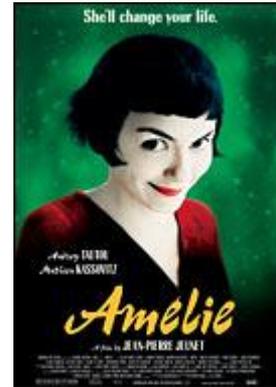


A Review of Amelie (Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amelie Poulain)

Amelie is a new film by director Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the French filmmaker who most recently directed the (hopefully) last installment of the uncomfortably Hollywood Alien franchise, *Alien Resurrection* (1997). Jeunet is best-known for his French-language collaborations with co-writer/director Marc Caro, *Delicatessen* (1991) and *The City of Lost Children* (1995). Fortunately, *Amelie* bears more resemblance to these films than to Jeunet's high-budget Hollywood mishap, displaying the unique visual style, oddball wit, good-natured surrealism, and off-the-wall empathy that made the earlier films successful.



Amelie is a comedy, the story of a shy, imaginative woman who decides to change the world by changing the lives of the people she knows. Amelie (played French actress Audrey Tatou) had an eccentric childhood, we learn through flashback, raised by two equally eccentric parents who overprotected her, believing her (incorrectly) to be suffering from a rare heart condition. As a result, she was held out of school, and, as a result, spent most of her time alone, developing an active fantasy life.

The first major turning point in Amelie's life occurs when her mother, the one person she has significant contact with as a child, is accidentally killed by a suicidal Canadian tourist leaping from atop a cathedral at precisely the wrong time. Her father, already emotional distant, becomes more so. In spite of all this, Amelie somehow grows up to be a fairly well-adjusted adult, now working as a café waitress. The second turning point in Amelie's life is when Princess Diana dies in a car wreck 1997. She alerts her to the fleeting nature of life, and she decides that she should do all she can to bring joy to those around her while there is still time. This quest draws her into the life of a strange assortment of characters—a hypochondriac, an elderly artist with a rare bone disease, a boorish vegetable stand owner, a young adult video store clerk obsessed with collecting discarded photo booth photos, and her own emotionally repressed father. There's also a couple of very funny subplots involving the rearranging of furniture and a globe-trotting garden gnome.

Like the worlds of *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children* (and, for that matter, the world of *Alien Resurrection*), there's no confusing the world of *Amelie* with the world we live in. It's a world that's purely (and slightly perversely) fantasy, a fairy tale for adults. It's a world that manages to be both self-indulgent and compassionate at the same time, taking pleasure in the pleasure of others, appreciating both the small joys of life and its huge absurdities. Above all, *Amelie* is, like Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (another terrific movie released in 2001) about emotional growth, human connection, and learning to be thankful for the small, good things in life.

That Jeunet is able recreate so many of the small, good things in life in such fine detail during the course of the hour-and-a-half of film that is *Amelie* speaks volumes about his talent as a filmmaker. The film has already garnered a host of award nominations at the British Academy Awards, European Film Academy Awards, and Golden Globe Awards, and it should be a lock for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards.

--Matt Parks (Feb 1, 2002)