

FRENCH CINEMA IN THE 21st CENTURY

Dr. Mary Harrod, University of Warwick
m.g.m.harrod@warwick.ac.uk

Welcome to the course!



A (Post)National Mainstream Industry

Lecture 1: Comedy and French Identity

Background, contexts, course rationale

- What is the relationship between film and society in France?
- Overview of the state of the French nation in the 21st century
- Overview of the state of the French film industry over the same period

French Comedy: the Case of *Amélie*

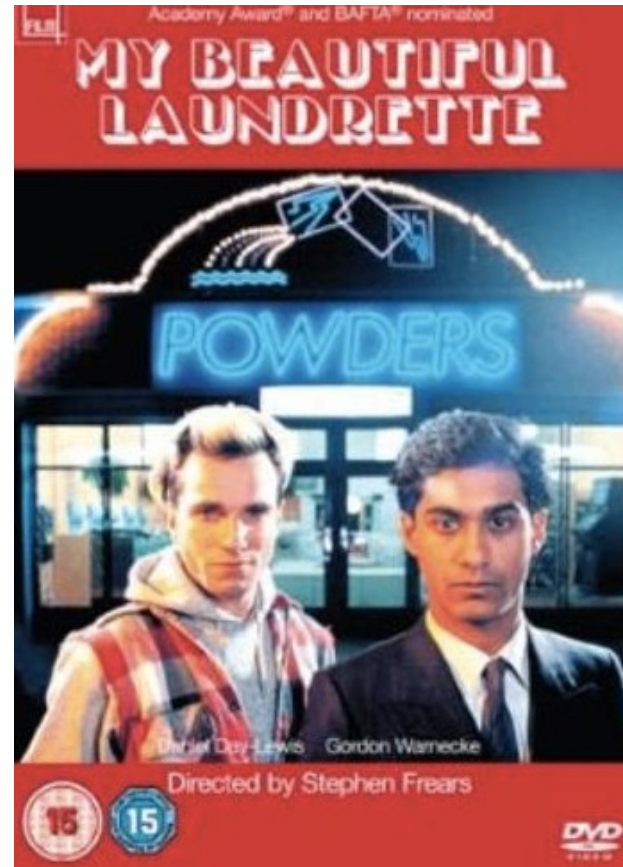
- Positioning, context, stylistic predecessors
- Reception, ideology, genre



Cinema as a Barometer of the Nation?

The 'state-of-the-nation film' – see John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Clarendon Press, 1999).

E.g.



- Engaged with contemporary social reality
- Dealing with 'gritty' social issues
- Filmed in a broadly realist style in terms of mise-en-scène in particular: location shooting, naturalistic lighting, a 'vernacular' style of acting.

21st-Century France: Some Key Shifts

- **Growing wealth divide**

Post-2000 economic slowdown and growing inequality

See Ludivine Bantigny (2013), *La France à l'heure du monde: de 1981 à nos jours* (Paris: Editions du Seuil)

Only aggravated by the 2007-8 global financial crisis, COVID-19 (from 2019/20) and most recently the cost-of-living crisis.

> Resentment; left-wing ideologies especially question the wealth divide.



'Put the unemployed first!'

21st-Century France: Some Key Shifts 2

- **Increased resentment of France's large immigrant population**

Successes by the Right-wing National Front (*Rassemblement national*) in successive elections; problems exacerbated by extremist terrorists.



- **Ongoing and growing fears about globalisation** and secondarily Europeanisation

21st-Century France: Some Key Shifts 3

- **Apocalyptic narratives about the decline of France as a nation.**

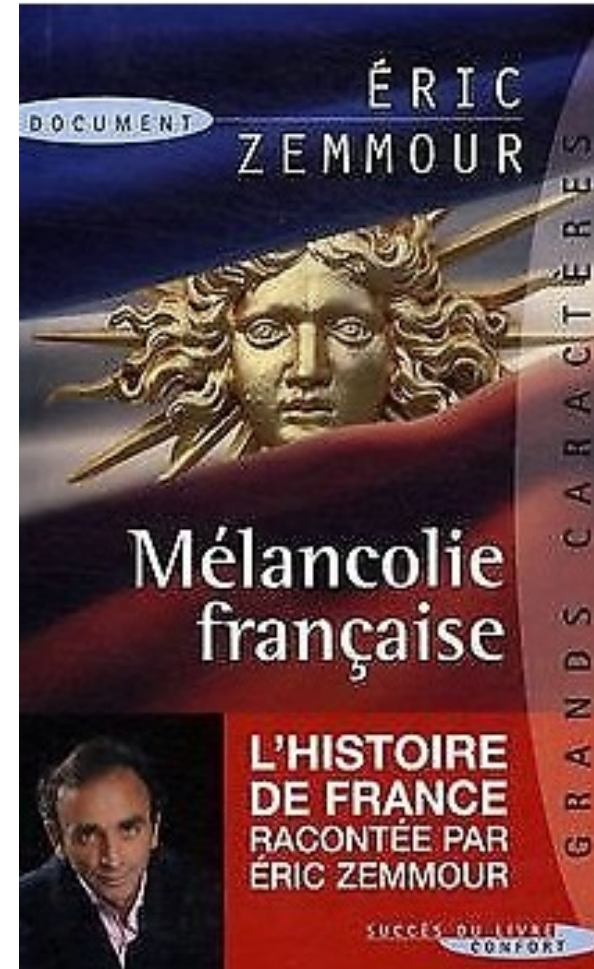
Present since the end of Empire, these have gathered force e.g.

- *La France qui tombe*, Nicolas Bavarez 2004
- *Quand la France disparaît du monde!*, Nicolas Tenzer 2008
- *L'Identité malheureuse*, Alain Finkielkraut 2013
- *Mélancolie française*, Eric Zemmour, 2010
- *Le Suicide français*, Eric Zemmour, 2014

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV4IK7yC56Y>

Linked also to **Europe's decline as a world power.**

See also Sarah Waters, 'The 2008 Economic Crisis and the French Narrative of National Decline: Une causalité diabolique,' *Modern & Contemporary France* Vol 21, No 3 .



Extract from Jonathan Fenby's *The History of Modern France* (Simon and Schuster 2016), p. xxvi.

21st-Century France: Some Key Shifts 4

- Changes in the private sphere, related to women's increased access to greater equality.



In traditionally patriarchal, Catholic France, women make up 47% of the workforce in 2020
([Évolution de la population active – Emploi, chômage, revenus du travail | Insee](#)).

The Paradoxes of French Cinema

‘a vigorous industry but also a subsidized artform; a field with intellectual ambitions that also courts widespread popularity; a craft extending from idiosyncratic experiments to commercial operations; a medium identified with a local audience yet one that also allows France to export itself on-screen around the globe, even to America’

Tim Palmer, ‘The Contemporary French Film Ecosystem’ (see further reading suggestions), p. 2.

Palmer cont.: A Booming Industry

	Total French films produced	100% French-financed
1995	97	63
2000	145	111
2005	187	126
2009	182	137

(taken from p. 8)

See also CNC France for up-to-date film statistics [Soutien à la création cinéma, séries, TV, jeu vidéo | CNC](#)

The Best-selling Films on the French Market since 2000

Extracted from a list of the 100 best-sellers, Internet Movie Database.

Position	Year of release	Title	Director
2	2008	Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Sticks	Dany Boon
3	2011	Intouchables/The Intouchables	Olivier Nakache, Éric Toledano
8	2009	Avatar	James Cameron
11	2002	Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre/Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra	Alain Chabat
19	2014	Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?/Serial (Bad) Weddings	Philippe de Chauveron
25	2006	Les Bronzés 3: amis pour la vie/French Fried Vacation 3: Friends Forever	Patrice Leconte
26	2000	Taxi 2	Gérard Krawczyk
33	2003	Finding Nemo	Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich
35	2001	Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	Chris Columbus
39	2002	Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	Chris Columbus
47	2001	Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie	Jean-Pierre Jeunet
48	2004	Les Choristes/The Chorus	Christophe Barratier
51	2011	Rien à déclarer/Nothing to Declare	Dany Boon
57	2007	Ratatouille	Brad Bird, Jan Pinkava
59	2001	La Vérité si je mens! 2/Would I Lie to You 2	Thomas Gilou
61	2009	Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	Carlos Saldanha, Mike Thurmeier
62	2000	The Sixth Sense	M. Night Shyamalan
64	2005	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Mike Newell
68	2014	La Famille Bélier	Éric Lartigau
70	2003	The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	Peter Jackson
75	2005	Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith	George Lucas
78	2004	Shrek 2	Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, Conrad Vernon
79	2004	Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	Alfonso Cuarón
83	2002	The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	Peter Jackson
87	2012	Skyfall	Sam Mendes
90	2001	The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	Peter Jackson
96	2008	Astérix aux jeux olympiques/Asterix at the Olympic Games	Frédéric Forestier, Thomas Langmann

See M. Harrod and P. Powrie, 'New directions in contemporary French comedies: from nation, sex and class to ethnicity, community and the vagaries of the postmodern,' Special Issue of *Studies in French Cinema on contemporary French comedy*, vol. 18, issue 1.

Resistance to the Perceived Acceleration in Commercialising French Film Culture

Darren Waldron and Isabelle Vanderschelden have argued **suspicious attitudes towards popular cinema** have only been exacerbated in recent years by a French critical tendency among cinephilic critics to equate so-called commercial filmmaking with **'a multifaceted crisis' linked to inflated production costs and shorter cinema runs.**

E.g. Jean-Michel Frodon in articles in the auteurist-cinephilic journal *Cahiers du cinéma* from 2005 onwards.

Waldron, D. and I. Vanderschelden. 2007. 'Introduction.' In D. Waldron and I. Vanderschelden (eds), *France at the Flicks: Trends in Contemporary French Popular Cinema*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.1-15, p. 8.

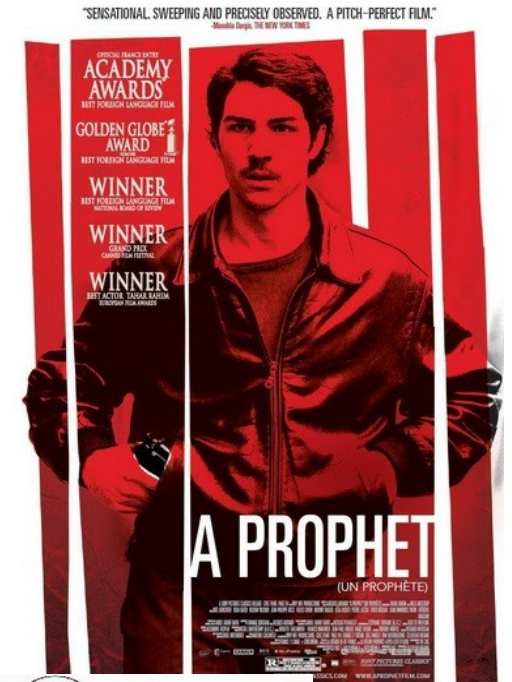
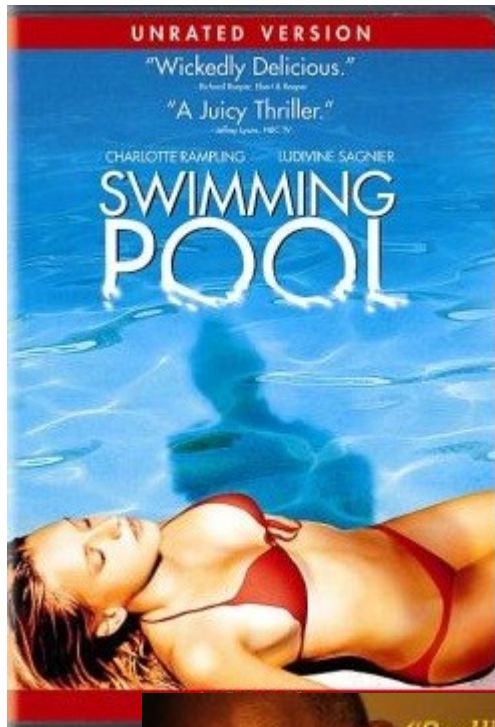
French films in top 20 at French box office in 2009

1. *Le Petit Nicolas/ Little Nicholas* (Laurent Tirard, France/ Belgium)
2. *Lol (Laughing Out Loud)* (Lisa Azuelos)
3. *Arthur et la vengeance de Maltazard/ Arthur and the Great Adventure* (Luc Besson)
4. *Coco/ Coco Before Chanel* (Anne Fontaine)
5. *Neuilly sa mère* (Gabriel Laferrière)
6. *OSS 117 Rio ne répond plus/ OSS 117 – Lost in Rio* (Michel Hazanavicius)

Data sourced from CNC France

And Some Internationally Successful Auteur

Films



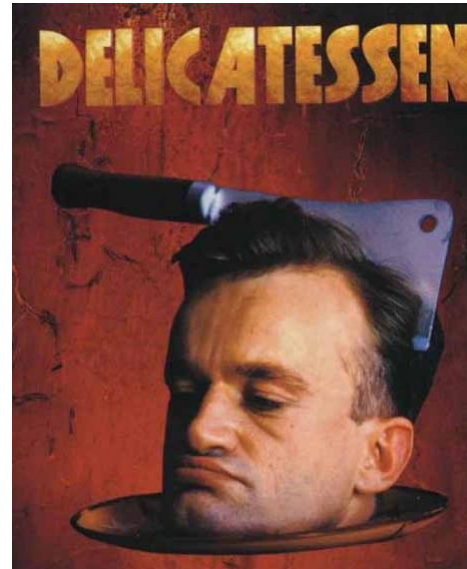
Amélie as extending the notion of the *comédie d'auteur*?

This term is coined by Raphaëlle Moine, 'Reconfigurations génériques de la comédie dans le cinéma français contemporain,' in *Le Cinéma français face aux genres*, Paris: Association française de recherche sur le cinéma, 2005, pp. 214-223.



Cf. Jeunet's earlier work e.g. *Delicatessen* (Jeunet and Caro, 1991)

Clip – opening.



Retro Aesthetic Influences on *Amélie*

Photographs by
Robert Doisneau (1912-1994)



Retro Aesthetic Influences on *Amélie*

Poetic Realist films of the 1930s and 40s e.g.

Hotel du Nord (Carné, 1938)

Le Quai des brumes/Port of Shadows (Carné, 1938)

CLIP *Le jour se lève/Daybreak* (Carné, 1939)

- ‘Not reproducing reality so much as recreating it, stories in these films are anchored to defined social settings, but aim to convey “essential” human truths that transcend social realities. Poetic realism undervalues a film’s direct links with the material world in order to explore the symbolic resonances which that world – when photographed – is capable of releasing’

(Baron Turk 1989: 109)

- Often featured vulnerable young women.

- Creation of an intimate ambience through set design. (Andrew 1995: 186).

- ‘The development of panchromatic film allowed a greater control of shadow and light in the studio and aided the presence of typical motifs, such as glistening cobbles, rain-spattered pavements, and dark shadows.’

(McCann 2017: 54-5)

- ‘France has become an imaginary realm available only through loss, exile, and nostalgia’

(Andrew 1995: 230)



Reception of *Amélie*: a Divided Picture

- Global box office blockbuster (8.5 million French spectators, over \$33m taken in US)
- BUT frequently critically derided e.g. Serge Kaganski, ' «Amélie», pas jolie ,' *Libération*, 31 May 2001

'Jeunet est sous l'emprise d'une telle volonté de maîtrise et de contrôle absolu de ses images que ses films ne respirent plus, que son monde paraît être filmé sous cloche. Amélie Poulain fait ainsi penser à ces boules de neige enfermant les monuments de Paris que l'on vend dans les boutiques de souvenirs kitsch.

Jeunet is so anxious to have total control over every single frame that his films become suffocating: his worlds are imprisoned under glass. AP makes you think of one of those snow-globes with Parisian monuments inside you find in shops selling kitsch souvenirs.

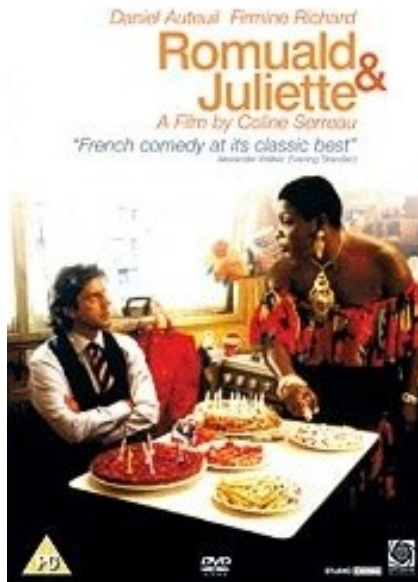
Kaganski Continued

[...]

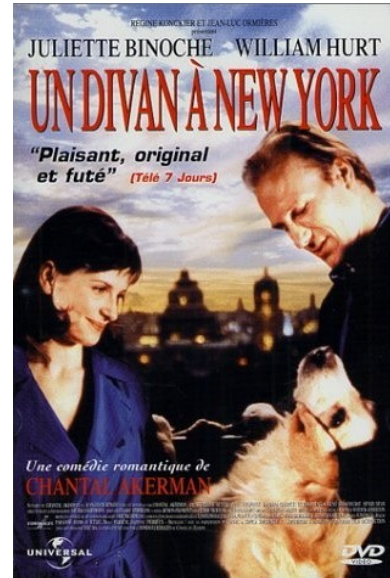
Que vois-je dans le Montmartre de Jeunet? Des Français aux patronymes qui fleurent bon le terroir. Je vois aussi un beur désarabisé qui s'appelle Lucien. Mais où sont les Antillais, les Maghrébins, les Turcs, les Chinois, les Pakis, etc? Où sont ceux qui vivent une sexualité différente? Où sont les Parisiens qui peuplent la capitale en 1997 (année où est censé se passer le film)?'

What do I see in Jeunet's Montmartre? French people with 'good old-fashioned French' names. I also see a de-Arabized 'beur' called Lucien. But where are the Antilleans, North Africans, Turks, Chinese, Pakistanis and so on? Where are the LGBTQ+ individuals? Where are the Parisians of 1997 (the year when the film's meant to take place)?

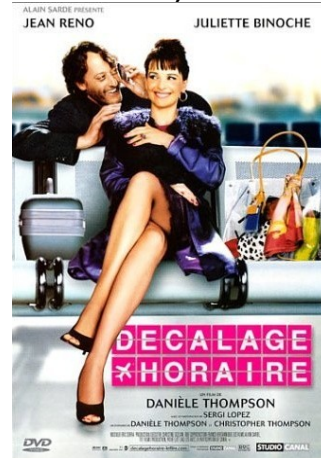
Early French Romcoms



Coline Serreau,
1989



A Couch in New York
Chantal Akerman, 1996

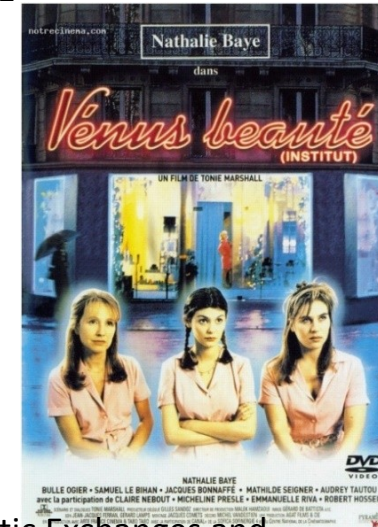


Jet-Lag
Danièle Thompson, 2002



Reines d'un jour
(“Queens for a Day”)
Marion
Vernoux,
2001

Venus Beauty Salon
Tonie Marshall, 1999
CLIP



See also: Rollet, B. 2008. ‘Transatlantic Exchanges and Influences: *Décalage horaire* (*Jet Lag*), Gender and the Romantic Comedy *à la française*.’

In S. Abbott and D. Jermyn (eds), *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 92-104.

Consolidation of the Genre Post-2000



2001



Palais Royal, Valérie Lemercier, 2005



I Do, 2006



Four Stars, 2006



Priceless, 2006



Heartbreaker, 2010



2012

Post-2015: see Netflix e.g. *The Hookup Plan, I Am Not an Easy Man....*

Ambivalent Endings

‘The end of the film [...] brings the hitherto star-crossed lovers together, the sheer predictability of their union, the “fabulous”, storybook fulfilment of Amelie’s “destin”, recalls the ending of countless Hollywood films’ (Ezra, p.301).



Or do you agree with Moore that Amelie is a ‘borderline sociopath’ and the film’s ending constitutes ‘a series of seemingly incoherent (or irrational) images’ (pp. 16-17)

Amélie: Romance or Realism?



For Michelle Scatton-Tessier, *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* is 'well anchored in its socio-historical and cinematic period, exploiting the same issues of loneliness and isolation found in recent French new social cinema'.

In '*Le Petisme, Flirting with the Sordid in Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain.*' *Studies in French Cinema* 4, no.3 (2004): 197-207, p. 197.

Isolating Camerawork



The Idea of a Nation

Benedict Anderson on the nation as an 'imagined political community', formulated through technology and modernity:

'[It] is imagined because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each there lives the image of the communion.'

Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism
(first published in 1983)

Amélie and the National Body



Amélie and ImpersoNation (Elsaesser 2005)

National identity a key area of signification for filmic discourse, just as film and now television are key signifiers for constructions of national identity both inside and outside the nation – though not always through co-extensive versions.



ImpersoNation refers to films designed to play to 'the look of the other' (2005, 49).

Additional Bibliography

- Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005.
- Elizabeth Ezra, 'The Death of an Icon: *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*.' *French Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3: 301-10.
- Ben McCann, *Julien Duvivier*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.