

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Jacques Demy



DARREN WALDRON

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Manchester University Press

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Jacques Demy

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FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

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In memory of my mum, Patricia Ann Waldron
(31 July 1940–17 May 2012); my Lola

Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent upon national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about auteurism. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the auteur perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly

X SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already well known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES

ROBERT INGRAM

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Introduction – ‘Un demi, Jacques, bien frais, avec de la mousse’: background and early filmmaking

Few directors are as ambiguously placed in the French popular imaginary as Jacques Demy. Saccharine for some, poignant for others, his *cinéma enchanté* is familiar to generations of French audiences accustomed to watching Christmas repeats of *Peau d'âne* (1970) or seeing Catherine Deneuve and Françoise Dorléac prance and pirouette in *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1966). With nine shorts and thirteen full-length features, Demy's filmography is solid, if not prolific. Though varied, his work is unified by recurring themes. Abandoned lovers await the return of errant partners, and passionate affairs are abruptly curtailed by external events or stifled by social pressures.

Demy's cinema is lyrical, at times melancholy, at others uplifting. He re-mastered the opera and the melodrama in *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1963) and *Une chambre en ville* (1982) and adapted the spectacle of the Hollywood musical to French cinema in *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* and *Trois places pour le 26* (1988). When his films lack big numbers or dialogues performed through song, their melodic tone and romantic plots transmit a sense of musicality, their appeal ensured by their bright colours and/or transformation of everyday places into enticing locations. Regularly set in coastal towns, his films combine a longing for an elsewhere, particular the United States, with affection for French provinciality, with Demy's devotion to his home city of Nantes arising in unexpected locations. If his films seek to teach us anything, it is that joy is sustained once melancholy has been endured, and that pleasure can exist in anticipation. By bucking the trends of his time through his passion for the musical and fairytale, Demy is one of French cinema's most unique filmmakers.

Although he died in October 1990, Demy's legacy as an iconic director for generations of admirers and filmmakers endures. His films attracted renewed interest from the mid-1990s, evoked by directors including François Ozon, Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, and Christophe Honoré. If these filmmakers are associated with a wave of queer cinema, the link is not fortuitous. With their palette of incandescent colours, affecting scores, energetic choreography, camp iconography, defiant heroines and vulnerable heroes, settings in cabarets, casinos or hairdresser salons, Demy's films have been read as the products of a filmmaker with a queer eye (Colomb, 1998: 39–47; Duggan, 2013). However, his cinema resists simplistic categorisation based on the logic of the binary. It chimes with both straight and queer-identifying viewing groups, concerns men and women, appeals to children and adults, and elicits mass appreciation and niche interest. Frequently thought-provoking, though never abstruse, often sophisticated, but never pretentious, Demy's films are both entertaining and informed.

Although this is not the first book-length study of Jacques Demy's cinema (Duggan's monography on queerness in the fairytales of Demy was published in 2013), it considers his oeuvre as a whole body of work. Additionally, it engages with and builds on existing studies, in both French and English, by providing a sustained analysis of his films in the light of relevant debates on temporality, affect, subjectivity, self–other relations and free will. It reads Demy's cinema through a perspective grounded in pre- and post-war philosophies on time and alterity, and their application in work on film. It contributes to a turn towards existentialism and phenomenology in film studies since the early 2000s by assessing the extent to which related ideas and ethics were already mobilised within the films of a director often overlooked as having little intellectual merit.

Chapter 1 examines Demy's relation to the French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague). It argues that, if the theme of the chance encounter performs a structuring function in Demy's films, his association with the movement was the product of coincidence. Chapter 2 probes Demy's 'musicals', *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* and *Une chambre en ville*. It shows how the films comply with and deviate from the codes and conventions of the Hollywood staple, producing a specifically Gallic and 'Demyesque' twist on the genre. It is a commonplace of writings on Demy to highlight his 'monde en-/

enchanté', meaning both 'expressed through song' and 'enchanted'. The third chapter concentrates on the latter, and examines Demy's adaptations of fairytale (*Peau d'âne*), fable (*The Pied Piper* (1971)) and myth (*Parking* (1985)). Chapter 4 analyses the representations of gender and sexuality in Demy's cinema, with particular attention to *Le Bel Indifférent* (1957), *La Naissance du jour* (1980) *L'Événement le plus important depuis que l'homme a marché sur la lune* (1973, hereafter *L'Événement...*) and *Lady Oscar* (1978). The fifth chapter considers Demy's legacy. It reveals how his final feature, *Trois places pour le 26*, establishes the foundations of his posthumous myth, which the work of Agnès Varda and other directors has affirmed and supplemented since his death.

The origins of the *Demy-monde*: the young Jacques, filmmaking and Nantes

Demy often claimed that his childhood was the inspiration for his cinema, and accounts present his early years as idyllic. He was born on 5 June 1931 near his paternal grandmother's bistro in the village of Pontchâteau, which was then in Brittany. His family lived at their garage at 9, quai des Tanneurs in Nantes. His father, Raymond, was a mechanic, while his mother, Milou, worked part-time as a hairdresser and pulled the petrol pumps. Milou took Demy to puppet shows at the Guignol des Créateur on the Cours Saint Pierre on Thursday afternoons and bought him his first puppet when he was four. Demy was fascinated by the way the shows were assembled, and he staged marionette versions of fairytales for his friends. Such a burgeoning love of spectacle was bolstered through regular family visits to the operettas at the Théâtre Graslin. Demy also developed a passion for music when listening to records on his parents' phonograph while they worked.

One event – the allied bombardment of Nantes on 16 September 1943 – ruptured the otherwise happy tranquility of his childhood, according to Demy. On that night, he, his family, their friends and neighbours endured the terrifying air raids in a shelter. He recalls: 'quand une chose aussi atroce est arrivée, on a l'impression que plus rien de plus atroce ne peut arriver. Et à partir de cela, alors, on rêve une

existence idéale'.¹ Such a traumatic event informed Demy's conviction that happiness is something that we strive for, that to want happiness is to already experience happiness, a worldview that he would portray and express in *Lola* and which would be repeated through the words and actions of the characters that populate his cinema. Following the bombardment, Demy and his younger brother Yvon were sent to live at the home of a clog maker and his wife in the hamlet of La Pierre-Percée near La Chappelle-basse-Mer, where he had already spent the summers of 1942 and 1943. This period is also depicted as joyful in his recollections.

Demy developed a passion for film during regular visits with his parents to the Palace, Apollo and Katorza cinemas on Saturday evenings. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney, 1937), *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (Robert Bresson, 1945) and *Les Portes de la nuit* (Marcel Carné, 1946) particularly impressed him. Again, he was drawn to the technical aspects of the productions and he would attempt to put them into practice in his first experiments with film. He dipped 9.5mm reels of old Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd movies into hot water to remove the gelatine and then drew his reconstitution of an air battle, entitled *Le Pont de Mauves*, which he screened to his family. In 1945, he exchanged a Meccano set for a 9.5mm Pathé-Baby manual camera in a second hand shop in the Passage Pommeraye and embarked on his first non-animated production, *L'Aventure de Solange*, about a young girl kidnapped by fairground workers who is rediscovered by her parents twenty years later. Sadly, the reel was returned from the developers blank due to overexposure. Undeterred, two years later, Demy convinced Milou to buy him an Erksam 9.5mm camera with a motorised spring and 1.9mm lens for Christmas and, later, an automatic Erksam projector. Milou thus played an instrumental role in supporting his passion. She contrasted with Raymond who prohibited Demy from enrolling at the Lycée Clemenceau and the Ecole des Beaux Arts and forced him to learn mechanics, electricity, woodwork, wrought iron work and boiler making at the Collège Technique Launay between 1945 and 1949. Demy's relationship with his father was thereafter marked by ambivalence, while his proximity to his mother endured until his death (Taboulay, 1996: 10).

1 'When something so dreadful has happened, you think that nothing more awful can happen. And from that point, therefore, you dream an ideal existence into effect.' (*L'Univers de Jacques Demy* (Agnès Varda, 1993/95))

Demy devoured the film magazine *L'Ecran français* and regularly attended the *ciné-club* L'Ecran nantais, where he nurtured an admiration for the films of Marcel Carné, Jean Delannoy, Robert Bresson and Jean Cocteau. After the War, American releases flooded the market and the young Demy was captivated by the musical, but it was to animation that he first aimed to apply his creative talents. He admired Paul Grimault's films and George Pal's advertisements for Philips, with their bright colours, sailors, dancing women and allusions to Busby Berkeley musicals, plus the magical world of the early shorts of Jiří Trnka (Berthomé, 1996: 35). At the Ecran nantais, he screened films of his trips to Amsterdam and La Rochelle, but, tired of discussions about adherents' holiday footage, he devoted himself to making animated films in his attic studio (Taboulay, 1996: 13). He modelled characters and sets from cardboard and plaster, and painstakingly shot each minuscule bodily movement frame-by-frame.²

La Ballerine (date unknown) features a composer and a ballerina performing the splits, a pirouette, a turn and two bows against a backdrop of a medieval castle perched atop a hill. *Attaque nocturne* (1947–48), which required two years to complete, focuses on a thief who steals a woman's bag and is chased by two passers-by before disappearing into a manhole. The sophisticated decors in the reconstituted version combine recognisable Nantes locations, including the quai de la Fosse and the transporter bridge, with roofs inspired by stills from *Sous les toits de Paris* (René Clair, 1930). *Attaque nocturne* foreshadows Demy's predilection for setting his narratives within compressed space, and his use of a tracking shot offers an early illustration of his proclivity for mobile camerawork.

Demy screened his short to director Christian-Jaque who had come to present *D'Homme à hommes* (1948) at the Apollo on 23 November 1948. Jaque showed it to Christian Matras, a teacher at the École technique de Photographie et de Cinématographie (ETPC) on the rue de Vaugirard in Paris. Meanwhile, one of his instructors at the Collège Launay recognised his talents as a painter, discovered his passion for filmmaking and encouraged him to attend evening classes at the Beaux Arts. It was here that he developed a sophisticated knowledge of and admiration for art and painting, which would inform many

2 Varda and researcher Mireille Henrio discovered two such characters and strips of 9.5mm film reel in the Demy garage during the filming of *Jacquot de Nantes*. They were able to recreate *La Ballerine* and *Attaque nocturne* (1947–48).

of the aesthetic choices he made in his films, and where he met his future decor and costume designers Bernard Evein and Jacqueline Moreau. Evein moved to Paris to study at the prestigious Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC), followed one year later by Moreau. Christian-Jaque convinced Demy's father to allow him to enrol at the ETPC. In 1949, he chanced upon Evein outside the Galleries Lafayette department store and was reunited with Moreau and future filmmaker Bernard Toublanc-Michel, whom he had met at the Coiffard bookshop in Nantes in 1948.

At the end of his second year Demy presented his first non-animated short *Les Horizons morts* (1951, discussed below). Following his graduation, he assisted Paul Grimault on advertisements, including one for Lustucru pasta. After unrealised projects, including a planned puppet adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Faux Nez*, Demy began writing as a novel the story that he would, almost three decades later, recount through film, *Une chambre en ville*. He also appeared as an extra in Richard Pottier's *Les Révoltés de Lomanach* (1954). In 1953, he began penning the script for his acclaimed documentary, *Le Sabotier du Val de Loire* (1955), which portrays a week in the lives of the clog maker and his wife to whom Demy had been evacuated. Demy invited Georges Rouquier³ to direct his detailed script: although he declined, he contributed one million old Francs to the budget. *Le Sabotier du Val de Loire* won the prize for Best Short Documentary at the Berlin Film Festival in 1956. Demy assisted Rouquier on *SOS Noronha* (1957) and, when awaiting the first day of shooting, helped Jean Masson with his official commemoration of the wedding of Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier of Monaco. For Rouquier's film, Demy suggested Jean Marais as protagonist, who would later be cast in two of his productions: *Peau d'âne* and *Parking*. Through Marais, Demy met Cocteau, who gave him the rights to adapt his short play *Le Bel Indifférent* to the screen. Masson then offered Demy two further commissions: *Musée Grévin* (1958) and *La Mère et l'enfant* (1959). Both contain stylistic and thematic markers of his future work. *Musée Grévin* plays with the distinction between reality and dreams, the self and its representation, through its narrative about a man (Michel Serrault) who fantasises about bringing the models of the famous waxworks museum to life and allowing them to escape.

³ Demy assisted Rouquier on his documentaries *Arthur Honegger* (1954) and *Lourdes et ses miracles* (1955).