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Isabelle Vanderschelden, *Amélie: Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. x + 114 pp. Stills, notes, film credits, box office statistics, filmography, selected bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-252-03221-9. \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07470-7.

Review by Guy Austin, University of Sheffield, U.K.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet's 2001 feel-good fantasy *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (known in anglophone circles simply as *Amélie*) rapidly attracted a huge audience at home and abroad, and was hailed as a phenomenon in the French film and popular press (credited with boosting the domestic box office while encouraging a revalorisation of the Montmartre district and of concepts of community identity). French politicians and commentators attempted to negotiate its meanings to their own ends; travel agencies and businesses soon followed suit. Yet, as Isabelle Vanderschelden explains in this comprehensive and readable study, the number one film at the French box office that year was in fact *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. And indeed, several recent French comedies, such as those in the *Astérix* series, have outperformed *Amélie* in the domestic market. What, then, made *Amélie* such an iconic film? Vanderschelden suggests several factors including the film's record-breaking performance abroad, particularly in the U.S. (which turned it into a kind of cultural ambassador for France), its canny mingling of digital technology with nostalgic values, and its central treasure-hunt motif.

Given the dearth of academic writing on Jeunet (either solo or in tandem with his early collaborator Marc Caro) and the popularity of *Amélie* with British and North American audiences, this book represents a timely and effective addition to the French Film Guides series at the University of Illinois. Vanderschelden approaches her subject via a clear four-part structure, looking at production contexts, film narrative, post-modern aesthetics, and reception. In her first chapter she observes how, despite presenting itself as quintessentially French, *Amélie* was actually a Franco-German co-production, shot partly in Cologne (p. 12). Characterising auteurism as the dominant critical discourse in readings of French cinema, which, she claims, tend to "portray the marginal as the norm, thereby misrepresenting the French film industry as a whole" (p. 15), Vanderschelden is aware of *Amélie's* generic elements, but nonetheless claims the film as auteurist insofar as it began as a "small personal project" long cherished by Jeunet (p. 26). She identifies the circularity that informs the narrative--the routines of the characters, the waltz music, and the image of the merry-go-round--and relates this trope to a certain temporal ambivalence whereby the film, although nominally set in 1997 (hence the reference to Princess Diana's death) parades a series of nostalgic intertextual allusions. If the influence of the Poetic Realism of the 1930s is one of the most apparent intertexts, Vanderschelden also manages to tease out surrealist-inspired elements, including "literal representations of linguistic idioms" such as "melting into tears" and "seeing the light" (p. 38). This fascinating observation might profitably have been compared to Stuart Liebman's positing of a similar technique throughout Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou*.<sup>[1]</sup> Equally, the connection made between *Amélie* and the fairytale (p. 39) might have benefited from a reference to Bruno Bettelheim's work on the function of fairytales as narratives of individuation, especially since Vanderschelden pointedly considers *Amélie* herself to be an "adolescent" character (p. 43).

Vanderschelden's third chapter, detailing the aesthetics evident in Jeunet's film style, is her strongest. Paying close attention to *mise en scène*, she focuses in particular on the use of digital colour, observing that "an originality of the film is to combine tones that are not traditionally complementary" (p. 52), and

that “by mixing sepia and saturated hues,” Jeunet “blurs temporal markers” and elides “the boundaries between fantasy and the real world” (p. 54). She also makes good use of Christian Metz’s taxonomy of special effects, and includes a detailed account of the film’s soundtrack, from Yann Tiersen’s score to the sound collages generated in several sequences. Close textual analysis allows her to reveal how *mise en scène* (such as the merging of shots of the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l’Est) crystallises “the semi-realist strategy of the film based on bricolage and hybridity” (p. 68).

As for the film’s vast success at the box office, attracting over thirty million spectators worldwide, and grossing in excess of \$130 million, Vanderschelden pertinently describes how what began as a small personal project ended up with a medium-sized budget and a very powerful marketing campaign that cost FF 11 million in France alone (p. 77). She contrasts the desexualised, consensual appeal of Amélie as played by Audrey Tautou with the opposing (but equally popular!) sexual objectification of Loana, the 2001 winner of *Loft Story*, French TV’s equivalent of *Big Brother*.

*Inrockuptibles* editor Serge Kaganski was one of the few dissenters to the pro-*Amélie* consensus.[3] His famous assault on the film in the French press is mentioned here, but disappointingly, Vanderschelden is careful not to let on whether she agrees with his assertion that the film presents a right-wing ethnic cleansing of Paris (see pp. 83-5). This reticence also applies to another point aggressively made by Kaganski, that the film empties out the ethnic background of the *beur* star Jamel Debbouze by calling him Lucien and giving him attributes that seem deracinated or even white French. Vanderschelden missed an opportunity here to follow Kaganski in exploring questions relating to performance and to the implications of marking—or not marking—ethnicity.

Finally, as perceptive as Vanderschelden is about the slightly distorted facial close-ups which present Tautou throughout the film as an elfin, almost other-worldly heroine, the image of the actress gurning on the cover is, in fact, rather disturbing. The book is not very generously provided with stills, but it does feature excellent appendices, with full film credits, box office and budget figures, Jeunet’s filmography, and a useful bibliography. Written in a clear and jargon-free style, this guide will prove handy for students and fans of the film. Its general avoidance of film theory is for such a readership no great failing. Vanderschelden has done a good, solid job. But I am afraid that she has not managed to make me like the film any more than I did in 2001. I am with Kaganski on this one.

## NOTES

[1] Stuart Liebman, “*Un Chien andalou*: The Talking Cure,” in Rudolf E. Kuenzli ed., *Dada and Surrealist Film* (1987; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 143-58.

[2] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

[3] Serge Kaganski, “*Amélie* n’est pas jolie,” *Libération*, May 31, 2001; “Pourquoi je n’aime pas *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain*,” *Les Inrockuptibles*, May 31, 2001; and “Comment je me suis disputé à propos d’*Amélie Poulain*,” *Les Inrockuptibles*, June 12, 2001. See also the overview of the debate by Kaganski’s colleague at *Les Inrockuptibles*, Frédéric Bonnaud, “The *Amélie* Effect,” *Film Comment*, Nov.-Dec. 2001.

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