman, 1985)
57. The Babadook (Jennifer Kent, 2014)
56. 13th (Ava DuVernay, 2016)
55. Monster (Patty Jenkins, 2003)
54. Bright Star (Jane Campion, 2009)
53. The Headless Woman (Lucrecia Martel, 2008)
52. Happy as Lazzaro (Alice Rohrwacher, 2018)
51. Harlan County, USA (Barbara Kopple, 1976)
50. Outrage (Ida Lupino, 1950)
49. Salaam Bombay! (Mira Nair, 1988)
48. The Asthenic Syndrome (Kira Muratova, 1989)
47. An Angel at my Table (Jane Campion, 1990)
46. Near Dark (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987)
45. Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935)
44. American Honey (Andrea Arnold, 2016)
43. The Virgin Suicides (Sofia Coppola, 1999)
42. The Adventures of Prince Achmed (Lotte Reiniger, 1926)
41. Capernaum (Nadine Labaki, 2018)
40. Boys Don't Cry (Kimberly Peirce, 1999)
39. Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Céline Sciamma, 2019)
38. Paris is Burning (Jennie Livingston, 1990)
37. Olympia (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938)
36. Wendy and Lucy (Kelly Reichardt, 2008)
35. The Matrix (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999)
34. Morvern Callar (Lynne Ramsay, 2002)
33. You Were Never Really Here (Lynne Ramsay, 2017)
32. The Night Porter (Liliana Cavani, 1974)

31. The Gleaners and I (Agnès Varda, 2000)
30. Zama (Lucrecia Martel, 2017)
29. Monsoon Wedding (Mira Nair, 2001)
28. Le Bonheur (Agnès Varda, 1965)
27. Selma (Ava DuVernay, 2014)
26. Stories we Tell (Sarah Polley, 2012)
25. The House is Black (Forugh Farrokhzad, 1963)
24. Lady Bird (Greta Gerwig, 2017)
23. The Hitch-Hiker (Ida Lupino, 1953)
23. We Need to Talk About Kevin (Lynne Ramsay, 2011)
21. Winter's Bone (Debra Granik, 2010)
20. Clueless (Amy Heckerling, 1995)
19. Orlando (Sally Potter, 1992)
18. American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000)
17. Seven Beauties (Lina Wertmüller, 1975)
16. Wanda (Barbara Loden, 1970)
15. The Swamp (Lucrecia Martel, 2001)
14. Point Break (Kathryn Bigelow, 1991)
13. Vagabond (Agnès Varda, 1985)
12. Zero Dark Thirty (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012)
11. The Ascent (Larisa Shepitko, 1977)
10. Daughters of the Dust (Julie Dash, 1991)
9. Fish Tank (Andrea Arnold, 2009)
8. Toni Erdmann (Maren Ade, 2016)
7. The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008)
6. Daisies (Věra Chytilová, 1966)
5. Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola, 2003)
4. Beau Travail (Claire Denis, 1999)
3. Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Chantal Akerman, 1975)
2. Cléo from 5 to 7 (Agnès Varda, 1962)
1. The Piano (Jane Campion, 1993)

Why The Piano is the greatest film directed by a woman

By Hannah Strong 26th November 2019

Jane Campion's stunning 1993 classic topped BBC Culture's poll of 368 critics in 84 countries. Hannah Strong reveals why it's a worthy winner.

In 1993, Jane Campion made history when she became the first woman (and the first New Zealander) to receive the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Her haunting period romance The Piano shared the award with Chen Kaige's Farewell My Concubine, but in BBC Culture's critics' poll of the 100 greatest films by women, Campion doesn't have to share the prize a second time: The Piano was chosen as the number one film in a remarkable list that showcases more than 100 years of female filmmaking.

Influenced by Jane Mander's The Story of A New Zealand River as well as the French folktale Bluebeard, Campion's story is of a Scottish pianist named Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), an elective mute who is sold off by her father into a marriage with New Zealand frontiersman Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill). She travels to the remote island with her young daughter Flora (Anna Paquin), but after her new husband trades her piano to his friend George Baines (Harvey Keitel), Ada is furious, and resolves to reclaim her beloved instrument through a bargain with the new owner. Romance, jealousy and heartache play out against a lush, unforgiving backdrop of Antipodean forestry and coastline – while Flora desperately searches for the agency and happiness that have so far eluded her.

The agency afforded by Campion to Ada and Flora McGrath means they aren't perfect, but they are complicated, fascinating and real

It's an exquisitely beautiful film, from Michael Nyman's score of sombre and soaring piano and strings compositions to Holly Hunter's performance, which rightly earned her the 1994 Academy Award for best actress. It's hard to imagine anyone else playing Ada now, but Sigourney Weaver was actually Campion's first choice. When she was unavailable, Isabelle Huppert met with the director to discuss the role, but ultimately it went to Hunter (something Huppert has expressed regret over).

We understand some of Ada's thoughts through tender voiceover monologues which bookend the film like a fairytale, but mostly it is down to Hunter's physicality to match Neill and Keitel without words. So much is said in a glance, in a gesture, in the way Baines examines a small hole in Ada's stockings. Similarly, Anna Paquin – who was just nine years old at the time of filming and made Oscar history when she won best supporting actress the following year – gives a performance for the ages, as a child forced to grow up too quickly, occasionally veering into brattish outbursts due to the stress placed on her. The agency afforded by Campion to Ada and Flora McGrath means they aren't perfect, but they are complicated, fascinating and real.

For New Zealand film critic Maria Lewis, Campion's cultural identity is part of what makes The Piano so special: "Jane Campion has always centred the female narrative. Not the female narrative as

Hollywood knows it, but the kind that's familiar to a New Zealand and even an Asia-Pacific audience: women who are unusual, women who are complicated and talented, women who are weird, women who have overcome, women who march to the beat of their own drum – or piano, if you will." Certainly it feels as though the specificity of The Piano is part of its unique charm – it's a fairytale, but one so steeped in the harshness of reality, it feels at once familiar and bracingly different from anything that came before it.

The history of women behind the camera is a history of oppression, as filmmaking, like so many professions and artistic endeavours, was once the reserve of well-connected, well-off white men. This bias toward films made by one narrow set of creatives has in turn shaped our collective film history, but the results of this poll (and last year's 100 greatest foreign-language films) prove that there is a wealth of talent out there, waiting to be discovered and recognised. How apt, then, that The Piano – a tale of female desire and oppression at the hands of the patriarchy – should resonate so deeply with viewers, more than 25 years since it was made.

The Piano arrived at a time when most films depicting female sexuality were directed by men. I've always considered Campion's vision ground zero for the female gaze – Melissa Silverstein

Some 8% of the 368 voters in the critics' poll chose The Piano as their number one film. Among them was Melissa Silverstein, Founder and President of Women and Hollywood, who cites the groundbreaking nature of the film as a reason for its resonance. "It might be one of the first films that I saw where I fully understood what it means for a director to have a vision," she says. "Nothing is said. It is all felt. The Piano arrived at a time when most films depicting female sexuality were directed by men. I've always considered Campion's vision ground zero for the female gaze."

Perhaps the greatest indication of The Piano's legacy is that it continues to resonate with and inspire new audiences. Film writer Laura Venning wrote her undergraduate thesis on Jane Campion, after discovering The Piano at the age of 16. "I was just getting interested in film and beginning to dutifully make my way through the canon, though I truthfully didn't feel much of a personal connection with any of it at that point," she tells BBC Culture. "When I watched The Piano for the first time I was expecting something restrained and melancholy, like Merchant Ivory, so I was astonished and a little unnerved to be transported into this dark, transgressive Gothic story where female desire and female creativity are unstoppable forces."

Since The Piano, Jane Campion has gone on to make further films and television series that focus on female oppression and desire, as well as the machinations of power in remote New Zealand communities. But The Piano continues to beguile, with its unpredictable heroine and sense of deep sadness sitting alongside tender romance. It is a piercing fable that speaks to the universal desire to love and be loved. Not only is it a beautiful, heartbreaking story in its own right, but a worthy winner of this poll, demonstrating just why it is so important that we continue to strive to make the film industry – and by proxy, the stories we tell – as diverse and remarkable as life itself.

Why Agnès Varda's Cléo from 5 to 7 deserves to be a classic

Agnès Varda received more votes than any other director in BBC Culture's poll of the greatest films made by women. Caryn James explores why the experimental director is finally gaining recognition – and what makes Cléo from 5 to 7 so special.

When Agnès Varda accepted an honorary Oscar in 2017, she called Angelina Jolie and Jessica Chastain, who had paid tribute to her, "My feminist guardian angels." That remark was typically generous and exactly backwards. Varda herself, who died in March 2019 at the age of 90, was the guardian angel. From her early days as a pioneer of the French New Wave to the retrospective biographical work, Varda by Agnès, completed in the final year of her life, the Belgian-born French director created resonant heroines, used innovative cinematic techniques and inspired other women filmmakers. No wonder she was beloved in old age, an unmistakable presence, her white hair ringed with red. And no surprise that she has six titles in the BBC poll of the greatest films made by women, more than any other director.

Cléo from 5 to 7, number two in the poll, was only her second feature, but it is pure Varda. No one else would have taken such a simple, dismal-sounding premise – a woman waiting over the course of two hours for the results of a biopsy – and turned it into a film that is playful, charming and haunting. Cléo is also the very definition of a masterpiece. Released in 1962, it captures the Audrey Hepburn-style fashions and cosmopolitan Parisian setting of its moment, but remains so relevant, so emotionally vibrant and real that it feels contemporary.

The film follows Cléo, a pop singer with some modest fame, as she tries to distract herself while waiting for her scheduled call to the doctor. The two-hour wait plays out almost in real time, as the film lasts 90 minutes. Varda was always concise, never self-indulgent. She employs a realism that is graceful on the surface, with deep philosophical underpinnings, poetic yet unpretentious (perhaps one reason she was undervalued for her New Wave contributions for so long). The camera glides across Paris, shot in rich black and white. And as Cléo takes taxis and cars, buys a hat, stops by a café for a brandy, Varda uses these everyday events to explore her inner life.

That intimate look at a woman's life and heart set Varda's work apart from that of her male contemporaries

We share Cléo's perspective and feel every turn of her emotions as she veers back and forth between fear and hope, while trying to kill time. That intimate look at a woman's life and heart, her worries about career and romance, set Varda's work apart from that of her male contemporaries. Cléo has a handsome lover, seen briefly, who doesn't pay enough attention to her. One of her songs is playing on the radio of a taxi, but the driver doesn't recognise her. Women today can relate.

Corinne Marchand, who plays Cléo, was never again in anything as important, but she is magnificently suited here. Cléo is admittedly vain and spoiled, yet her self-awareness and insecurities make her sympathetic. Most important, we see her changing moods. She may briefly forget the very real spectre of death, but we see her face cloud over when she remembers.

Varda never loses sight of the fact that Cléo is trying to distract herself, though – and what diversions! The film is full of buoyant, witty moments that are more potent today than they were all those decades ago. Cléo's composer friend, Bob, comes to her apartment. He is played by Michel Legrand, later famous as the composer of lush film scores. Here he has an engaging goofiness as he tries to cheer Cléo up. (Legrand also wrote the score, more romantic than in other Varda films.) Bob brings Cléo a song about a break-up, which she sings while he plays the piano. But when she gets to the part about a woman who feels she will die without her lover, Cléo recalls that actual death is looming and has to escape. She takes off the elaborate fake curls piled stylishly on her head, stripping down emotionally as well, as she heads out to walk the city streets.

Her walk leads to the film's most playful interlude, brilliantly tucked in. Cléo watches a short, silent, slapstick film in which a man in dark glasses and a boater hat runs around antically. He is played by the ultra serious New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard, and the woman he is chasing is his then-wife, the actress Anna Karina, friends of Varda's. Godard, known even now for hiding behind dark glasses (and for his often inscrutable films), takes them off as the title card says, "My glasses made everything black!" The comic episode lifts Cléo's spirits and adds humour to the film, whether you recognise the players and get the inside joke or not, and it now stands as a tiny piece of film history.

Varda's bigger contribution to cinema is especially clear in a stunning scene in which Cléo walks down the street, and we see a rush of images at the same time as she does, some in her memory, some before her eyes. She recalls Bob and, in ominous close-up, the face of the woman who read Tarot cards for her at the start of the film. She passes women in housedresses carrying loaves of bread home for dinner. She recalls a lovely clock with a toy monkey perched on top of it, suggesting the randomness of time itself. Close-ups of faces, life on the streets, and the meaningful weight of objects would become recurring patterns in Varda's films. Here they also beautifully evoke the overload of Cléo's thoughts.

That eyes-wide-open intensity is always present in Varda's films, even when they are as varied in form as drama, documentary, and autobiography

When she meets a young soldier about to go off to fight in Algeria, they share their worries, bolster each other's hopes, and confide in each other the way people who meet fleetingly can. "Today everything amazes me," Cléo tells him, "The people's faces next to mine." Her sense of life has been intensified by her brush with death, and she emerges less vain, less isolated and more engaged. But that eyes-wide-open intensity is always present in Varda's films, even when they are as varied in form as drama, documentary, and autobiography.

In her Oscar-acceptance speech, Varda allowed herself a moment of pride about the way she let her imagination roam and tried innovative techniques in her films, including a few that have now landed among the 100 greatest by women. "I tried to work to get the essence of cinema – finding different structures for each film," she remarked, noting the use of real time in Cléo; the long tracking shots in Vagabond (number 13), her moving 1985 story of a rootless young woman traipsing through the countryside; the real-life people in her 2000 documentary The Gleaners and I (number 31). She could have gone on but did not mention her deceptively sunny-looking 1965 story of marital infidelity, Le

Bonheur (number 28), her bold feminist drama from 1977, One Sings, the Other Doesn't (number 85) or her eloquent, biographical The Beaches of Agnès from 2008 (number 89).

Cléo is finally getting its due as a film that deserves to stand beside Francois Truffaut's The 400 Blows and Godard's Breathless as New Wave classics. In Faces, Places, her 2017 Oscar-nominated documentary made with the artist JR, Varda tries to take the younger man to visit Godard, who rudely snubs her with a note on the door turning them away. She feels personally hurt in that moment yet throughout her career she never seemed to mind (at least not out loud) about competing with her contemporaries for acclaim. She was not part of their boys' club. She simply created her own, independent path.

"I feel I'm dancing," she said as she ended her Oscar speech, taking a little sidestep and raising her arms in the air like wings. "The dance of cinema." And she exited the stage, leaving behind an angelic legacy.