

Amélie



AWARENESS

Genre is very important to our enjoyment of a film – this is the way we tend to choose what films we go and see because if we recognise the genre, we have certain expectations of what the story will entail and what sort of characters we are likely to encounter. Film distributors are very aware that audiences will be more inclined to go and see a film if they can recognise the genre in advance and the way they market the release plays heavily upon audience recognition. Of course, if one film is perceived as being too much like another then it may not draw an audience because they feel they have ‘seen it all before’, so it is important for distributors to highlight the individual features of the film whilst still placing it comfortably within the characteristics of the genre.

Look at the publicity material for Amélie on imdb.com. This could be the poster or even the DVD cover. What expectations does it set up in terms of genre?
Consider the following:

- How does the title give us clues as to what the story will be about?
- How does the tag line – ‘She’ll change your life?’ add more information?
- The main image – what is the expression on Amélie’s face and where is she looking?
- What are the main colours used?
- What fonts are used?

THE OPENING OF THE FILM

The first four minutes of a film are absolutely vital. Filmmakers know that if they have not captured the attention of the audience within this time frame then the likelihood is that they will not enjoy the film. For this reason many films delay the opening credits by anything up to twenty minutes, until the story, main characters and location have been well established. Others may choose to present the opening credits in such a way as to entertain, shock or amuse. Either way, the opening sequence is often one of the most visually stunning of the whole film.

Recognition of genre plays an important role in engaging the audience with the action and so the filmmaker will use these first few minutes to tell the audience what type of film they are watching, by giving them visual and audio clues. We, as an audience, enjoy piecing together the information we are given - this is an important part of how we interact with what is taking place on screen and is what encourages us to watch further. We enjoy the experience of identifying familiar elements and this builds our expectations of what will follow. For instance, as we are introduced to characters we enjoy recognising whether they are heroes or villains and anticipating what part they will play. Likewise, as a certain situation is set up within the narrative we feel comfortable that we can predict what will happen as events unfold. Even location can feed our expectations of what we are about to experience. As you have seen from the promotional material, *Amélie* is not a film that is easy to categorise. Watch the opening credits up until the story starts, paying attention to both sound and vision. How did it hold your attention? What clues are we given as to what the film will be about? Can you now say what genre it is?

- Now watch the first five minutes of the film. Are you able to establish who the main characters are? If so, how? Can you predict what part they will play in the action? Do you identify with any of them?
- What part does the voice-over commentary play in helping us to establish the genre? What type of films do we associate with voice-overs? Does *Amélie* follow the pattern of our expectations with regard to this?
- Now watch the rest of the film. Are you able to classify *Amélie* in terms of genre? If you're finding it difficult, a good way to do this is for everyone in the group to write down three words to describe the film. Share your ideas and see what emerges as the most popular. Can you now make a decision?
- What other films does *Amélie* remind you of? In what ways?
- Having seen the film would you now choose to market it in a different way? Produce new publicity materials including a short synopsis of the film.

REALITY vs. FANTASY

Amélie has been described as a modern-day fairy tale. Certainly one of the qualities that give the film its charm is the way in which it interweaves elements of fantasy with reality. We, as the audience, never really know what will happen next and indeed whether what we see is really happening or not. So how is this element of unreality conveyed through each of the elements in the film?

LOCATION

Amélie is a story set in present-day Paris – or is it? The locations that we see are real areas of the city but manage to convey a sense of timelessness, of nostalgia, even, rather than the daily routine of busy modern life. It's as though the action is taking place in a secret corner of the city unaffected by the concerns of the wider world. The sets do in fact contain many of the props of modern life such as TV sets and video cameras but still manage to be constructed in such a way as to suggest that the action is taking place in no specific timeframe.

Consider the following:

- Amélie's family home
 - the fairground
 - Mr Dufayel's flat
 - the grocer's shop and the street it is in
- Can you say what it is about each location that gives it a timeless feeling?
Be as detailed as you can in your answer.

CHARACTER

Many of the characters in the film have a quirky quality to them which means they could easily be part of a fairy tale. The way they look, how they behave and their various idiosyncrasies set them slightly away from the modern world even though they live and work firmly within it. Amélie herself is a prime example of this. Although she is supposed to be twenty-eight in the film she has a child-like quality about the way she looks and behaves. Her dress is chic but she wears shoes and socks like a child. Her hair is fashionably cut but her fringe is short as if cut by her mother. Her face is full of expression - we see her ponder people's speech and actions like a child would and she says very little but observes a great deal.

Amélie behaves throughout the film like the traditional good fairy or elf, meddling in people's lives to create happiness or on occasion, mischief. Her neighbour, Mr Dufayel is the one who sees that she hides from the world like a shy child and encourages her to come forward and take part in life; indeed when we see her consummate her relationship with Nino at the end of the film this is truly her becoming a part of the real world.

Think about these other characters in the film. Which of these belong most definitely in the modern day and which have more of a storybook feel to them? For each character, try to say exactly what it is about the way they look and behave that makes them 'modern' or not.

- Nino
- girl in porn shop
- Amélie's mother
- Gina
- Mr Dufayel
- the grocer's assistant
- Georgette

ACTION

We, as the audience, are captivated by the story of Amélie as it's very difficult to predict what will happen next. We're also never sure whether what we see will be part of the real world or fantastical in nature – the first time an element of the unreal is introduced we are delighted and surprised and from then on we watch intently in case we miss another 'magical moment'.

The film uses many of the regular conventions that we are familiar with which are not part of the real world, such as moving back and forth in time and being privy to the thoughts of a character. It also plays with the audience, tricking them on occasion into thinking something has a mystical quality to it when actually there is a very simple explanation, as in the case of the mystery ripped-up photos which turn out to be the samples of the photo booth repairman.

With a partner, consider the following list of events from the film. Try to say whether each belongs in the world of fantasy or reality and place it in the correct column. For each answer, be prepared to explain why you have placed it in this category.

- glasses on a tablecloth magically dance in the wind
- the garden gnome travels the world and sends back photos of himself
- Amélie counts the orgasms of everyone in Paris
- the cat likes to listen to children's stories
- Amélie's father thinks she has a heart defect
- the key to the grocer's flat glows in Amélie's pocket
- Georgette and Joseph fall in love
- Mr Dufayel has bones which are so brittle they might break like glass
- the grocer's assistant takes over the shop
- Amélie lays a trail of arrows for Nino to follow

- Try to find another three examples for each category
- What other narrative tricks are played on the audience?
- What other conventions of film that do not happen in the real world do we see in the film *Amélie*?

SOUND

Amélie is not a film that makes great use of background music. Much of the action is set against a backdrop of silence, which accentuates the sounds accompanying the action we see, such as glasses clinking, doors opening and so forth. In real life the sounds of everyday action are masked and muffled by the background noise so the clarity with which we hear these is quite startling at times, conveying the feeling that this is not reality. In addition, there are some sounds that are distorted, such as the trains echoing through an empty subway station, thus giving the scene an unearthly quality.

- How does the theme music for the film add to the overall fairy tale quality?
- Choose one scene where the sounds are exceptionally clear. What exactly can you hear? It may help to watch this scene with your eyes closed so you are not distracted by the visuals.
- In what other scenes is the sound distorted and how does this enhance the action?

NARRATIVE

At the very beginning of the film we hear the voice of the narrator, rather like someone reading a story from a children's book.

- What is the tone of the narrator? What does this add to the tale?
- What information does he give us that we would not otherwise know?
- How else could this information be conveyed?
- Why do you think the role of the narrator is less obvious in the middle of the film?

VIEWPOINT

We see the action in *Amélie* from various viewpoints, but most frequently we are placed in the role of observer. The camera stands at a distance and we are invited to watch events take place as if watching them on stage. We are used to this convention in film but we are also used to being invited to get close into the action when it is appropriate, for instance if there is an important conversation. There are some occasions in *Amélie* where we expect to be closer in to the action than we are, for example in the closed cafe, when Amélie suggests to Georgette that Joseph likes her, we are positioned in a corner behind the stacked chairs, as if suggesting that we are eavesdropping on the conversation. This adds to the air of secrecy and mystery in the film.

An extension of this is when we see the action through a window, or an actual physical barrier, such as the conversation between Amélie and Nino in the cafe where they talk through the glass screen. And removing the audience even further, binoculars and video cameras are used by the characters in the film in some scenes, lending an air of voyeurism to their, and consequently our, role.

- Which scenes do we see through windows, binoculars or video cameras and what effect does this have?
- Where in the film is TV footage used and why?

Amélie and Mr Dufayel have various conversations about the characters in the Renoir he has copied for twenty years. Try to recall one or more of these. How do they play with our perception of reality in the film?

And finally...

- *Amélie* contains some scenes with sexual content. Why are they there? What do they add to the film in terms of narrative, humour and pathos?

Author: Anita Abbott

©Film Education 2006