

Le Petisme: flirting with the sordid in *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*

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Abstract

The happiness carefully constructed in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie (2001), finds its roots in the recent French phenomenon of a return to minuscule pleasures of daily life, le petisme. Petisme is first a reaction to and a concern about everything that is gigantic or growing in France, that is, globalization, crime, ordinary violence, unemployment, hypermarkets, and the loss of individual identity in the technological age. Petisme bears homage to the little things. It prioritizes the local, the immediate, that which can be quickly rectified, and implies a diversion from the larger issues. It centres on the familiar, resulting in a withdrawal into oneself. It involves an interest in the 'fait divers' or usually sordid, current local event. Jeunet's film taps into this need for a diversion from a mistrust and growing malaise in a France facing the rise of globalization, increasing cultural diversity, a growing lack of confidence in governmental institutions, public security and an unstable economic climate. As this article demonstrates, Jeunet's film remains well anchored in its socio-historical and cinematic period, exploiting the same issues of loneliness and isolation found in recent French new social cinema.

Keywords

*Le Fabuleux Destin
d'Amélie Poulain
Jean-Pierre Jeunet
petisme
faits divers
French film*

Enthusiasm in France surrounding Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (2001) has focused primarily on the film's ability to make its audiences feel good. Critical reviews have often drawn on the film's potential to evoke a certain happiness present in everyday life. The happiness carefully constructed in *Amélie* sparks from the female protagonist's active intervention in the lives of her co-workers, neighbours and family, just as much as it finds its roots in the minuscule pleasures of daily life, *le petisme* (Mermet 2003: 279). A relatively new French word (formed on the 'petit', or small), *petisme* refers to a reaction to the national concern about everything that is gigantic or growing, that is, globalization, crime, ordinary violence, unemployment and the loss of individual identity in the technological age. *Petisme* bears homage to the little things. It prioritizes the local, the immediate, that which can be quickly rectified, and implies a diversion from the larger issues. It centres on the familiar, resulting in a withdrawal into oneself (Biais et al. 2003: 53). *Petisme* implies an attraction for everyday scenarios, situations, obstacles and news. The happiness associated with *Amélie* develops from this recent phenomenon.

I argue that this happiness functions as a diversion, a distraction or avoidance of reality. The viewers' pleasure derives from the heroine's mischievous antics and revenge; satisfaction arises from her rapid potential

elimination of others' misery and frustration. Souvenirs, games, disguises, imaginary friends and secret collections distract us from the background of deformation, malady and isolation haunting the film. Infantile actions become a valorized means of achieving immediate gratification. They provide a means of escape for the female protagonist (and for the viewer), allowing for a regression to a time before adult responsibilities and behaviours. This happiness is, however, inseparable from the angst and mistrust that foreground the film; it grows from the loneliness found in an increasingly individualistic French society in which 7.3 million persons live alone (Mermet 2003: 149). This emphasis of small pleasures and malaise reveals the extent to which *Amélie* is anchored in its socio-historical and cinematic period.

(Un)happiness

Amélie first appears as light entertainment, especially when compared with other contemporary French films displaying a fascination with the sordid and banal existences of everyday life. In Carlos Pardo's February 2000 article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on the then recent French cinema, originally published anonymously in *Libération* in 1999, the journalist and film-maker criticizes a certain tendency among French directors who revel in 'despair, decadence, impasse, powerlessness and murder' (Pardo 2000: 28). Pardo's task in this socially engaged article is twofold. He criticizes recent French film-makers who create cinematic scenes which become true advertisements for their films. These scenes and expressions facilitate the sale of the film and, at times, supply a shock-value effect composed mostly of graphic violence and sex. This mixing of genres, of publicity and product, results in a solipsistic self-referentiality: 'We sometimes ask ourselves if certain scenes have not been made uniquely for the preview' (Pardo 2000: 28).

Pardo's article illustrates through comparison the ways in which films of the mid-to-late 1990s by Breillat, Dumont, Grandrieux, Kassovitz, Noé, Ozon and Zonca 'darken into a sordid naturalism and stay fascinated with decline, hopelessness and defeatism [...]. Fundamentally, their fascination with the abject and sordid reveals an undeniable hate of the people' (Pardo 2000: 28). In fact, it is not so much the content of recent films by these directors that is at issue, but rather the *ways* of filming and valorizing gore, repulsiveness and the lurid in a realistic cinematographic style. Though the films mentioned explore diverse subject matters and approaches, just as they demonstrate different styles of film-making, they are all marked by a realist aesthetic accompanied by 'a very ambiguous social and political discourse' (Pardo 2000: 28). They are part of a French cinema of the 1990s which has been described as social renewal by film critic Franck Garbarz and new poetic realism by Martine Beugnet (Beugnet 2000; Garbarz 1997). For Phil Powrie, this renewed interest in the social and the political is a new social cinema developing from a 'postmodern attraction to representations of the ordinary, establishing ties with the social cinema of the 1930s and the realist cinema of the 1970s; the aura of spectacle has become the ordinary of the everyday' (Powrie 2002: 81). This sordid naturalism, which Pardo sees in *La Vie de Jésus/The Life of Jesus* (Dumont,

1997) and *L'Humanité/Humanity* (Dumont, 1999), *Assassin(s)* (Kassovitz, 1997), *La Vie rêvée des anges/The Dreamlife of Angels* (Zonca, 1998), *Sombre* (Grandrieux, 1998), *Seul contre tous/I Stand Alone* (Noé, 1998) and *Les Amants criminels/Criminal Lovers* (Ozon, 1999), among others, show how film-makers are exploring a malaise in contemporary France, a malaise stemming from an unstable economy, rising rates of delinquency and crime, and a shift away from traditional values of family and religion. It is a microscopic examination of misery, awkwardness and identity crisis, a fascination in each other's base behaviour and bad luck; it comes from film-makers who no longer curse or fight against the society in which they live, but who (may) loathe their condition as human and living beings (Caviglioli 2003: 45).

Superficially, the fictional day-to-day in *Amélie* is far from the brutality of Ozon's *Les Amants criminels* and Noé's *Seul contre tous*, the rape and murder of a young girl in Dumont's *L'Humanité*, and the boredom and violence of adolescence of his *La Vie de Jésus* or of Kassovitz's *Assassin(s)*. At first sight it seems impossible to compare the lives of Jeunet's protagonists with the desperation portrayed in *Rosetta* (Dardenne, 1999) and with Isa's and Marie's destiny in Zonca's *La Vie rêvée des anges*. Jeunet's neighbourhood recalls few concerns of public insecurity or the questionable behaviour of public institutions which attempt to preserve urban safety, so clearly exposed in Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995). The disillusioned decors of *Rosetta* or *La Promesse* (Dardenne, 1996) of dirt, empty petrol tanks and *sans-papiers* appear initially to have little in common with *Amélie*.

Undeniably, Jeunet's Montmartre is a neighbourhood without socio-economic hardship, without crime, without the racial or religious issues of contemporary France. In his world, the homeless do not even beg on Sundays. But just below the surface lies a plot preoccupied with angst, isolation, loss, sickness and death and a myriad of dysfunctional and lonely neighbours including a recluse, an alcoholic and a hypochondriac. What differentiates *Amélie* from other films mentioned above is that Jeunet weaves the human condition into a (false) sentimentalist story of a heroine out to provoke happiness, out to fix things. Like a new product, marketed for a needy public, Jeunet tells us, 'Amélie will change your [desperate?] life.'

It is quite fitting that an interview with Jeunet should be entitled 'Magnificent Obsession' [*sic*] because most of the film's characters are just that, obsessed (Pride 2001). They have developed neurotic pastimes and elaborate collections. Some have hobbies that structure their lives. Others relieve stress through repetitive gestures. Pleasure in *Amélie* comes from childhood habits and everyday adult tasks, mostly through the obsessive (re)ordering of objects, arrangement of things and fantasy. Comical biographies, focusing on the small solitary pastimes, show ways in which characters find pleasure and displeasure from everyday occurrences. Larger social concerns do not exist. While Amélie's father likes to remove wallpaper, shine his shoes, meticulously vacuum and organize his toolbox, her mother obsessively cleans and repacks her handbag. She enjoys waxing the hardwood floors with her special slippers, and watching ice-skating competitions on television. As a child, Amélie invents imaginary

friends, enjoys sliding her hands in sacks of grain, breaking through the caramelized surface of a *crème brûlée* and skimming pebbles on the canal, immediate pleasures experienced alone. As an adult, she likes watching others at the movies, being with others, yet without any direct social interaction. Happiness is either an affair of individuals and things, or it is constructed through play. In this world, as the rest of the film demonstrates, we are alone together.

A sense of control and security comes from an obsessive mastering of ordinary situations: Amélie's father scrutinizes her health by performing a thorough monthly medical examination and her mother schools her at home. Just as likes stem from activities performed alone, so dislikes entail chance events and the presence of others. Here, it is the question of urinating next to another, comments on sandals, swimming trunks which stick embarrassingly to the skin at the public pool, a stranger's touch, and the irritating traces of unwanted contact with things, such as hands shrivelled by bath water and pillow marks left on the face after a night's sleep. In Amélie's family, contact with others either induces stress, embarrassment or disappointment, even a suicidal pet goldfish.

In Jeunet's Paris, people are alienated in their domestic space. They spend time in front of their televisions, find pleasure in dark movie theatres, peep shows and fun houses where people participate or watch alone in the dark. Individuals communicate through machines and mechanisms such as cassette players, telephones, cameras and video recorders. Joseph and Nino use Dictaphones to trace human expression. Garden gnomes facilitate the expression of thoughts and emotions. Letters and flyers fuel seduction. Protagonists converse through visual media. Some obsess over fixed images of others, yet have few relationships. Most interact merely through the exchange of things, usually lost objects that imitate the human form or return the gaze. Paradoxically however, the characters' lack of healthy interpersonal communication skills creates a homogeneous community. As in numerous French films of the late 1990s, there are neither nuclear families, nor stable couples in *Amélie*. The plot often builds on couples breaking up, reuniting or individuals mourning a lost partner. In fact, family holds no central role in any of the films mentioned. In many cases, such as in *Amélie*, *La Vie de Jésus*, *L'Humanité*, *Romance* (Breillat, 1999), *La Vie rêvée des anges*, friendship replaces family. In *Rosetta*, *La Vie rêvée des anges* and *Amélie* in particular, female protagonists come from single-parent or dysfunctional households, where roles are reversed within familial structures and daughters care for parents while trying to get by themselves. Are we then to believe Jeunet when he states this digitally 'cleaned-up' version of Paris's tenth *arrondissement* and of some eighty of the city's sites bring to fruition his first positive film (Pride 2001: 53)?

It is difficult to agree with Jeunet's claim that *Amélie* is a fully positive work when every element of his inhabitants' daily lives from childhood to adulthood is tainted with loneliness and unhappiness. Even childhood memories evoke painful events. Amélie loses her mother at an early age. She endures a stress-inducing monthly physical from her father. Nino is bullied by his classmates; 'whereas Amélie was deprived of contact with other children, Nino could have really managed without it', says the voice-

over. The schoolmaster humiliates the young Bretodeau who has just lost all the marbles he won. Whether in flashback or present time, loss permeates the film. It involves treasured objects as well as mobility, intimacy and loved ones. It stems from the accidental and unpredictable side of life in an increasingly individualistic society. In *Amélie*, loss simultaneously alienates and brings people together; it gives birth to Amélie, 'the do-gooder'.

Loss and loners

Without Amélie's transformation, Jeunet's film would be just a slice of life in the lives of the lonely: the retired widow, the single girl, the hypochondriac, the ill-natured grocer, the invalid, the jealous ex-boyfriend, the frustrated writer, the shut-in and the alcoholic concierge. It highlights loners who have lost normal daily contact with others or who have suffered from such contact and have become, consequently, recluses. In this instance, *Amélie* is not unique: numerous recent films highlight protagonists who are marginalized and spend most of their time alone. Audrey Tautou also stars in Laurent Firode's 2000 film *Le Battement d'ailes du papillon/Happenstance*, where, as is the case in *Amélie*, she is an active female protagonist on a quest; and like *Amélie*, the film deals with the need for social recognition, mischievous revenge, popular superstition, loneliness, illness and old age. Both films also exploit the consequences of individuals' everyday choices that create a ripple effect of random actions. What differs in *Amélie* is that Jeunet has created a marginal character who has perfected a system of mediated communication, a resourceful coping plan. Amélie intervenes, yet without directly addressing a problem or a desire. She provides what is lost or escaping our knowledge. She fixes small problems. She cannot solve unemployment, but arranges for a man to see his grandson. She gives us a quick fix, repairs what (we did or did not know) was broken and is an immediate remedy to every man's daily life. Amélie, the domestic good fairy, grows out of the daily loneliness that she attempts to efface.

Amélie may function as the element of hope, an incarnation of Lady Diana and Mother Teresa on the local level, in the *petit quartier*; however, this hope can never be divorced from loss. Images of Amélie's conception are coupled with a short scene of an elderly man erasing the name of his deceased best friend from his address book. The accidental death of Lady Diana inadvertently initiates the trajectory of our heroine.

Loss characterizes all those mentioned thus far, whether it be death as in *L'Humanité*, *La Vie rêvée des anges*, *Les Amants criminels* and *Sombre*, loss of love in *Romance* and *Sombre* or even *L'Humanité*, lack of hope in *Seul contre tous*, *La Vie rêvée des anges* and *Rosetta*. In such films, film-makers dissect human behaviour, offering graphic, and at times, grotesque, depictions of individuals in precarious and sombre situations. These films are not, however, unique. They are part of a stream of realist 1990s French films similarly motored by loss such as Patrice Chéreau's film of mourning and movement *Ceux qui m'aiment prendront le train/Those Who Love Me Will Take the Train* (1997), *Le Battement d'ailes du papillon* and *Marius et Jeannette* (Guédiguian, 1997), where it is question of employment, or Cédric Klapisch's *Chacun cherche son chat/When the Cat's Away* (1996), in which

the entire plot revolves around the search for Chloé's cat. Marginalized in one way or another, the protagonists of these films grapple with loneliness, as in *Amélie*.

Loneliness, of course, is the central paradox in recent years in French society, as well as in most Western cultures. Never have the means of communicating rapidly and efficiently been so available to the masses and never have the risks of 'excommunication', through exclusion and marginalization, seemed so pervasive (Mermet 2003: 57). In a society experiencing economic instability, the possibility of becoming marginalized is even greater. A fascination for films based on the everyday lives of those on the fringes of society is another shared theme in recent French cinema. This voyeuristic curiosity for others' day-to-day actions is best emphasized by reality television exposing *real* stories of *real* people in *real* situations, as witnessed in France with *Loft Story*, *Pop Stars* or *Star Academy* (Mermet 2003: 22). This permanent presence of ordinary people eliminating others for lack of particular skills, affiliations or alliances pinpoints a growing anxiety of adaptability, competitiveness and social elimination in an increasingly individualistic society.

In a society that values physical and social mobility, we also witness a preoccupation with the fear of the *loss* of attributes. Sickness and death remain central to plots in *Amélie*, *La Vie rêvée des anges*, *Rosetta*, *La Promesse*, *L'Humanité* and *La Vie de Jésus*. For example, in *Le Vie rêvée des anges*, Isa visits the comatose Sandrine. In *La Vie de Jésus*, the main protagonist, Freddy, suffers from epilepsy while a secondary character, Michou's brother, Cloclo, is immobilized and dies of AIDS. In both cases, a one-way communication is established; others speak (through words and gestures) to those hospitalized and remain unsure of being understood. In *La Vie rêvée des anges*, a car accident kills a mother and relegates the daughter to a coma, just as in *L'Humanité* a car crash causes the protagonist's fiancée and child's death. Jeunet also integrates this preoccupation with the loss or hindrance of mobility in numerous characters: a blind man, a boss who limps, a neighbour who suffers from a rare bone disease. Even Amélie supposedly suffers from a heart problem which forces her parents to forgo travel. Televised images such as a dancer with a wooden leg, a baby swimming, a horse and the cyclists of the Tour de France and a soccer game reinforce a preoccupation with movement. Physical mobility provides a means of escape and a certain level of autonomy, as seen in long sequences of people on foot or motorcycles in *La Vie rêvée des anges*, Pharaon's exhausting bike ride in *L'Humanité*, Freddy and his friend's long moped rides in *La Vie de Jésus*. Perhaps the clearest example highlighting mobility and bodily comfort in contemporary French cinema comes from Dominik Moll's thriller *Harry un ami qui vous veut du bien/A Friend Like Harry* (2000) where an old car without air-conditioning provokes a murderous plot. In *Amélie*, movement and its contrary, stagnation, dominate. For the most part, obsessed characters or those unable to find the right medium for self-expression are sedentary, associated with one particular physical space, such as the Parisian barfly and unpublished author of the local café, the alcoholic concierge, the recluse or the retired widow. Whereas certain protagonists never go beyond the mere stereotypes which

places propagate, others escape compartmentalization by frequenting diverse areas in the city (Gina, Nino and Amélie) and, at the film's end, those who travel about achieve emotional balance (Hipolito, Amélie, her father and Nino). The final sequence of Amélie and Nino, filmed at high speed, in which the two travel through the streets of Paris on his scooter, brings together the stereotype of romantic closure and the dynamic complex of emotional well-being and mobility.

As certainties diminish, the body tends to take on an increasing importance. It is no longer maintained merely to attract or seduce, as we see in the highly-stylized films of the 1980s *cinéma du look* (Vincendeau 2001: 24). The cult of the body, which has its roots in the 1980s, has developed progressively into a perception of the body as a means to achieve immediate physical pleasure and personal balance (Mermet 2003: 69). The body is viewed both as a way to attract others and to achieve well-being. Those simple and immediate corporeal pleasures suggest a regression to an earlier stage of childhood, a turning away from adult responsibilities and uncertainty. The preoccupation with bodily functions and malfunction, suffering and mortality, is coupled with a growing interest in the bodies of others. Such voyeurism takes several forms in contemporary cinema, illustrating a fascination for the natural body and the ordinary. Graphic images of sexual intercourse remain a common element of those films that comprise a so-called cinema fascinated by the sordid. The extreme close-ups of intercourse in *La Vie de Jésus*, Leos Carax's *Pola X* (1998), Breillat's *Romance* or even staged copulation in *L'Humanité* all recall an influence of the 1970s-pornographic style of 'unglamourized' (Powrie 2002: 82), crude images of sexual activity in which sex appears as a series of coldly robotic and repetitive motions. Likewise in *Amélie* sex appears also as a mechanized, but comical game. Objects move, lights flicker and cappuccino machines produce steam during Joseph and Georgette's sex scene, in a scene which recalls Jeunet's *Delicatessen* (1991). Sex organs and sexualized bodies become childish entertainment. Penises are plastic, wrapped in boxes and kept in view behind the counter. Young women leisurely serve coffee and dance in a back-room peep show. Orgasms are serialized. Amélie, who does not enjoy sex, satiates her sexual curiosity by imagining how many people are having orgasms at any given moment.

In most of the above-mentioned films, protagonists are, somehow and to some extent, hindered from freely expressing their desires. In *Seul contre tous*, the daughter is autistic. In *L'Humanité*, the protagonist Pharaon speaks little and appears to be living in a state of perpetual shock. Maria in *La Vie rêvée des anges*, refusing to confide in Isa and becoming increasingly more isolated, jumps eventually to her death. In *Romance*, Marie is dyslexic. In *Amélie*, fathers do not speak to their daughters. Communication among protagonists occurs through a circuit of images, messages, riddles, and quotations. Even the waitress Gina's interrogation of Nino to see if he is suitable for Amélie is mediated by French proverbs in which evidence of one's shared cultural heritage provides proof of acceptability and character. Revenge comes not from verbal confrontation, but from the manipulation of objects or electricity. Things provoke emotion, memory and reveal affiliations. As Mireille Rosello states, we are in a

system obsessed with the incessant consumption of commodities (Rosello 2002: 4).

Amélie presents the margins of a society where the gratuitous exchange or recycling of objects, and not consumption, holds an important role. It is primarily a film about recovery. The subplots of Bredoteau, Nino, Madeleine Water, the concierge and Amélie's father build from the recovery of sacred objects, whereas those of Georgette, Amélie's father and, to some extent, Amélie herself entail a restoration, however temporary, of healthy social activity. People do not create, but recreate, reconstruct and rearrange. They glean traces of the presence of others, those alive and those lost. Nino is a loner who collects photos of human footprints in concrete, tape-recorded samples of odd laughter and discarded identity photos. 'The Glass Man' pathologically repaints Renoir's *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*. The need of others' presence is, thus, fulfilled through human image; the gaze is returned through a medium. The obsessive collecting of photos and repainting of the Renoir allows the reconstructors to create fictive relationships. Thus, images of strangers replace the presence of family and friends. The exchange of money, video-cassettes, boxes, satchels and the manipulation of household items, garden gnomes and electricity relay disapproval and affection. Paintings, groceries and lottery tickets give pretence for relationships to develop.

Everything local reassures in *Amélie*, replicating a nostalgic view of a more traditional French neighbourhood, a universally accepted, exported version of the capital. In this instance, Amélie may be perceived as a calculated reaction to films like *La Vie rêvée des anges*, *L'Humanité*, *Rosetta*, *Les Amants criminels*, among others, in which little if any clarification of the past is expressed and concrete future plans are relatively non-existent. Here, plots exploit the immediacy of the protagonist's present situation. The past provides no solace. Extreme close-ups replicate a suffocating present or the immediacy of pleasure. Flashbacks are few. Beginnings start in mid-action; endings give little closure. At a time when extended families offering advice and support are rare, protagonists stagnate; some stumble blindly without definite future goals. Such would also be the case in *Amélie*, were it not for the presence of the crafty heroine. Amélie is first and foremost linked to the past. Her birth and biography are set out for the viewers so that we can better understand her present behaviours. Her retro-coif and garb identify her with the tailored silhouette of the likes of Chanel, yet with a modern touch (she wears Dr Marten-like shoes). Amélie reactivates memory for both Bredoteau and 'the Glass Man'. She rewrites a love affair for the concierge. In fact, Amélie's quest begins with the verification of past facts, forcing neighbours to prove the accuracy of personal memory and records. Amélie does not really transform people herself; she propels them backwards, providing a necessary distance for them to reconsider their existence so that closure and behaviour change may take place.

It goes without saying that television and video have taken a central role in the lives of the French, although nowhere near to the extent we witness in the United States. In general terms, television discourages interaction among people, though it may provoke discussion, bring people

physically together or even give the illusion of 'togetherness'. In *La Vie rêvée des anges*, *L'Humanité*, *La Vie de Jésus* and *Amélie*, protagonists sit alone, favouring the screen above discussion. In Jeunet's film, television holds a key role in the recognition of individuals and communication for 'the Glass Man' and the heroine. In fact, Jeunet announces the protagonist's rebirth as local do-gooder by incorporating imaginary television footage of Amélie's national funeral, done in the style of televised magazine *Étoiles et Toiles* with presenter Frédéric Mitterrand. Amélie's thoughts and daydreams, usually exposed in cinema through voice-over or dream sequences, are conveyed through televised images or fictional documentary-like sequences. Amélie's projection into the lives of Lady Diana, Mother Teresa and the likes of Florence Nightingale reinforces the need for a recognition not found in the family unit or comparable social group. The genius in Jeunet's film is his balance of the virtual and physical worlds. Protagonists seek traces of the human body through the manipulation of media (audio and video recordings, painting, photography, etc.). The personal use and appropriation of media devices become a means of self-expression in a world of individuals who find it difficult to communicate.

Le fait divers

The strongest thread linking *Amélie* to those films emphasizing a sordid naturalism is the exploitation of one of the most popular elements of the written press, the French *fait divers*, originating from *fait* (fact of action) and *divers* which not only indicates the diversity of the acts, but more importantly, the story's ability to entertain the reader (*divertir*). The *fait divers*, or 'current local event', events such as an accident, disturbance, crime, suicide, disappearance, fire, regional flood, draws on and creates curiosity for others' dismal situations and exploits an exaggerated interest in graphic accounts of sex, violence and crime in general. It often remains anchored in the local, and thus of little importance to the majority of readers, yet because it draws on universal sentiments, fears or curiosities, it allows for the reader (or viewer) to appropriate the interests of a localized group. Through curiosity alone, one comes to identify with a particular individual or group. Popular in its tone and accessibility, these stories link to the *roman noir* often based on such sordid local events. The boundary between a *fait divers* and an *événement* (an event) is, at times, difficult to grasp and relies on a much subjective interpretation; differing from a *fait divers*, an *événement* touches upon the political, economic, scientific or cultural nature of things.

The inquiry into the rape and murder of a young girl that fuels the plot in *L'Humanité* or the murder of a young *beur* which ends *La Vie de Jésus* may fall under the heading of *fait divers*. Media coverage of suburban violence and the beating of a young *beur* by the police which provides the background in *La Haine* is another example, although here the media coverage of this localized incident attempts to turn it into a cultural event. In *Romance*, the protagonist's blowing up of her apartment in which her husband is sleeping would constitute a *fait divers*, just as the heroine's possible suicide at the end of *Rosetta* or that of Marie in *La Vie rêvée des anges* would be more local incidents than of national news. Scenarios developing

from *faits divers*, whether real, such as *Les Amants criminels*, or fictional, often build into detective stories or other quest narratives, leading to films, such as *L'Humanité*, fascinated with a microscopic view of our base behaviours and angst.

Amélie is influenced by numerous real *faits divers*. A suicide from the top of the Notre Dame, a rare event, kills the heroine's mother. A garden dwarf is gone, possibly liberated by the infamous Garden Gnome Liberation Front. The concierge, Madeleine's husband, robs his employer and flees the country with his mistress. A supposed postal bag found near Mont Blanc years after the crash of a plane brings mail long past due. In addition, Amélie's trajectory develops from, and as a reaction to, a cultural event, the death of Lady Diana in September 1997, which would have otherwise remained a *fait divers* had it not involved a woman very much in the public eye. The presence of *fait divers* in *Amélie* links perfectly to *petisme* in that these current events, presented in a comical fashion, entertain.

By reducing loss and personal tragedy to a series of seemingly unrelated incidents, Jeunet shifts the viewers' attention away from the incidents themselves. What we experience is a mere *zapping*. This zapping reduces the impact of each event by disconnecting the image from its original context. Flashes of aircraft and car crashes, a suicide, the death of an international figure, violence in schools, homelessness, begging in the metro, malaise in public spaces, and the presence of graffiti merely touch upon strong concerns of contemporary urban French society. This zapping reflects Jeunet's approach to the construction of his film, in which actual footage was gleaned from the television series '*Le zapping de Canal +*', providing a concentration of images shown on French television on a particular day. The director recuperates sequences and *faits divers*, just as protagonists salvage and exchange objects, and recreate with found images.

It is not surprising that Jeunet's film celebrating the *petit quartier populaire* should exploit the *faits divers*, since the history of Montmartre recalls an attraction for sordid stories in a close-knit popular community living on the margins of the French capital. The film draws on two veins: one which offers nostalgia and a polished unrealistic version of Parisian life, another which taps into a renewed interest in the social and a sordid voyeurism of the late 1990s. It draws on, yet does not wallow in, the same symptoms of a social malaise expressed in these recent naturalist films. *Amélie* combines an attraction to aestheticism and to ordinary people in common situations, creating a fabulous story of misery and glory in ordinary lives. It offers a close look at our vulnerability, albeit with a sentimental lens. Jeunet's controlled mixture of nostalgia and caricature, zapping us through an everyday riddled with accidents and obstacles, creates a quick-fix remedy serving as a very ambiguous alternative to a reality increasingly marked by individualism.

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