Jacques Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg: A National Allegory of the French-Algerian War

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ABSTRACT
If the French-Algerian War remained for decades a ‘war without a name’, as Bertrand Tavernier and Patrick Rotman suggested in their so-titled 1992 documentary, for many years it was also considered to be a war without a cinema, both in France and in Algeria. Benjamin Stora, a historian who has written extensively on the development of French memory of the Algerian War, speaks of a ‘black hole’ in French cinema of this period, of the absence of films dealing with the war in a frank and direct manner, both during the war and subsequently. In his opinion, this absence was indicative of a ‘large scale acquiescence of the Algerian war on the part of French consciousness, though perhaps on a very subconscious level.’ and suggests that by refusing to speak out directly against the war in their films, French filmmakers tacitly supported it. An allegorical reading of Jacques Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg (1963), challenges this viewpoint. In this article, I interpret Demy’s film allegorically in order to illuminate its contribution to French cinema’s understanding of both the war itself and of a nascent post-colonial France. I argue that Les Parapluies de Cherbourg represents a fundamental crisis in France’s national identity of the 1960s, a vigorous interrogation of its place in history and geography posed by the political and economic transformation brought about by French decolonization.
**THE FRENCH-ALGERIAN WAR: A WAR WITHOUT A CINEMA?**

If the French-Algerian War remained for decades a ‘war without a name,’ as Bertrand Tavernier and Patrick Rotman suggested in their 1992 documentary, *La Guerre sans nom*, for many years it was also considered to be a war without a cinema, both in France and in Algeria. Although in recent years French filmmakers have begun to deal with the war and its legacy more directly and graphically – in films, for example, such as *Hors la loi/Outside the Law* (Bouchareb, 2010), and *L’Ennemi intime/Intimate Enemies* (Siri, 2007) – historians and film scholars have noted the lack of cinematic treatment of the war relative, say, to representations of the Vietnam War in the United States. Benjamin Stora, a historian who has written extensively on the development of French memory of the Algerian War, speaks of a ‘black hole’ in French cinema of this period, of the absence of films dealing with the war in a frank and direct manner, both during the war and subsequently. In his opinion, this absence was indicative of a ‘large scale acquiescence of the Algerian war on the part of French consciousness, though perhaps on a very subconscious level’ and he suggests that by refusing to speak out directly against the war in their films, French filmmakers tacitly supported it (Stora 1997: 182).

Jacques Demy’s film, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg/The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1963), one of the relatively few French films of the 1960s that even attempts to deal with the war, is also the very kind of film Stora criticizes, because it does so indirectly and from an exclusively French perspective. As William Cohen puts it, ‘in the musical *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1963), the soldier has gone ‘over there’, but the name ‘Algeria’ is never directly mentioned’ (Cohen 2000: 490).²

Moreover, unlike other New Wave films of the period, which were generally seen to overtly and radically challenge the cinematic conventions established by ‘Tradition of Quality’ films, or the ‘cinéma de papa’ that had dominated post-war France, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* seems to embrace many of these conventions. Rodney Hill has recently argued that, in fact, although *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* shares some of the ‘most salient characteristics’ of both ‘Tradition of Quality’ films—such as high production values, an emphasis on ‘Frenchness’, and the use of big stars—it nonetheless has a firm grounding in New Wave principles, given, for example, its location shooting, its emphasis on ordinary characters, its focus on contemporary cultural issues, and the fact that it was written and directed by a single creator or *auteur*. As Hill puts it, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* ‘represents a curious intersection between the New Wave esthetic and that of the “Tradition of Quality”, against which the movement claimed to rebel’ (Hill 2008: 27).

If, as Hill argues, Demy’s film is more complex esthetically than it has previously been acknowledged to be, I believe that Stora’s emphasis on direct cinematic representations of the Algerian war overlooks the political complexity of even the most seemingly oblique treatments of the war, such as those that we find in *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* and films like it of the period – such as Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7/Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) and Resnais’s *Muriel ou le temps d’un retour/Muriel* (1963) – which were made during or immediately after the war, in a period of strict state censorship in France.³ In this article, I provide a close allegorical reading of *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the importance of this film in shaping how audiences might have understood both the war itself and a nascent post-colonial France.
Allegory is a useful tool for explaining the kind of absence Stora criticizes. Ismael Xavier argues that

the most interesting instances of allegory are those in which the surface of the text either gives unsatisfactory answers to readers’ interrogations or remains overly enigmatic, thus inducing a sense of recognition of the opacity of language and mandating the search for the concealed meaning. The prestige of allegorical exegesis derives from its claims of solving a textual problem.

(Xavier 2004: 340, emphasis mine)

In the case of Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg it is possible to see the ‘textual problem’ as what Lindeperg and Marshall have called its ‘highly ambiguous’ relationship to ‘hegemonic ideas and cultural forms of the period’ (Lindeperg and Marshall 2000: 99) or more generally perhaps, as the ‘black hole’ in French cinema posited by Stora.

By definition, allegory is the public articulation (agoria) between two ‘others’ (allos). National allegories provide an articulation between the past and the present, the private and the public, the local and the global. In the case of Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, we find not only the esthetic intersection described by Hill between the relatively conservative ‘Tradition of Quality’ films and the more modern, radical elements of the French New Wave; we also find an articulation between the spoken and the unspoken; between, on the one hand, France’s acknowledged past grandeur and, on the other, its unacknowledged ‘war without a name’ and the concomitant and frantic drive toward modernization examined by Kristin Ross in Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture. Indeed, Ross counts Demy among ‘those artists who historicized their era at the time and who gave full voice to the debates and controversies surrounding modernization’ and who ‘offered a critique of official representations of a uniformly prosperous France’ (Ross 1998: 13). I am interested here in exploring more thoroughly how through allegory Les Parapluies de Cherbourg ‘gives voice’ to the crisis in France’s national identity posed by the political and economic transformation brought about by French decolonization.

**LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG: THE CASE FOR AN ALLEGORICAL READING**

At first glance, Les Parapluies de Cherbourg might appear to be an unlikely candidate for an allegorical reading. Jacques Demy himself usually avoided the tendency to speak about his work in overtly political terms. In the numerous interviews cited by Jean-Pierre Berthomé, for example, in Jacques Demy et les racines du rêve (1984: 366), Demy rarely if ever discusses the broader political implications of his film, preferring rather to focus on its private themes (love, fidelity, separation), details about its filming and production, or its formal elements. Though he once described Les Parapluies de Cherbourg as being about both love and war, calling it, ‘a film against war, against absence, against all we hate and which ruins happiness, a life … a testimony to peace and love’ (Demy 1964), there is little to suggest that he intended his film to be understood as deliberate political allegory. In fact, Demy was criticized over the course of his career for the lack of political consciousness in his films. New Wave directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, for example, criticized Demy for the
perceived detachment of his work: ‘He has an idea of the world he is trying to apply to the cinema or else … an idea of cinema which he applies to the world’ (Godard 1972: 217).

Moreover, critics have arguably been distracted by the stylized nature of Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, which is known (and widely loved) for its stunning, dreamlike use of Eastman colour and for its entirely sung dialogue, and which therefore appears on the surface to resist any claim to a broader, national significance. Its narrative, too, is one in which private lives, though clearly shaped by national interests and events, are represented as being disassociated from public concerns. In one of the most moving and operatic moments in the film, the main characters literally appear to float down a cobbled street in a tracking shot as they declare their undying love to each other. The unreal sounds, colours and movements used by Demy to define their private realities heighten the sense of detachment between the characters’ individual dream of perfect, insolated love and the national drama unfolding around them. This apparent disconnection plays out strikingly through the words and actions of the film’s characters, all of whom appear oblivious or indifferent to, as Guy puts it, ‘what’s happening in Algeria’. But it is perhaps the film’s striking use of colour and its modern operatic style that have led many critics and scholars to focus on its dreamlike, ‘melodramatic’ qualities (Berthomé 1982: 181) and to dismiss it as less serious than other New Wave films of the period.

Yet, in order to engage in allegorical interpretation, one need not claim intentionality on the part of the author. It is important to distinguish here between readings of films that self-consciously present themselves as political allegories and critical approaches that see all films as potentially allegorical. Siegfried Kracauer argues that ‘what films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions—those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness’ (Kracauer 1947: 6). According to him, consciously or not, films are reflective of the ‘inner life of the nation’ from which they emerge (Kracauer 1947: 7). And Xavier points out that allegory requires the ability on the part of the reader (or viewer) to recognize the various ways national consciousness becomes encoded through individual psychology. As he puts it, ‘the presence of national allegories in film history goes beyond the examples of overt and intentional encoding […] Recognizing an allegorical dimension in a text requires the ability to perceive homologies, and national allegories require the understanding of private lives as representative of public destinies’ (Xavier 2004: 335). Fredric Jameson makes a similar point, emphasizing the way in which audiences might intuit such allegories:

If we remain on the level of the intention of the film-maker himself, who is bound to be limited consciously or unconsciously by his objective situation […] [we] fail to reckon with the political content of daily life, with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the film-maker must work: such political logic will then not manifest itself as an overt political message, nor will it transform the film into an unambiguous political statement. But it will certainly make for the emergence of profound formal contradictions to which the public cannot but be sensitive, whether or not it yet possesses the conceptual instruments to understand what those contradictions mean.

(Jameson 1977: 846)
Thus, I would argue that *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* has more to say about its broader cultural and political context than critics and scholars have previously given it credit for. Without claiming that it makes an ‘unambiguous political statement’, to use Jameson’s term, there is nonetheless much to be learned from reading *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* with an attention to the ‘political logic’ encoded within it, in other words, allegorically.

The very title of Demy’s film would appear to invite an allegorical reading, to ‘mandate the search for concealed meaning’ as Xavier puts it, for it functions on multiple levels of signification in the film. The ‘parapluies de Cherbourg’ refer at the same time to the literal umbrellas that pass before our eyes in the opening credits of the film (see Figure 1), to Madame Emery’s commercial establishment, also called ‘Les Parapluies de Cherbourg’, a name that is as utilitarian or serviceable as the objects it sells, and finally to Demy’s film, a commodity item in itself, but one that circulates in a much larger, more international market than that of Cherbourg. By the end of the film, any visual trace of actual umbrellas or of Madame Emery’s shop have disappeared from the film; indeed, the film ends with a scene in which Cherbourg is implausibly covered in snow, mitigating any need for umbrellas. Keith Reader points out that Madame Emery was unable to make a living selling umbrellas in one of the rainiest towns in France: ‘The beleaguered stuffiness of the provincial petite bourgeoisie comes through in Emery’s failure to make a go of running an umbrella shop in Cherbourg, notoriously among the rainiest towns in France’ (Reader 1997: 63). This suggests that the literal umbrellas of Cherbourg have lost their utility as commodities on the global market. As objects and as signifiers, they are out of circulation, obsolete, emptied of meaning. As Kristin Ross puts it, Demy uses the umbrella ‘to register the outmoded or artisanal world in the face of mass production and accelerated commodification’ (Ross 1998: 212n). The onomastic multivalence of its title thus suggests that the film *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* recuperates and puts back into circulation on a global market that which has lost relevance and significance historically and geographically, which is arguably allegory’s calling.
LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG: ARTICULATING BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DRAMAS

Although the narrative of Les Parapluies de Cherbourg is highly personal, localized, and temporally specific, the film nonetheless provides an articulation with the larger national and historical picture of France in the late fifties and sixties. It provides a detailed picture of what Ross has referred to as the kind of ‘interior colonialism’ taking place in France during the 1950s and 1960s. As Ross puts it: ‘modernization requires the creation of such a privatized and depoliticized broad middle strata: a “national middle class”’ (Ross 1998: 11). Structurally, the film is divided into three main sections that are then sub-divided according to specific dates – ‘The Departure’ (November 1957); ‘The Absence’ (January 1958 to April 1958); and ‘The Return’ (March 1959 to December 1963) – each section echoing significant phases in Algeria’s struggle for independence from the French. Between 1957 and 1963, the narrative span of the film, France would abandon its military occupation and the colonial dream of a ‘French Algeria’ in favor of economic cooperation assured by Algerian oil. The discovery of oil in the Algerian Sahara in 1956 initially intensified the French military offensive; it is estimated that it prolonged the war by at least two years (see Mahiout 1974: 117). However, Hocine Malti argues that De Gaulle, who returned to power in 1958, ‘understood that France’s situation had become untenable, that this war in Algeria had lasted all too long. So why not put an end to it, giving Algeria its political independence, while simultaneously keeping hold of its Saharan resources?’ (Malti 1997: 7). In the end, many historians believe that the French economy benefited from decolonization because the Evian Agreements explicitly assured French oil interests in France. According to Philip Naylor, ‘the most important correlative of Gaullist foreign policy objectives was to protect the concessions of the French petroleum companies whose discoveries and subsequent production freed France from an embarrassing overdependence on Anglo-American hydrocarbon purchases’ (Naylor 2000: 65).

Himself a former hero of the Resistance and therefore strongly associated with the past grandeur of France, De Gaulle represented a link between France’s military past and its economic future. Under his leadership and encouragement, France would in the end renounce its outdated dream of being a great colonial power. In 1960 he asserted that ‘it is quite natural to feel a nostalgia for what was the empire, just as one can miss the soft glow of oil lamps, the splendor of sailing ships, the charm of the horse and buggy era. But what of it? There is no valid policy outside realities’ (De Gaulle 1960: 228). What De Gaulle offered France was no dream; it was a modern, commercialized, oil-driven ‘reality’.

This tension between the colonial model in France and a more forward-looking model based on liberal principles of a free-market exchange is thus allegorized in Les Parapluies de Cherbourg through the conflicts and relationships of its main characters. By enacting on a narrative level the disintegration of the unrealizable love of Guy and Geneviève, the film’s young lovers, Demy suggests at the same time the impossibility of reconciling these two incompatible political models in France. The quaint but drab image of old Cherbourg with its cobblestones and umbrellas shown in the opening credits of the film, will be replaced at the end of the film (explicitly indicated by Demy as 1963, the first year of Algerian independence) by the image of Guy’s new gas station, the perfect signifier of the new Gaullist state.

Geneviève, whom we first see framed by the umbrellas in her mother’s shop, represents at the beginning of the film a sort of contested commodity.
Desired by Guy, yet dominated by her mother, Geneviève is seen struggling for her personal independence and the right to determine for herself her own future. Madame Emery, for her part, wants her daughter to marry Roland Cassard, a wealthy diamond merchant whose fortune, as we know from Demy’s previous film *Lola* (1961), was made from the illicit sale of South African gems. Madame Emery realizes fairly early in the film that she will not be able to force Geneviève to marry Cassard, and adopts toward her a strategy of veiled coercion, alternating between threats, verbal abuse, and gentle coaxing, an approach that mirrors on a domestic level the ambivalent and duplicitous policies of the French in Algeria in 1957. Up until this point, a series of ineffective French governments had alternated between promising Algerians ‘integration’ and political reforms, while simultaneously intensifying military actions, and refusing all the while to call ‘what was happening in Algeria’, as Guy vaguely puts it, a ‘war’ since, from the French perspective, Algeria was and always would remain, part of France.

The temporal indicators in *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* also allow us to situate Madame Emery’s personal narrative in historical context. Geneviève, who is seventeen when the film begins, would therefore have been born in 1940 and her father has been dead for years. Madame Emery, a small business owner who lives beyond her means, thus represents the generation of people in France who lived through the Occupation, who made large sacrifices, and who by 1957 were hoping to recover at least economically from the war. Madame Emery claims to want a better life for her daughter, but her intentions are clearly self-interested: ‘You know’, she says to Geneviève during one of their many arguments, ‘I too was courted by a young man other than your father […] I want you to be happy, I don’t want you to waste your life like I wasted mine’. What Madame Emery wants is to relive her past through her daughter, and, by marrying off Geneviève to Roland, to achieve that which she herself was never able to achieve: wealth, power, social mobility, in short, the French colonial dream.

Less than a year after he leaves for Algeria Geneviève has, as her mother predicted, ‘forgotten Guy’ and married someone else. From this point on, she disappears from the film until the last scene in which she appears behind the wheel of her Mercedes at Guy’s gas station, the very picture of her mother’s consumerist desires: elegantly dressed, hair done up, filling up her tank with Esso gasoline (Super, not Regular). At several points in the film, Demy shows Geneviève and her mother reflected in the same mirror, and by the end of the film, she appears to have become her mother. Madame Emery’s economic and moral makeover of her daughter is to some extent reflective of France’s ‘civilizing mission’ in Algeria, for she attempts to create in her daughter an obedient, submissive, exploitable version of herself. It is thus no coincidence perhaps that the date Demy assigns to Geneviève’s wedding, Spring 1958, corresponds precisely to De Gaulle’s return to power, the beginning of the end of France’s colonial dream of a ‘French Algeria’.

At this point in the film, in the last of its three parts, there is a shift in the narrative away from Geneviève’s story to a focus on the personal and professional trajectory of Guy. Over the course of the film, Guy, like Geneviève, undergoes his own transformation. Forced to abandon his dream of marrying Geneviève and raising their child together, he begins a new life and family with his childhood friend, Madeleine. And just as Geneviève’s new marriage signals a dramatic change in economic status, Guy’s new love narrative similarly coincides with his economic transformation; the former gas station employee, who at the beginning of the film does not even appear to own
his own car, ends up fulfilling his lifelong dream of owning his own Esso gas station, aptly called L’Escale Cherbourgeoise (The Cherbourg Stopover; see Figure 2). Like his relationship with Madeleine, Guy’s relationship with gasoline predates and outlasts any other relationship in Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, and thus transcends the explicit temporal span of the film. We see, for example, a toy Esso gas station in his childhood bedroom in the apartment of his Aunt Elise (see Figure 3) and, at the end of the film, his son François wears a little Esso uniform (see Figure 4). The toy gas station of Guy’s childhood is almost an exact replica of the one he will eventually own. Moreover, his love affair with oil resembles that of France. Indeed, we first see Guy’s gas station in 1963, suggesting a correlation between the fulfillment of Guy’s economic independence and the fulfillment of France’s own economic interests, secured by Gaullist foreign policy in Algeria.

The importance of oil in Guy’s life (and, by extension, in contemporary French society) is explicitly established in the first scene of Les Parapluies de Cherbourg. Just as the first time we see Geneviève she is framed by umbrellas, Guy is first shown under the roof of a car. More importantly, Guy and Geneviève’s love story is repeatedly associated with the love of gasoline. ‘I love you, Guy. You smell like gasoline’ are the first words Geneviève utters in the film. Later, when Guy shares with Geneviève his dream of opening a gas station, she says: ‘you’ll smell of gasoline all day. What happiness!’ Gasoline and oil are thus inextricably linked to the imagined future happiness
of the two young lovers. And the fact that they discuss their future plans while walking along the dilapidated port of Cherbourg in 1957 suggests perhaps the seductive promise that Saharan oil, newly discovered in Algeria, was offering France at this precise moment.

Furthermore, the choice of Esso, a French subsidiary of the American company, Standard Oil of New Jersey, is most likely significant. It reflects the lingering dependence of France during the war on foreign oil controlled by the Anglo-American coalition and, perhaps, the desire on the part of the French to extricate themselves from this dependence through Saharan oil.

Guy’s twinned desire, his dream of a marriage base on love and Esso gasoline, is shattered in the very next scene of the film in which he announces to Geneviève that he will be leaving Cherbourg to fight in the war in Algeria. ‘So we’ll have to put off our discussion of marriage’, he says: ‘with everything that’s going on in Algeria right now, I won’t be coming back for a long time’. Guy’s obtuseness when referring to the war hides a harsh irony: however sweet and innocuous his dreams for marriage and a gas station may appear to be on a personal level, they are untenable and even somewhat sinister on a national level. For in 1957, the year Guy is conscripted to Algeria, companies like Esso are supplying the ever-increasing demand for French oil which, in turn, is prolonging the war in Algeria, which, in turn, is exactly that which jeopardizes Guy’s dream of owning his own Esso station. It is doubtless no coincidence that during this scene references to gasoline (an Esso sign, a gas pump, the reflection of the Esso sign) and signifiers of the demand for gasoline (a car and a boat engine) eerily frame the young couple, even seem to be closing in on them (see Figure 5). By associating Guy’s dream of a life with Geneviève and France’s colonial dream of appropriating Saharan oil, Demy suggests that both are economically and morally bankrupt and therefore doomed, for they are both based on the desire for commodities that do not belong to them and that will be hotly contested.

However, an ideal consumer society is one in which consumers buy according to their means. If, thanks to Madame Emery’s ability to commodify her own daughter, to put her outside of Guy’s buying power, Guy is able nonetheless to reconstruct a version of his childhood dream with Madeleine, his childhood friend and caretaker of Aunt Elise, Guy’s surrogate mother. On the surface, Guy ends up with everything he had dreamed of in the beginning of the film: a woman who loves him, a child, and above all, a gas station. He even names the son he has with Madeleine François, a repetition of the name chosen for his daughter with Geneviève, Françoise. His life with Madeleine, a rehabilitated version of what he might have lived with Geneviève, arguably lacks the passion and spark of his first love. His new dream is, as he puts it rather mutedly, ‘to be happy with a woman in a life that we will have chosen together’. This may not be an exact twin of the happiness that he had originally imagined in Cherbourg, but it is like that dream, it is ‘cherbourgeois’, as the name of his gas station suggests. Unlike Madame Emery, who sells her umbrella shop and moves to Paris, Guy stays in Cherbourg and buys his gas station. Madame Emery, achieves her lifelong dream of not having to work, of being economically dependent on a wealthy man, but in the process, she is revealed to be morally bankrupt, having mortgaged her daughter’s future happiness to ensure her own. Guy, on the other hand, is in the end morally and economically redeemed, for he invests his inheritance from Aunt Elise in oil and his heart in Madeleine. He is reflective of the kind of ‘new man’ Ross describes, both a product and agent of modernization: ‘modernization brought into being a whole new range
of middlemen and go-betweens, new social types that dominated and profited from the transformations wrought by the state’ (Ross 1998: 8).

The new love narrative between Guy and Madeleine, which dominates the last segment of the film, is reflective of the new political and economic era of Gaullist post-war France. If Guy’s relationship to Geneviève was as doomed as France’s colonial hold on Algeria, Guy’s marriage to Madeleine shows shining new promise. In sharp contrast to Geneviève’s marriage to Roland Cassard, the consummate colonialist who seems perfectly happy to appropriate that which is not his, whether it be another man’s fiancée or another country’s diamonds, Guy’s marriage to Madeleine appears, rather, to be a union based on a reciprocal model of free exchange, not only of respect and affection, but also of consumer goods. Madeleine, like Geneviève, is a good consumer and, as we see in the last scene, she is every bit as well-dressed and well-coiffed as Geneviève as she runs off before dinner to window-shop with her son. However, and in sharp contrast to Geneviève’s blatant and abject consumerism, Madeleine’s participation in the burgeoning consumer culture of a newly modernized France – suggested in the last scene by the obvious joy she takes in buying Christmas gifts for her family – does not impoverish her life in any sense; on the contrary, it allows her to invest in the shared future of her family and, by extension, of Cherbourg and France in general. In the film’s final sequence, in which Guy and Madeleine declare their love for each other from within the gas station, where they now live, they are framed by the Esso pump and by their Christmas tree (see Figure 6), which signifies the new buying power the gas station has brought them. It is no doubt significant that Guy proposes to Madeleine on the same day that we see him signing papers for the purchase of his gas station. If Guy smells of gasoline, Madeleine does not seem to notice, for she fully inhabits both the gas station he has purchased and the dream it represents. Just as France’s economic interests were newly secured by the Évian Agreements of 1962, Guy’s financial, moral, and emotional well-being are all inextricably linked in the film to his marriage with Madeleine.

However inevitable, the decolonization of Algeria represented an enormous compromise to France. The imperial ground lost in Indochina in 1954

![Figure 6: Framed by the Esso pump and by the Christmas tree (Koch Lorber Films).](image-url)
Jacques Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg

would not be redeemed in Algeria, and as the French soon learned, they would not be allowed to exploit Algeria’s oil reserves free of charge. French modernization, so clearly under way in Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, would from now on, come at a price. However, what was at stake was the survival not only of Algeria but also of France. De Gaulle understood this all too well; as he said in 1959: ‘those who shout the loudest for integration are the very same people who opposed this step [before]. What they want is for someone to give them back Papa’s Algeria (‘L’Algérie de Papa’). But Papa’s Algeria is dead, and if they don’t understand that, they will die with it’ (De Gaulle, interview with Pierre Laffont in L’Echo d’Alger, 29 April 1959, cited in Lacouture 1986: 60). When Papa’s Algeria died, a certain image of France – that of Geneviève’s maman – necessarily died with it, but ceded its place to a new generation of French consumers, the generation represented in Les Parapluies Cherbourg by Guy’s children from different mothers, François and Françoise, whose very names suggest, perhaps, a new generation of ‘true’ French men and women, born consumers. In the final sequence of the film both children are scolded by their mothers, Françoise for playing with the horn of her mother’s car (‘the horn is not a game’), and Françoise for drumming on an Esso oil can. The two children, who are half-siblings, may share little in common other than their father, but they represent between them both the supply and the demand for oil in France, which as their mothers’ scolding suggests, is serious business. For if ‘Papa’s Algeria’ was dead in 1963, the date at which the narrative of Les Parapluies de Cherbourg draws to a close, France had a new ‘papa’ in De Gaulle, who had found a way to provide for his country’s growing need for oil by negotiating Algeria’s political independence in exchange for economic interdependence, and by insisting that the French relinquish political control of the colonies in order to compete economically on the world market with countries like the United States. In this way, he fathered a new identity for France based this time not on military power but on ‘buying power’, uniting the twinned interests of French hegemonic potential: politics and economics.

Demy, whose father owned a gas station, once said that he could ‘smell the difference between Shell and BP’ oil (Roud 1964: 139). In fact, Demy deeply disappointed his father by failing to take over the family business and to choose a more ‘practical’ career than cinema. The candy-coloured, sing-songy Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, at first glance, would seem to be a similarly impractical choice for an expression of contemporary French events, an implausible vehicle for any kind of serious political message, particularly when compared to the more sombre, black and white, documentary-style films of other New Wave directors of the time. To the disappointment of some, Les Parapluies de Cherbourg is not a radical, direct indictment of France’s war in Algeria. In fact, in the end, the only explicit visual reference to Algeria in the film is a black and white photograph that Guy sends to Geneviève a little more than half way through the film. The photo, which shows Guy in uniform next to the gaping doorway of what appears to be a mosque, fails to arouse in Geneviève a sense of memory. Gazing at the photo, Geneviève wonders aloud at the fact that Guy is slipping from her memory: ‘it seems like Guy has been gone for years. When I look at this photo I even forget what his face looks like. And when I think of him, all I see is this photo’.

Just as the black and white picture in Demy’s film is unable revive the memory of Guy for Geneviève, Demy’s motion picture makes no claim to revive
national memory by allegorizing decolonization. Modern, post-Benjaminian allegory, says Xavier, is:

the sign of a new consciousness of history where the appeal to analogies and to a vivid memory of the past is now taken not as the celebration of an identity connecting past and present, but as an experience able to teach us that repetition is always an illusion, and that old facts, like old signs, lose their ‘original’ meaning when looked at from a new perspective.

(Xavier 2004: 349)

When examined through an allegorical lens, old signs do indeed take on new meaning in Demy’s film. If *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* documents anything, it is precisely the demise of signs in France over time and their replacement with new signs, from umbrellas to gasoline, from old empires to new republics, from classical operas to Hollywood-inspired musicals. *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is allegorical in the most literal sense of the term, *allosagoria*, publicly articulating between two others, between the past and the present, strange half-siblings. However, true to modern allegory, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is no mere celebration of the good old days of ‘Papa’s Algeria’; it is undoubtedly a nostalgic film, but one that is intensely conscious its own time and place, in both a political and esthetic sense. For, true to his own generation of New Wave filmmakers, Demy enacts in his film the harsh national truth that was the demise of French political imperialism, of ‘Papa’s Algeria’, and he does so, as Godard famously put it, ‘at 24 frames a second’. At the same time, however, he also pays homage not only to his own father, a humble provincial mechanic, but to his spiritual forefathers, both political and artistic, those men of his past who helped form his identity as a young man, as a citizen of the fledgling fifth Republic, and as a filmmaker raised in the tradition of the ‘cinema de Papa’. In the end, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* reminds us that even the most self-consciously artificial and commercially viable films can convey truth and, in some cases, have profound political currency.
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SUGGESTED CITATION


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