

## *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*: Transcript

### Five Things to Love About *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, 50 years on

The film *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*) came out in 1964, so this year we celebrate its fiftieth birthday. It's a great moment to look back at its success and legacy. It's also one of my favourite films, which is why it's such a pleasure for me to talk to you about it today. The film was written and directed by Jacques Demy and is part of a trio of his films which re-use both actors and characters; *Lola* acts as a prequel (and came out in 1961), while the much brighter musical *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (from 1967) completes the set.

*Les Parapluies* was immensely popular when it was released, collecting prizes at the Cannes film festival and several Oscar and Grammy award nominations; perhaps unusually, it was highly successful both in France and in America. Demy's film-making is often classified under the broad heading of the 'nouvelle vague' (the new wave), along with cinematographers such as Jean-Luc Godard. Roughly speaking, this term – the new wave – designates the union of innovative cinematic techniques, autobiographical elements, and contemporary social commentary. Jacques Demy's work challenges such labelling, with its fantastical, fairy-tale *son et lumière*, but it is worth bearing the wider cinematic trend in mind.

*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is, in brief, a film about young love thwarted. It takes place, as the title indicates, in Cherbourg, where it was filmed on location (another typical feature of the 'nouvelle vague'). The setting is thus a busy port town in Basse-Normandie, and more specifically an umbrella shop run by a mother-daughter team (Mme Emery and Geneviève, played respectively by Anne Vernon and a dazzlingly young and beautiful Catherine Deneuve). The film is in three parts, which it is tempting to describe in theatrical or operatic

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terms as three acts: namely, *Le départ*, *L'absence*, *Le retour*, which together depict events from November 1957 to December 1963.

At the start of the film, Geneviève is in love with a car mechanic, Guy (Nino Castelnuovo); their plans to marry are, however, thwarted by the twin forces of Geneviève's mother (who insists her daughter is too young to marry) and by the national requirements of military service. Guy is duly sent off for two years to participate in the Franco-Algerian war. Geneviève's plans to wait patiently for Guy to return are complicated both by the realisation that she is pregnant and by the amorous attentions of a diamond-dealer, Roland Cassard (played by Marc Michel). The latter is, unsurprisingly, favoured and encouraged by Mme Emery as a much more eligible catch.

Is the result predictable? Geneviève marries Roland and leaves the town with her mother. Guy returns, limping from a war wound to his knee, and is devastated to find Geneviève gone, consoled only fleetingly by drink and prostitution. The death of his godmother (Élise) shocks him out of his self-absorbed misery, at which point he has inherited enough money to set up a petrol station of his own, aided by the lovely brunette Madeleine (played by Ellen Farner). Madeleine had been a faithful nurse to Élise and quietly in love with Guy throughout the film, and so she perhaps is the only character to have a traditional happy ending.

Guy and Geneviève meet for a final time unexpectedly one White Christmas when Geneviève stops to fill her car at Guy's petrol station, with their daughter Françoise in the car. They exchange brief meaningless words and part without any resolution or emotional outburst.

Hopefully this brief plot summary has been helpful. It can't, obviously do justice to the complexity of the film and its many lingering glances, nor above all can it do justice to the music. For *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is a film in which all speech is set to music, whether swift and simple melodic dialogue or long languorous love duets. The music, composed by

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Michel Legrand, is almost Wagnerian in its design, with its rich orchestration and each character having an associated *leitmotif* that is quickly recognisable, even unforgettable. The only disappointment with the music is that the whole film is dubbed, although this allows for an international cast as the actors' voices are never heard. Guy is thus played by an Italian, and Madeleine by a German. The singing – rarely in the rain despite the film's title – is of such sublime beauty that the singers deserve equal credits alongside the actors. Perhaps most interestingly, the singer for Mme Emery, Geneviève's mother, Christiane Legrand, was the sister of the composer and the founding lead soprano of the originally French group The Swingle Singers.

The music of the *Parapluies* is my first of 'five things to love' about this film. It is a sinuous, winding, chromatic, repetitive, insistent, heart-breaking melody, as you have just heard. This song has had an interesting English afterlife in that it was translated from French into English under the new title 'I will wait for you', and as such was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Song in 1966. It has also had covers by many artists – Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Liza Minnelli, Oscar Peterson, and more.

My second reason to love this film is for its amazing colours and costumes, fantastic and floral mixes of pastel yellows, blues, and pinks. From the beginning, the viewer is wowed by the Technicolor of youth and life (with their truly rose-tinted glasses). As the film progresses, however, the decorous colours of black and white encroach on these fairy tale colours, with Roland Cassard's black suits and black car, Geneviève's white coat and wedding dress, the white of the laundrette that replaces the umbrella shop when the family leave the town, the white of Guy's own petrol station, and the white of the snow at the end. This white (even of the laundrette) seems not to be redemptive, cleansing, or cathartic, but rather to be a stark commentary on the suppression of desire and absence of emotion demanded by the film's

plot. The warm, soft rain of romance turns into the bitter, harsh snow of social, familial mores as the film progresses.

If in the 1998 film *Pleasantville* the 1950s cosy family drama moves from black and white through the discovery of reading, geography, and love, to radiant colours (beginning with the colouring in of rose petals and cherry blossom), *Les Parapluies* can be said to be a *Pleasantville* in reverse, since it moves from multicolour to monochrome. This movement signals a shift from the colourful pursuit of pleasure to the *chiaroscuro* restrictions of middle-class expectations and norms.

Costumes are a key element of this celebration of colour. Everything matches, not only dresses and coats (one for every day of the week) but also wallpaper and wallpaint. One of the most important effects of Geneviève's pregnancy is simply the need to have larger dresses made; much, in the film, is similarly reduced to a matter of fashion. Mme Emery's immediate reaction to the news that the shop is in dire financial straits is to wonder whether she should go to the hairdresser's ('Si je changeais de coiffure...'). In fact, Geneviève's evident taste for Chanel and Burberry contrasts strangely with this claim that the umbrella shop is struggling financially. Yet costumes also have their part to play in the pain of the film: Geneviève's feet hurt when she tries to dance in her heels; Guy is pricked by a pin in her dress at the opera.

Names take third place for their contribution to the poetry and symbolism of the film. Guy and Geneviève share an initial that seems to promise their similarity and closeness. Roland Cassard's breaking up of this intimacy seems to be inscribed within his very name, given the French verb *casser* (to break) which is audible in his surname. The guilt and shame that Guy feels at his dalliance with the prostitute Jenny is brought home to him forcibly by her thoughtless, offhand suggestion 'Tu peux m'appeler Geneviève si tu veux'.

Like Guy and Geneviève, the two mother figures, Mme Emery and Élise, also share an initial which suggests their similar function in the film. Élise, however, as a bedridden old lady with white hair provides a stark contrast to the vain, elegant, well-coiffed Mme Emery. Yet both, by the end, have died, symbolising more than anything the passage of time and the shifting of responsibility to the younger generation, who now have children of their own about whom to worry. That Guy's son with Madeleine is called François, just as Geneviève's daughter is called Françoise, is a final cruel twist of fate that reminds the viewer of earlier scenes in which Guy and Geneviève looked forward to having children and chose the name Françoise. The unswaying loyalty to the anticipated name of the child is at odds with the disloyalty of Geneviève. The name of the town, 'Cher-bourg', also has a possible allegorical meaning: literally, 'dear little town', where 'dear' connotes both affection and expense. This leads us to my fourth point of interest about the film: the role of money.

It is here that the film takes on more of the characteristics of social commentary associated with 'new wave' cinema. Money is an essential motivator for all the characters in the film, in the time-honoured tradition of the French proverb 'Amour peut moult, argent peut tout' (Love can do much, money can do everything). Guy and Geneviève's love cannot withstand the onslaught of Roland Cassard's attractively wealthy suit. This weakness is prefigured in the dinner party for Epiphany to which Mme Emery invites him. At this dinner, Geneviève finds the sixpence in the 'roi des galettes' cakes, and has to choose Roland as her king, even though she already knows by this point that she is pregnant with Guy's child. In fact, Roland Cassard only meets Geneviève because Mme Emery in despair has gone to a jeweller's to pawn her pearls. Roland's purchase of the pearls is seemingly only a prelude to his purchase of Geneviève.

Yet Roland is not the demon of the film by any means. He is, rather, a sensitive, generous man who seems genuinely fond of Geneviève and is quite happy to bring up her child as his own. And wealth has its consolations for Geneviève; a gorgeous wedding dress, and nice jewellery and a Mercedes in the final scene. Besides, Guy, too, experiences the freedom and possibilities granted by money. On his return from national service, he has a sizeable pension (since he was injured in the line of duty) which allows him to walk (or at any rate limp) away from his job as a car mechanic and fritter his time away in cafes and bars. There is evident tension between Guy and the locals, who resent him for his self-indulgent lifestyle. Such tensions provide a snapshot of life in provincial France during the Franco-Algerian war which raged from 1954 to 1962 as a consequence of the desire for Algerian independence. It is this war, and its effects on French society, as much as Roland Cassard, which come between Guy and Geneviève. Moreover, Élise's bequest to Guy allows him to shake off the ghosts of the past, set up his own petrol station, and marry Madeleine. For both couples, love is expensive, and money is love.

Finally, it is the bittersweet ending of the film that makes it demand to be watched again and again. Madeleine takes her son into town to look at the shop windows decorated for Christmas, leaving Guy alone at the petrol station. Geneviève pulls up for some petrol, apparently unaware of the owner. Once they recognise each other, a polite conversation ensues: 'Toi, tu vas bien?' 'Oui', and so forth. Soon Guy tells Geneviève 'Je crois que tu peux partir', tapping into a vocabulary of leaving that has been constant throughout the film. Guy was originally the one who left (on a train at the end of act one) and the one who had a toy ship in his bedroom, promising travel and adventure. Yet Guy also had a toy petrol station in his bedroom, and it is this dream that is eventually realised. Guy was punished for leaving Geneviève by returning and finding her gone; now, he is immobile and chained to his life-

size service station, destined to watch others (including Geneviève) drive in and out. Guy may have physically left Cherbourg at first, but it was Geneviève who left Guy for another man, and it is Geneviève who finally has the freedom of movement and the excitement of travel. The relationship between Guy and Geneviève thrived on walks together and floating along on Guy's bicycle; these slow, romantic means of transport are replaced in the film by the train that takes Guy away, and the car that carries Geneviève off after her wedding to Roland. Time passes, life becomes faster and more complicated, the songs of youth fade. Roland Cassard's conspicuous absence at the end is, besides, no doubt due to his glamorous life of business travel, suggesting that Geneviève is destined to be left (even if only temporarily) by successive men even though her iconic song is 'Ne me quitte pas' (Don't leave me).

Guy's instruction 'Tu peux partir' takes on an even more bitter tone if we remember that Élise had sung, on his return, 'Maintenant je peux partir' (i.e. Now you're back I can die happy). Leaving, in this film, is always potentially a prefiguration and an allegory of death.

The fifth and last point might thus be dubbed ambiguity or irresolution. The film poses many questions – should Geneviève have waited for Guy? does Guy really love Madeleine? is anyone happy at the end? Is this a case of *All's well that ends well* or even of *Much ado about nothing*? Alongside such specific, speculative questions, more general issues can be discerned about the possibility of judging morality in such a situation, about human responsibility, about the fickleness of the human heart, about the attractiveness of money, about growing up and surviving first love. This is neither Disney, nor *La Bohème*, despite the singing. Mme Emery tells Geneviève that 'On ne meurt d'amour qu'au cinéma', thereby suggesting that Jacques Demy wants us to consider his film realistic rather than cinematic, challenging the boundaries between art and life.

This is a haunting, unforgettable, impeccably constructed film, a feast for both eyes and ears, while a complex, bittersweet tonic for the heart. Through the five facets of music, colour and costume, names, money, and the ambiguous, unresolved ending, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* charms and challenges. It is a film to watch, rewatch, and ponder, a film with which to grow up and grow old.

Thank you for watching.