

Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les parapluies de Cherbourg) (1964)

P Michell, 2016.

Occasionally films are just made for the pure joy of translating one idea onto the screen. Umbrellas is such a film.

The next film scheduled is this delightful, colourful and musical film. A French confection reminiscent of a joyful meander in a patisserie shop in Paris.

Beautifully restored (1996) and fresh with its vibrant colours. There is nothing before or after quite like Umbrellas. The give away is the opening titles.

Whilst initially looking deceptively simple. Umbrellas is an extremely complex film structurally. See Brophy's analysis below and link to Ridley's Criterion analysis too.

Be warned ... the entire dialogue is sung. Two famous tunes will be recognisable. This is the film that launched Catherine Deneuve's career. Though there is no dancing. Whilst not a true 'musical' in the Hollywood sense. It extends the form. Not quite standard operatic either as there is no big arias, plot developments. Say – apart from the end Esso service station scene.

Synopsis:

Geneviève (Deneuve), a 16-year-old girl whose mother, Madame Emery (Anne Vernon), operates an umbrella shop in Cherbourg, is in love with Guy (Nino Castelnuovo), a 21-year-old auto mechanic who lives with his sickly Aunt Elise (Mireille Perrey) and young Madeleine (Ellen Farmer), her companion. Guy and Geneviève want to marry, but he is about to begin 2 years of military service; before he departs, Geneviève has sex with him to prove her love. Guy has been away several months, and Geneviève has received only one letter when her mother learns that Geneviève is pregnant. Roland Cassard (Marc Michel), a wealthy diamond merchant, proposes to Geneviève, declaring his willingness to raise Guy's child as his own. Geneviève is at first shocked by the idea, but as time passes, she becomes convinced that Guy has forgotten her. Won over by Cassard's tenderness and her mother's arguments, she marries Cassard. Guy returns home, learns of Geneviève's marriage, and disconsolately goes back to his old job. When Aunt Elise dies and Madeleine prepares to leave, Guy realizes that they are in love with each other. They marry and Guy buys a gas station with the money inherited from Aunt Elise; 3 years later, Guy and Madeleine are a happy family with their young son. On Christmas Eve when Guy is alone, Geneviève drives into the gas station. Aside from noting that their daughter strongly resembles Guy, the former lovers have little to say to each other, and they go their separate ways.

Credits:

Direction, Screenplay and lyrics – Jacques Demy

Music – Michel Legrand

Trivia:

The children in the final scene have personal connections to the filmmakers: Genevieve's daughter Françoise is played by Jacques Demy's adopted daughter by Agnes Varda, Rosalie Varda-Demy; and Guy's son François is played by composer Michel Legrand's son.

Its been turned into a stage musical in 2014:

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/mar/31/musicals-the-umbrellas-of-cherbourg>

Analysis by Phillip Brophy:

The early musicals constitute the general slant of Demy's directorial style, with UMBRELLAS being perhaps the best example. He often worked with the same set designer/art-director Bernard Erein, and the same composer/musical-director Michel Legrand. These musicals (fairly unconventional in form considering how far- they go with song and dance) are heavily influenced by the MGM musicals by Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly and Vincent Minelli from the late 40s into the mid 50s. As such, Demy is regarded as a 'metteur en scene' - someone who manipulates the plastic elements of the cinematic construction to convey the narrative slant and style of the film.

A quote from Demy: "To me the screen is essentially pictorial and musical. The camera picks out significant details in a story and gives them emotional emphasis. Musical dialogue does the same thing in the dramatic conflict of characters or in the interior conflict of a single character."

Close analysis: THE UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG

What follows are some points for consideration concerning how the construction of song, dance and music constitute the narrative of the film (especially considering that there is no spoken dialogue in the film).

1. Deneuve looking directly to the camera in relation to accompanying musical theme. This has the effect of us being projected directly into Deneuve's mind, as if we are reading her mind and hearing its musical contents. Melodies often function throughout the film as the content of a character's thoughts.
2. Roland Cassard's flashback (which is a recreation of the identical scene from LOLA) where melodies of the past are evoked. Melodies are often used to typify or represent a solid impression left in the mind (a memory of a person, a time, a place, etc.). This means that the melody is the actual content of what is in a character's mind, as opposed to a musical theme being used to symbolize a state of the character's mind.
3. Rhythmic editing (metronomic) to symbolize sexual intercourse. A different temporal sensibility governs the physical act of sex, as opposed to the musical-time flow which is more attached to the emotional flow of the characters.
4. Characters moving on unseen wheeled platforms symbolizing the feeling of being in love (visual counter part to 'sweeping violins' cliché). This is a spatial-kinetic mechanism employed to symbolize a character being swept away by their emotional

state and the accompanying music.

5. Lack of dissolves and ellipses within scenes as the scenes are defined musically not visually (time and space are defined by the musical numbers themselves).

6. Jump cuts that follow the 'void space' of moving from one piece of music to the next. This is because, once again, music and melody are the controllers of the narrative flow and the determining factors which shape plot events.

7. Operatic scenes: full of condensed symbolism and fragmented gestures that follow the musical intensity. Note how the timing and sequencing of their gestures and their dialogue is largely determined by the phrasing of the melodies. Note how key changes of the melody correspond changes in dramatic and emotional intensity.

8. Fusion of realism (acting performance) with musicality (operatic soundtrack) in contrast to the lyric drama of WEST SIDE STORY - ie. the body movement, posture and overall presence of actors in UMBRELLAS is quite naturalistic despite the fact that they are singing.

9. The emphasis on melody as opposed to themes. Note how the melody is continually playing (orchestrally) and whenever a character 'speak-sings' they sing whatever notes are happening with the ongoing melody.

10. The relationship between melody and wallpaper: both are 'ambient' elements which are repeated and patterned in a fashion to make up a flow of music (the modulating melodic unit) and a wash of colour (the sequencing of the visual pattern).

<http://www.philipbrophy.com/projects/mma/UmbrellasCherbourg.html>

Reviews:

Original New York Times review by Bosley Crowther in 1964 -

<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B07E7DA123CEE32A25754C1A9649D946591D6CF>

Author: [desperateliving](#) from Canada

27 January 2005

The first of the three segments is perhaps the sunniest film ever made. It's a totally original film (at least from what I've seen); so original, in fact, that at first it's kind of off-putting -- the artificiality of the bubble gum colors (in the first segment, as they change slightly as each moves into the next), the constantly moving camera, and the fact that all of the lines are sung makes it hard to get situated within the film, for the same reason that you turn the car radio down when you're driving down a street trying to read house numbers. ("I can't follow the plot, they keep singing...") And yet Demy isn't satisfied with just being sunny (and his brightness is never garish); each segment has a specific feel, the grandest being the last, with an ending that's just right. (Though it should be said that Demy never once sacrifices the pleasure he creates, nor does he fall into any stale conventions, even while his story is based on the oldest of movie clichés -- wait for me!).

I hesitate to use the word melodrama, but that's essentially what the film is, both for the meaning of the word "melo" (music) and for the heightened emotions brought on by the music. It feels like we've got our head in the

clouds, not least of all because the acting is aided by, well, the singing. The music, which is nearly always splendid (and never song-and-dancey), compliments the actors. At first the acting is very plain; or at least, it seems that way. I think that's due to the unconventional approach. Deneuve's loveliness as a young woman keeps us from responding to much aside from her beauty (and she starts off as a typical love-struck sixteen year-old), but by the end she's quite a different person, and to overuse a term applied to Deneuve, she becomes elegant. (I kept looking at her handsome costar thinking Alain Delon would have been perfect in the role; then I learned his most noteworthy film aside from this one was the Delon-starring Visconti film, "Rocco and His Brothers.") Surely some people would probably vomit at a film of such shameless exhibitionism and style, but I was left astonished, thinking, How in the hell did they pull it off?

Roger Ebert:

Has there ever been an actress in the history of the movies who has changed as little and aged as slowly as [Catherine Deneuve](#)? Here she is in "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg," her first major film, made in 1964 and now restored. Thirty-one years later, I met her at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival. To the degree that she had changed, it was simply to ripen, to add experience and sympathy to the raw beauty of a teenager. I am not making empty compliments. Her beauty, then and now, is like a blow to the eyes.

When she made "Umbrellas" for the French director [Jacques Demy](#), Deneuve was 20, and her work in this film was a flowering that introduced one of the great stars of modern French cinema. The film itself was a curious experiment in which all of the words were sung; [Michel Legrand](#) wrote the wall-to-wall score, which includes not only the famous main theme and other songs, but also Demy's sung dialogue, in the style of the lines used to link passages in opera. This style would seem to suggest a work of featherweight romanticism, but "Umbrellas" is unexpectedly sad and wise, a bittersweet reflection on the way true love sometimes does not (and perhaps should not) conquer all.

Demy's film was a worldwide hit when it was first released, but if its star did not age, its film stock did. Like many of the movies shot in the 1960s, it was released in a version of Eastmancolor that did not remain true to the original colors. The greens and blues lost their strength, leaving the film looking pink, as if it had faded in a bright sun. Demy regained control of the film a few years before his death in 1990, and I remember a summer day in 1989 when I sat with Demy and his wife, the director [Agnes Varda](#), in the garden of their house in Paris, and they talked of restoring the film's original color. That task was finally finished by

Varda in 1994, and now here is "Umbrellas of Cherbourg" again, looking as bright and fresh as on the day it premiered.

The story is a sad one, yes, but it ends on a note we can only conclude is the right one. (Do not read further until you see the film.) Deneuve plays a young woman named Genevieve, who is head over heels in love with a local garage mechanic named Guy ([Nino Castelnuovo](#)). Her mother ([Anne Vernon](#)) runs a little local shop and is desperately in need of money to save her business. A rich man ([Marc Michel](#)) walks into the shop, falls in love with the daughter and begins a slow, indirect process that might lead to a proposal of marriage. Genevieve has eyes only for Guy, but he is drafted for two years by the army. And although they pledge to love each other forever, she receives only one letter from him in two months.

Meanwhile, almost inevitably, Genevieve finds she is pregnant. The rich man proposes, is told of this development and offers to marry Genevieve anyway and raise the child as their own. And then there is an epilogue, in which Guy returns to the town, discovers what has happened, turns to drink and dissolution, and then is rescued by Madeleine (Ellen Farnet), the young woman who was the companion for Guy's aunt and has secretly loved him for a long time. The very last scene, of a final meeting between Guy and Genevieve, is one of such poignancy that it's amazing the fabric of a musical can support it. I had forgotten many of the details of the story in the 32 years since first seeing it; my mental images were of smiling garage mechanics and Catherine Deneuve happily singing with her lover. The film is incomparably richer and more moving than that. And although the idea of having the actors sing (or, more exactly, lip-sync) every single line might sound off-putting, it's surprising how quickly we accept it.

"The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" did not initiate a new movie style (although Demy tried it again in "The Young Girls of Rochefort," in 1967, with Deneuve, her sister [Francoise Dorleac](#) and [Gene Kelly](#)). But it is remembered as a bold original experiment, and now that it is restored and back in circulation, it can also be remembered as a surprisingly effective film, touching and knowing and, like Deneuve, ageless.

From the Criterion collection. Excellent piece by Jim Ridley:
<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3235-the-umbrellas-of-cherbourg-a-finite-forever>