« L’illusion de l’amour n’est pas l’amour trouvé » : Camp and queer desire in Jacques Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, Les Demoiselles de Rochefort, and Peau d’âne

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Jacques Demy’s *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964), *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967), and *Peau d’âne* (1970), though quite popular with the public at their time of release and continuing to leave an aesthetic stamp on contemporary cinema, have been received by some critics and viewers in general as pure contrivance with little edification. This thesis puts forward, however, that such interpretations of these Demy musicals as primarily saccharine, superficial, and light miss the elemental melancholy belied by the charming varnish. Here, the three are unified as a triptych that thematicizes and aestheticizes lack and desire in ways that can speak directly to the queer viewer. This thesis first situates the films among criticism from the 1960s to the present, opening a discourse on the potential for diverse political and aesthetic readings of Demy’s work that continues to the present queer reading. Through a method of narratological close reading, I unify the three films as a triptych, each a variation on themes of isolation, absence, and amorous lack. Jean-Pierre Berthomé’s *Jacques Demy et les racines du rêve* (1982) is a rich resource in presenting these three seemingly distinct films as a totality. Once justified for study as a triptych, my thesis presents a queer reading of the films’ ostensibly heterosexual narrative structures. With the buttressing of the queer theory of Harold Beaver, Andrew Ross, and Michael Koresky, among others, this chapter demonstrates how the narratives of longing Demy crafts can speak to the queer viewer and transcend a heterosexual framework. Finally, my thesis moves beyond narrative to another continuity, the aesthetic of camp present throughout the triptych. Through an exploration of the interconnectivity of camp, gender performance, and seduction, drawing on scholars Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, and Jean Baudrillard, respectively, the aesthetic of Demy’s triptych is situated in a queer sensibility. Catherine Deneuve, Demy’s “princesse idéale,” is read as the reification of this sensibility in her potent performance of gender at the confluence of masculine and feminine qualities, as well as the ideal tabula rasa onto which the queer viewer’s desire and longing can be projected. Ultimately, the triptych’s reconciliation of the visually confectionary and the narratively somber is celebrated, as it points to a victory over tragedy through affective agency.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Jacques Demy’s *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964), *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967), and *Peau d’âne* (1970), French musicals from a masterful director of the New Wave movement in cinema, have been generally received positively by the public, and especially by gay viewers. Yet, these Demy films have been met with a range of skepticism to derision by some critics and even by a number of Demy’s contemporaries. The three films’ narratives concern a nascent romance thwarted by the Algerian War and economic demands, potential amorous encounters prevented by missed connections and arbitrary social barriers, and a flight from incestuous demands and its consequences of isolation and ridicule, respectively. Though these narratives are fundamentally melancholic, they are aestheticized through kaleidoscopic colors, virtuosic dancing, and the beautiful music scores of Michel Legrand. This thesis reexamines these films as a triptych that, considered together, thematizes lack and desire in a way that can speak directly to the queer viewer. Areas of overlap between the filmic narratives and the queer experience in the West are excavated and explored to demonstrate how the films can carry intimate signification to sexual minorities, as well as to other marginalized identities. Finally, the particular and continuous aesthetic of the three films is studied as a queer sensibility embodied by the star of all three, Catherine Deneuve. The ability of this triptych to transcend a singular heterosexual interpretation and to heighten its effects on the viewer through a tension of form and content is celebrated.
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I would like to thank my closest friends for taking a lively interest in this thesis, experiencing Demy’s work with me despite linguistic and cultural barriers. Their reception to the films deepened my own interpretations, adding contextualization from people whom I respect and who inhabit different subject positions from my own.

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Introduction

« Mais où est donc l'ami que partout je cherche ? Dès le jour naissant mon désir ne fait que croître et quand la nuit s'efface, c'est en vain que j'appelle. Je vois ses traces, je sens qu'il est présent partout où la sève monte de la terre, où embaume une fleur et où s'incline le blé doré. Je le sens dans l'air léger dont le souffle me caresse et que je respire avec délice. Et j'entends sa voix qui se mêle au chant d'été. » - Archbishop Johan Olof Wallin (1779-1839)

« Un film léger parlant de choses graves vaut mieux qu’un film grave parlant de choses légères. » – Journal entry 16 July 1964, Jacques Demy

On a purely formal level, Jacques Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg (1964), Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (1967), and Peau d’âne (1970) are reminiscent of Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s series of panels Les Progrès de l’amour (1773), filled with bright pastel colors, a constant sense of ebullient movement, and a preference for the aestheticized over the soi-disant natural. For Demy, right underneath his films’ charming varnish is an elemental melancholy, begging to be noticed, concerning themes of separation, isolation, and ostracism. Demy’s artistic choice of treating the serious with levity was generally well-received by the public of the 1960s and early 70s (Rees-Roberts 110, Colomb 39). Parapluies won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1965, and Peau d’âne, the highest grossing of the three films in France, continues to occupy a mythic place in the French popular imagination, in a way like Victor Fleming’s The Wizard of Oz does in the United States.
Nonetheless, many contemporary cinephiles have largely turned away from Demy’s work (Rees-Roberts 110), and the films’ aesthetic style and narrative themes are now received by some audiences as désuet or simply weird (Colomb 39-40). From their release in the 60s to the present, a certain number of film critics have had difficulty in placing Demy among other acclaimed directors of the Nouvelle Vague, or have banished him from the movement entirely as an anomaly or “blip” (Hill 27).

Despite trends of negativity, incomprehension, or indifference towards these three Demy films, they remain « un élément majeur de la culture homosexuelle française … [continuant] d’exister de façon vivante … dans un imaginaire gay » as Philippe Colomb writes (39). Additionally, as Nick Rees-Roberts charts in his book French Queer Cinema (2008), Demy’s films have left an “aesthetic stamp on contemporary queer film,” notably in the works of directors Christophe Honoré, Olivier Ducastel, and Jacques Martineau (6, 110-111, 121).

Agreeing with Demy’s place in the aforementioned lineage, this thesis establishes new interpretations of Demy’s films that have been hitherto underdeveloped, as perennially socially relevant queer cinema.1 It challenges the persistent notion, expressed by figures as influential as Jean-Luc Godard, that Demy’s commitments were aesthetic and not political (Virtue, “Parapluies,” 130). My thesis takes an antithetical stance, putting forward that Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne are charged with political meaning related to gender, sexuality, and class, among other problematics. Far from being vacuous frivolity, these three films in particular thematize and aestheticize lack and desire in ways that can speak directly to the queer viewer. They recast the melancholic in the mold of the delightful.

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1 In my research, I have uncovered only one Francophone critical work that approaches Demy’s oeuvre from a distinctly queer lens: Philippe Colomb’s beautiful article “L’étrange Demy-monde” (1998).
Chapter one situates *Parapluies, Demoiselles*, and *Peau d’âne* amongst film criticism from the 60s to the present, a contextualization that demonstrates an increased attention to the political as well as technical dimensions of Demy’s films over time. The chapter also interacts with negative receptions to Demy’s work in an effort to better understand the formal and narrative elements that have engendered condescension or confusion among some critics. Ultimately, Chapter one begins a conversation on the potential for diverse political readings of Demy’s work that continue to the present queer reading, which is necessarily also a political reading. By interacting with published criticism of Demy’s work that excavates its political meaning and intertextuality, a queer reading of these content-rich works becomes eminently possible.

Chapter two argues that *Parapluies, Demoiselles*, and *Peau d’âne* represent a triptych, weaving together tight connections through their narratives and recurring themes. Existing criticism has characterized *Parapluies* as «le côté tragique» and *Demoiselles* as «le côté joyeux» (Colomb 46) of two Demy musical narratives. *Peau d’âne* has been received as totally distinct in “tone, structure, and theme” from the rest of Demy’s oeuvre (Hill, *Peau d’âne*, 44). This chapter submits that all three films are united in their fundamental narrative melancholy, especially when considering unfulfilled or unfulfillable desire. My methodology of narratological close reading applied to the three films sheds light on how each is a variation on a theme of romantic and amorous lack, imposed by unjust or inexplicable social barriers. *Les racines du rêve* (1982), a book by Demy scholar and professor of cinema at the Université de Rennes Jean-Pierre Berthomé, is a rich resource in presenting these three seemingly distinct films as a totality, or a «grand rêve balzacien du puzzle» (17).
Chapter three, to my knowledge, presents a new reading of the films through the prism of the “queer ache of desire,” in Michael Koresky’s language. Again, the three films form a unified whole in their eminent potential to speak to a queer audience. Specifically the themes of suffering, longing, isolation, and stigmatization are experiences and emotions that the audience has faced. Key scenes from each film are decoded from a queer perspective to shed light on the many intersections between the struggles faced on screen and those lived by queer people in Western society. The films are fertile ground for the production of meaning that carries intimate and often poignant significance for the queer viewer. Queer theory such as Harold Beaver’s “Homosexual Signs” (1981) is put in direct conversation with the themes and problematics presented by Demy’s triptych in order to demonstrate the ways in which Demy’s characters are invitations to the queer viewer to identify with their on-screen lives of longing in a visceral manner. On a surface level, each of the three films deals with heterosexual problems in heterosexual relationships. Yet, Demy’s triptych has the imagination to go beyond heterosexual couplings and desire. Interacting with Judith Butler’s theorizing on gender performance and Andrew Ross’ theorizing on queer audience reception, I bring attention to cinematic elements that work outside of a heterosexual framework.

Finally, chapter four moves beyond narrative to unite the three films in the queer aesthetic sensibility of camp. Close readings of key camp scenes illustrate a sensibility that sees the world “in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (Sontag 277). As such, queer men and women are able to express their discomfort with assigned gender roles (Cleto 17). Demy’s triptych is further claimed by and for the queer audience through its endless exhibition of the camp sensibility. Because camp, according to Susan Sontag, is a “victory … of irony over tragedy” (287), the clear identification of this aesthetic in the films allows for a perception shift
on the part of the queer viewer; though Demy’s films deal with melancholic content, their form allows for a potentially joyous experience of it. Camp’s key motifs in Demy’s films are analyzed through cinematic aspects: his masterful use of color, camera work, and contradictory mise-en-scène, as well as through composer Michel Legrand’s music which “enchants” each film².

Chapter four also closely explores the third element of the Holy Trinity which animates this thesis - Demy, Legrand, and - Deneuve. Chosen to incarnate different iterations of « l’idéal féminin » in each film, Catherine Deneuve’s screen persona is interpreted as a factor that strengthens the queer camp quality of the triptych.

Ultimately, this thesis is an exaltation of Demy’s singular ability to communicate and resist the melancholic, or the grave, through levity. The triptych’s ability to make bleak, realist narratives soluble with high-spirited, phantasmal aesthetics confers power upon the viewer in the form of affective agency. In the first song of Peau d’âne, the Princess (Deneuve) is seated at a keyboard, singing on love:

L’amour se porte autour de cou / Le cœur est fou / Quatre bras serrés qui s’enchâinent /
L’âme sereine … L’amour fait souvent grand tapage / Au plus bel âge / Il crie / Il déchire /
/ Et il ment / Pauvre serment / Il fait souffrir tous les amants / Qui n’ont pas su tourner la page / Amour, amour / N’est pas bien sage.

Demy, beyond being a masterful director, was also a sensitive lyricist. Here, he expresses love’s contradictory qualities: crazy and serene, connective and destructive. Still, taken holistically, the song creates meaning that is both coherent and prescient of the narrative arcs of the entire triptych: love will bring a certain warmth and succor, but the very idea of it opens a vulnerability

² Demy referred to his work as “cinéma en-chanté,” a clever wordplay capturing how the films are both set to song and made enchanting by music (Colomb 39).
to suffering. The reconciliation of form and content, of melancholy and effusiveness, that

*Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne* bring is celebrated in this thesis.
Chapter 1: Situating the triptych in Franco-Anglo-American film criticism

Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, Les Demoiselles de Rochefort, and Peau d’âne, a triptych of musicals by director Jacques Demy, have not been critically received in a homogenous way. Perhaps the only two currents that run through nearly all critical responses to Demy’s three aforementioned musicals are that he offers a sensory experience that is highly “artificial,” and that Catherine Deneuve, the star of all three, is, to cite her publicist, “gorgeous enough to make you sick” (De Vries 1). Beyond the consensus of those two aesthetic reactions, there is not one general opinion of Demy’s musical oeuvre, but a plurality of voices whose interpretations range from dazzled adulation to tempered critique to outright disgust. Though the most trenchant critics dismiss them as “tunefest(s) from poor outmoded Demy” (Ridley 25), the three musicals have been a fertile ground for the production of meaning on issues or movements connected to capitalism, liberalism, the carnivalesque, problematics of gender and sexuality, and the definition of the French Nouvelle Vague.

This chapter examines the critical responses to Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, Les Demoiselles de Rochefort, and Peau d’âne in order to call into question the persistent notion that Demy’s musicals are all “confectionary” form with no nutritious or edifying content (Crowther 1). Demy’s films may be “shiny and sleek and sugar-sweet” (Crowther 1), but the eye candy is never an empty signifier. Moreover, as Nancy Virtue writes in “Cubism and the Carnivalesque in Jacques Demy’s Demoiselles de Rochefort” (2016): “Defying easy categorization within cinema studies, Demy’s films have, until fairly recently, been relatively ignored or dismissed as less serious and out of sync with the grittier, more realist-seeming New Wave works of filmmakers such as Godard, Resnais, or Truffaut” (22). Jean-Pierre Berthomé laments in Jacques Demy : Les
racines du rêve (1982): « Un paresseux aveuglement permet au spectateur d’ignorer les inquiétudes douloureuses qui nourrissent l’œuvre de Demy et les masques multiples du Mal qui y surgissent, pour n’en retenir que la grâce légère et colorée, la gaieté de surface » (17). Here, Berthomé gives what I find to be a high compliment: Demy’s work offers so much in the way of aesthetic pleasure that the pain, worry, and even evil that he exposes in his narratives do not overwhelm the viewer with despair. Unfortunately, if this graceful levity is not met with an attentive viewer, the films may be dismissed as all charm and little edification.

Demy, a director who embraced “a high degree of reflexivity” (Hill 29) in his films, seems to have created the fictional embodiment of the sneering, sober, and aggressively heteronormative critic in the character of Guillaume Lancien in Demoiselles. Lancien (played by Jacques Riberolles) owns an art gallery in Rochefort in which he disputes with his lover Delphine Garnier (played by Deneuve) over a displayed painting that she finds to be deeply and personally meaningful. He dismisses her interpretation, calling the work « platement figuratif » and its creator « fade, insignifiant ». Delphine, on the other hand, sees herself in the work – « C’est tout à fait moi ! » – and swiftly breaks off their relationship. This chapter aims to push back against the sensibility of a Guillaume Lancien.

To begin to analyze the existing critical responses to Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, Les Demoiselles de Rochefort, and Peau d’âne, it is useful to first examine reviews that were published closest to the release of those films. Firstly, they provide an insight into the worldview and approaches of the critics of the 1960s in France and the Anglophone world. Secondly, they offer a greater degree of unfiltered candor compared to contemporary criticism. Generally, Demy’s musicals have aged well with the public, making it harder for a contemporary critic to
dismiss them than it would have been for a critic in the 60s or 70s. Over the decades, the critical response to Demy’s films has grown more sensitive and nuanced.

Bosley Crowther’s 1964 *New York Times* article “Cherbourg ‘Umbrellas’ Arrives Here” and Roger Régent’s review “Les Parapluies de Cherbourg” (1964) in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* both offer candor, while arriving at totally different conclusions about the musical. For Crowther, *Parapluies* is a saccharine visual experience with little to nothing beneath the surface. He characterizes the form as “quaint,” “artificial,” “cute and cosy,” yet he has little to say about the content, because he finds very little material (1). Régent, on the other hand, finds in the film, « la poésie pure … aucune sublimation, aucune enflure de la voix ou des sentiments » (290). Régent shows admiration for *Parapluies* not only in its form, but also in its intense sensitivity to its location, its levity in dealing with psychologically difficult material, and in its use of music and movement as a connector between sensory effects and diegesis (289-291). Régent writes:

Le mélange texte-musique-image est si profondément lié qu’aucune frange, aucune ligne de démarcation n’apparaît. Nous nous trouvons devant une sorte de ballet où les personnages, les décors, les paroles, les couleurs et les sentiments dansent et forment tous ensemble un bloc inséparable. (291)

For Régent, therefore, *Parapluies* is a true work of art in which the form and the content inform and intensify each other. For Crowther, the form is overdone and the content is paper-thin. He writes,

The décor, on the whole, is handsome, but it is not as interestingly used as it should be in a picture that is largely atmosphere … Likewise, the music, while melodic, tends to monotony. Michel Legrand writes a good song, but he can’t sustain a whole score with a few thin themes. (2)
Crowther argues that the film is not only superficial, but also, the superficies are *boring*. Beyond these broad observations, the two critics differ greatly on the specifics of the film, notably the acting and the plot. Régent finds in Demy’s choice of actors, notably Catherine Deneuve, youth, freshness, depth, and pathos. He writes: « … Elle apporte aux Parapluies de Cherbourg une grâce qui enchante. Elle est douce, fine, très Juliette au balcon et, en grande partie grâce à elle, ces amours juvéniles sous les averses de Cherbourg ont un accent de sincérité qui nous émeut » (291). Crowther’s assessment of the actors – a reflection of their director – is mordant: “ … Catherine Deneuve and Nino Castelnuovo, while attractive and touching as the love-struck youths, give stock performances in their stock roles – and their singing (if it is their singing) is as frail as reeds” (2). Though there is very little dancing in Parapluies, the character movements were highly choreographed by Demy (Hill 45). Evidently, the effect of Demy’s choreography produced polarized assessments by those two critics.

The differing responses to the plot proper between Crowther and Régent are striking as well. Both reviewers choose to analyze crescendos in the narrative that deal with separation and melancholy. Régent hones in on a tragic scene in Parapluies at the train station in which Guy (Castelnuovo) must leave behind Geneviève (Deneuve) to serve his military conscription in Algeria. In his view, this contour in Demy’s film, accompanied by a building crescendo of the film’s principal musical theme by Michel Legrand, is an expression of boundless love that is mercilessly broken. He states that: « L’amour que se portent mutuellement Geneviève et Guy semble profond, éperdu et éternel … les adieux que se font les deux jeunes gens lorsque Guy, appelé au service militaire, part pour l’Algérie, sont déchirants » (290). Crowther responds far more sarcastically to the film’s ending, accompanied by the same musical theme. After years of separation due to war, economic anxiety, and social pressure, Guy, a successful business owner
with a wife and a child, encounters Geneviève, now a mourning haute bourgeoise trapped in a lonely marriage. Crowther thus summarizes the finale:

The Esso station is gleaming in the snow, and a Mercedes-Benz bearing a woman and a child pulls up. Its occupants are – guess who? You’ve got it! And if you want to know what happens then, you can go see the film or, from your own mind, draw the corniest ending for a sentimental plot you can conceive (2).

Crowther is clearly unmoved by the opera of the ordinary that is Parapluies. Though the film concerns plausible characters living out realistic tragedies, this critic cannot or will not identify with a profound, distraught, and eternal love (as Régent characterizes it) destroyed by war and infidelity. His analysis refuses to go beyond the “cheap music” and “thin themes.”

In his 2014 article on Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, “A Finite Forever,” Jim Ridley comments on the type of criticism that is epitomized by Crowther: “You wouldn’t think [Les Parapluies de Cherbourg] would need defenders. And yet something about this film trips a wise-guy alarm in viewers who distrust musicals as a form, and who use ‘light entertainment’ as a pejorative” (22). It could be argued that the chasm between Crowther and Régent’s responses to the film is largely due to cultural difference, especially since Demy’s musicals are noted for their close relationship to their location and their apparent “Frenchness” (Virtue 23-24). Perhaps the irreconcilable differences between Anglo-American stoicism and French/Latin sentimentalism engender such opposing receptions of Demy’s work. For example, Renata Adler, another American film reviewer, described Les Demoiselles de Rochefort in a 1968 critique in the New York Times as “strange, off-beat” and containing “terrible puns” (1-2). Likewise, Peau d’âne, an obscure and underappreciated film in the American context, is among Demy’s most familiar and widely distributed in France (Hill 40).
Yet, stereotypes about the differences between a French and an Anglo-American sensibility can be reductive and do not explain away how the same film left Régent enchanted and Crowther apparently nauseated. The absence of a binary opposition between positive French reviews and negative Anglo-American ones in response to Demy shows that myths about culture are not a sufficient way to filter response to him. For example, Adler’s review, “Offbeat, Dreamlike Musical: Demy’s ‘Young Girls of Rochefort Bows’” (1968), while commenting on the strangeness of the film, shows an appreciation for the tension in Demy’s musicals between the glossy, colorful, and artificial form and psychosexually troubling content. She describes Demoiselles as “a conventional, gay form … structured over what would be, in its terms, a catastrophe.” To her, the film has the air of a “frosted concentration camp” in which war, loneliness, and sadistic acts of violence coexist with skillful dancing, pastel colors, and “just lovely” music (Adler 1-2).

Yet despite, or perhaps in part thanks to, this disconnect of expectations between form and content, the American reviewer was delighted by the film. Unlike Crowther, who ascribes corniness to the strange, Adler writes that the weirdness “give[s] the whole movie a fine, eccentric, pastel and dreamlike irony” (2).

J. H. Fenwick’s review of Les Parapluies de Cherbourg in the British publication Sight and Sound (1964) provides additional insight into a positive Anglophone response to Demy’s musicals. Fenwick identifies in Parapluies an aesthetic of glamor, “gloss,” and artifice (37). Like Adler, he argues that the visual and sonic elements of the film serve to enhance the plot and its emotional effects: “the plot is made important through the technique” (37). Where Crowther saw the film’s “handsomeness” as underexploited in relation to the diegesis, Fenwick sees the artifice of Parapluies as the infrastructure for its emotional and artistic effects. He writes, “All the film’s
Artifice is used to enhance the fragility of the isolated moment” (37). He takes the entirely sung dialogue as an example of this. What Crowther saw as “cheap music,” Fenwick identifies as a necessary device in elevating ordinary language (Crowther 2). What is said and how it is sung become soluble to the extent that “natural speech would be an intrusion” in Parapluies (37). For Fenwick, the color in the film provides a signifier for the relationship between the characters – especially Geneviève – and the power of their environment. He also observes that the patterns on Geneviève’s dresses often match those of the wallpaper so closely that she seems to blend into the set. Hollywood production rules would avoid this kind of bleed, but in Parapluies this choice could well signify the tyrannical, overbearing and assimilating nature of the characters’ very environment.

The prominent Anglo-American and French reviews of Demy’s musicals at the time of their release demonstrate the potency that their aesthetic effects carry; whether the latter be deemed noxious or nourishing depends on the individual reviewer. With time, the response to Demy’s films has become more nuanced and deferential to their technical virtuosity. This is no doubt partly due to the power of familiarity; Fenwick reports that Demy anticipated his audience to react to his musicals “as to a bath which is rather too warm – after the first moment of surprise we can relax” (37). Régent’s declaration that “[le] public sera sans aucun doute déconcerté par la nouveauté et l’audace de l’ouvrage” was certainly true for the 1960s and 70s, but the more contemporary reviews generally demonstrate a diminished worry over the aesthetics, and an increased effort to connect the musicals to other theoretical concerns (292).

Nancy Virtue makes a forceful case for connecting Demy’s work to broader social issues in “Jacques Demy’s Les Parapluies de Cherbourg: A national allegory of the French-Algerian War” (2013). In large part because Demy’s musicals are so visually and sonically captivating,
Virtue argues, they have often been dismissed as being willfully ignorant to the social and political concerns of the “real world.” She writes, “… It is perhaps the film’s striking use of color and its modern operatic style that have led many critics and scholars to focus on its dreamlike, ‘melodramatic’ qualities and to dismiss it as less serious than other New Wave films of the period” (Virtue 130). Even more damning, Demy’s creation of Parapluies has been criticized as tacitly supporting French imperialism and the liberal capitalism that succeeded it, because of its perceived silence on the politics of the 1950s and 60s in France. The word “Algérie” is only uttered once in the film, and the idea of creating a pastel bourgeois melodrama during a time of war and injustice has struck some critics as irresponsible (Virtue 130, 137-138). Virtue cites Jean-Luc Godard among such critics of Demy. Godard remarked about Demy, “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” (qtd. in Virtue 130). In Godard’s view, Virtue explains, Demy prioritized aesthetic concerns over clear political commentary in his films.

Virtue repudiates the idea that Demy’s work is or was an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand. By engaging in an allegorical interpretation of Parapluies, searching for meaning beneath the ostensibly opaque surface of the film, she argues that the film “represents a fundamental crisis in France’s national identity of the 1960s” (Virtue 127). Virtue’s interpretation is less concerned with authorial intent than it is with the idea of the film as a reflection of “psychological dispositions.” She is able to identify signifiers in the film that point to the Algerian War and Gaullist socioeconomics (Virtue 130). For one, she advances that the atmosphere created by the old cobblestone Cherbourg can be interpreted to signify an already nostalgic France in the 1960s when Parapluies was released; France was lamenting its waning economic and cultural empire. A second contradistinction she raises is Guy’s shining white Esso
station-service. Its location for the film’s conclusion is “the perfect signifier of the new Gaullist state,” a liberal France guided by the interests of oil companies (Virtue 132).

On the level of characters and narrative thrust, Virtue finds that the love affair between Guy and Geneviève is not the only seductive force guiding the characters’ actions. In her interpretation, Guy consummates a love affair with oil while Geneviève consummates one with consumerism. Guy’s “innocent” life dream of opening his own Esso station-service takes on a political dimension when considered in the context of a war partially motivated by the control of oil. Virtue writes: “… 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” (135). As for Geneviève, Virtue interprets her relationship with her mother as an allegory to France’s relationship with its colonial possessions. In encouraging Geneviève to forget about working-class Guy, marry upwards, and purchase material comfort, Mme. Emery is instilling discipline in her daughter to become an obedient and responsive consumer (Virtue 132). Emery “colonizes” her daughter’s life and mind: “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” (Virtue 133).

Finally, Virtue’s critique of Parapluies notes that the visual elements carry political meaning as well. Red Esso gas pumps surround, or “close in on,” Guy and Geneviève in multiple scenes (Virtue 133). For example, near the end of the film, Guy and Geneviève face each other in the office of his new station-service, but appear unable to approach or touch one another. For me, one sees in that frame that the two are bisected by a red Esso gas pump in the middle ground
whose boundary they dare not cross, which reinforces Virtue’s argument. It is ironic, as Virtue identifies, that Geneviève’s first line in the film is, « Guy, je t’aime. Tu sens l’essence! » (Virtue 134).

The contemporary responses to Demy’s musicals have not only attempted to excavate their political dimension, but also to generate discourse on their place in artistic movements. A thorough example of a critical response to Demy that puts his work back into conversation with that of his Nouvelle Vague contemporaries, a domain that some had banished him from since the 1960s, is Rodney Hill’s article “The New Wave Meets the Tradition of Quality: Jacques Demy’s ‘The Umbrellas of Cherbourg’” in Cinema Journal (2008). In the article, Hill situates Demy’s musicals within a New Wave tradition that – at least on a superficial level – would be at odds with them both aesthetically and technically. He writes of Demy’s excommunication from a particular discreet movement: “To the casual observer, the all-sung, operatic film might even appear as an anomalous blip in French film history, not obviously belonging to any particular tradition or movement” (27). Echoing the critique seen above, because of their affected, highly stylized presentation, Demy’s films have been lumped in with the “overblown” and “morally bankrupt” films of the Tradition of Quality of the 50s against which the Nouvelle Vague rebelled (29-30).

In analyzing Demy’s films and their place in the Nouvelle Vague, Hill offers some general commonalities that are found in many films identified as part of that movement. He enumerates four attributes: the centrality of the auteur in the realization of the film, the preference for shooting on-location as opposed to in studios, the utilization of nonprofessional actors as opposed to recognizable stars, and an improvisational approach to scripts, lighting, and
other technicalities. In a very broad sense, Hill elucidates that films of the Nouvelle Vague are highly reflexive and concerned with contemporary and ordinary issues (29-30).

Of course, as Hill also develops, the Nouvelle Vague, like many artistic movements, defined itself in terms of what it was not – the Tradition of Quality. After the Second World War, the Centre National de la Cinématographie, which was subsidized by the French government, sought to cultivate a “coherent national cinema” whose technical and material merits could rival any American film, a demonstration of a French tradition of quality (30). By the mid-1950s, marked by the publication of François Truffaut’s article “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” (1954) in *Cahiers du cinéma*, the tradition was being criticized for churning out overwrought and unoriginal films. It had become, in the eyes of many, the “cinéma de papa” (Hill 30-33). A problem arises, then, in locating Demy’s film within the dichotomy of the Tradition of Quality versus the Nouvelle Vague. On the one hand, Demy’s films are (modest) examples of technical excellence and curated to a degree that producers in the 60s found to be “fou”; Jean-Pierre Berthomé documents that 15,000 francs were spent on custom wallpaper alone for *Parapluies* (Berthomé 156).

Yet, Hill identifies many points of similarity between certain elements in *Parapluies* and the commonalities of the Nouvelle Vague stated above. In terms of Demy’s quality as an auteur, Hill, Berthomé, and others have identified clear autobiographical and intertextual elements in *Parapluies*. For example, the film opens at a mechanic’s shop in Cherbourg, a site Demy would have known well, as his father owned a similar shop in another port town, Nantes (Berthomé 88). The film is intertextual at the very least to the extent that characters and references are carried from Demy’s earlier work into *Parapluies*; the diamond merchant Roland Cassart who courts Geneviève was left heartbroken in Demy’s earlier *Lola* (1961). Though Demy applied his own
kaleidoscopic vision to the decoration of Cherbourg, as Berthomé documents below, the film is shot on location. In an anachronistic way, Catherine Deneuve’s status as “the ice queen of French cinema” could be seen to detract from a Nouvelle Vague preoccupation with using little known actors (Riding 1, Hill 28). Yet, as Hill contextualizes, “The Umbrellas of Cherbourg is widely regarded as one of the films that made her a star” (37). In a 1996 interview with the New York Times, Deneuve commented on her role in the film: “Without ‘The Umbrellas’ and without Jacques Demy, I am not sure if I would have remained an actress” (Riding 1). Finally, the content of the film, though delivered in what Hill characterizes as “a melodramatic opera of the bourgeoisie,” is very ordinary. He writes:

*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* fits the classic New Wave paradigm of portraying ordinary characters caught up in situations of everyday life and addressing contemporary cultural issues … One would be hard-pressed to find any more ‘ordinary’ characters … a garage mechanic, a shop girl and her widowed mother, an ailing aunt, a hired caregiver – and Demy’s tone toward them and their problems is never one of condescension, but rather one of fondness. (Hill 35-36)

Hill’s demonstration that Demy’s body of work fits with many conventions of the Nouvelle Vague does not valorize it because of this association – he in fact calls for a fresh look at the Tradition of Quality that goes beyond Truffaut’s highly influential polemic against it (Hill 31). Instead, his article shows that Demy is not a “blip,” but an important “figure of intersection” between the Tradition of Quality and the Nouvelle Vague (Hill 27).

Artistic criticism of Jacques Demy has not only attempted to situate him within a movement of the *septième art*, but also to connect his work to other media and theoretical approaches, as Nancy Virtue does in “Cubism and the Carnivalesque in Jacques Demy’s
**Demoiselles de Rochefort** (2016). With great sensitivity to detail, Virtue explores “Jacques Demy’s distinctly postmodern approach to art and representation” and puts the film in conversation primarily with Mikhail Bakhtin (22). In *Demoiselles*, Virtue identifies expressions of Bakhtin’s concept of the hybrid construction, a single utterance that “contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, ‘two languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems” (22). She identifies the hybrid construction in the film in relation to the carnivalesque: “the borderline between art and life” (23). On the most literal level, she explains the film is the story of an actual carnival: the action of *Demoiselles* takes place as traveling carnies set up, perform, and dismantle a spectacle over the course of a long weekend. However, Demy breaks down a contradiction here, making the “behind-the-scenes” work of organizing a carnival a part of the spectacle itself.

Virtue identifies another area of postmodern hybridity in the diegesis of the film. In *Demoiselles*, narrative structure is decentered: multiple plots are interwoven, implicating characters that do not exist as individuals but as parts of estranged pairs or inseparable couplings. The viewer himself cannot occupy a privileged or static observational space in the film because the camera work “playfully blurs the line between carnival illusion and real life” (23-24).

As Virtue explains, this technique of blurring two spaces, a key factor in the film’s hybridity, extends to temporal and spatial relationships in the film, calling to mind Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope. Time and space are presented in contradictory ways; a single signifier can point to two signifieds at once.

[Time] is moving too quickly [that life is passing (Delphine and Solange) by] or too slowly [that they have yet to embark on their true destinies]. Solange and Delphine are always running late or kept waiting. Lovers narrowly miss meeting each other, as if their
spatio-temporal trajectories have gotten off track. (Virtue, “Cubism and Carnivalesque,” 24)

Space exists in a state of hybridity or tension state as well. Rochefort, Virtue points out, is both a comfortable and safe place; the family literally lives in the center of town. It is also an alienating and hostile environment in which “l’idéal masculin/féminin” is always just beyond reach, stuck in an apartment, a music store, or behind a bar (23-25). Rochefort as an aesthetic locale also exists in tension, between being a real town and an idealized, dreamlike space: “Demy … deliberately idealizes his on-location set by very carefully and elaborately staging it to give it the artificial feel of a studio set” (Virtue 23). The film is obviously shot in a “real” place, on-location, but the impossible pastels and bright whites that cover all of the walls and outfits in the town make it appear hyperreal, or at least enriched or supplemented. Berthomé’s documentation of the production of Demoiselles shows the obsessive nature of Demy’s desire to film a hyperreal Rochefort; his team, led by production designer Bernard Evein, repainted 40,000 meters of Rochefort for three months prior to the shooting (Berthomé, Les racines du rêve, 181). Virtue further posits that Delphine and Solange’s outfits are themselves chronotopic hybrids, combining avant-garde shift dresses that would be read by the original audience as space-agey and hyper-contemporary with large floppy hats and décor that evoke the nineteenth century (25). I have also observed that the décor of Les Demoiselles demonstrates another point of both continuity and intertextuality among Demy’s films. For example, the same piano is used in Lola and in Demoiselles. The décor is also a nod to the work of Demy’s wife, director Agnès Varda. For example, the sofa and piano that are central props in the iconic scene of “La Chanson des Jumelles” in Demoiselles are the same items that appear in the sentimental rendition of Michel Legrand’s “Sans toi” in Varda’s classic Cléo de 5 à 7.
Finally, Virtue connects *Demoiselles* with cubism both in its title and in Demy’s filming style. In the title, Virtue sees a clear homage to Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907). The numerous references to Cubism in the film, notably in Guillaume Lancien’s art gallery, seem to confirm this connection. Further research I have conducted reveals that Demy intended the association, but found Avignon to be an unfitting place to shoot parts of the film. He states in an interview, “Je voulais d’abord faire ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,’ ce qui me semblait s’imposer, mais je n’ai pas pu trouver à Avignon cette fichue place où les forains arrivent et s’installent” (qtd. in Berthomé 178). Beyond the title, Demy’s filming can be seen to follow the Cubist goal of depicting the subject (if there is one) from all angles, displacing the fixed perspective of the viewer: “… the camera has a kind of unreal mobility that makes it appear to be everywhere at once – above, below, on, in front of, behind, beside the stage. Demy seems to place the viewer on the edge between panoptic illusion and street-level realism” (Virtue 23).

While Virtue’s interpretation is unique in the way it connects Demy to Bakhtin and cubism, it overlaps with other critics’ assessments from the 1960s to the present that Demy was aware of his films’ own artifice. Instead of opposing the artificial aesthetic nature of the films and implying accidental heavy-handedness, as Crowther did in 1964, Virtue demonstrates a sensitive appreciation for Demy’s “hybridic merging” of seemingly opposed concepts. Like Renata Adler, who wrote on *Demoiselles* in 1968, Virtue identifies in Demy an ability to connect “spacey” or frivolous aesthetics with very grounded, if also “highly subjective and necessarily distorted” human experience (“Carnivalesque and cubism,” 29).

Much like Nancy Virtue, Jean-Pierre Berthomé demonstrates a deep interest in the simultaneously on-location and unsettlingly artificial sets that Demy employed in *Parapluies, Demoiselles*, and *Peau d’âne* in his article “Reinventing Reality: Demy and his Sets” (2016). As
a Demy scholar, he notes that “the ideal space in the films of Demy is almost always an enclave.” Like Virtue, he points out that these enclaves provide security at the expense of being carceral. For example, Cherbourg, Rochefort, and the Château de Chambord in *Peau d’âne* are all, in a sense, provincial prisons where the only hope of happiness can come through escape. *Parapluies* begins with Roland Cassard entering Cherbourg, and ends with his trophy (Geneviève) leaving the town in his car. As Virtue points out, referencing *Demoiselles*, Maxence can only find his “idéal féminin” when he decides to hitchhike on his way out of Rochefort (Virtue 27). The princess of *Peau d’âne* must flee in the night from the castle to avoid an incestuous marriage to her father, the King. Yet, as Berthomé develops, the bordered provincial town offers another “contradictory movement” as a safe space. Cherbourg is where Guy is safe from the war in Algeria, for example (89). Rochefort is where Delphine and Solange’s family can protect them from men with dubious intentions, and the château is a place where the princess is admired and doted on, albeit due to an insalubrious desire.

Berthomé also notices that Demy always chose a variation on Nantes for his location, since places characterized by physical distance and transient inhabitants prevail: “a port sufficiently far from the sea never to see it, but close enough for its presence always to be felt, if only in the dreams of leaving that float through the town” (88). Cherbourg, Rochefort, Nice, Venice, and Marseille – all shooting locations for Demy – share this essential quality. Therefore, though there are superficial differences between Demy’s different sets, they all exist in the same universe.

Finally, Berthomé offers commentary that supports Rodney Hill’s interpretation that Demy’s oeuvre belongs within, or at least shares technical similarities, with his Nouvelle Vague contemporaries. Demy, he reiterates, always preferred shooting on location, even if the location
was entirely fictitious, as is the case with *Peau d’âne* (89). Berthomé’s interpretation also posits that Demy took advantage of this method to create a contradiction between the real and the fantastical, as Virtue also noted above. He writes: “The worlds invented by Demy bear a surprising resemblance to our own, but are of another nature and demand that we agree to cross the barrier of appearances to enter into them” (91). Demy’s sets, therefore, carry both a practical and an ideological reasoning. His choice of sets suited his sensibility as a master technician, and created a tension between the mundane world and the dreamlike, or explicitly dreamt, visions of his characters.

The Demy musical that has perhaps been the most underrepresented – at least among Anglophone critics – is *Peau d’âne*. Rodney Hill’s 2006 review of *Peau d’âne* offers a sensitive response to the film, even if the author makes some questionable assertions. The dearth of critical response to *Peau d’âne* in the United States may be explained by some of the film’s “offbeat” elements that Hill identifies: “elements of scatological humor, implied incest, wild anachronisms, and eye-popping visual design” (40). Hill’s article is valuable because it does take *Peau d’âne* seriously, though he reaches some conclusions that appear to be at odds with what the viewer would see on the screen.

Hill’s article identifies a theme in Demy’s musical works that has already been discussed by Régent, Virtue, Fenwick, Ridley, Berthomé, and others; *Peau d’âne*, Hill writes, calls attention to its own highly artificial form (40). In addition, like Virtue does with *Demoiselles*, Hill remarks that Demy intentionally plays with the concept of time in his work. In *Peau d’âne*, past, present, and future become so blurred that it is impossible to locate the film in a particular period. For Hill, this is a commentary on the supposedly timeless nature of fairy tales. He provides numerous concrete examples of the film’s anachronisms and chronological
disorientation. For example, the fairy godmother (Delphine Seyrig) has a rotary telephone, complains that the batteries in her magic wand are dead, and, (in)famously, flies in by helicopter at the film’s conclusion (42). Hill could have strengthened his inventory of anachronisms by pointing out the way Demy filters the costumes and décor of what is ostensibly the seventeenth century through a psychedelic hippie aesthetic of the late 1960s, having just returned from Los Angeles where he filmed Model Shop (Berthomé 228-233).

On a more abstract note, Hill theorizes that Peau d’âne may not present a linear narrative structure, given that the film opens on a page out of a book on the King’s (Jean Marais) bookshelf. The bookshelf contains works by Jean Cocteau and Guillaume Apollinaire, which both the King and the Fairy Godmother seem to know well. Are these two characters, then, acting out a plot whose ending they already have access to, Hill asks. He ponders: “After all, if the King has read the books of poetry [the Godmother] gave him, perhaps he has also read the book of Peau d’âne, which may even have galvanized his plan to marry the princess. It is almost as if the film has written itself from within …” (Hill, emphasis author’s own, 42).

Apart from his analysis of time in Peau d’âne, Hill attempts a class-conscious reading of the film, especially of the dream sequence shared by the Prince (Jacques Perrin) and the Princess/Peau d’âne (Deneuve). There, the Prince and the Princess are united. He is lovesick – literally bedridden – as a result of a beautiful maid he saw in the woods but cannot identify, and she is disguised under the ugliness of a donkey’s skin to evade her sexually predatorial father. The unlikely pair find each other in a psychedelic dream in which they romp through a clearing in the woods dotted with pink flowers, a feast of pastries, red wine, a water pipe, and other earthly delights. They sing of forbidden love, of indulging in that which has been denied to them, and of carnal pleasure. Hill interprets this sequence, which to me is an expression of boundless
joy and euphoria, as “perverse” and “problematic” (43). For him, Demy is offering a critique of class privilege. The prince and princess are indulging in excess that they feel uniquely entitled to, and their love is special to the extent that it is something that not everyone can have: “… the very concept of a privileged class is in fact mythical, reinforced by fanciful notions of perfect, eternal love and happiness …” (43). Hill interprets the scene as a pessimistic, ironic, even “satanic” reprocessing of the mythical vision of the perfectly and rightfully happy elite.

I however feel that, in the dream sequence, the prince and princess are stripped of any class markers in costume. Throughout the film, the Prince is dressed in the red Louis XIV regalia of his kingdom. The Princess, when she is not disguised as Peau d’âne, is dressed in lavish court dresses with panniers and wide sleeves. Yet, in their shared dream, they both shed these class markers and appear in simple, white costume. Peau d’âne looks more like a nymph than an aristocrat. In a film where all of the royal and court characters are dressed in either red or blue as political signifiers, the white costumes of the dreams are a departure from the aristocratic world, into a realm where such distinctions are not made.

Hill concludes his response to Peau d’âne by claiming that it is a radically different film from Parapluies and Demoiselles; viewers who expect to see an extension of these films in Peau d’âne are bound to be “disappointed” and “confused” (44). He takes his argument further, stating that Demy’s films are all distinct from each other, writing: “… Demy never made the same film twice, and even those that bear a certain degree of surface-level resemblance (Umbrellas and Young Girls for example) are ultimately quite different in tone, structure, and theme. Peau d’âne is nothing if not unique …” (44). As we will see in the next development, not all critics are in agreement with Hill’s summative remarks. My interpretations, in particular, take an antithetical view. Chapter two argues that Demy’s triptych presents a unified tour de force when analyzed.
holistically. The aesthetic sensibility of Camp too contributes to a unifying aesthetic in Demy’s films, which is analyzed in Chapter three. Moreover, we will appreciate how camp invites the queer audience to identify with narrative and character in compelling, hitherto unexplored, ways.
Chapter 2: Demy’s triptych: one interconnected universe

« Suis-je vraiment coupable ? / Quel crime ai-je commis ? / Je n'ai pas mérité cette vie misérable / Si un prince charmant ne vient pas m'enlever / Je fais ici serment que j'irai le trouver / Moi-même » “Les Insultes,” Peau d’âne


This chapter pushes back against the premise that each film is singular and compartmentalized. Instead, it demonstrates that all three films are a triptych that display different images but form one cohesive whole. Through close readings of key scenes, a unity in tone, structure, and theme, among other elements in the films, becomes evident.

With an oeuvre comprising fourteen full length films, seven short films, among which many contain elements of the musical genre (Lola, Une chambre en ville, Trois places pour le 26, for example), the question of corpus arises: Why study the three particular films Parapluiues, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne together as a triptych? In his comprehensive analysis of Demy’s films, Les racines du rêve (1982), Jean-Pierre Berthomé provides a partial justification for that particular assemblage. He likens Demy’s filmography to an artistic puzzle-game, referencing: « Le grand rêve balzacien du puzzle dont chaque film serait une pièce qui éclaire le sens de l’ensemble en même temps qu’elle en tire une partie du sien » (17). For Berthomé, each of Demy’s films is one fragment of a totality, and his analysis is thus both metatextual and paratextual (Demy’s films abound with subtle art historical and contemporary references) (19,
When treating Demoiselles in particular, Berthomé observes that the dialogue subtly but persistently calls upon the viewer to notice its « parenté » with the rest of Demy’s work. Demoiselles « tisse avec les mots le lacis des racines qui se mêlent et font deux arbres frères, » referencing, for example, the city of Cherbourg multiple times (189). When analyzing Peau d’âne, Berthomé notes that Deneuve, whose appearance in Demy’s work left off at Demoiselles, is now recycled as « la princesse idéale » (224). For Berthomé, Peau d’âne, though concerning a completely different period than the vast majority of Demy’s work, is still firmly connected to the totality because it is « la matérialisation d’images qui hantent depuis des années son imagination » (227).

While Berthomé’s analysis of Demy’s work lucidly serves to connect every Demy film as part of a coherent whole, often relying on overt visual or narrative cues that link them, his view provides only a partial justification for the present project. To say that the entire filmography, when considered holistically, produces a coherent message, is a remark that could be made about the oeuvre of many artists in relation to their way of seeing. Francisco Goya, for example, was consistently unforgiving in his renderings of the facial features of his subjects, but such a remark misses considerable and specific detail about his distinct group of Pinturas Negras, for example. In order to unite Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne as a triptych, it is necessary to understand the narrative interconnections among these films.

Following Berthomé’s method in Les racines du rêve, I will treat the films in the order that they were produced. Les Parapluies de Cherbourg (1964), set in 1957-1959, introduces the viewer to Geneviève Emery (Catherine Deneuve), the seventeen-year-old daughter of an owner of a failing umbrella store in a town where it always seems to be raining. At the start of the film, she is going out with twenty-year-old Guy Foucher (Nino Castelnuovo), a handsome, sensitive,
and gentle man whose occupation as a mechanic makes the coupling intensely disturbing to the bourgeois aspirations of Geneviève’s mother. Nevertheless, Geneviève and Guy continue seeing each other, dodging or overtly defying Mme. Emery, until the negative external factors reach a crisis point and Guy is drafted to fight in the Algerian war for two years. In a moment of polarized emotions, between never-ending love and an acute anxiety about the reality of their future together, the two consummate their relationship, expressed in the film’s climatic song « Je ne pourrai jamais vivre sans toi ». Despite this moment of narrative release, reality does not relent, and Geneviève must bid farewell to her love at the train station. Berthomé explains of the film’s climax: « Entre le rêve et la réalité, les jeunes gens ne peuvent choisir, c’est la guerre qui choisit pour eux » (168). In its apparent mercilessness, time and social pressure force the two even further apart, and Geneviève realizes that she must find a way to live without him, because she is pregnant and there is no sign that he will return to Cherbourg soon. Under the influence of her caring, but fundamentally manipulative mother, Geneviève breaks her promise – « mon amour, je t’attendrai toute ma vie » – and accepts a wealthy diamond merchant’s marriage proposal, saving both the umbrella store from financial ruin and herself from social ostracism as a single pregnant woman. Guy returns, wounded from war, and soon discovers a series of personal tragedies: he has been left behind by Geneviève, his Tante Elise is on her deathbed, and his economic prospects are bleak. The exigencies of society soon force him to break his end of their promise – « je ne penserai qu’à toi » – and he marries his aunt’s nurse, Madeleine, who helps him realize his childhood dream of opening his own service station. The following Christmas, a black Mercedes pulls up to his Esso station as the theme song of their promise hums. Inside are Geneviève, wearing the signifiers of her newfound status as a bourgeoisie – pearls, fur, and an elaborate bouffant coiffure – and their daughter, Françoise. He invites
Geneviève inside where she learns of his own marriage and son, François. Disciplined by time and circumstance, both seem melancholically resigned to their romantic failure. The attendant interrupts the two to ask Geneviève, « Est-ce que je fais le plein pour Madame ? » to which she responds, « Oui. » He then asks, « Super or ordinaire ? » and she shrugs, « Peuimporte. » Geneviève has not really made a choice between the « super » of a fulfilling romantic relationship with Guy and the « ordinaire » of a financially secure and socially sanctioned marriage with Roland, the diamond merchant. Her society has chosen for her, and her only option for survival is indifference. Guy, too, must sublimate his desire for Geneviève into his socially sanctioned ambitions of starting a business and a family within his own milieu.


Les Paraplues de Cherbourg was immediately followed by another musical by Demy, Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (1967). This film, which takes place over a long weekend from a Friday afternoon to a Sunday morning, opens with an elaborate traveling carnival crossing the transport bridge into Rochefort. In a single shot, the camera moves its focus from the choreographed set-up ritual of the carneys to the apartment window of the Garnier twin sisters, Delphine (Catherine Deneuve) and Solange (Françoise Dorléac), who teach dance and piano, respectively. For Demoiselles, Demy was inspired by glitzy, elaborately choreographed Hollywood musicals, specifically Good Morning, Singing in the Rain, and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Berthomé 183). Out of this desire to produce a show business musical that could stand alongside its American counterparts, Demoiselles differs from Paraplues that preceded it in that the former is driven by virtuosic dance sequences while the latter has almost no dancing, unless if one sees the film’s delicately choreographed camera and corporal movements as constituting
one long dance sequence. It is also driven by a love narrative intruded upon by time and social constraints. Nonetheless, *Demoiselles* is a narratively determined film, even if that narrative is a bit masked by all of the elaborate, stunning dancing. In this film, each character has been confined to her carceral corner of sunny Rochefort, desperately desiring love from her complement who seeks the same love on the opposite side of town. The filmic narrative is one of narrowly missed connections, of love prevented by evidently ridiculous and arbitrary social barriers. Delphine sings of her « idéal masculin, » describing the traits of a man whom she has never met but has apparently encountered in a dream. Nearby, Maxence (Jacques Perrin), a sailor on temporary leave, sings the same melody, calling out for his « idéal féminin. » This pattern of a separated, yet perfectly compatible couple, that would fulfill and be the complementary other, sing mirroring melodies about each other, which continues with the other figures in the film. Delphine and Solange’s mother, Yvonne, is always stuck at work behind the glass bar, her “aquarium” as she calls it, lamenting that she rejected the marriage proposal of her love and the father of her children due to his last name, Dame. The idea of being called Madame Dame was enough for her to call off the relationship, lie that she had moved to Mexico, and isolate herself on the other side of town. For his part, Monsieur Simon Dame (Michel Piccoli) is stuck running his own business, a music store in Rochefort, and spends his days cutting out paper dolls and singing of Yvonne. Likewise, Solange falls in love at first sight with the visiting American composer Andy (Gene Kelly); they anxiously brush hands on the street, and she runs home to sing out her fantasies about him without entertaining the idea of actually seeking him out. The only two characters who are capable of singing in a public space about their sexual desires are the two inseparable male carnies, Etienne (George Chakiris) and Bill (Grover Dale), whose
relationship seems to be slightly stronger than that of brothers and slightly less affectionate than that of lovers.

Writing on the score for *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, Berthomé notes that neither Guy nor Geneviève has their own musical theme; they share a single theme that can only exist in synchrony. This is a reflection on their relationship: “Ils n’existent qu’ensemble” (*Les racines du rêve*, 165). The same holds true for each of the impossible couples in *Demoiselles*. On the level of melody, Delphine’s song is a mirror of Maxence’s, Yvonne’s of Simon’s, Solange’s of Andy’s, and so on (Berthomé 185).

In critical reviews, *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* has been studied in contrast to *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, the former being seen as the “sad one” and the latter as the “happier one” (Colomb 46). Such a view falls into the trap of “lazy blindness” that Berthomé identifies. On the level of diegesis, *Demoiselles* is an essentially tragic narrative of alienation (Berthomé 16-17, 195). It is true that the sonic and visual tone of the film is much brighter than that of *Parapluies*, so much so that composer and close friend of Demy, Michel Legrand, had a hard time setting Demy’s lyrics to a score: « Pour *Les Demoiselles*, j’ai eu beaucoup de mal car … j’écris très naturellement des choses tristes ou nostalgiques ou noires ou dramatiques, mais les choses joyeuses ne me viennent pas naturellement du tout … » (qtd. in Berthomé 180-181). On a visual level, this musical parades a series of lemon yellow, mint, (what is now called) millennial pink, and dusty blue costumes against a bright, literally whitewashed backdrop. To me, the dissonance between the visually confectionary and the narratively dark and serious is a strategy that Demy employs in both *Parapluies* and *Demoiselles* to intensify the tragic effect when we see what happens to the characters. Between tears, the question in both films becomes, “How could such awful and unfair things happen to such innocent people in such a beautiful place?”
When Berthomé characterizes the city as « un univers tourmenté et habité par la souffrance de la séparation, » he could be characterizing either Cherbourg or Rochefort (195). And, incidentally, he is speaking on “pastel, just lovely” Rochefort (Adler 1-2). In part because the narrative taking place in Rochefort is tormented by the suffering of separation, as Berthomé puts it, it is not so easy to categorize Demoiselles as the “upbeat” response to Parapluies.

The amount of time that Demy dedicates to the tragic separations as opposed to the cathartic and highly improbable final connections of Demoiselles is also indicative of the elemental melancholy of the film. During Demoiselles’s two-hour and five minute run, Solange does not gather the courage to approach Andy until the one hour and 56-minute mark, and Yvonne is not haphazardly reunited with Simon until the one hour and 58-minute mark. Neither of these fulfilled couplings follow logically from the loose plot; they seem to be last-minute concessions to a classical narrative structure expected of a film with such a massive budget. Demy cultivates Delphine as the blonde movie star of the film, dressed in one particularly memorable scene in a short blond wig and red sequined dress that obviously pay homage to Marilyn Monroe in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Yet, the viewer never sees the star encounter Maxence, the man for whom she is lovesick throughout the film. Their coupling is only implied at the end of the film. We realize that the pair will come together as the blue truck containing Dephine stops to pick up Maxence who is hitchhiking along the road. The overwhelming majority of Demoiselles, with all of its easily accessible gorgeousness, concerns the abject failure of the characters to achieve a meaningful romantic experience with another human being. The reasons for this vary from the economic demands of work to the refusal to take on a civil status and last name that would make a tight-knit community laugh. In this way, Parapluies and Demoiselles are not discordant, but variations on a theme: separation imposed by culture.
Following the release of *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* in 1967, Jacques Demy, enamored with American culture since his childhood, spent almost two years in Los Angeles. There, he produced the film *Model Shop* in 1968 and observed firsthand the hippie subculture, the protest movement against the war in Vietnam, and the developments of the Civil Rights Movement. Demy found American culture and Americans to be a contradiction of the popular representations of Americans in France in the 60s: on the one hand, the beatnik, and on the other, the imposing, indifferent, rich man (Berthomé 201-203). After the commercial failure of the English-language drama *Model Shop*, he returned to France to direct yet another musical, *Peau d’âne* (1970), infused with the psychedelic visuals he had imbibed in California. *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* and *Peau d’âne*, then, represent for a French audience a tight chronological series of Demy musicals, made within eight years of each other. Just as *Demoiselles* has been interpreted in contrast to *Parapluies* in large part due to its aesthetic effects, *Peau d’âne* is often interpreted as an anomaly when compared to both aforementioned films. While *Demoiselles* and *Parapluies* are set within similar time frames, it is difficult, as Rodney Hill observes above, to place *Peau d’âne* within any specific epoch. Of course, the narrative is based on the classic seventeenth-century tale from Charles Perraut, and the film – true to the Nouvelle Vague principle of shooting on location – was shot principally at the Château de Chambord. Yet, the French aesthetic of the *Ancien Régime* is reprocessed through the psychedelic visuals of 1960’s America. In addition, the many prominent anachronisms, some of which Hill listed above, destabilize the idea that *Peau d’âne* is a film that takes place in the 1600s at all.

Because the film has been categorized as a period piece and a children’s movie, *Peau d’âne* could be interpreted as a distinct effort from Demy’s other musicals; however, an
examination of the diegesis that he chooses to develop shows a clear continuation of the theme of tragic, socially imposed separation. In *Peau d’âne*, we are introduced to the world of the Blue Kingdom, a place that derives its prosperity from a precious donkey (*l’âne banquier*) that excretes gold coins and its peace from the happy marriage of the King (Jean Marais3) to the beautiful Queen (Catherine Deneuve). However, in the filmic world of Demy, paradise is yet again interrupted by an outside factor, and the Queen falls deathly ill, supplicating that the King not marry « que lorsque vous avez trouvé une femme plus belle et mieux faite que moi. » The King does find such a woman, in his own daughter, the Princess (also Catherine Deneuve). Upon learning of her father’s intention to marry her, the Princess, horrified, seeks the advice of her Fairy Godmother, played by actress and feminist activist Delphine Seyrig4. The trusted Godmother – « les fées ont toujours raison » – suggests that the Princess demand three gifts in order for her father to demonstrate his love: dresses the color of “le beau temps,” “le soleil,” and “la lune.” Imagining that the creation of such dresses would be impossible, the Godmother and the Princess ostensibly believe that they can stall and terminate the marriage.

Unexpectedly, the King fulfills each request, and out of desperation, the Princess requests the skin of the magic donkey as her ultimate nuptial gift. When the King provides even this improbable gift, the Godmother instructs the Princess to flee the kingdom under the cover of the donkey skin, renounce her physical beauty, take on the identity of Peau d’âne, and seek refuge in a village of the Red Kingdom. There, Peau d’âne is stripped of the privileges afforded to her by class and appearance, and is abused by the villagers as a physically repulsive scullery maid. She

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3 Jean Marais (1913-1998) was an openly gay actor during his career and a longtime lover to Jean Cocteau.
4 Seyrig, a distant relative of Ferdinand de Saussure, was a vocal feminist. To the French consumer of print media and television of the early 1970s, her presence may have registered as a political stance in favor of the feminist movement, especially given that she occupies a place of feminine authority in the film. Deneuve’s role as an advocate for the legalization of abortion in France in the early 70s strengthens the political aspect of Demy’s casting.
must hide under an imposed identity to avoid familial violence and is degraded and ridiculed by her new peers for being socially inferior. The lyrics of the scene « Les insultes, » which takes place while the villagers prepare for the arrival of the Red Prince (Jacques Perrin) capture Peau d’âne’s chagrin:

Villageoise: Quelle calamité, elle doit être malade / On m'a dit que sa peau cache une infirmité

... 

Villageois : Tu devrais te cacher, si le prince te voit / Il pourrait se fâcher, exiger ton renvoi / Tu n'auras pas le droit d'assister à la fête / Car les soldats du roi, croyant voir une bête / Pourraient bien te tuer

... 

Peau d’âne : Suis-je vraiment coupable ? / Quel crime ai-je commis ? / Je n'ai pas mérité cette vie misérable / Si un prince charmant ne vient pas m'enlever / Je fais ici serment que j'irai le trouver / Moi-même

In this sequence, the Villagers posit that Peau d’âne’s repulsive, dirty appearance must be a manifestation of an illness or inner deformity. When Peau d’âne runs away from the crowd that ridicules her, she wonders if she should internalize the disgust, or if she is guilty as a result of her place in the world. She resolves to take her happiness into her own hands.

Later, when the Prince arrives for the festival, he wanders into the woods where he encounters Peau d’âne’s shack. Thinking she is alone, the princess removes her disguise and the prince admires her beauty from the outside. Significantly, when he tries to approach her, there is evidently a transparent wall around her shack that he cannot penetrate. The Prince is neither able
to express his admiration nor to encounter the Princess due to the external barrier that blocks their way.

Later, the Prince enters a hallucinatory state induced by a cake Peau d’âne baked for him. There, he is able to unite with her, and they are able to verbally and physically express their mutual love. Berthomé writes of this dream sequence: « Ils sont immédiatement donnés l’un à l’autre, non par leur réalité physique, mais dans une captation magique de leur image immatérielle » (239). As in Demoiselles, the two lovers – who are played by the same actors – know that they are destined for each other without having ever met. They are tragically kept from each other due to arbitrary social circumstances. Also, it is only in the last few minutes of the film that the two are united in material reality because out of all of the women in the Kingdom, only Peau d’âne’s finger can fit the Princess’s ring hidden in the “space cake.”

Throughout Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne, Demy thematizes unfulfilled desire. Innocent love is forbidden by arbitrary boundaries. In all three works, the female protagonist (in each instance Catherine Deneuve) and her male compliment (once played by Nino Castelnuovo and twice by Jacques Perrin) reach the greatest/closest fulfillment of their desire only in dreamlike or explicitly dreamed sequences. It is important to note here that Demy was very intentional about the casting of his masculine and feminine ideals in these films. Deneuve, his « princesse idéale, » was his choice for all three, even before she was a global star. The complementary male role was also made to measure; Demy originally intended to cast Castelnuovo in Demoiselles as well, but this continuity was broken due to a professional conflict (Berthomé, Les racines du rêve, 180, 224). Finally, neither Parapluies nor Demoiselles end according to a “classical narrative;” they focus on characters but do not give a sense of closure to
their situations (Corrigan 40). It takes the chronologically last film, *Peau d’âne*, for the male and female avatars to explicitly and conclusively unite on screen.

In this unforgettable scene that concluded the triptych, the Prince and Princess sit on outdoor thrones as they receive a procession including the three wise men, Nababs on elephants, nobles carried in *palanquins*, and dressed monkeys. Infamously, fairy godmother Delphine Seyrig descends onto the scene in an Alouette II helicopter decorated with psychedelic images of cats and flowers. Demy fully abandons any fidelity to temporal coherence. The heterosexual coupling of the masculine and feminine ideals is finally actualized, but only under the most fantastical and wildly absurd circumstances. Demy’s denouement finally allows desire to be fulfilled on-screen – in a psychotomimetic hallucination.
Chapter 3: Desire and isolation: Demy’s narratives as queer cinema

Drawing upon a multicultural study from the 1930s to the present, Michael Koresky claims in his article “The Ache of Desire” (2019) that queer films are those that explore “erotic longing, urban isolation, and social alienation.” Through an analysis of a diversity of films, Koresky identifies an “ache of desire” in queer films from Belgian, French, Chinese, German, and Jewish diaspora directors around the world. He identifies, for example, “a pronounced ache of desire that informs every moment, every fiber, of their films” in the work of both Chantal Akerman and Tsai Ming-liang, two queer directors from quite different backgrounds. He explains: “The best queer films make you feel that desire, make you feel the ache right along with the characters.” As argued in the previous chapter, Demy’s Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne are narratively united in articulating the tragedy that comes with unfulfilled desire, spatial isolation, and social alienation. Through a queer theoretical approach, this chapter will demonstrate that the persistent themes surrounding that “ache of desire” open the three films to being claimed by a gay audience as queer cinema. The manner in which Demy presents ideal complements separated by arbitrary, often inexplicable, forces invites a gay reading of the united narratives. The thematic continuities are fertile ground for the production of meaning that is seen and understood in particular by the queer viewer. Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s notion of bricolage⁵ (xii-xiii, xv), this chapter dialogues with the queer theory of Harold Beaver, Judith

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⁵ De Certeau writes: “The analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during this time and with these images … The ‘making’ in question is a production … For instance, the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers’ ‘success’ in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind” (xii-xiii).
Butler, and Andrew Ross, among others, to illuminate the vast areas of commonality between Demy’s narrative elements and the problematics of the gay experience.

The historical context in which the films were made enforced heteronormativity in the cinema. As such, it forces the queer spectator to identify with the films in a way that goes beyond heterosexual characterization. The production of personal meaning by the gay audience is not precluded by Geneviève being a feminine persona, and Guy being a masculine one, for example. Speaking on the queer potential of cinema, Andrew Ross writes in his essay *Uses of Camp*: “The gay male and lesbian subcultures express their lived spectatorship largely through imaginary or displaced relations to the images and discourses of a straight, ‘parent’ culture” (323). These relations between the gay spectator and the Demy films will be explored. Instead of investigating Demy’s “true intentions” or even ulterior, surreptitious motives, this chapter will follow the methodology of audience reception theory, to expose the meaningful potential for the gay audience to identify with and excavate intimate meaning from Demy’s triptych of films.

In “Homosexual Signs,” (1981), Harold Beaver writes powerfully on many of the consequences of being labeled a homosexual⁶ in Western society, drawing upon references as varied as the Narcissus myth, Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Foucault’s *La volonté de savoir*, and young gay “queens” “bitchy” vernacular which is a “constant play of double entendres and innuendos” (165). He claims that, because of his exclusion from matrimonial heterosexual culture, the male homosexual must produce and interpret his own system of signs:

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⁶ In order to avoid mischaracterizing Beaver’s words, it is important to note his reluctant acceptance of the word “homosexual.” He reminds the reader that the term was invented and imposed as a social category in the late nineteenth century as a way to create a dualism with heterosexuality. In this way, his expansive treatment of “homosexual signs” is a social, rather than a biological, exploration (161, 174). Neither his essay nor the present work is intended to be an advancement of sexual determinism. The pathologizing term homosexxual was created in Germany in 1869 to describe the unnatural and socially nefarious opposite to the healthy heterosexual (Beaver 161). This term is employed with reservation given this history.
“For to be homosexual in Western society entails a state of mind in which all credentials, however petty, are under unceasing scrutiny. The homosexual is beset by signs, by the urge to interpret whatever transpires, or fails to transpire, between himself and every chance acquaintance. He is a prodigious consumer of signs – of hidden meanings, hidden symbols, hidden potentiality. Exclusion from the common code impels the frenzied quest …” (164).

Beaver identifies that, in the absence of a socially sanctioned process of interpreting signs, the "homosexual" must develop a highly refined ability to interpret signs that are hidden, suggested or subtle. The hermeneutical practice, or “urge to interpret,” that he describes provides an “in” to understanding a series of signs that the queer viewer easily detects in Demy’s triptych. For us, the “frenzied quest” is actualized and this chapter will reveal the “hidden meanings,” “hidden symbols” and “hidden potentialities” from the narrative through the lens of a queer point of view.

Beaver’s theoretical work on “homosexual signs” and the gay male experience is useful in re-viewing Demy’s three musicals through a queer perspective in part because there are countless commonalities between the homosexual experiences and signs Beaver describes and the tragic narratives that Demy created for his films. On desire, Beaver writes: “What is ‘natural’ is neither heterosexual nor homosexual desire but simply desire … Desire is like the pull of a gravitational field, the magnet that draws body to body, plant to plant …” (161). Beaver notes that all living things share the experience of desire. All humans are drawn to other human beings, naturally. And yet, for the homosexual man, “The real world was a fortress where prisoners, condemned to solitary confinement, unceasingly flashed their symbolic credentials from cell to cell, where ‘certain things’ must remain forever dreams” (164). Therefore, as he tragically underscores, what is unnatural is not “homosexual desire,” but the social order, the “fortress,”
that prohibits desire from expressing itself in actions. From their “solitary confinement,” the prisoners of this order still reach out, flash their “symbolic credentials,” in search of meaningful connection.

Key elements of the narrative of *Demoiselles* take on new meaning when considering the queer perspective that Beaver describes. Though each protagonist has his or her complementary other, that is the male protagonist is “potentially” paired with the female lead, they are each isolated in their respective parts of town, incapable of uniting. Yvonne is stuck in her “aquarium” of a bar that she runs, Simon at his music store, Delphine in her apartment, Maxence at naval exercises, and so on. Adler’s characterization of Rochefort as a “frosted concentration camp,” mentioned in the first chapter, takes on another metaphorical meaning here. Just like each of the complementary couplings in *Demoiselles* is prevented from unification due to temporal or spatial constraints, so are actual and filmic homosexual couplings stopped from being fulfilled due to powerful social constraints. The spatial separation seen in *Demoiselles* can be seen to represent the enforced separation that gay men and lesbians feel in their inability to intimately connect with the same sex in a socially sanctioned way. The scene described above from *Peau d’âne* in which the prince is unable to penetrate the glass wall to unite with the princess follows a similar metaphor as no togetherness or real sexual fulfilment may take place. Pressing his face against the invisible glass that surrounds Peau d’âne’s shack, he is incomprehensibly unable to approach her to declare his love. He can admire her voyeuristically as she combs her hair, but to make his presence known, to touch any part of her, is forbidden. Due to a barrier imposed by a higher power, which Demy never chooses to explain narratively, the coupling is prohibited. Demy’s “prisoners” must remain in “solitary confinement” for arbitrary reasons, a social reality that
queer people experience as well. Hence, isolation is a key element in queer cinema and a nod (or a “sign”) to a queer audience that their existence is validated.

Though the entirety of Parapluies is a narrative of unfulfilled desire, of absence and longing, as described above, it is perhaps the closing scene that most resonates with the hegemonic order that, for gays, “‘certain things’ must remain forever dreams” (Beaver 164). In this scene, Geneviève and Guy accidently cross paths after social and economic obligations have driven them apart. Though they find themselves in the same room – the office of Guy’s long dreamed-of Esso station – they are both aware that they are now prohibited from associating with each other. The ending scene is very short on dialogue; Geneviève plaintively asks “Toi, tu vas bien?” and Guy flatly responds “Oui, très bien. Je crois que tu peux partir,” ending the film’s dialogue. Yet, the way Demy directs the two protagonists shows a deep and painful desire. Geneviève’s eyes glisten with tears as she looks tenderly at Guy, turning her head towards him, then away, as if ashamed. He occupies himself with a cigarette to attempt to avoid painful eye contact. The impossible desire that we see in the characters, now socially and legally bound by marriage to others, speaks to a similar queer experience that Peau d’âne’s glass wall and Demoiselles’ missed connections and carceral city planning do. These scenarios communicate an impossible desire that will not be fulfilled. As Koresky writes on queer cinema, “The movies show us our dreams, but they’re behind a thick, un navigable fog that keeps them forever just out of reach.” Geneviève is physically present, Peau d’âne is visible, but imposed conditions render them ungraspable and forever separate.

Demy’s female avatars’ enduring loneliness and their thwarted attempts to resolve that psychic suffering resonate with the queer experience of enforced isolation. Gay people are subject to the pathologizing and criminalizing of any expression, any signifier that might point to
something outside of cis-gendered, heterosexual desire. Gendered relations are, as Judith Butler
puts it, “embodied under duress” *(From Interiority to Gender Performatives*, 366). This means
that men and women carry out their obligations to a bourgeois reproductive order and sexual
normativity not as a purely elective affinity, but under the threat of discipline for noncompliance.
As I have mentioned above, “homosexual” was originally a term for a disease suffered by an
individual, created in contrast to the “healthy” heterosexual couple. Once a symptom of the
“disease” manifests, perhaps from not “doing gender” correctly (Butler 366), social stigma and
punishment will follow. On this punitive reality, Beaver writes:

> “By defining the heterosexual monogamous couple as the very foundation of social life,
bourgeois society was able to regard every other form of erotic relationship as *contre
nature*, a threat to health as well as to society … This conceptual schema of
homosexuality can never be *proved*. As long as the subject remains taboo, however, it is
reinforced by vicious stereotypes … Just consider, for sheer paranoia, the range of
synonyms when the mask is ripped, the silence broken, the deferment brutally concluded:
animal-face, arse-bandit … cocksucker, daisy, fag, faggot, fairy, flit, fruit …” (163,
emphasis author’s own).

As Beaver writes, ridicule is one social consequence of homosexuality being labeled unnatural
and unhealthy. Once the heterosexual couple has been held up as an ideal, any deviation from
that model will be met with a range of suspicion to hostility. Beaver’s list is quite comprehensive
in listing terms that many queer people, or “homosexuals,” who did not perform gender
correctly, or who demonstrated an “unhealthy” desire, have been subjected to.

In this triptych of films, Peau d’âne’s treatment by the villagers captures this violent
othering, this cruel and pathologizing behavior towards the feared and hated sissy or tomboy. In
order to take refuge from her father’s incestuous demands, the princess hides in a foreign village and covers her famed beauty by wearing a donkey skin and masking her face with dirt. Yet, her attempt to hide, to “pass” for less than who she truly is, comes at the price of intense social ridicule. Among the villagers, there is a continuing discourse that Peau d’âne is dirty, smelly, undesirable, animalistic, even a disease carrier. Like the homosexual in Western society, her difference is deemed unhealthy and repulsive. While she performs menial labor as a scullery maid, children chant around her, « Elle est dégoutante! Elle est sale! » Female villagers speculate: « Quelle calamité, elle doit être malade, on m’a dit que sa peau cache une infirmité. »

Two male villagers wonder if it is the skin she wears that makes her so repulsive, or if it is her body itself that emits a foul odor: « Est-ce ta peau qui pue? Je crois que c’est son corps. » Could the « laideron » be cured with proper rinsing, or is the repulsiveness emanating from the inside? Is a conversion, a realignment possible? From a queer perspective, Peau d’âne’s treatment at the hands of the villagers is reminiscent of the cruel rejection, bullying, name-calling, and pathologizing that can come from family members and peers. The acquired persona that she has put on to protect herself has the effect of bringing different types of violence upon her. In her failed passing, her natural beauty is hidden and at the same time, her acquired mask is repulsive. Closeted or “out,” there will be a punishment. External traits that are undesirable to others are speculated to be manifestations of an illness. Perhaps the least cruel remark she receives is that there is hope that she can be cured, which calls to mind the treatment of homosexuality which “merely … affirm[s] the reality of the ‘disease’” (Beaver 163).

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7 This pathologizing experience of othering that Peau d’âne suffers invites identification not only on the part of the queer viewer, but also for other identities vilified and othered by dominant discourse. Consider, for example, groups othered in function of race or class who could identify with Peau d’âne’s false association with squalor or illness. The theme of ostracism and debasement Demy creates around Peau d’âne’s treatment by the villagers is one that can speak intensely to the queer viewer as well as to many other groups deemed deviant or inferior.
In *Demoiselles*, Yvonne rejects Simon Dame’s love for what seems to be a superficial reason – his last name. Every time the name is mentioned – either « Madame Dame » or « Monsieur Dame » – characters laugh and mock the sound of such a name, calling it « bête, » « ridicule, » or, condescendingly, « aimable. » Around an hour into the film, Yvonne confesses « une passion secrète » to Maxence and Subtil Dutrouz (an old friend who turns out to be an axe murderer). She sings: « Mon fiancé avait un nom fort détestable/ Et ce nom m’agaçait plus qu’il n’est supportable/ Alors je l’ai quitté, sans un mot, sans adieu/ Il y aura dix ans que j’ai brisé ce nœud. » Because she feared a lifetime of humiliation, Yvonne called things off with the future father of her son. The result of her decision -- her response to other people’s ridicule -- is: « A présent je suis seule et je n’ai plus vingt ans/ j’ai voulu voir la ville où mon amour d’antan/ Avait connu le jour, je m’y suis installée/ Avec mes souvenirs épars et désolés. » Simon also confesses to the failed relationship to Solange from his music shop on the other side of Rochefort:

« Elle m’avait appris dans le plus doux moment/ Qu’elle attendait de moi l’heureux événement/ Qui enorgueillit l’homme et anoblit la femme/ Mais elle refusait le nom de Madame Dame … A présent je suis seul comme un amant déçu/ J’ai voulu voir la ville où je l’avais connue/ Je m’y suis installé, et depuis j’y demeure/ Avec mes souvenirs, je joue à cache-cœur. »

A queer reader may well identify with a relationship terminated out of fear that the ridicule, mockery, and othering would be unbearable. It is significant that Yvonne speaks of this relationship through a confession, on the verge of tears as she recounts what might otherwise be interpreted by the viewer as a silly decision. Yet there is nothing silly about choosing loneliness over being categorized as abnormal, and later confessing to one’s betrayal of self. Beaver echoes Foucault’s views on power: “Power is the right to formulate categories, to control the moral
currency, to define the nature of ‘nature’. Defeat is humiliation extorted as confession” (166). Many homosexuals, much like Yvonne, must capitulate to power, in the form of enforced normativity, to avoid being publicly pathologized. Confessing to this defeat leaves one still humiliated, and of course alone.

In Parapluies, the threat of being categorized as abnormal expresses itself powerfully in the circumstance of Geneviève’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy. When Geneviève confesses to her mother in the umbrella shop that she is pregnant with Guy’s child, her response expresses the fear of social ostracism. Mme. Emery sings: « C’est épouvantable … qu’allons-nous faire ? Qu’allons-nous dire aux voisins, aux amis ? » This anxiety of being permanently outcast from society, of having a child who will always be a bâtard, leads Geneviève to abandon her promise to wait for Guy and instead to enter an essentially transactional marriage (un mariage de raison) with Roland. As Geneviève is coerced by her culture and family to abandon the hope of a fulfilling relationship of her choosing, so too are many queer people in Western society pressured by their families and social milieu to abandon their pathologized (and thus “unnatural”) desires in favor of a more “appropriate” heterosexual coupling. Even before that queer desire may manifest itself in adolescence, the multiplicity of images of normalized heterosexual couplings queer people receive from the family, the school, the Church and the media dictate what is normal, and through the absence of homosexual couplings, what is outcast. Geneviève’s confession to her mother that she is pregnant outside of marriage in Parapluies receives a similar reaction to that of the gay child who comes out to well-intentioned parents concerned with safety and status: “What are we going to say to our friends and family?”

In addition to this narrative treating the social punishments listed above, the critique of marriage Demy provides allows for a further queer reading. The very existence of practicing
homosexuals, Beaver reminds us, undermines two bedrocks of bourgeois society: marriage and the family. The homosexual has refused the contract of marriage, and thus “poses a uniquely peculiar challenge to cultural stability” (160, 168). He writes, “Unlike formal engagements or dowries or wedding oaths, homosexual acts are never socially viewed as forms of exchange” (161). Homosexuality, which is socially punished and, in some places, still legally punished, evades and can be free from the form of exchange that is marriage.

In the narrative that Demy constructs, what is the result of this venerable social institution? Geneviève and Guy are both stuck in lives that are not really of their own choosing, attached to a partner for many reasons that have nothing to do with mutual love or personal happiness. *Parapluies*’ presentation of marriage as the escape from social ostracism opens a space for a queer critique of marriage. The institution that is supposed to be a civilizing force, an ennobling of both man and woman, creates disasters for Demy’s protagonists. At the end of the film, when the gas station attendant asks Geneviève if she would like « super or ordinaire » and she shrugs, « peu importe, » it is as if she is commenting on her bourgeois marriage. Marriage, an institution exclusive to heterosexual couples until 2013 in France and nationwide until 2015 in the United States, is no ideal in Demy’s work. What is more, the Catholic Church in *Parapluies* is not the site of pastoral care or the blessing of happy families. Instead, Geneviève is presented kneeling at the altar, visibly resigned, when she marries Roland out of material necessity. Guy is seen at the Church only to mourn his Tante Elise. The Church and one of Her sacraments, Holy Matrimony, officially reserved for those in a state of grace, are presented as dismal in *Parapluies*.

Pathologized for their desires and thwarted in their attempts to realize them, gay men and lesbian women often turn to fantasy, to the interior world as a form of self-preservation. Beaver
writes: “Exclusion from the common code impels the frenzied quest: in the momentary glimpse, the scrambled figure, the sporadic gesture, the chance encounter, the reverse image, the sudden slippage, the lowered guard … Every sign becomes the cause for elaborately inconclusive fantasizing” (164). According to Beaver, homosexuals must become master interpreters of an underground system of signs, communicated in subtle, secret, artistic, or unconscious ways. At what point does a certain glance, utterance, touch, or image cross the threshold from the amical to the amorous? Deprived of the direct, clear, and naturalized tools of signifying desire that heterosexuals have at their disposal, homosexuals must grope in the dark – navigate the fog as Koresky puts it – to connect the signifiers that others give off to the proper signified. Does the signifier point to the conceptual element of desire? Does the psychological entity correspond to something mutually compatible between two queer men or women? To reformulate these questions in more concrete, particular terms: Is this a pass or an expression of camaraderie? Is this the furtive look or detached observation? From these endless questions and unclear connections, comes the “elaborately inconclusive fantasizing.”

Delphine and Maxence, Demoiselles’ thwarted coupling, reflect in their artistic fantasizing this queer displacement of desire and the fantasy of its fulfillment. Early in the film, Delphine begins fantasizing about her idéal masculin when she sees a painting in a gallery that resembles her. She remarks to Guillaume, her insensitive and insincere lover, « c’est tout-à-fait moi ! » Guillaume attempts to cut off her fantasizing, responding, « C’est un portrait sans valeur, une œuvre d’imagination. » But Delphine is insistent that this portrait is a sign that there is someone who loves and understands her; she refuses to believe that it is an empty signifier: « Comme ce type doit m’aimer puisqu’il m’a inventée ! » Though she is unsuccessful in
identifying the painter, she is willing to engage in the “elaborate inconclusive fantasizing” that there is an artist who has a sincere, secret love for her.

When she returns home, Delphine returns the favor of the artist’s visual signifier of desire with a lyrical one. Pacing back and forth between the windows of her apartment-cum-dance studio, she explains to her sister: “Je ne sais rien de lui et pourtant je le vois/ Son nom est familier et je connais sa voix/ Souvent dans mon sommeil, je croise son visage/ Son regard et l’amour ne font plus qu’une image. » She goes on to describe her masculine ideal as « cette beauté des hommes romantiques / Du divin Raphaël le talent imité / Une philosophie d’esprit démocratique / Et du poète enfin la rime illimitée. » Unable to communicate directly, both Delphine and Maxence enter into the world of artistic fantasy and dream to explore their desires for the ideal other. This calls to mind one of Beaver’s statements on homosexual signs: “Deprived of their own distinctive codes, homosexuals make art itself into their distinctive code. Aesthetic absorption is all” (165). Deprived of each other, both Delphine and Maxence invent each other through the plastic arts and song. This fantasy can be seen as a strategy of self-preservation in a situation that imposes loneliness. Instead of being paralyzed with despair, the two use their aesthetic tools at hand to partially satisfy a longing that cannot be fulfilled. Beaver writes, “Art and sex are analogous activities since both are projections of fantasy.” Following Beaver’s theorizations of the treatment of art and fantasy in producing a homosexual code, the queer viewer identifies with Delphine and Maxence fantasizing about each other through art. They both sublimate their romantic desire into an artistic endeavor that permits them to approximate a sexual experience with the other. In the absence of a permissible or possible reality, they interpret the signs they are presented to create a fantasy.
Just as Delphine can only encounter “l’homme de sa vie” in her sleep, Peau d’âne and the Prince can only be united in a hallucinatory state. As Prince and Princess, they are separated for political reasons: he belongs to the red kingdom and she to the blue. When the Princess takes on the persona of Peau d’âne as a survival tool, she and the Prince become separated by class. The Prince cannot cross the invisible yet unyielding barrier to greet Peau d’âne in her shack. It is only when Peau d’âne bakes a hallucinatory cake for the Prince – perhaps calling to mind the psychedelic “space cake” that Demy may have encountered in Los Angeles in 1968 shortly before directing Peau d’âne – that a meeting becomes possible. Like in Demoiselles, romance is confined to the realms of art, fantasy, and dreams. When the Prince ingests Peau d’âne’s cake d’amour, he passes through a bilious state to arrive at a transcendental, out-of-body experience. From his sleeping body rises a double, clothed in a white garment stripped of signifiers that point to social stratification (like the color red). Translucent, he approaches Peau d’âne, who too is clothed in immaculate and simple white dress. Berthomé writes of the significance of Demy’s choice of the color white: “… le blanc, chez Demy, c’est la couleur de l’amour incandescent, sublimé, la couleur de l’idéal poursuivi, du rêve” (Les racines du rêve, 259-260). Their white dress is another confirmation that the coming fulfillment of desire exists only in the sublime, in an oneiric state. Likewise, as Beaver explains, because homosexual desire has been pathologized, its realization is often confined to fantasy. The prisoner in “solitary confinement” can fantasize, dream, retreat into the world of signs, but he cannot physically escape.

The two embrace and are transported to a psychedelic paysage featuring a banquet of pastries atop a hill dotted with fuchsia and navy-blue flowers, which in turn are surrounded by cherry blossoms and emerald green trees. In this imaginary landscape, separated from the real world, they find a jouissance in each other’s longed-for presence. They somersault, feed each
other cake and wine, and are finally entwined on a gondola navigating itself down a hazy stream. It is important to note that this scene is a major narrative point of departure between Demy’s film and its source inspiration, Charles Perrault’s 1694 tale. Berthomé writes: « L’apport essential de Demy au mythe c’est que … Peau d’Âne à son tour va libérer le prince de son enveloppe charnelle, au lieu de se contenter d’être comme dans les contes celle qu’il vient éveiller. » The dream sequence is particular to Demy’s telling of Peau d’âne, and it offers fertile ground for a queer reading on desire and fantasy.

Demy also adds a dream sequence to the original narrative of Peau d’âne, reminiscent of the literal painting of the idéal and Delphine’s song in Demoiselles. In this psychedelic dream, a fulfillment of thwarted desire is once again approximated through ideation. When the Prince and Princess are united, they sing a contrapuntal melody that can only be executed by a pair. The lyrics show the union’s forbidden and yet blissful nature. For example, the Prince and Princess sing in unison, « Mais qu’allons-nous faire, de tant de bonheur/ Le montrer ou bien le taire ? … Tous deux nous ferons de notre vie/ Ce que d’autres n’ont jamais su faire … Nous ferons ce qui est interdit/ nous irons nous promener la nuit ». In the lyrics, we can hear the queer anxiety of having to hide love even when it is so blissful because it is forbidden. Even in this « captation magique » of « l’amour parfait, idéal, absolu » (Berthomé 257) the question lingers of whether or not this fantasy can come out of hiding.

Homosexuals, as Beaver writes, are “relegated to the borderlands and sick ghettos of bourgeois culture” even though their desires and practices may be “displaced accounts of the symbolic needs of an entire culture.” Because the homosexual drive is so confrontational and destabilizing to heterosexual matrimonial culture, it has to be rendered less threatening. He writes, “To become nonserious it must first be condensed then systematically displaced in
dreams, ritual myths, and jokes” (Beaver 167-168). The dream sequence in *Peau d’âne* is psychedelic and comedic on the surface; watching an immaculately coiffed Catherine Deneuve somersault up a hill decorated with fake flowers before being fed decadent pastries by Jacques Perrin can read as absurd to the viewer. Still, the intensity of their desire and its beautiful fulfillment in a mutual dream carries significant meaning to the gay viewer. As I will explore below, this scene is an example par excellence of camp: to the uninitiated it seems light and silly. Yet, to a member of the marginalized community in question, the sequence possesses at the same time an entirely earnest quality. To draw upon erotic filmmaker Bruce LaBruce’s essay *Notes on Camp and Anti-Camp*, Demy’s dream sequence is “an enormously serious and profound frivolity” (3).

Nevertheless, no more than in *Paraphlues*, does Demy’s universe permit this desire to be fulfilled (here, not until the 87-minute mark of a 90-minute film, and in fantasy only). Oscar Wilde’s words seem to bear witness to the conclusion of *Peau d’âne’s* blissful, amorous dream: “… there is no such thing as a romantic experience; there are romantic memories, and there is the desire of romance – that is all. Our most fiery moments of ecstasy are merely shadows of what somewhere else we have felt, or of what we long some day to feel” (Wilde, qtd. in Beaver, 1885). The high has its comedown, and the dream fades from the screen and is replaced by the cold stone walls of the castle. The royal physicians enter and declare to the King and Queen of the red kingdom that “le Prince meurt d’amour.” The queer viewer is left with a familiar feeling: the dream does not translate to reality; the signs were misinterpreted. This diegetic transition from the otherworldliness of the romantic dream to the litigated reality of the court in the chateau is a bitter letdown. Koresky’s ache of desire is ever-present and the cinema is yet again “a denial of our physical pleasure, a strictly imaginary evocation of what we want.” (Koresky)
*Parapluies* too contains a moving scene in which desire is unfulfilled. Its images serve as the ultimately unsatisfying trigger for and result of fantasy. Moreover, to quote Michael Wood in reviewing the oeuvre of another great filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, “lack is all you truly know.” In part one of the film, *Le départ*, Guy is sensuously and immediately present, and the love he shares with Geneviève completes them both. As Berthomé remarks, « Ils n’existent qu’ensemble et l’un par l’autre » (*Les racines du rêve*, 165). Guy is accessible to Geneviève’s touch, his voice is full of promise and promises⁸, even his smell is palpable⁹.

Guy’s tangible availability in part one makes his inaccessibility in part two, *L’absence*, all the more powerful and painful for Geneviève, and for the queer viewer who identifies with her. In a scene in the umbrella shop, Geneviève, visibly pregnant and emotionally troubled, pulls a photo of Guy out of her handbag and contemplates:

« C’est drôle, l’absence. Il me semble que Guy est parti depuis des années. Quand je regarde cette photo, j’oublie jusqu’à son visage. Et quand je pense à lui, c’est cette photo que je vois. C’est tout ce qui me reste de lui. »

While this scene echoes human experiences of loss and longing in general, what Geneviève expresses here speaks yet again to the themes of isolation and unfulfilled desire that run through queer cinema. Like Maxence in *Demoiselles*, she fixes her attention on an image in the absence of the ideal it represents. And like in the dream sequence in *Peau d’âne*, because it is just an image, or a vision, it cannot actually satisfy the desire she feels. The presence of Guy’s photo is but a reminder of his absence in Geneviève’s material, “real” life.

In proposing a queer reading of this triptych of films, and in claiming them as queer cinema, the issue of gender would seem to be a facile point of contradiction. One could argue

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⁸ Guy to Geneviève: « Nous aurons des enfants … nous serons très heureux »
⁹ Geneviève at their first on-screen encounter: « Tu sens l’essence ! »
that Geneviève, Delphine, and the princess are all normatively beautiful women and Guy, Maxence, and the prince are all normatively handsome men. If the interpretation of Demy’s work permitted only cis-gendered heteronormative identification, it would be true: the films are variations on a theme of Barbie and Ken having a very tough go of it.

My reading of the films, however, rejects a narrow identification of the gender of the films’ characters that must fit within a heterosexual and reproductive construction. More than others perhaps, a queer audience resists the coupling of the complements based uniquely on the gender binary and sexual scripts of compulsory heterosexuality. As viewers, we find meaningful potential in our ability to identify with one of the members of the couple unit. In addition, a binary view of gender completely ignores the films’ highly self-aware and performative presentation of gender in general and femininity in particular, as will be developed below.

In Judith Butler’s terms, seeing the two lovers as Barbie and Ken, as two avatars without potential beyond l’idéal masculin and féminin, “effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of a heterosexual construction” (362). It purports that the surface gender assigned to the characters exhausts their signifying potential. In her essay “From Interiority to Gender Performatives,” (1990) Butler draws from Foucault’s writing on the strategy of inscription. In the case of criminals, this strategy “compel[s] their bodies to signify the law as their very essence” (361). Likewise, the hegemonic culture imposes a similar process of inscription with regards to gender: compelling bodies to signify gender as an interior and abiding truth in a way that fits the heterosexual construction (363, 366).

Gender pertains to ideology in the sense that gendered social and sexual identities are constructed, internalized and reproduced as “natural.” Instead of being an expression of the authentic self, the performance of gender is a series of “corporeal stylization[s]” enacted
repeatedly over time to the point of being mundane. For Butler they are, “the fantasized and fantastic figurations of the body”10 (362, 366). She goes on to write: “The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally …” (362). Therefore, this standpoint that gender is completely stable and that these stable binaries relate directly to sexuality is a biased, invested position. This common view of gender which appears atemporal, neutral, and natural, is still ideological.

Butler’s theorizations on sex, gender and desire allow for the triptych to open up fully to a queer reading when the viewer does not consider gender to be coherent and fixed in interpreting Demy’s work. Because there is no one true default gendered way of interpreting characters, we can transcend it in a queer reading. One of the brilliant aspects of Demy’s work – within and beyond the films discussed in this thesis – is the way it calls attention to gender’s performative and unstable qualities. For example, in his later film L’Evénement le plus important depuis que l’homme a marché sur la lune (1973), gender roles are inverted and exploded as Marco, played by Marcello Mastroianni, becomes pregnant with Irène’s baby, yet again a role incarnated by Catherine Deneuve. In this narrative, the socially constructed nature of gender is exposed and mocked. As the fiancé becomes visibly pregnant, Irène must assume a more dominant providing and protecting role. Many more men – among them construction workers and businessmen – become pregnant. The Assemblée Nationale convenes to review its social

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10 Butler uses this phrase to characterize gender parody, such as drag. It is applied here not only to parody of gender, but to all gender performance, including those which are heteronormative. This is done to call attention to the “fantastic” nature of gender performance, in the sense of being fanciful and remote from reality, even that which is within a heterosexual framework. Beyond the example of a drag queen, a biologically female beauty queen or a biologically male badass type are still performing gender. The differences are that these latter performances may be subliminal and are the enactment of configurations imagined and normalized by heterosexual society. They occur and reoccur with enough consistency to pass for mundane when they are in fact no less “fantasized and fantastic figuration[s] of the body” than a camp drag performance. All gender performance, I believe, even that which exists within a heterosexual framework, has a degree of aesthetic value when we invoke “fantasy” or “performativity.”
welfare and birth control policies, the Catholic Church is baffled, and the medical community and general public speculate and scramble to fit their received ideas about men, women, and copulation between them to the new reality. Thus, in working outside of a binary view of gender in narrative, this project not only escapes “the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality,” to employ Butler’s terms (363). It also respects a continuity in Demy’s work that questions and ridicules gender roles and performance.

If we accept that gender is constructed and performed, it is important to explore how it is performed in the triptych of films. I would argue that, at least concerning femininity, gender is performed in such a way that calls attention to itself. Deneuve’s characters – made to measure for her, as noted above – are so stereotypically feminine that femininity as a trait becomes clearly a performance, and sometimes a joke or an absurdity. She is at times so “girly” that her femininity becomes, to borrow Butler’s words, “thoroughly and radically incredible” (367).

The gender expression of Deneuve’s characters is as made-up and put-on (that is to say, constructed) as Geneviève’s bleached hair pulled back in delicate ribbons, Delphine’s doll-like makeup, and Peau d’âne’s gauzy pastel costumes. When we see these costume elements of Demy’s mise-en-scène, they call attention to the overt artificiality of the “idéal féminin.” It is a testament to the gravitas and androgynous reserve Deneuve’s persona brings to her characters that they are not rendered totally absurd.

Catherine Deneuve, the body upon which gendered meaning is inscribed in Demy’s triptych, is in drag as Catherine Deneuve, the idealized feminine persona on screen. The actress is performing herself in a way that is not concealed from the viewer. Butler elucidates what is happening when the actress’ characters imitate the actress in a kind of parody of self: “Gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without
an origin … As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself” (364). As Butler points out, drag subverts the claim that there is a true, internal, and stable gender identity. The stylized imitation of gender, even that of a woman who is playing a stylized version of herself, calls attention to performance of gender.

I would argue that Deneuve’s most feminine qualities in the three films are a simulacrum: copies of absent originals. The femininity she performs does not correspond to any naturally found reality, but only to culturally bound artifices of gender expression. Thus, her performance of expressing a feminine gendered identity in the film opens a space for the queer viewer, who (ultimately like everyone else, but more painfully so) can never achieve perfect masculinity or femininity within a heterosexual, gendered paradigm. The excesses of Deneuve’s femininity – the blonde wig laid on top of bleached blonde hair, the outbursts of sentimentalism and crying, the giddy cake-baking in the kitchen – are not at all impediments to the gay male viewer identifying with her experiences, for example. They are invitations, because these effects demonstrate that her gender is enacted fantasy. If gender is socially constructed, varying according to historical times and cultural differences, it is subject to change, to permutation, to different interpretations. One of the effects of drag, or gender parody, is revealing the myth of a coherent, unchanging sex-gender structure because the performance exposes the artifice: “In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler 364). The saturation of femininity in Deneuve’s personas reminds us that she is performing an act, and that ultimately her gendered subject position playing her characters is less important than our ability to identify with her tragic narrative experience.

11 This is intended to be a statement of fact, not of value, about Deneuve’s hyperfeminine gender performance.
Because of her constructed persona, the queer viewer can feel her longing and sadness. Her femininity is so overblown, so openly constructed that it becomes evident that it is put-on. The *mise-en-scène* calls attention to itself. Once these gender markers are exploded, it becomes clear that the person or entity behind them is a tabula rasa onto which queer viewers can project their own desires and fears. Her incarnations of Demy’s ideal invite a process of identification and projection for the gay viewer.

Even if Demy had intended for a purely heterosexual and rigidly gendered interpretation of his films (a very dubious “if”), this would still not deprive the triptych of its queer potential. In his essay *Uses of Camp* (1988), Andrew Ross argues that a queer aesthetic, and queer interpretation, possess qualities of a survivalist strategy. Keenly aware of their distance from cultural power and bourgeois values, queer viewers interpret art in a way that is distinct from the heterosexual one (317). We make use of bricolage in De Certeau’s sense, taking what is meaningful among the signs and images presented and reassembling them in a way that speaks to our own subjective experiences. Because the queer viewer has been denied a heterosexually “masculine” or “feminine” subject position in interpreting art, the queer reading will seek to displace and appropriate meaning. Because there is a dearth of media that represents us directly, we follow the French expression, “Il faut faire avec.” Even in films that ostensibly concern the heterosexual experience and the heterosexual viewer, Ross writes, “there is no guarantee that what is *encoded* in these film scenarios will be *decoded* in the same way by different social groups with different sexual orientations” (323, emphasis in the original). Therefore, even though Guy and Geneviève are ostensibly encoded as a heterosexual couple, for example, the queer viewer may decode their narrative of desire and lack in a way that transcends a heteronormative reading.
Chapter 4: From narrative to spectacle: The unifying Camp aesthetic

In the previous two chapters, I have demonstrated that Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne are tightly connected filmic universes that coalesce on their representations of separation, lack, unfulfilled desire, and (sexual) fantasy. Once the limiting boundaries of heteronormative interpretation are transcended, these themes give the queer viewer access to a reprocessing of the diegesis that can speak to their experience. I have shown that a reading, such as Crowther’s, who advanced that the films are confectionary, light, or removed from social issues is incredibly myopic and, willfully or not, does not account for Demy’s greater project and vision.

Yet, my vindication of Demy’s work is not supported exclusively by the argument that they speak to queer tragedy and unjust romantic failure. To borrow the words of the American film critic Molly Haskell, “Gloom is easy. Comedy is hard.” One quality that makes Demy’s triptych so laudable is its unresolved tension between dazzling aesthetic effects – saturated technicolor, beautiful bodies, operatic singing that sends a chill down one’s spine – and essentially somber narratives. He makes formal beauty and melancholic content symbiotic, synergistic, and exponential. The beauty heightens the tragedy, but the tragedy is also given a lightness of touch, a cushion, a gentler letdown by the beauty. Catherine Deneuve, ever the queen of speaking an incisive truth while remaining vaguely pudique, remarked on Demy: « Sa bouche souriait souvent mais pas ses yeux » ("Lola Demy Deneuve"). Her description of his facial expressions can be extrapolated to his films. For me, they seduce with a gleaming smile while forestalling far sadder inner workings. However, there is no gloom; there is gravity, presence, and seriousness.

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12 Synergy designates the process by which the presence of two particular chemicals together in the body makes the effects of each more potent than if one were present by itself.
In the journal where he wrote the lyrics for Demoiselles, Demy noted: « Un film léger parlant de choses graves vaut mieux qu’un film grave parlant de choses légères. » Instead of elephant-stepping through fine points, Demy’s style was to bring levity to, even to have effusive fun with, matters that are always serious and sometimes very sad. The mouth smiled; the eyes did not.

The present chapter contends that Demy’s style and sensibility in these three films place him within the queer aesthetic called camp, which is difficult to define but sensuously and cerebrally felt. Christopher Isherwood wrote in 1954: “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (qtd. in Beaver, 166). I would argue that this treatment of the serious with an effect of levity and fun captures an essential quality of Demy’s three films. They belong to, or at least strongly resonate with, a queer aesthetic sensibility that has expressed itself for hundreds of years through camp.

Due to this, Demy’s triptych can be placed within and claimed as queer cinema not only on the level of narrative, but also on that of aesthetic sensibility. Demy’s films share something elemental with the Rococo structures erected in the late eighteenth century by the Catholic Church; the structures are charming, whimsical, and elaborately grotesque (in the original sense of the word, referring to a grotto). Yet and still, the Catholics were deeply serious about the ideology these churches propagated. Likewise, Demy’s films are serious and earnest in their tragic narratives, but these narratives are structured around a light (gay) form.

In the same interview mentioned above, Deneuve said of Demy: « Il vous emmenait dans son univers musical … pour vous mettre dans un certain état … un état de grâce, de légèreté. C’était toujours plutôt très léger. C’était quelqu’un de grave et plutôt presque triste d’ailleurs. »
Demy’s work can be identified as camp in part because it lets the viewer be carried away to a state of lightness, beauty, and grace but the message itself – the core – is totally serious, almost sad.

While Demy films such as *Le Sabotier du Val de Loire* (1955) and even *La Baie des Anges* (1963) possess a black-and-white austerity, this triptych is marked by colorful, self-referential, and contradictory camp. In order to identify the camp aesthetic in the films, it is essential first to have an operating definition of what “camp” signifies. This is no easy task, because to define camp, as Andy Medhurst put it, is to try to “sit in the corner of a circular room” (qtd. in Cleto 9). In his essay *Queering the Camp* (1999), Fabio Cleto proposes many synonyms that approach the meaning of camp: aestheticism, aristocratic detachment, irony, effeminacy, sexual transgression, even simulacrum (Cleto 9, 17). To borrow Kenneth Williams’ analogy, camp is like a diamond, both in that it has many facets and that it is rendered recognizable through interaction with its context: “No diamond sheds its light independently from the culture producing, refining, and forging it” (qtd. in Cleto 1).

Significant for the present interpretation of Demy’s triptych, Cleto claims camp as a queer aesthetic, as a means for both men and women to express their discomfort with assigned gender roles (Cleto 17). Because Camp calls attention to the theatricality, or failed sincerity, of art, people, and gestures within its scope, it undermines ideological words like “normal” and “natural.” It reminds us, to borrow Oscar Wilde’s observation, that “to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up” (qtd. in Sontag 282). By developing a working definition of camp and
then identifying it—almost endlessly—in *Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne*, these films by a closeted\(^\text{13}\) director can be further claimed by, for, and of the gay audience.

Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on Camp” identifies this incessantly undulating and mutating term as a matter of sensibility and taste: that is, a matter of great importance. She writes: “To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free—as opposed to rote—human response. Nothing is more decisive” (276). For Sontag, and for other writers who have meditated on camp (Ross, Cleto, and Beaver, among others), camp is a way of seeing that prioritizes the aesthetic, the frivolous, and the ornamental. Camp art delights in exaggeration, but crucially, an exaggeration that takes itself seriously. Camp is not a rejection of substance or rigor. Instead, as Sontag argues, Camp must have content, for camp revels in the contrast between form and content (278). Extravagant, affected form with rich content is, or at least can be, camp. Frivolity and decoration in the absence of significant content is not. Perhaps this would be closer to kitsch, though a full treatment of the schlock/kitsch/camp distinctions would be an unnecessary digression here. In short, caprice alone is not camp; fundamentally, there is nothing silly about camp. It is not a means of smoothing over bad taste. Sontag writes: “The essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails” (283).

Demy’s triptych is so thoroughly within the tradition of camp in part because it effuses levity and color and at the same time seriously thematizes desire, absence, and isolation. Camp can be located in almost every shot of *Parapluies, Demoiselles*, and *Peau d’âne*; however, representative examples will fully demonstrate Demy’s camp sensibility.

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\(^{13}\) In his book *French Queer Cinema* (2008), Nick Rees-Roberts situates Jacques Demy among closeted gay directors whose work’s queerness is expressed within a “predominately heterosexual narrative structure” (6, 109-110).
Sontag writes in the same essay: “Pure camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be camp (‘camping’) is usually less satisfying” (282). Following her idea, the examples of camp given are read as serious, but inflected in an innocent way. In perhaps the most famous scene in Parapluies, we find this phenomenon of baroque\textsuperscript{14} stylization of a narrative turn that is bleak and melancholic. When Geneviève finds Guy in the street, she embraces him, his presence clearly calming. The atmosphere is dark and heavy: the exterior shop walls are painted in navy blue that is peeling and chipping. People pass on the street in an impersonal and vaguely aggressive manner, and showers hover over the sky. She sings to him: « J’avais tellement peur de ne pas te trouver, je suis si heureuse d’être avec toi. Maintenant je ris parce que je me rends compte combien je suis bête quand je suis toute seule. » She goes on to exclaim that she would rather never see her mother again than lose him. His response to her is tragic: « Oh, tu sais maintenant ça n’a plus d’importance, nous avons même tout notre temps. Ce matin j’ai reçu cette feuille de route et je dois partir pour deux ans. » He has been drafted into the Algerian War, and he will not return for two years.

Yet, as Sontag posits, camp is never fully tragic (288). The next shot cuts from the street to a café, where the color stylization moves from navy to a warmer palette. Geneviève and Guy are surrounded by dark, lacquered wood and a mirrored wall, painted mustard yellow. The mise-en-scène instantly becomes more welcoming, protective, and intimate. Yet, Geneviève spectrally stares into Guy’s eyes as she sings: « Mais je ne pourrai jamais vivre sans toi. Je ne pourrai pas, ne pars pas, j’en mourrai. » It is in this scene that a moment of pure camp occurs; what Geneviève is expressing is deadly serious, but Demy’s mise-en-scène and direction of the two lovers is extremely aestheticized and artificial. A close up shows heavy tears collecting on

\textsuperscript{14} In the sense of “ornate” and “complex.” In the two characters’ movements, “undulating,” used to describe the Baroque line in the visual arts, also applies.
Geneviève’s slender face, sans fard. The two sing back and forth, moving with the contours of the music like exactly manipulated marionettes. When they pause, Legrand’s melody crescendos to the three memorable notes that open the film – E, F, C. At the same time, the two lovers’ touching heads gyrate in three movements in unison with the notes. Sontag writes that “Camp puts everything in quotations,” (280) and here the two are read as so deeply serious that they are ironic. Demy directs Geneviève and Guy not as two distraught lovers, but as “two distraught lovers.” They are not crying, they are “crying.” Finally, the sequence dedicated to this now-famous song transitions back onto the street, where Geneviève sings: “J’ai tellement peur quand je suis seule … Tu connaîtras d’autres femmes, tu m’oublieras.” She leans onto Guy, gripping his coat, as he pushes his bike down the street, defeated. Except, it is made absolutely clear to the viewer that the two are not moving at all: they are standing almost still as an unseen dolly rolls them down the street and Demy’s camera precedes them on a track. The viewer is not witnessing a filmic moment emulating a representation of natural life, but a highly stylized vision. Sontag writes: “Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content’ … of irony over tragedy” (287). Demy offers his viewers a tear-jerking aesthetic experience, but it is Camp, not tragedy.

Looking to Peau d’âne, it is perhaps not a coincidence that one of the film’s most (in)famous and referenced scenes is also the ne plus ultra of camp excess and contradiction. Relegated to her shack as an outcast souillon, Peau d’âne is visited by the attendant to the Queen of the Red Kingdom. He flatly orders her to bake a cake for the prince, and she scurries inside to read earnestly from her cookbook. After reading several recipes to herself, she arrives at the

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15 This scene opens both the French and American trailers for Peau d’âne. In addition, the song associated with the scene, “Recette pour un cake d’amour,” continues to be referenced in French culture. For example, model Carla Bruni interpreted the song for an AIDS research fundraiser in France in 2016. Chanel’s Fall/Winter 2020/21 prêt à porter show was accompanied by the music of Peau d’âne.
perfect one: *le cake d’amour*. She rises from her gilded rococo chair – posed among the filth of the shack – and remembers that she must cook in her *robe couleur de soleil*. In this moment, she undergoes a literal splitting of personality; the Princess walks to the kitchen space, dressed in full Louis XV regalia, while Peau d’âne offers culinary instruction from the other side of the room. Ascending major scales of strings and trumpets serve as a portent to the viewer that something very important is about to happen. Indeed, despite the patent absurdity of the visuals, this scene represents a narratively serious event. By baking the perfect cake for the Prince, Peau d’âne has the potential to escape the isolation and ostracism of the village, thwart her father’s incestuous desire, and find love. All the same, the scene is, I would argue, of a camp sensibility; the seriousness will fail.

When the Princess begins cooking, it becomes evident that the recipe is rather impractical (“une larme de miel, un soupçon de sel”). Unfazed, the Princess follows Peau d’âne’s directions without hesitation. Her lacy sleeves get soiled with flour, and as the recipe comes together in her *jatte*, the *pâte* looks distinctly unappetizing. In an unforgettable moment, she cracks an egg and a baby chick emerges, which she clutches in her hand. A close-up glamor shot shows her eyes in enrapt wonder, her smile wide and teeth somehow minatory. Sontag writes: “Camp rests on innocence. That means Camp discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it” (283). While it cannot be known if Catherine Deneuve was in on the joke (in fact it is better if she is not), the effect is still the same: the innocence and earnestness with which she goes about baking the cake are almost a scene of burlesque frivolity. The two extremes inflect each other. Like with Geneviève and Guy’s plaintive declarations of love, everything transpiring in the shack’s kitchen is in between quotation marks. The Princess is not cooking for the Prince, she is “cooking for the Prince.” She succeeds at baking the cake, but the manner in which she does so is the
foregrounded element. The *how* is infinitely more important than the *why*. To paraphrase Sontag, the entire scene is camp in part because style triumphs over content (287). How unsurprising, then, that in the next scene the prince will become violently ill from eating his future beloved’s confection.

The aforementioned scenes of camp demonstrate how Demy used elements of *mise-en-scène*, notably saturated color and the sentimental music of Michel Legrand, to create a moving aesthetic and emotional experience for the viewer, and specifically here, the queer viewer. This analysis of Demy’s deployment of a variety of effects to intensify his narratives and to further emotionally implicate the viewer in them would be incomplete without some meditation on one of the greatest tools in his toolbox: his choice of actress. In the triptych of films, an obvious uniting factor is the presence of Catherine Deneuve; no other actor appears in all three films in this triptych. As argued above, Demy crafted the female avatars of Geneviève, Delphine and Peau d’âne/the Princess with Deneuve in mind (Berthomé 180, 224). In *L’univers de Jacques Demy* (1995), Agnès Varda, director in her own right and Demy’s wife, remarked on Demy’s insistence on Deneuve’s presence because she was his “princesse idéale.”

A germane question in excavating significance, especially queer significance, from this triptych of films is: why Catherine Deneuve? What seductive and affective qualities are particular and indelible to her that could not have been performed by Brigitte Bardot, or Jeanne Moreau, for example? Why does she operate so well as a camp persona? These questions are particularly important in better understanding Demy’s cinema because we cannot divorce Demy and Deneuve. As Susan Weiner writes in her essay *Demy and Deneuve: the princess and the post-’68 fairy tale*: “Deneuve’s screen persona and Demy’s cinema developed in tandem … each a showcase for the other” (46). Deneuve herself seemed to confirm this inexorable connection.
when she observed to Cinéma in 1981: « Demy m’a marquée plus définitivement qu’aucun autre réalisateur. L’image qu’a imposée de moi Les Parapluies de Cherbourg correspond quelque part à une vérité de moi-même. » Her words demonstrate not only that Demy had a tremendous impact on her career, but also that Demy’s invented image of her corresponded and continues to bear relation to some fundamental truth about herself\textsuperscript{16}.

In order to capture what that truth might be, and thereby have a more complete understanding of the queer response to the triptych, the relatively recent field of Star Studies is quite useful. This field aims to study the star as a text, as a “signifier of cultural meanings” that can reveal much about the fantasies and values of a particular culture and time. For example, in the 1950s Edgar Morin made use of a Marxist framework in understanding the star as a commodity to be sold and then to encourage future consumption (Downing and Harris 6-8). As Downing and Harris explain in their introduction to From Perversion to Purity: The Stardom of Catherine Deneuve, star studies offer a unique opportunity to better understand the importance of “subcultural audience recuperation of the star images” by, for example, the queer audience\textsuperscript{17} (6-7). Since Deneuve has been identified as both a gay and a fashion icon (Asibong 145, Handyside 162), an examination of the effects of her particular presence in Demy’s triptych adds necessary depth to a queer reading. The particular gay male cultural trend of elevating certain women to the status of superstars (à la Andy Warhol) or what we now colloquially call icons should not be ignored in approaching film from a queer perspective. Andrew Ross reminds us in Uses of Camp:

\textsuperscript{16} Traces of the image that Demy cultivated of Deneuve can be found throughout her career, especially in films by gay directors. For example, in François Ozon’s Potiche (2010), Deneuve plays the owner of an umbrella factory, calling to mind Geneviève and her mother’s occupation in Parapluies. Consider also Christophe Honoré’s musical Les Bien-aimés (2011), in which Deneuve plays a contemporary woman marked by illicit love affairs and political separations since her youth in the 60s.

\textsuperscript{17} Downing and Harris draw upon Richard Dyer’s book Heavenly Bodies: film stars and society (1986) in positing the queer potential of star studies.
“As with persecuted or economically subordinate groups, the fantasy possibilities of life on the screen allowed the utopian privilege of imagining a better world … Gay male identification with the power and prestige of the female star was, first and foremost, an identification with women as emotional subjects in a film world in which men ‘acted’ and women ‘felt.’” (323)

Because gay men can often relate to the female star on an emotional level, and I would add, on a vicarious sexual level, there is a great deal of overlap between queer theory and star studies. Star studies, then, is not a vehicle here to parrot popular discourse surrounding Deneuve. That is, her lifestyle preferences, relationships, and beauty rituals are of virtually no interest. Instead, her screen persona within Demy’s work can be read for queer purposes, offering what Downing and Harris call a resistant and against-the-grain interpretation (11-12). I would argue that in Deneuve we also find a strong source of continuity in Demy’s work as an acteur fétiche, “a site on which the director inscribes a continuity of meanings internal to his project” (Downing and Harris 10).

Deneuve’s sartorial stylings change considerably from film to film, but the persona beneath them is continuous. As we will see below, this persona is yet another camp element of the triptych.

In attempting to pin down the continuity of meanings that have been attached to Deneuve as a star text, I have found two major loci of interpretation. The first interprets Deneuve as a hyper-feminine, culturally nostalgic, distinctly white, and “pure” cinematic presence. This grouping of interpretations of Deneuve will be presented not as an endorsement, but as a claim to be challenged. By developing Deneuve instead as an epicene ideal, by pantheonizing her as a Camp persona, the star text will be read for queer purposes and freed from these conservative characterizations. By interpreting the star’s persona with the help of Jean Baudrillard’s theorizing in De la séduction (1979), Deneuve’s androgynous and seductive qualities will be
shown to have more potency and relevancy in Demy’s work than any associations with whiteness or bourgeois values.

To begin with the outright negative interpretations of Deneuve as a star text, let us consider Bridget Birchall’s essay *Incongruous femininity: Catherine Deneuve and 1970s political culture*. In the essay, she locates an uncomfortable contrast between Deneuve’s traditional feminine dress - especially her long flowing blonde hair, which she interprets as a signifier of youth and heterosexual availability to men – and the alternatives presented by the sexual liberation movement(s) concurrent with her film work (our Demy triptych spans 1964 to 1970, a time of massive social change in France). For Birchall, Deneuve, despite her vocal support for the legalization of abortion and sympathy for the feminist movement(s), is a symbol of traditional femininity. Deneuve as a cultural sign, in effect, guarantees the heterosexual order and erases or denies the alternative femininities unleashed by the feminist and gay liberation movements (Birchall 81). Criticism of Deneuve as a conservative symbol can be seen as well in Guy Austin’s book *Stars in Modern French Film* (2003), which draws upon Klaus Theweleit’s theorizing on fascist impulses and western culture’s incessant urge to see women in images. In *Male Fantasies* (1987), Theweleit attempts to identify a binary into which the West divides women. The first is the Red Woman, characterized as corporeal, sexualized, working class. Theweleit posits that, for disaffected straight men, she is the “internal maelstrom of terrifying desires” (qtd. in Austin 34). The obverse of this Janus coin is the White Woman, “a shining bastion against such filth” (Austin 34). She is characterized as ethereal, impassive, and noble. Due in part to her associations with elegance and bourgeois emotional restraint, Austin identifies Catherine Deneuve as the White Woman (35). He focuses in particular on the evolution of her image in *Parapluies*, in which he sees a mutation from the Red to the White woman in Demy’s
character development of Geneviève. The shop girl who blushes over her working-class boyfriend and later cries over his absence is resolved into an insular and statuesque bourgeoisie. He writes: “Her image is maternal yet cold, as symbolized in the final, snowy scene of Les Parapluiés de Cherbourg, the film that made her a star” (35). Given that the White Woman is the eternally obliging “nonwhore,” responsive to male fantasies (34), Austin’s evaluation easily leads to the conclusion that Deneuve the star text is reactionary. She represents a return to traditional femininity and a repudiation of the freedoms of sexual liberation. She can be mother, nurse, or plaything, but she is never dirty. In this line of thinking, her persona is the “white mask” of bourgeois purity and introversion (Austin 41-42). Finally, in his essay The Killing of sister Catherine: Deneuve’s Lesbian Transformations, Andrew Asibong identifies a Deneuve who is an embodiment of French national identity¹⁸ and white bourgeois cleanliness. He posits that, on screen, a superiority is conferred upon her for being widely recognized as impossibly beautiful, or ideal. Thus, he writes that Catherine Deneuve is a “potentially fascistic myth” (151). Thinking within this framework, she is the embodiment of a discourse that puts Gallic beauty and birthright privilege on a pedestal while devalorizing anything outside those standards.

Because of their extremely dangerous implications, it is essential to cover these interpretations of Deneuve. Nonetheless, I would argue that the above fixation on Deneuve’s looks is a particularization of a much more general truth: cinema is undemocratic with regards to physical appearance. This observation reveals little with regard to Deneuve’s place within Demy’s cinema. In addition, almost all of the above critiques miss what I see as an essential aspect of Deneuve: the blank queer quality that she brings to her characters. It is here that there is

¹⁸ Deneuve’s effigy was the model for the official bust of Marianne, a symbol of the Republic, between 1985 and 1990 (Austin 42).
potential for a critical intervention into Deneuve’s androgynous, or queer, seductive persona in Demy’s triptych.

A second grouping of critical responses to Deneuve as a star text focus its attention less on her physical traits of being very white and very blonde. Instead, these interpretations attempt to draw meaning from her spectral, almost somnambulant screen persona. For example, in the same essay in which he grapples with the potentiality of a “fascistic,” aristocratic, or, perhaps most simply and truthfully put, a slightly smug Deneuve text, Asibong prioritizes a reading of her that is a queer invitation. In The Killing of sister Catherine, he writes: “Deneuve’s cinematic queerness has … emerged from on-screen evocations of a wide range of ‘perverse,’ paradoxical, or somehow blank heterosexualities” (145, emphasis author’s own). In this framing of Deneuve, the critical distance and stylish stiffness with which she embodies her heterosexual female roles allow for a diversity of viewers to put themselves in her shoes. The queer blank quality she brings to her characters, Asibong argues, “allow for a persona of limitless potentiality” (149).

Because there is such ambiguity in her portrayals and a near indifference to certain heterosexual couplings in her affect, the star text is rendered open to the production of meaning by viewers of limitless identities (Asibong 158). For example, in Demoiselles she reacts with complete disinterest to the sexually charged carnis that come on to her. In Peau d’âne, when the Prince is furtively admiring her beauty from outside her shack, she catches his gaze in the reflection of her hand mirror. Her response is to continue brushing her hair and singing to herself, apparently unfazed. Significantly, her only enthusiastic response to a man in her actual physical presence

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19 Incidentally, Deneuve is a natural brunette. Her bleached hair can be interpreted as artifice and playfulness, since it bears no relation to genetics or her “real,” biologically determined self.

20 It bears mentioning that there is a profound chasm between being slightly smug or hautaine, and possessing a fascistic persona. I believe any reference to “fascism” must be precise and rigorously defended. Otherwise, the word risks becoming a floating signifier, hazy in meaning and thus impotent in identifying that which is actually fascistic.
occurs with Guy in Part One (Le Départ) of Parapluies. The tragic outcome of that relationship demonstrates the impossibility of the happy heterosexual relationship.

Other authors who have remarked on Deneuve’s distant quality include Camille Paglia. In chapter fourteen of her 1990 work Sexual Personae, “Light and Heat,” Paglia attempts to trace a continuity of androgyne, effeminacy, and hermaphrodic fascination in the arts, analyzing figures from Athena to Nefertiti to David Bowie (367-8). She locates Deneuve within this tradition as a “screen zombie,” writing that: “Emotional lifelessness is psychological abstraction, a masculine impersonality” (368). For all of her invective about every topic under the sun, I feel that Paglia touches on a subtle truth here: right beneath the aesthetically hyperfeminine Deneuve lies a persona that aligns closely with traits that Western culture traditionally associates with masculinity. Deneuve as fully matured Geneviève, Delphine, or the Princess/Peau d’âne possesses a cold distance and near harshness that we are conditioned to associate with men. Instances of capricious and effusive femininity described above are carried out with such an ironic camp performativity that they are never naturalized into a persona that is, to take up an essentialist, heteronormative descriptor, “womanish.”

Crucially, her gender presentation within a culture that is accustomed to collapsing nuances of gender into a binary is transversal; it is at a delightfully confusing intersection of masculinity and femininity. In his aforementioned article, Asibong writes: “All social and sexual relations are marked – and power is created – by the artificial (but usually disavowed) exaggeration of difference” (153). Socially sanctioned heterosexual relations, then, hinge on the two parties occupying perceived opposite poles of gender performance (think of Barbie and Ken). By blurring that demarcation, Deneuve is an expression of the radical potential of androgynous affect. The star text breaks down an ideology of difference.
Because she incarnates certain blankness with relation to her sexuality on the screen, I would argue that Deneuve is the ideal tabula rasa onto which the queer viewer can project his or her fantasies and fears. In a different context, Gérard Depardieu remarked to French LGBT magazine *Têtu* in 1996: « Catherine Deneuve est l’homme que j’aurais aimé être ». This remark is initially confusing to the consumer of culture who associates Deneuve with traditional symbols of femininity, such as her widely recognized Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent advertisements. Yet, by examining the gendered qualities of her on-screen persona, especially in Demy’s work, Depardieu’s comment becomes more comprehensible. Deneuve embodies a combination of masculine and feminine traits, and this nonnormative blank openness provides an “in” for the queer viewer. A queer reading of Demy calls for a queer reading of his androgynous « princesse. »

In *De la séduction*, Jean Baudrillard theorizes on seductive forces in a way that is extremely useful in understanding Deneuve’s singular power to incarnate the camp persona par excellence. Baudrillard explores a vast array of components that comprise the polyvalent force that is seduction. As there is neither the time nor the space to explore them all here, let us consider at least that Baudrillard identifies seductive forces as those which stand in contrast to productive or natural forces (9, 21, 28). He means this on a quite literal level: production and sex are in the realm of drive, *pulsion*, the generation of fluids, and anatomy. He writes: « La séduction est partout et toujours ce qui s’oppose à la production » (21). Seduction, in contradistinction to production, exists in the symbolic realm (19). Seduction lies in a certain secrecy and distance (50-51, 110, 174); it is a game of signs that maintains itself through feigned indifference or impersonality (137). To restate this in more concrete terms, I would extrapolate that Baudrillard’s conception of seduction lies in a couple’s engagement and not in their
honeymoon. Seduction is in desire, in expectations, in challenges, in lack, but it is not in copulation: « Le désir ne se soutient … que du manque » (16).

What is most fascinating for the present study of Deneuve as one component of a triptych of a camp sensibility is that many of Baudrillard’s definitions of seduction overlap with Sontag’s notes on camp. Further, it is at this confluence of seduction and camp that Deneuve’s star persona in the triptych can be better understood. For example, Sontag writes that camp, when observed in people, is the triumph of an epicene or androgynous style:

“ … Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness … consists in going against the grain of one’s sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine” (279).

In Demy’s Deneuve we can identify this type of attractiveness that synthesizes traits that we tend to associate with both the masculine and the feminine. For example, at the end of Parapluies we see a persona that is at the intersection of masculine and feminine qualities. Geneviève is dressed in luxurious fur, large pearl earrings and an elaborate bleached-blonde bouffant. Her exposed legs marionette in high heels through the accumulating snow. The way Demy has stylized her body, she is performing her femininity formidably, both for the 1960s audience and today’s. Yet and still, her affect when she sings to Guy the final time is remarkably distant and controlled. She is impassive and spectral, qualities that I believe Paglia and Ross correctly associate with notions of masculinity. Given the masculine energy – or studied indifference – that emanates from and ultimately envelops her feminine stylings, there is actually a homoerotic quality to her last interaction with Guy, one marked by forbidden desire.
Interestingly, Baudrillard identifies seduction as a “jeu transsexuel,” a parody or a game of masculine and feminine traits (28). Yet, he elaborates that we are living in a world that is imploding all binary distinctions, but not in a way that is seductive. On the erosion of differences in semiotics, he writes:

« Ce à quoi nous assistons aujourd’hui : à l’érosion lente de toutes les structures polaires à la fois … Mais cette neutralisation n’est pas séduisante. La séduction, elle, est ce qui précipite les termes l’un vers l’autre, ce qui les réunit dans leur maximum d’énergie et de charme, et non ce qui les confond dans leur minimum d’intensité » (148).

For Baudrillard, what is seductive is not neutralizing opposites, but drawing them together in a configuration that takes from both their most vital and charming aspects. If we view his treatment of the collapsing of structuralist binaries through the lens of gender, this explains, in part, Deneuve’s seductive persona. In Demy’s triptych, she brings together masculine and feminine traits to a more powerful and heightened effect. Deneuve the star text is not amorphous, without distinction; she is not a dilution made up of the least offensive elements of what we identify as masculine or feminine. In this way, Baudrillard’s commentary on seduction being a union of opposing terms echoes Sontag’s above remark about the epicene nature of camp. Within camp’s perspective, she writes, the most attractive people are ones who possess a potent mixture of masculine and feminine traits.

The interchangeability of camp and seduction extends to these concepts’ aversion to nature and embrace of artifice. Baudrillard writes: « La séduction n’est jamais de l’ordre de la nature, mais de celui de l’artifice » (10). In terms of camp sensibility, Sontag concurs: “All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy” (279). It is fitting then, that Deneuve as a seductive and campy star text, is most often stylized in
Demy’s films in an exaggerated, artificial manner. In each film of the triptych, Demy chooses to attach blonde wigs to already blonde hair. If it were not so skillfully applied, the use of makeup would be read as heavy-handed. In addition, as explored above, Deneuve’s performance of gender is exaggerated at times to an extent that calls attention to its performativity. Though her face retains its glacial serenity in the famous cake-baking scene, there is no suspicion here that Demy is showing a woman in her “natural” environment doing “natural” things; she is performing “womanhood” as “Catherine Deneuve” herself. What Sontag identifies as the triumph of artifice over nature in camp, Baudrillard calls the superior seductive force of ritual beauty compared to natural beauty (124-125). What Butler identifies as gender performativity, Sontag would call “Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (280) and Baudrillard would call seduction as the perfection of the artificial sign (130-132). Demy’s Deneuve, with her performative mix of masculine and feminine, is the incarnation of these ideas expressed in different terminologies.

Finally, in the blank or impersonal heterosexuality that Asibong and Paglia find in Deneuve’s persona, Baudrillard also identifies a seductive force: « Les grandes stars [de cinéma] … brillent par leur absence. Elles brillent par leur nullité, et leur froideur, qui est celle du maquillage et du hiératisme rituel … » (132). He continues: « Il y a quelque chose d’impersonnel dans tout processus de séduction » (137). It is as if he had Deneuve in mind when theorizing seduction. As identified above, the presence she brings to the screen is paradoxically an absence, an impassive introversion that withdraws from her own corporeality. Baudrillard’s conceptions of seduction crystalize how camp, performativity, and distance are so potent through the Deneuve persona. From a queer perspective, Demy’s choice of “princesse idéale” (of camp) is a sign of excellent instincts. N’en déplaise à Birchall and Austin, Deneuve’s star power does not come from a subtle appeal to fascist impulses or retrograde ideas about women. It is the result of
a seductive, camp force of persona that, as Asibong documents, happens to appeal strongly to
gay men and lesbians (Asibong 145).

This chapter has unified Demy’s triptych beyond queer narrative to the queer aesthetic of
camp. Camp, like gender parody, is claimed as a queer aesthetic in part because it calls attention
to the performativity and artifice of doing gender, being “natural,” or even seducing. In
analyzing key scenes of camp sensibility, we have seen how Demy uses the tools of Michel
Legrand’s music, color, travelling shots, and costume to evoke a particular queer aesthetic effect.
In addition, one of the indispensable and omnipresent tools of his *mise-en-scène* is having cast
Deneuve to embody the persona of his vision. Camp, and its seductive, glacial emissary, also
unify this triptych.
Conclusion

In the documentary Les Demoiselles ont eu 25 ans (1993), Varda tenderly explores the making of Demy’s film and how its production continues to impact Rochefort and its inhabitants twenty-five years later. One Rochefortais recounts concerning the arrival of Demy and his crew:

« On était tous un peu endormi, et c’était un peu comme La Fée au bois dormant. Rochefort, c’est ça. Ils sont arrivés avec leur film et on s’est réveillé, on s’est levé du lit baldaquin, et on s’est tous mis à chanter. C’était merveilleux, c’était extraordinaire. »

It has been said that to analyze beauty too much is to destroy it, but the objective of this thesis has been to find the exhilarating and uplifting in Demy’s Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne. In these films, meaning is excavated to “wake us up,” to bring greater awareness to the struggles faced by queer people. Demy’s films are beautiful, but the eye candy is not an empty signifier. This revelation, or awakening that Demy’s three films are grounded in a melancholy about unfulfilled desire and isolation need not drain this triptych of their visual and sonic joy and pleasure. Instead, in the spirit of Camp sensibility, the viewer can conquer the tragic and make irony, expose the naturalized as pure artifice and mock it, take the serious and turn it into play.

The uplifting and life-changing potential of what Demy’s triptych offers cannot be understated: some of the most somber and disappointing impositions of life, especially for a marginalized group, can be reframed on our own terms. Demy’s way of seeing unfulfilled desire and imposed solitude permits a mental escape from it. This perspective shift calls us, like the Rochefortais remarked, to set ourselves to singing. What is more, Demy’s own lyrics implore us to find joy in the beauty of life, even amidst hostility or failure. In Demoiselles, Delphine and Solange

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21 Laura Mulvey made reference to this maxim in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975).
reluctantly volunteer to perform a dance number for the weekend carnival at the pleading of the carnies. At this point in the narrative, both feel forever stuck in Rochefort and at romantic dead ends. Still, they sing before the carnival crowd:

« Quand l’amour a disparu / quand le cœur s’en est allé / du côté des jamais, plus jamais / On ne peut que regretter / L’amour envoie / Mais pour ressusciter l’amour / Si votre cœur vide est trop lourd / Si l’ennui menace vos jours / Il faut aimer / … Chanter la vie, chanter les fleurs / Chanter les rires, chanter les pleurs / Chanter la mer, chanter le feu / Chanter la terre pour être heureux ! »

This song and dance number is absolute glittering spectacle, and it is also serious advice from Demy to the viewer. Happiness must be ours for the taking, and Demy’s work demonstrates a tactic of finding it in the aestheticization of daily life.

As seen in Chapter One, some critics have characterized Demy’s cinema as apolitical and disengaged. As I have demonstrated, this is myopic at the very least in not considering the films’ rich queer potential as well as other critics’ scholarship showing links between his films and serious realities such as war, the discomforts of confronting class difference, the transition in France from imperialism to economic liberalism, the constraints of marriage, and so on. In addition, I find that the aesthetic and affective prescriptions Demy offers point the way out of a bleak reality. More work must be done in the field of affect theory, but Sara Ahmed’s essay “Happy Objects” approaches a partial explanation of the triptych’s radical potential. Ahmed advances that “happiness involves a specific kind of intentionality” and that the affect we bring into a space will influence how a space affects us (33, 37). Of course, happiness has a sociopolitical dimension. She references, for example, the “feminist kill-joy,” a person to whom unhappiness is unfairly ascribed because they find no delight in, and actively object to, sexist
jokes (30, 38). Also relevant is the cultural trope of the unhappy queer, the person who is marked as doomed to unhappiness because they have turned away from the traditional family model, an object hegemonically deemed to be happy. She writes: “The unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy” (43). The spaces we occupy and the way other people in them label us affect our ability to be happy.

Crucially, however, she argues that happiness is also a personal endeavor involving intentionality. To be affected by an event or an object need not be interpreted as an exclusively passive phenomenon. Instead, being affected can be viewed as action, because it is an act of evaluation (31). The affect we bring and the responses we cultivate are in our domain. Finally, Ahmed argues that happiness involves intentional work. In an Aristotelian view, she writes, happiness is the ultimate end and all good or virtuous acts are a means towards it. Yet, the good man in Aristotle’s view is the one who not only behaves justly, but who also derives pleasure from that behavior. He must both work on developing good habits, and on directing positive (happy) feeling towards them (35). This view has tremendous liberating potential because happiness moves beyond contingency. It becomes an active, intentional state because it is created through our way of approaching spaces and events, our evaluations of circumstance, and our work to find pleasure in the virtuous. A line from Demy’s film Lola (1961) resonates beautifully here: « Vouloir le bonheur, c’est déjà un peu le bonheur ».

As explored in chapters two and three, Demy’s triptych of Parapluies, Demoiselles, and Peau d’âne thematize unfulfilled desire and isolation. For the queer viewer, his narratives are especially touching and melancholically relevant. Koresky’s “queer ache of desire” is poignantly conjured up in the forbidden and thwarted love in Parapluies, the social and spatial isolation separating complementary pairings in Demoiselles, and the ostracism of difference in Peau
d’âne, to focus on but a few diegetic elements. However, as developed in Chapter four, by presenting the tragic through the prism of camp sensibility, Demy allows the viewer to walk away from his triptych with more than dour melancholy. Even in the films’ most tragic moments, there is effusive aesthetic joy in music, color, and dance. The “failed seriousness,” to borrow Sontag’s words, of the tragedies Demy sets in motion invite the viewer to regain power through affect. We can smile back – camp may even suggest we smirk back – at the melancholic. This road map out of tragic realities beyond our control has liberating potential. Thanks to Demy’s way of seeing, we can approach socially imposed pain – and his characters do psychically and physically suffer considerably - with distance, impassivity, or even dance.

I find that one of the most moving elements of Demoiselles is its treatment of the quotidian. Around the twenty-minute mark of the film, Delphine has just finished teaching a dance class that she finds to be fundamentally unfulfilling. After having brushed off Bill and Etienne’s unwanted compliments surrounding her looks, she is on her way to Galerie Lancien to break things off with Guillaume, a man who doesn’t care about her dreams and prizes her only for her body. Guillaume certainly does occupy a gallery of ideas that belong in the past; Demy’s wordplay in naming the gallery is darkly humorous. Between these two events, Delphine does not brood while traversing Rochefort like Carole in Polanski’s Repulsion (1965) or Séverine in Buñuel’s Belle de Jour (1967), films Deneuve also starred in between Parapluies and Demoiselles. Instead, something as banal as a walk from one disappointing place to the next becomes a joyous spectacle. Delphine hops, skips, and twirls down the street. Sailors gracefully lift her over a discarded bathtub obstructing her way, she stops to appreciate a man doing a

22 She sings: “Je n’enseignerais pas toute ma vie la danse / À Paris moi aussi je tenterai ma chance”

23 Dephine to Guillaume: “Que sais-tu de mes rêves et de quoi ils sont faits / Si tu les connaissais tu serais stupéfait … Pour toi je ne suis rien qu’une poupée de plus / Je me demande encore ce qui en moi t’a plu”
cartwheel on the sidewalk, she dances with young girls dressed in emerald green and bright orange, and she briefly plays hide-and-seek with two soldiers that she crosses. The plain, ordinary act of walking becomes its own resistance to the melancholy of the diegesis. Demy’s Delphine is basking in the happiness she chooses, regardless of what narratively precedes and follows. Demy’s vision of a practice of everyday life being actively converted into an occasion for joyous pleasure tracks Ahmed’s identification of intentionality in happiness. Delphine’s affect dictates the sweet happiness of the sequence, not her circumstances. While Demy’s triptych possesses an underlying melancholy, it also expresses a tremendous will to happiness. Beaver, Ross, Butler, and others have written on the suffering and punishment associated with the queer experience in a heterosexist world. I see this in Demy’s work, but I equally see a subcultural aestheticization of daily life that is a partial triumph over that struggle. Demy’s supplication to the viewer is the same as that of the *sœurs jumelles* and the carnies:

« Aussi fort que la joie / Aussi beau que la vie / Donnez-nous des chansons / Inventez des folies / … Chantons le jour / dansons la nuit / chantons les beautés de la vie / chantez la joie / chantez le vent / chantez la pluie et le beau temps / Exaltez-vous / Inspirez-nous / Enchantez-nous, étonnez-nous ! »
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