

There IS a spoon!



Amélie: Momentum

Amélie (2006)

In this new series, the scripts of the last five years' BAFTA award winning screenplays will be analysed. Looking in detail at their stories, structure, characterisation, genre, dialogues and themes, Kira-Anne Pelican will attempt to identify what it is that makes them winners.

In 2001, the quirky, French romantic comedy *Amélie*, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, won the BAFTA award for the best Original Screenplay. The writers are Jean-Pierre Jeunet (story and scenario) and Guillaume Laurant (story, scenario and screenplay). Originally written with Emily Watson in mind for the lead role, an earlier version of the script began in England. When Watson pulled out of the film, the character 'Emily' became 'Amélie' and Audrey Tatou was cast.

The Fabulous Destiny of Amélie Poulain (Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain) was the most successful cinematic release in France in 2001 and made nearly \$174 million at the box office worldwide. Winning audiences' hearts all over the world, the film also achieved critical success, was nominated for five Oscars and universally recognised for its visual style, sound, editing, performances and writing. In total, the film won 49 awards including the French Cesar for Best Picture.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet, award-winning director of *A Very Long Engagement*, *The City of Lost Children*, *Delicatessen* and *Alien: Resurrection*, based the idea for *Amélie's* script on a series of anecdotes he'd been collecting since childhood but it wasn't until later in life when he fell in love that he had the urge to turn his notes into a romantic comedy. Together with Guillaume Laurant, with whom he'd worked on *The City of Lost Children*, he developed the screenplay over the following year. Laurant is currently working on *The Life of Pi*, also to be directed by Jeunet.

Three Act Structure

On first viewing, this magical romantic comedy primarily resembles an episodic fairytale or a series of chapters. Laurant tells me this wasn't his original intention but having made the decision with Jeunet to gather all his notebook anecdotes into a single story, this was the structure that seemed most obvious though on closer analysis what we have here is a classic, linear, three act structure.

Act One

Act One sets up Amélie in her 'ordinary world'. Born in Paris to a former army doctor and a schoolmistress with a nervous disposition, Amélie knows love only indirectly. Her monthly check-up by her father is the only physical affection she's given and she so looks forward to it, her heart beats like a drum. As a result, he believes her to have a heart condition and she is educated at home. When she loses her only friend, Blubber the

fish, Amélie retreats into her imagination. Amélie's mother prays for a baby brother for her but tragedy strikes when heaven sends her instead a suicidal tourist who falls upon her, killing her instantly. After her mother's death, Amélie lives alone with her father whose life has come to a standstill.

In the set up, in these first ten minutes of the script, we're given a clear idea of who Amélie is. We know her flaw: she's shy; her need: to find love, and why she's not going to achieve it: staying put in her ordinary world. Dreaming there must be more to life, Amélie leaves home to become a waitress in romantic Montmartre where she establishes a quiet life amongst her co-workers, Gina, Georgette and Suzanne. The narrator informs us that in 48 hours Amélie's life will change forever. In a flash we are given a glimpse of the identity photos that we'll learn later belong to Nino, Amélie's romantic love interest.

The inciting incident or "event that changes her life forever" as hailed by the narrator, falls, as we'd expect, near the fifteen-minute point of the film. Watching the news one night on television, Amélie learns of the death of Princess Diana. It poses the 'central dramatic question' or the question that engages audiences to the end of the film. Will Amélie (like Princess Diana) help others but die alone, too shy to reach out and find love herself, or will she learn to take risks and find lasting romantic love?

As a character, there are three basic ways in which Amélie appeals to us: through empathy, likeability and intrigue.

Shocked by the news of Diana's death, Amélie drops the perfume bottle stopper. It rolls across the floor and loosens a wall tile. In the cavity behind, she discovers a tin box whose contents reveal that it was hidden by a boy some forty years ago. She decides to reunite the box with its owner, Bredoteau. She seeks advice from her neighbour, the Glass Man, and after a series of complications locates Bredoteau and secretly leaves the box for him to find. Motivated by the joy she gives him, "an urge to help mankind comes over her". We arrive at the first plot point 33 minutes into the script and Act One draws to a close.

Act Two

Act Two sees Amélie realise her goal in spreading

happiness to others and like a guardian angel, she embarks on a series of altruistic adventures across the city. Determined to help her father first, she kidnaps his prized garden gnome and sends postcards on the gnome's behalf from his travels across world.

Amélie runs into Nino, her twin soul, another loner who views life from a distance. When Nino drops his photo album filled with the discarded identity photographs he collects, this should be the chance for her to arrange a rendezvous. Hindered by her shyness, the 45 minute point sees Amélie miss the opportunity and instead discuss Nino with the Glass Man. He points out that she helps other people with their lives but who will help fix hers?

Amélie spots Nino's posters advertising for his lost album. The Mid Act Turning Point, 60 minutes into the script, has our protagonist turn from passive to active in relation to her personal quest. She picks up the phone and dials Nino's number. Scared, Amélie immediately hangs up.

It isn't until the next fifteen minute sequence that we get to know our male romantic lead. Working on the ghost ride at the fun fair dressed as a skeleton, Nino nuzzles Amélie's shoulder but when it's time for him to finish work, Amélie has fled. The 75 minute point sees Nino recovering Amélie's message: "Do you want to meet me?" The stakes are raised. Amélie reaches out.

Nino leaves notes for Amélie around the subway: "Where and when?" Amélie suggests her

café but when Nino arrives late, Amélie loses her nerve and can't muster the courage to admit she's the one with the photo-album and she hands Gina a note to pass on to Nino. As he leaves, she's filled with sadness and melts into a pool of water. The 90 minute point marks the end of Act Two with the 'all is lost' moment: Amélie is at her lowest point. Though so close to Nino, she's the furthest from achieving that which she needs. Will she ever be able to reach out to him, take a risk and make contact?

Act Three

Act Three begins with Amélie talking over the event with her neighbour, the Glass Man. She realises that if she doesn't take a risk, reach out and make contact, she'll become like him, always ▶

afraid of what might hurt her.

Nino discovers Amelie's note and heads off to meet her at the station. He arrives and Amelie gathers up her courage to meet him but her path is blocked by a luggage cart. The cart leaves and Nino has gone. Now finally ready to meet Nino, having overcome her emotional obstacles, it's a physical obstacle that comes between them at the film's climax. Amelie heads back to the café where she learns Gina has gone for a walk with Nino. Amelie despairs, thinking she's lost the man she loves.

Back in her flat, the doorbell rings. It's Nino, but Amelie is too anxious to open the door. The phone rings and via a video recording in her bedroom, the Glass Man instructs her to seize the moment. Amelie rushes to the door, pulls Nino inside and they kiss. The resolution ties together the remaining sub-plots. Amelie's father, suitcases in hand, jumps in a car to the airport to travel the world.

Themes

The primary theme running through the script is 'Amelie's reconciliation and re-enchantment with life'. Themes can make for dangerous ground in some scripts because they don't fit with the story, but in *Amelie* the themes work well because



they're integral to the protagonist's character arc and thus tied inherently to the meaning of the film. Jeunet describes *Amelie* as being an optimistic film about generosity, depicted through a woman who helps others in secret. It's also a film about passions and what happens if we don't follow them: we either expose ourselves fully to this world, seize the day, take risks and live life to the full or we insulate ourselves and become like Amelie's father or the Glass Man.

A second theme running through the script is the notion of chains of events creating destiny. From our introduction of Amelie, via the uniting of

The protagonist's need stems from his or her flaw and determines the character arc.

a sperm and an egg, to her complex scheming as a young woman, we're reminded repeatedly of the effects of chains of actions. It is through these that Amelie acts upon her world. Voyeurism is another motif integral to the story. In Amelie's world, everyone is either a participant or a voyeur, from the Glass Man watching the world through his window, to Amelie peering through her Polaroid camera and later, binoculars. She begins her journey as a voyeur but becomes a participant.

Genre?

Whilst *Amelie* has all the charm of the Romantic Comedy, it certainly doesn't adhere to the genre's tradition where two apparently incompatible characters, destined for each other, are introduced the moment the film begins. In the traditional Romantic Comedy we follow the would-be couple's trials and tribulations until they eventually find common ground or some new path that is better for the pair of them.

Instead, in *Amelie* the focus is on our protagonist. Whilst we know it is love that Amelie needs, we don't meet the male love interest or

Nino. We're touched when Amelie reaches out and takes a risk but we care rather less about what happens to Amelie and Nino as a couple. Clearly, by the title alone, this is Amelie's story, and it's in her singular trajectory that we're most interested.

It's in the primary ingredients of an emotionally satisfying Rom Com, in chemistry, charm and a delightfully offbeat humour that *Amelie* packs in the punches. In the vein of *Sleepless in Seattle*, Amelie isn't united with Nino until the final moments of the script. We know our protagonist well and we've a good idea of the kind of man for whom she'll fall so from the first moment we glimpse Nino, we're anticipating the chemistry Amelie will share with him. Their actual relationship is left to our imagination.

Characterisation

The vitality and humanity of the script comes through the charm of the characters. Populated by a rich world of passionate eccentrics with enchanting foibles, these characters are alive, imaginative and brilliant. Jeunet and Laurant introduce each actor by having them tell us their likes and dislikes. Amelie's father, Raphael Poulain, is an ex-army doctor, "an iceberg" at risk of being a two dimensional caricature but when the narrator delivers a beautifully observed list of his likes and dislikes, we have a living, breathing man with humanity. Even the most trivial characters are introduced in a similar way and we learn something extraordinary about each of them.

Also important is the fact that every character serves at least one function that isn't replicated by any other. The personalities of Amelie's parents enable us to understand the origins of Amelie's flaw. The Glass Man has two purposes: as a hermit, scared of the world, he shows us what Amelie's life could be like if she continues to avoid taking risks and, as a Mentor archetype, he provides Amelie with the advice and guidance she needs on her journey. Gina, in contrast, exemplifies the more rounded person, a go-getter who embraces risk. Unafraid of the world, she shows us the strength that Amelie could have if she grows on her personal journey.

Amelie

Part guardian angel, part shy loner, Amelie's charm touched audiences in their millions. Despite her initial lack of being able to connect with others, she's an active character with

passions. Laurant tells me that 'Amelie's character began only with a little note: A young girl, living in her own world, decides to make other people's lives better. From the moment we decided that she will be the main character, it had to be developed. As soon as we invite the audience into a story, the least we can do is create a story that goes somewhere. For that, Amelie had to succeed for herself in what she wanted for the others.'

As a character, there are three basic ways in which Amelie appeals to us: through empathy, likeability and intrigue. Empathy can be created through character traits, flaws or situations. Here, we're presented with all three. Act One sets up a shy, lonely girl who always feels the outsider - universal traits we've all experienced at some level - creating feelings we recognise and respond to instinctively. When Amelie loses first her pet fish, then her mother, we've started to care, creating a connection at a deep level. Amelie's flaw, her inability to reach out to those she loves, serves to compound the problem and, most importantly, builds empathy for our protagonist.

Without wanting to state the obvious, much of Amelie's appeal is down to her likeability as a character. We may not all relate to a shy loner but we'd find it hard not to like her. Ever optimistic, she takes pleasure in the small things in life and when she embarks on her altruistic quest to help others, Amelie is positively saintly. Yet, so impish is her humour and charming her convoluted methods, she's always the right side of sickly sweet.

The strength of any good script is in mastering the pace of the protagonist's change because only then does a character ring true and resonate emotionally with its audience.

Finally, it's Amelie's lack of predictability that builds our intrigue. Forever scheming in the most complicated of ways, she keeps audiences guessing; we never know quite what to expect. The mysteries about the character make us yearn to know more about her, pique our interest, further adding to her appeal.

Voice over

Whilst the usual rule decreed by the screenwriting gurus is 'Show, don't tell', *Amelie* uses voice over to brilliant effect. By providing a commentary on the interior thoughts of our protagonist, Jeunet and Laurant are able to work with a character trait that wouldn't otherwise lend itself to a lead



character: Amelie is shy and her dialogue scanty. With the addition of voice over, though, we're able to see the world through Amelie's eyes. Every small detail is observed and it's in the precision and black humour of this observation that the audience delight. Additionally, as Laurant points out, 'Because of numerous short scenes and fast rhythm, the voice of the narrative speaker allows a sort of necessary link that sets up the story.'

Goal vs Need

Amelie finds her goal at the end of the first act. Touched by Princess Diana's death, she's motivated to return Bredoteau's tin box. In seeing the happiness she gives him, "life becomes simple and clear". In the words of the narrator, "A surge of love, an urge to help mankind, comes over her."

which functions as an emotional barrier. It isn't until the 45 minute point of the script, in conversation with the Glass Man, that Amelie acknowledges she has a problem. By the film's Mid Point or 60 minutes into the script, we see Amelie turning from passive to active in relation to her need. She picks up the phone to call Nino but quickly hangs up, not yet ready to make contact. Until the Mid Point Amelie had been primarily driven by her goal but it's at this turning point that her need comes into focus and becomes the motivation for her character for the second half of the film.

Only at the 75 minute point is Amelie ready to communicate with Nino, when she contacts him via a message on a photograph. The 90 minute plot point at the end of Act Two gives Amelie the opportunity to meet Nino in the flesh, but being only the end of Act Two, she's not ready yet. Instead she's at her low point: so close yet so far from achieving her need.

In conversation with the Glass Man at the beginning of Act Three, we see Amelie recognising how she needs to address her flaw. She makes contact with Nino once again, stumbles but, with a little encouragement from the Glass Man, she gets there. She opens her literal and metaphorical door, allows Nino in and finds that which she needs.

It's a rare thing to find a feel-good movie that doesn't feel like an overdose of Turkish delight, and yet Amelie's optimism and enthusiasm for life engages the audience wholeheartedly in her whimsical journey.

Amelie succeeds as a film because of the strength of its script. With the fresh feel of the story and the precision of its structure, it is undoubtedly through the sheer wit and humanity of the protagonist that this script really triumphs.

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