

WORLD ON FILM



MARTHA P. NOCHIMSON

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WORLD ON FILM

An Introduction

MARTHA P. NOCHIMSON

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Although there is a distinctly global flavor to American life today, there is noticeable student discomfort with engaging world film. Subtitles, is the cry. The students don't like subtitles! But while there is an undeniable truth here, it may not be a productive focus in considering pedagogy. *World on Film* is predicated on a pedagogy that will provide students with a comfort zone that trumps subtitles in the assignment of world film. It is also sensitive to the need to bridge the gap for students into the "wilds" of other cultures by providing basic background information that will allow them to appreciate the significance of the work on its own cultural terms without either sounding remedial or compressing the information to an economy that will make it impossible to absorb. (Think: textbooks on international film that are often a laundry list of names and titles.)

In each chapter, *World on Film* immediately highlights the real intersections between American students and films from other cultures, and addresses its readers with key images that tap into the more universal discourse of sight to serve as a springboard into the deeper waters of background and analysis. The language of the chapters, while pointing toward sophisticated concepts, is jargon free. *World on Film* principally addresses lower-division Film Studies majors in undergraduate college, but can also be used effectively in elective college courses created for non-majors and in film classes open to high-achieving upper-division high-school students.

World on Film is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the development of national film cultures from the inception of moving pictures to the end of the twentieth century. The second part traces the trend toward international rather than national film that began in earnest

after World War II. In the first part there are six chapters, each of which contains at least one case study about a leading figure in the nation's history of cinema, plus a healthy selection of films, offered chronologically, that represent major cinematic developments. Each offers mid-chapter and end-chapter thought and writing exercises and a list of secondary sources. The second part contains five chapters about filmmakers who represent the cresting tide of internationalism in world film.

World on Film contains at least ten times more material than can be taught in one course. It is intended as a resource cabinet from which cultural background information and in-depth discussions of individual films may be extracted from chapters of interest to create an array of designs for courses on international film. The introductions to both Parts I and II are intended to give the students important guidelines for the study of whatever films are chosen by the instructor; it is advisable to assign them and discuss them in class whenever *World on Film* is assigned. However, many different course outlines based on this book are possible. In fact, each chapter in Part I could be the basis of a single course. It would also be possible to focus on one film culture while drawing single films from other chapters that illustrate the international repercussions of that film culture. For example, in a course on Italian cinema, film selections from the chapters on India, Japan, France, and/or Germany might be assigned to illustrate the influence of neorealism.

It would be possible to teach a course on Western European film by assigning selections from the chapters on France, Germany, Italy, and Russia in Part I and from the chapters on Luis Buñuel and Ingmar Bergman in Part II. Similarly, a course on Asian film could be developed using the chapters on Japanese and Indian film and the chapters on Jia Zhangke and Wong Kar-Wai. A course on film from the

global village could use all the chapters in Part II, and selections from Part I to alert student to influences, either from or on the auteurs in Part II. Specific ideas for course designs are available online at www.wiley.com/go/worldonfilm. Also available there is a troubleshooting guide that proposes solutions to problems frequently encountered by instructional faculty in world film classes, and some supplementary class assignments. Bon voyage!

PART I NATIONS MAKE MOVIES

INTRODUCTION Other Languages, Other Stories

What are you looking at?

You are looking at an **image** of one of the most familiar figures in mass entertainment: the beautiful, bosomy blonde. Made-up and dressed to attract attention, she pauses at this moment to check her appearance. And yet, in context, this golden girl, Cléo (Corinne Marchand), in this **frame** from *Cleo from 5 to 7*, directed by French filmmaker Agnès Varda, is not likely to give the spectator the typical uncomplicated Hollywood promise of romance and sexuality. Students who have seen the film know that Cléo is checking her image to reassure herself about her body because she fears she is dying, not a very sexy situation. As she surveys her pretty face, she tries to escape into the fantasy of her beauty, but while director Varda lets Cléo do what she needs to, she does not allow the audience to escape with her. Varda throws this asymmetrical image at us to make us feel some of Cléo's insecurity. **Asymmetry** in frame composition creates an unbalanced image in which one side dominates the film frame; the norm is balance, with objects and people placed so that the audience feels that everything is all right. An asymmetrical frame immediately challenges the usual aesthetics of commercial film, which has traditionally composed images so that the object or character of importance is squarely placed in the middle of the frame, with all the other elements in the image positioned interestingly around it. In this frame, the main character in the film, Cléo, is and isn't in the center of the frame. Director Varda is doing some very interesting things with the convention of framing the heroine in a central position.

Varda places Cléo's real body significantly off center on the extreme right of the frame while her mirror image, multiplied many times over, occupies the rest of the screen. Cléo is given a lot of importance here, as is conventional, but at the same time the real woman is hardly present. Would you say that Varda is showing us a woman who is more image than person? At the very least, Cléo's beauty has an eerie, unreal aura.

Its unreality is further emphasized by the startling nest of images in the mirror that form an **infinite regress**. Infinite regress refers to a chain of images in which each image contains an image of itself. This visual effect can be created using mirrors, as above, or when a film character looks at a picture of her/himself looking at a picture of him/herself. The chain of images continues until the image becomes too small for human perception, but the suggestion remains that this chain is infinite. In [Figure 0.1](#), the primary object, the flesh-and-blood Cléo, is almost discarded in favor of a never-ending series of her reflections. Where is the real? Cléo appears to be locked into a set of appearances. So instead of celebrating the glamour and sexuality of the blonde, as Hollywood inevitably does, and asking us to believe that it is real, this image implies that the glamour that surrounds Cléo is a kind of hallucination. It's an interesting and telling image. However, when you screen the film, you will see that this shot flies by. Alone it would mean little. In **context**, that is as part of the larger sequencing of images, it serves as a foreshadowing of later events that validate this first impression. In fact, the next frames already suggest that Cléo herself is a primary victim of the illusion of her glamour. Does Cléo see what you see? Does she give any hint of being struck by what the mirror suggests about her lack of freedom? Not really. Cléo seems to be hypnotized by her face and body. Her pleasure is so intense that she appears narcissistic at this point in the film.

Narcissism is a personality deformation that cuts a person off from reality because of a radical preoccupation with self.

What strikes you about the above analysis? Most students say that they are surprised by how much they learn when they take the time to look closely at one image. In some ways, [Figure 0.1](#) is a story unto itself. Without any words, it predicts Cléo's discovery, as the film unfolds, of how unhappy she is as a sex symbol, and how much she wants her freedom. The further into the film you go, the more its visual information brings you ever deeper into the problem of her situation and creates suspense about when and if she will know as much as you know about her by the film's **closure**, that is, its end.

[FIGURE 0.1](#) An image from *Cleo from 5 to 7* aka *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Dir. Agnes Varda, 1962). B&W (including one color sequence). 90 mins. This is an asymmetrically composed frame that occurs early in the film. Here, Cléo (Corinne Marchand) assesses her beauty in a large wall mirror that also reflects her back in a mirror behind her, in a chain of images known as *infinite regress*. What is asymmetricality? What is *infinite regress*? Who is Cléo?



Also consider for a moment that this extremely telling image does not require that you look at a subtitle. It communicates in an international language, the image.

Welcome to *World on Film*.

For many people subtitles are the biggest barrier to enjoyment of, and interest in, international film. Too many people are so preoccupied with the unhappy anticipation of having to deal with annoying subtitles that they find it impossible to get excited about seeing films in other languages from other countries. But not always. Director Ang Lee's Chinese-language film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* aka *Wo hu cang long* (2000) overcame that prejudice. Americans flocked to see it in huge numbers. Why? They were anticipating the visual spectacle of martial arts in midair. But wait. All international film gives you visual spectacle. We began this book with visual spectacle, too. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is simply more obvious and simpler; it gives you images that are something like sports events; the visual spectacles you will survey in this book are more magical than that. This book will lead you to a new

appreciation of looking when you watch a movie. It will allow you to see that the images are speaking to you and that you only need to receive their messages. In other words, you have much more power than you think when it comes to understanding international film. Subtitles exist to give you prompts in English that dissolve the verbal language barriers between you and the film. But verbal language is only a secondary part of virtually all the films you will read about in this book. The problem is not the subtitles but an unnecessary dependence on them. You don't need to learn to love subtitles, you need to learn the visual language of film that *World on Film* will help you master. To test out your relationship to subtitles, try watching a part of one of the assigned films without its subtitles. What do you lose? What do you gain? How does this experience alter your attitude toward international film?

In fact, Agnès Varda was part of a group of French **cinéphiles**, that is, movie lovers, who piled into the Cinémathèque Française, a famous screening-room in Paris, in the 1950s and 1960s, to see American movies in English even though they didn't have subtitles. It was the images that fascinated them. And when they began to make their own movies, it was the images that were most important to them as directors. This group of cinéphiles became known as **La Nouvelle Vague/The New Wave**, and you will learn more about them in Chapter 1. Something new happened to them when they couldn't rely on their own language and narrative traditions to help them understand a film – and something new will happen to you when you move beyond the comfort zone of your language and narrative traditions. *Cléo* and the other films you will read about in *World on Film* will get your eyes moving with new strength and insight. For this reason, at the beginning of every chapter, you will be asked to look very carefully at an image from an important film. From there, the book will take you with more depth into

other aspects of the film, including the story and the specific cultural characteristics of the national film culture you are studying, to aid you in making your interpretation and in understanding its place in the development of film in that country.

Warning: even when you get into the exciting practice of mining images not only for their beauty but also for their meaning, you will need to get used to the pace of international film.

The good news, which is also the bad news, is that the pace of nearly all the films you will study in your international film course is much slower than you are used to. Bad news first. Many students who are not familiar with international film feel impatient when they first see films from other cultures. You may experience a “get on with it” feeling at first. That’s part of the reason why many students need a college class experience in order to get into international film. Ultimately, becoming comfortable with the slower pace of many international masterpieces will be worth your efforts. There’s a lot of excitement in movies that many American audiences miss because they are too absorbed with the plot. Of course, most international films have plots and Hollywood movies also contain images, some of them every bit as eye-popping as the images you will see in your international film course. But Americans don’t always have time to enjoy their beauty and mystery because Hollywood plots rush forward so fast that you are likely to rush by even the most captivating images so that you can concentrate on the dialogue, hoping it will explain the action. Exactly the opposite will happen in the discussions in this book.

In the films you study in an international film course, the slow pace of the story makes room for you to think about not only what is happening, but why, and to look at the images that tell you more than words about what is going

on inside the characters and maybe inside you too. For example, the image of Cléo, above. It is part of a pattern of extraordinary lingering images, many of which exploit Marchand's beauty, glamour, and sensuality. But not for the usual Hollywood reason that "sex sells." You get to look at her image so carefully because this tells you much about the problems that arise for her as a character, and for you as part of the audience precisely because her beauty is part of what "sells" her as an entertainer, and even as a woman. Cléo is a singer, and director Agnès Varda intends to give you insight into what it means to be a woman who is not only constantly observed, but whose life depends on being looked at. Varda doesn't lecture you; she allows you to think about what it means to look at a glamorous celebrity by letting you look at her often, and by leaving clues to the problem of being **objectified**, or turned into a thing who is only important because she is there for someone else's visual pleasure. How will you notice these clues? At first, you will depend upon your instructor and on class discussion. But as you become accustomed to being an active part of the audience, you will begin to recognize them yourself and class will become a place where you can tell your classmates what you see and learn what they have seen.

Now the good news. All of the above means that most of what bothers you most about subtitles comes from the habits you have learned from Hollywood about watching movies, habits that make fast action your main option as a filmgoer. This course will give you more options. Once you begin to allow yourself to look at international films emphasizing what you see, instead of worrying about whether you are getting the plot, it won't matter so much if you miss a subtitle or even pay little attention to them the first time you see the film. Through the magic of current technology, you can always rewind to see a subtitle you

have missed, but more important, you will develop new habits that free you from dependence on those subtitles. Moreover, *World on Film* will help you to feel more comfortable about learning to concentrate on the images by giving you the major details of the plots from the films you are screening for the first time so that you will feel less pressure to see how it all turns out. Instead, you can focus on puzzling out what the director shows you about why events unfold as they do, by making the kind of frame analysis modeled for you in the discussion of [Figure 0.1](#). You will need to cultivate patience to become good at doing independent analyses. But you will be rewarded not only by having some wonderful new movie experiences, but also by becoming an international tourist in a new way.

As you read the chapters in this book on different national film cultures, you will leave the United States without paying a penny for airfare. Below, we will discuss in detail what “national film culture” means. Here let us say that while real travel to other countries is a wonderful experience, all too often American tourists in Europe, Asia, and Africa continue to see the new lands with American eyes, that is, as though everyone had the same values and history as America. In the great international films through which *World on Film* will guide you, you will try to see other countries through *their* eyes. Other stories and other languages will become expressive in their own terms. The world will become bigger and smaller at the same time: bigger because there will be so much more to it, smaller because you will no longer feel distant from it. Other countries will cease to be places that ought to be more like America. With additional options for seeing movies, you will begin to understand that the films you are observing have a different point of view from the point of view of Hollywood films. This new perspective will make even more sense when you know something about the history and culture from which the film grew. *World on*

Film will give you the cultural information you need in order to understand the films; and it will point you toward further reading, if you want more extensive information about a subject that particularly interests you.

Experience with films from other countries will break up stereotypes you have absorbed, stereotypes you probably don't suspect you have stored away. For example, if you were told that you were going to meet a French person, what would you expect? If you are not familiar with France, your assumptions might be highly colored by the movies you have seen. A lot might also depend on whether you have seen old American films as well as new ones, since some clichés vary greatly from generation to generation. Women who saw American musical comedies in the 1930s starring Maurice Chevalier, a charming song-and-dance man who came to Hollywood from France to star in movies like *Love Me Tonight* (Dir. Rouben Mamoulian, 1932), thought he was a typical Frenchman, and often equated France with idealized love. Chevalier frequently shrugged his shoulders in a way that was supposed to be “very French.” It's true that shrugging is a more common part of body language in France than it is in America, but stereotypes exaggerate a small truth beyond its value. How much shrugging do you see in *Cléo*?

Similarly, in the late 1950s, American men who saw Leslie Caron, a lovely French actress and dancer, play the title role in *Gigi* (Dir. Vincente Minelli, 1958), which traces the development of a young girl into a woman, often assumed that she was a typical Frenchwoman, but she was a Hollywood fantasy of an adorable young Parisian. In that film, a new generation saw a much older Maurice Chevalier, still shrugging in a “very French” way that strengthened old stereotypes. So, although Caron and Chevalier are both French, as is Louis Jourdan, Caron's co-star and love interest in the film, and although the story was based on a novella

by the French author Colette, *Gigi* was made from an American point of view by Hollywood. The film was shot on location in Paris, but showed only the most beautiful and famous areas in the city, which may have created the impression that Paris had no crime, no dirt, and no poverty. In other words, the pieces of the film were French, but they were assembled according to values and clichés from American culture. A French film not only uses French actors, it is written by a French writer and directed by a French director, all of whom are influenced by the history and traditions of the French nation. When you see the films that have emerged from French film culture, you will understand that *Gigi* is an American fantasy of France that imagines it as a place full of champagne, romance, and love. As is usual when an American made film is set in France, in *Gigi* we are shown an image of the Eiffel Tower, to ensure that the American audience knows the location of the story. In *Cléo*, we see all kinds of neighborhoods, all kinds of people, and not one shot of the Eiffel Tower. It's a very different Paris than American audiences are used to.

Today, is the Eiffel Tower still the essential landmark for American films set in France? Who are the French actors who currently define French men and women for American audiences? Do they convey the same idea of France that Hollywood portrayed in the twentieth century? Or have things changed? In Part II of this book, we will discuss some major international shifts in film culture caused by **globalization**, that is, increasing international economic interdependence. This shift has weakened the notion of a national film culture. What has taken the place of that concept? That is getting ahead of our story. These current international developments will be explored in Part II of *World on Film*.

Love, champagne, and the Eiffel Tower are all clichéd, often silly, parts of American fantasies about ordinary

French life, and you will cast them aside once you have seen real French films. There is just as much love and champagne in America as there is in our media fantasies about France. And there are much more profound and interesting ways of knowing you are in a French setting. You will also be liberated from Hollywood cultural clichés, especially those about Asians and Africans, who inevitably appear in Hollywood films as subordinate characters who are portrayed as less powerful and beautiful than the American characters; often they are the villains whom American stars defeat. For the most part, the visual information supports their secondary roles in the narrative. The best lighting, costumes, and places in the frame compositions are reserved for the American characters. Conversely, in Indian, Chinese, Hong Kong, and African films; Indians, Chinese, and Africans are the main characters. Seeing Asians and Africans as the heroes of their own stories and at the center of the frame may be quite a new experience for you.

At the same time, the films you will study in *World on Film* will also reveal the concerns you have in common with people who live in other countries, perhaps more than you have in common with the heroes in the American films you are used to. For example *Cléo* does not contain a plot in which its protagonist must battle external adversaries in tense life-or-death situations; win the love of a handsome but unattainable man; or foil the plans of a criminal mastermind determined to rule the world, the menu of stories from which Hollywood likes to choose. But how many students have days like that? By contrast, in *Cléo*, director Varda strips away the surface of the heroine's life so that we can see what lies beneath outer appearances, a process that many people must go through in order to mature, grow, and change. Under the veneer, her surface, she is a person with fears and hopes you may identify with even if you are not exactly in Cléo's situation. The veneer that slowly gets

scraped away is made up of images of Cléo's success: she is not only beautiful, but a famous singer, she also has a rich, good-looking lover who denies her nothing; she lives like a queen. Or she has done so. The film begins shortly after Cléo has had some tests taken to see if she has stomach cancer.

As the film unfolds, Cléo waits for the results. While she waits, she looks at herself with more honesty than ever before. You will make discoveries with her, as she becomes increasingly aware of her narcissism and begins to notice that she is trapped by the luxuries that other people envy. She begins to see that her rich, very "devoted" lover is more interested in her as a beautiful object than as a person; and she realizes that her life with him has been an act calculated to please him, but that has left no room for her feelings and needs. The possibility that she may have cancer clears her mind of many of the falsehoods she has been living with. Paradoxically – in opposition to what might be expected – the threat of death sets Cléo on the road to freedom. Many people find that a shock like the discovery of cancer makes them see life in a new way. Does this sound familiar?

Because this is not a Hollywood film, we don't discover that Cléo is headed toward a more open life only when she or the script verbally tells us she is. Instead, much of what we learn grows from the images in the film. By the end, we have had a few shocks about how disguised she was when we first met her, including seeing Cléo strip off the glamorous blonde wig we thought was her real hair and learning that her real name is Florence. To understand where she is going in life, we watch what happens to her face and body after she leaves her expensive apartment, her suffocating daily routine, and the false identity she and others have built for her. The possibility that she is facing death brings about rebirth out of the ashes of her old

identity when she finally meets someone she can talk to without selling herself: Antoine (Antoine Bourseiller), a young, openhearted soldier on his way to Algeria, whom she encounters by chance. In fact, the main action of the film is Florence/Cléo's discovery of a man who is in the same position she is. Both she and Antoine are facing possible death, he on the battlefield, she from a disease. Together they share a few hours of complete honesty and friendship, walking around a beautiful Paris park. Symbolically it is the first day of summer, the longest day of the year and the beginning of a season of abundant life. It is also significant that Florence/Cléo meets up with a soldier going to Algeria, since it turns her attention from her artificial life of luxury and fame toward the larger world of politics she has ignored previously.

Since you may not know about this aspect of French history, here is some background. In 1962, when this film was released, the morality of France's military presence in Algeria was a hot topic in France, and among politically aware people all over the world. Algeria had been a colony of France since the 1830s, when it was conquered by France. Between 1954 and 1962, the Algerians waged a guerrilla war for independence that was met with shocking violence on the part of the French colonial government, including torture. This conflict took place during the time of the Fourth Republic in France, which was formed right after the end of World War II, but collapsed in 1958, due to its instability and the crisis caused by the Algerian War; war hero Charles de Gaulle formed the Fifth Republic. The French public was as divided about the questions of Algeria as Americans were during US military action in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s and during the Iraq War at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Some of the French endorsed independence for the Algerians and were against their government's policy. Some supported the government. In

1962, Algeria finally achieved independence. French audiences would have known that it was uncertain whether Antoine would live to return to France, since, as you know, guerrilla violence is unpredictable, even after a formal ceasefire. Neither Antoine nor Cléo say anything about what they think of Algeria. But given their mutual desire for freedom for themselves, what do you think French audiences would assume about their sympathies?

A journey to freedom communicated by a transition from confining to open images, from a selfish life to a life aware of political developments? This concept may not even make sense to a filmgoer educated by Hollywood, where a fight for freedom is the result of a plot that ends in a violent battle. Many Americans are trained to believe that films about freedom should involve violence, guns, cars, airplanes, explosions, suspense, and multimillion dollar **CGI** effects. Many students are disappointed by characters who do not express themselves through violence, even though most of them would never resort to hitting or shooting people with whom they disagree or by whom they feel abused. Some psychologists have investigated why ordinary, law-abiding people take pleasure in seeing violence committed in a fictional world. This is a question worth pondering. One possibility is that the extreme violence we see onscreen distracts us from our problems. It might even be cathartic. That is to say, it might purge us of some of our own inner tensions and anger. And we do need a temporary vacation from what ails us every so often. But don't we also need to gain more clarity about our problems? *Cléo* is actually the kind of film that uses the allure of the movies to bring us closer to our own lives. One part of the interesting invitation to look more carefully at the way we live that Varda gives us is her refusal to close the story with the kind of certainty that we all idealize but rarely find in life. At the end of the film, the audience is given no idea