



ET

# Fate, chance and fabulous destiny:

*Amélie* in the classroom

LUCIANO DI GREGORIO

*Amélie* lends itself perfectly to the study of a film as text in English from Years 9 to 11. It deals with ideas ranging from fate and chance to the complexities of human interaction, all wrapped in a visually superb story about the life of a woman who seeks meaning through helping others and, eventually, the search for true love. The concepts and ideas discussed in this article are not exhaustive and are intended to provoke discussion and activity around the film.

---

A text that features French streets, pastel colours and subtitles might not sound ideal for an English or literature class, but do not be fooled: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001) is a visual feast that presents a wealth of material to analyse in secondary school classrooms.

---





#### MAIN CHARACTERS

|                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Amélie Poulain   | Audrey Tautou     |
| Nino Quincampoix | Mathieu Kassovitz |
| Raphaël Poulain  | Rufus             |
| Raymond Dufayel  | Serge Merlin      |
| Lucien           | Jamel Debbouze    |

#### MAIN THEMES & ISSUES

Fate  
 Chance  
 Cause and effect  
 Human interaction  
 Physical interaction  
 Perceptions and stereotypes  
 The pursuit of happiness  
 Love

#### THE TRIVIAL AND THE EVERYDAY

The opening scene of the film immediately captures our attention and introduces a concept that will be dealt with spectacularly in the next two hours. We are given a snapshot of a particular point in time in the busy metropolis of Paris: we witness a fly buzzing; a street in the Montmartre district; wine glasses clattering in the wind atop a tablecloth; a man deleting his best friend's number from his address book following his death; and a woman conceiving a child, Amélie. This collection of seemingly arbitrary events is brought together with spectacular visuals that highlight the film's main ideas about the interconnectedness of the world around us and the role that fate and chance play. These ideas are further highlighted in the main credits, which include a sequence of images of Amélie as a child. She is playing with dominoes – a symbol that should not be lost on the viewer.

It is still within the first ten minutes that the director further demonstrates his obsession with the seemingly trivial and

the everyday. Raphaël, Amélie's father, is shown to love certain things, including the feel of stripping pieces of wallpaper and polishing his shoes. Amélie's mother, Amandine (Lorella Cravotta), doesn't like the feel of wrinkly fingers after too much time in the bath or having her hands touched by strangers. A man in a cafe loves popping bubble wrap. Amélie herself enjoys the sheer physical feeling of putting her hands in sacks full of seeds, or cracking the hardened top of crème brûlée with a spoon. These are random triflings, but they connect with the viewer because there are myriad people everywhere who can relate to the satisfaction derived from such unimportant and seemingly inconsequential activities. Who, after all, doesn't enjoy popping bubble wrap?

#### THE PROVERBIAL CAUSE AND EFFECT

The adult Amélie's characteristics and habits can arguably be traced back to the death of her mother, also the first major instance in the film of the impact of cause and effect on individuals. At an outing to



Notre Dame, a suicidal Canadian plummeted from the roof of the cathedral, landing squarely atop Amélie's screaming mother. At this juncture, the film poses a question that is to arise time and time again throughout the movie: is it fate, or mere chance, a random moment unrelated and unconnected to any other, one that will have no spiralling effect? This is a question that the film does not feel the need to answer categorically, leaving the viewer to make up his or her own mind.

The turning point in Amélie's adult life is another instance of cause and effect, chance and fate. Casually going about her business in the bathroom, Amélie hears of the death of Princess Diana and drops a bottle top on the floor. This, in turn, dislodges a skirting tile and reveals a small tin box filled with childhood memorabilia. This discovery leads Amélie to investigate who lived in the apartment before her and, eventually, to be at a station at the precise moment when Nino, who later becomes the object of her affections, is attempting to gather discarded photos around a photo booth. They are immediately fascinated by each



other, but eventually Amélie is intimidated by the situation and scurries off. Under normal circumstances in a city the size of Paris, it would be extremely

## Is it fate, or mere chance, a random moment unrelated and unconnected to any other, one that will have no spiralling effect?

unlikely that the two would ever meet again. However, the two eventually have another chance (or fateful?) encounter and begin an eccentric courtship. This eccentricity is fitting to the unusual characters of the two young people, 'dreamers' who have unconventional ideas about how they should interact with the people around them.

### INTERACTION AND PERCEPTION

*Amélie* is a film that concerns itself with an individual's interaction with the people around them and the space that they occupy. The film presents a set of characters that seem quite 'ordinary' in nature – they work 'ordinary' jobs, they live in 'ordinary' apartments and houses. This is by no means an original basis for a film, though the interesting twist is that these characters are not portrayed as either boring or typical. The use of colour, costume, voice-over and sound contribute to



a unique aesthetic. The director thus comments on the disjuncture between the appearance of 'ordinary' lives and the actual reality of these individuals. Contrary to the representation of such characters in popular films (which often comment on the need for such people to completely overhaul their personalities in order to get anywhere), these characters live are rich in personal experience. Furthermore, perceptions of such characters, such as Amélie herself, are subverted. When Amélie goes to find Nino in order to give back his photo album, a shop worker claims that 'times are tough for dreamers'. However, the irony is that it is a dreamer like Amélie who is responsible for the spurring of change in the lives of the handful of people she helps.

After finding the owner of the tin box, Amélie is filled with the urge to help whomever she can. However, she does not personally interfere with the lives of those around her whom she wishes to help, at least not in a physical sense. Amélie simply 'tinkers' with their environments in various ways in order to send a message that might nudge a person in a particular direction. From here, she sits back and hopes that a small measure of change might occur in order to better their lives in some way. There are many examples of this: the placing of the tin box at a phone booth for its owner to find; the spilling of coffee on the hypo-chondriac tobaccoist Georgette



(Isabelle Nanty) in the café so that she might need to change in the bathroom where, unbeknown to her, the customer she fancies is waiting; and the poignant story of Raphaël's gnome, who vanishes from the garden and ends up travelling the world. In all these cases, Amélie's

made idyllic, free from the likes of tourists, rubbish and problems of a political nature. The focus must inevitably be on Amélie and, to a lesser extent, those around her. Problems of a social kind are absent – even the beggar claims that he doesn't work on Sundays – distancing

Paris), they make a huge difference on a micro level to the lives of individuals.

## There is irony in the fact that Amélie is able to help other people but her greatest task, as is often the case in life, is overcoming her fears in order to find her true love.

clever manoeuvring results in a change of sorts for the characters in question: the owner of the tin box realises he needs to connect with his estranged daughter; Georgette makes passionate love in the bathroom to her suitor; and Raphaël begins to question his own life and eventually breaks out of his self-imposed rut by leaving Paris, suitcase in hand.

On logistic and visual levels, the way the characters interact with their own city is masterminded by Jeunet to allow no distraction from Amélie's journey. The city is

us from any of Paris' real problems as a modern city. Some critics have slammed this aspect of the film, claiming that it presents an unrealistic view of contemporary French life. However, these critics may just fail to see that the portrayal of Paris in this way has a greater purpose. The lack of any sociological or political aspects of Paris links neatly to the idea of cause and effect. Jeunet uses the concept in order to highlight that life is a constant web of interrelated events. While they do not make any dramatic changes at a macro level (in this case, the film's constantly unspooled version of the city of

In this arena that somewhat resembles a utopia, the nature of human interaction is also, in a way, venerated. The character of Amélie seems to be idyllic in her lack of desire to seek affirmation or praise from the people she decides to help. The act of returning the tin box to its rightful owner is a completely selfless one: the only thing she might stand to gain from it is the satisfaction of seeing someone momentarily happy, even if that happiness is only fleeting and soon gives way to a sense of self-awareness about the state of her life. Helping people becomes somewhat of a drug for her – a feeling of wanting to help even more engulfs her, even though she is fully aware that she'll receive no affirmation or recognition from the blind man she helps across the road, or from Lucien, the young man whose life is made momentarily easier when his boss succumbs to Amélie's tricks. However, there is irony in the fact that Amélie is able to help other people but her greatest task, as is often the case in life, is overcoming her fears in order to find her true love. Amélie's journey to falling in love would not have been possible had she not undergone a journey of self-discovery by allowing herself to be altruistic.



## SYMBOLISM

### Windows

Windows play an important part in the presentation of the film's main themes and issues. When we look through a window, we get a glimpse of the private lives of others. So while we live separate lives, we are all connected in some way. The tangible connections that the director proposes in this film are not only the ways in which we are all affected by the concepts of chance and fate, but also common human experiences such as the satisfaction derived from dipping hands into a sack of seeds, or the common dislike of wrinkly fingertips after a long bath. Note also the use of binoculars and video cameras.

### Train stations

It is no ordinary coincidence that Amélie doesn't drive a car. The stations she visits and the trains she takes are symbolic of moving through life as part of a community linked by common feelings and thoughts, regardless of our own idiosyncrasies and characteristics.

### Still shots

A photo or painting captures a particular moment, and their presence in *Amélie* is a reminder that intense emotion can be fleeting and evolving but captured nonetheless. However, without context, they are elusive and too complex to decipher. Nino's obsession with discarded photos is symbolic of the search for meaning and emotion in his own life. As such, he becomes obsessed with discovering the identity of an enigmatic

man who constantly takes photos and discards them, later revealed to be the photo booth repairman. Meanwhile, Raymond continually paints Renoir's *Le déjeuner des canotiers*, but struggles to perfect the girl drinking a glass of water – a girl who seems on the outer, perhaps a little like Amélie herself.

### Colour

The film makes heavy use of the colours red, yellow and green. However, we also

