

The thoroughly conformist world of Amelie

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Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain [The extraordinary fate of Amelie Poulain] is the most recent film by French film director Jean-Pierre Jeunet, whose previous works include *Delicatessen* (1991), *The City of Lost Children* (1995) and the fourth “Alien” remake *Alien: Resurrection* (1997). Following its rejection for programme inclusion by the director of this year’s Cannes Film Festival, *Amelie* (as his new film is being called in English) has enjoyed a meteoric success in French cinemas with a viewing public of nearly eight million since its release in May. It has just opened in Germany to largely gushing reviews that invariably note that both French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and President Jacques Chirac have made a point of seeing and enthusing about the film.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet has a talent for translating everyday events into compelling images. His initial background as a filmmaker was in cartoons and animation film, and it shows. Separated from Jeunet’s pyrotechnical imagery, the figures and characters in his films remain schematic and unconvincing, while the moral of *Amelie* is simply banal. Nevertheless the attendance figures for his film indicates he has hit a nerve with the public. It is worth exploring why this is so.

Amelie begins with the juxtaposition of a series of unconnected, everyday images. We witness a fly being run over by a car, switch abruptly to drinking glasses dancing on a white cloth being blown by the wind, and then a man rubbing out the telephone number from his address book of a friend who has just died. Under a microscope a sperm embeds itself into an egg—we are witnessing the conception of the film’s main character, Amelie.

In a hectic series of intricately compiled images we speed through the infancy and childhood of Amelie. Her father is a doctor incapable of real affection and physical warmth. The only time he touches his child is

in the course of a routine examination he makes once a month. Aroused by the rare bodily nearness of her father during one such examination, Amelie’s young heart races. Pressing his stethoscope to her chest the father concludes that the girl has a heart defect and proceeds to wall her off from the external world. Later we encounter Amelie (Audrey Tautou) as a shy, introverted woman in her middle twenties working in a bar in Montmartre.

All of Jeunet’s characters in *Amelie* are semi-proletarian, but far removed from what might be regarded as ordinary. They possess a surplus of foibles, weaknesses and endearing eccentricities: the one-armed boy working for the greengrocer who is so tender and respectful to the fruit and vegetables he handles, the elderly artist neighbour suffering from brittle bone disease who every year paints a copy of the same picture, as well as Amelie herself, of course, and her colleagues and customers in the bar where she works.

The world of politics and power is alien and far removed. Amelie goes to a newspaper stand to buy a paper. It is the start of September 1997, one day after the violent death of Princess Diana in a Paris car crash. The Princess Di headlines and story dominate the pages of all papers—as well as the billboards. It is useless to look for any other news. With a sweep Jeunet has established an important pre-condition for his “fabulous” but also very hermetic world of Amelie, where there is nothing better to concentrate on than the peregrinations of the film’s heroine in her entirely predictable search for true love.

Jeunet’s Paris is a thoroughly sanitised version of the real thing—Paris inside the “*periferique*” (the ring road around the city)—clean, tidy, free from honking cars, tourists, too many foreigners and other complications. The action is concentrated in a Paris bar situated at the heart of Montmartre—the famous and picturesque haunt of artists and writers at the start of

the twentieth century. The Metro stations are tidy, the advertising placards on the walls are artistic and very French. One has the impression that Jeunet went to great lengths to ensure that no poster for a Hollywood film disturbed his background shots of scenes played out in Paris's central railway station Gare de l'Est. In another scene in the film we are treated to nostalgic black and white newsreel footage of a Tour de France cycle race. This is very evidently a Paris and France before globalisation, performance-enhancing drugs and McDonald's fast-food restaurants ever happened.

Even the beggars are happy with their lot in such an idyllic Paris and bear their fate with dignity. As Amelie rushes to catch a train on Sunday she stops to donate a few Francs to a tramp slumped against a railing with his dog. "Non, merci!" he says, rejecting the donation, "I never work on Sundays."

Upon the insistence of her elderly artist neighbour Amelie discovers that if she interferes and makes small changes to the environment of the people around her, then it is possible to make significant changes to their lives. She removes her father's garden gnome from its shrine in his garden and sends it on a trip round the world. The father, who has never travelled in his life, takes up the example of his gnome, packs his bags and sets off to see the world. With similar means Amelie is able to bring a shimmer of romance into the life of a spinster fellow worker. Now Amelie is confronted with the most difficult task of all—overcoming her own inhibitions to snare the man of her dreams.

According to Jeunet the world is a vast mesh of barely comprehensible causes and effects which defy any sort of meaningful change on a large scale. Nevertheless opportunities do arise whereby the individual can initiate changes in life's fabric with dramatic consequences. As one character comments; life is like the Tour de France, blink at the wrong moment and you miss it. In fact the film's message is thoroughly trite and familiar—the world is full of wonder and mystery, keep your senses alert, your eyes open for opportunities and maybe you can overcome the tawdry fate that awaits most of mankind.

In interviews Jeunet emphasises his desire, together with a new generation of French directors, to liberate French cinema from what he terms the intellectual "garbage" of the French *Nouvelle Vague* and contemporary French "realist" cinema, which he

describes as "badly written, badly filmed, as stupid as life itself." In fact, Jeunet confuses two very different genres and periods when he lumps together the French New Wave and much contemporary French "realist" film.

Despite the unevenness of much of their work, French New Wave directors in the 1960s, drawing from the cinematic traditions in America and neo-realist cinema in Italy, were able to produce a host of thoughtful, provocative films which cast a wry, critical glance at modern society. The crisis of much modern French "realist" film has very much to do with broad ideological sentiments. A number of contemporary French filmmakers (e.g., Bruno Dumont) recognise and feel compelled to comment on the howling injustices and inhumanity in modern capitalist society, but they lack confidence in a political alternative which would allow them to step back and approach their subject with more consideration and objectivity.

Jeunet's response to modern society—after all the French Republic has been shaken recently by a series of profound political and financial scandals and political support for the ruling parties is at an historically low ebb—is to turn his back on all of it in favour of recreating a by-gone French wonderland which was in fact never that wonderful. *Amelie* is, all in all, despite the gags and visual fireworks, a thoroughly conformist film.



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