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Angel and Antihero, Straight From Toontown

TOY STORIES

BY J. HOBERMAN

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AMÉLIE

Directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Written by Jeunet and Guillaume Laurant
Miramax Opens November 2

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

Directed by Joel Coen
Written by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen
USA
Loews Lincoln Square

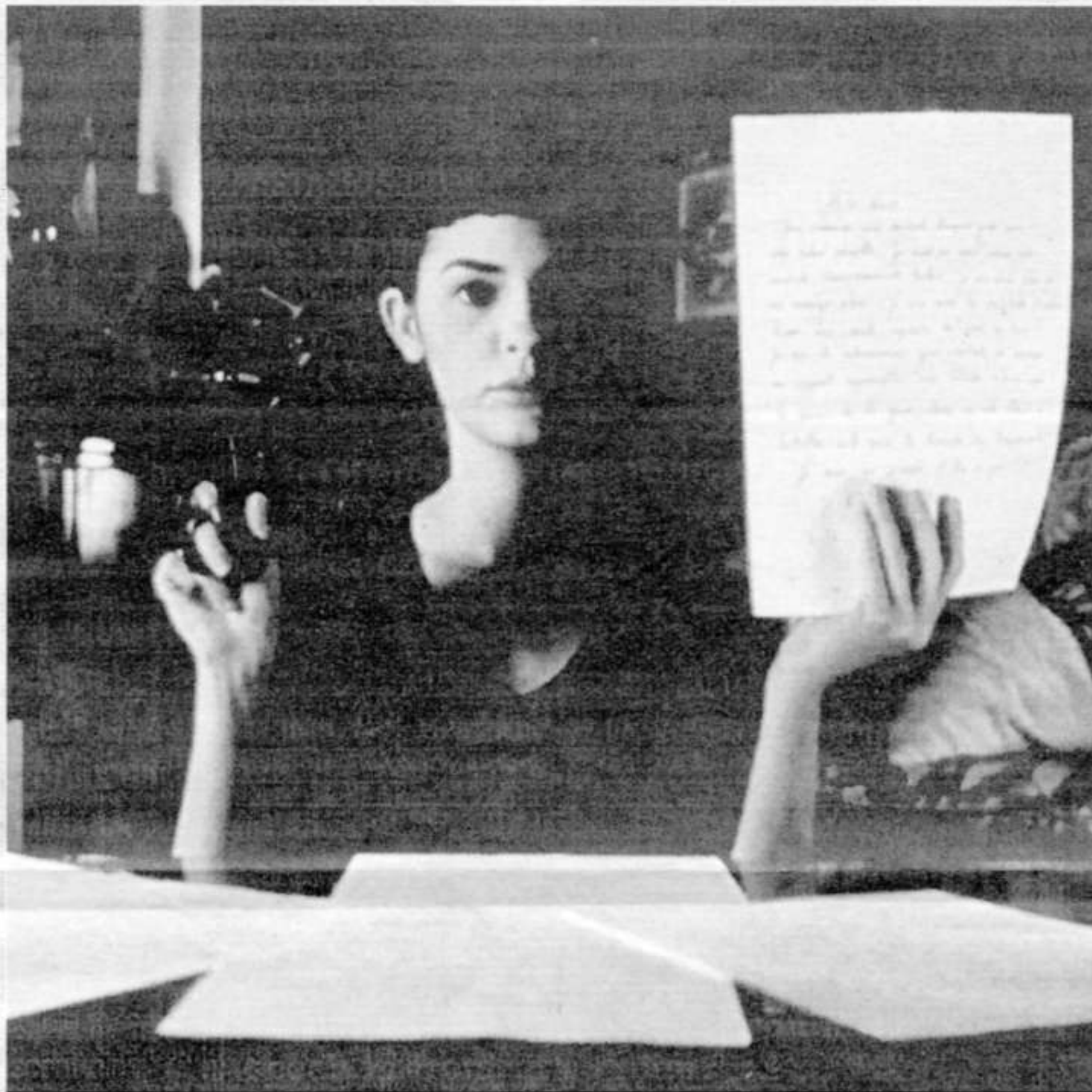
There's a case to be made that the two poles of fin de siècle commercial movies are dehumanized live-action cartoons and their supposed antithesis, the messy neo-neo-realism of the Dogme group and its fellow travelers. This opposition has nothing to do with avant or derriere gardes. Dogme may be a reaction against deluxe production values, but it likewise benefits from the new digital technology, and crypto-animation does not belong solely to megabudget sci-fi or action films.

Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* is predicated on a phenomenally precise mise-en-scène and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's equally mannerist *Amélie* on an intricately calibrated pow-pow montage; neither delivers any grand explosions, but they're straight from Toontown. If one movie is terminally depressed and the other hysterically feel-good, both feature characters pitched somewhere between grimacing meat puppet and calculated special effect—and both project worlds, filtered through extensive voice-over, so deeply nostalgic and hermetically self-enclosed as to make the Magic Kingdom resemble downtown Karachi.

The more likeable of the two, *Amélie* unfolds in a evocatively old-fashioned version of contemporary Paris, populated by mysterious curmudgeons, secret artists, adorable loners, and benign fetishists—the little people of Montmartre, all subjects of the movie's eponymous gamine du jour (Audrey Tautou). *Amélie* is less creatively grotesque than director Jeunet's two collaborations with cartoonist Marc Caro, *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*, but it's just as droll, and blithely retro: The accordion strains of old-timey musette resound through the cobblestone streets, and *Jules et Jim* is playing at the movies.

Amélie is Jeunet's first feature to be shot outside the studio, but he's managed to transform Paris itself into his atelier: "We [digitally] cleared the streets of all cars, cleaned the graffiti off the walls, replaced posters with more colorful ones." The neighborhood residents are rather less colorful—a replacement that may be regarded as analogous to Woody Allen's similarly homogenous *Manhattan*. The screen is saturated with Gallic whimsy and the romance of Montmartre in the person of Amélie. This wide-eyed creature, who loves cracking the crust of crème brûlée, is tall and thin, with impishly bobbed hair and clunky comic-strip character shoes. Disguised as a shy café waitress (her place of employment is a virtual museum of vintage brands), she's actually an aspiring guardian angel.

After discovering a child's treasure box hidden in her apartment, Amélie tracks down the now middle-aged owner and plants his boyhood stuff where he will stumble across it,



SATURATED WITH GALIC WHIMSY: TAUTOU IN AMÉLIE

secretly watching as he does so and proudly noting his grateful tears. In the same spirit, Amélie rescripts her concierge's unhappy past by fabricating a love letter from her long-missing husband. (Not that she is always so benign. Angered by the local greengrocer's abuse of his slow-witted assistant, Amélie turns avenging angel, sneaking into his apartment to perpetrate all manner of subtle mischief.)

Basically asexual, Amélie takes a child-like pleasure in orchestrating a neurotic co-worker's near-cosmic orgasm in the café. Her imagination is infantile as well. Furniture comes to life in Amélie's presence; the old Russian movies shown on TV talk directly to her. Initially disarming, this simpering dolly grows increasingly wearisome, particularly once she begins attending to her own destiny. The movie develops a plot when Amélie recovers a scrapbook of photo-booth portraits lost by a sensitive porn-shop cashier (director Mathieu Kassovitz, far more benign here than in his own movies) and engages him in a wild goose chase through the funhouse that is Paris.

Basically a faux new-wave romp, *Amélie* achieves a high-tech remix of the playful narrative digressions in François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* and the prolix sight gags of Louis Malle's *Zazie Dans le Metro* (an early '60s art-house treat that seems ripe for revival). Jeunet loves nothing better than a pell-mell, wide-angle track into an open screaming mouth. Although there's a surfeit of business—thunderous cuts, convulsive white-outs, split screens, interpolated newsreels, X-ray shots, annotated frames, exag-

gerated sound effects—much of it is funny. Indeed, the manic pace serves to mitigate the movie's cloying sentimentality.

An ecstatically received critical and box-office success in France, and hence a source of much local pride, *Amélie* became the subject of some debate. The lefty spoilsports of *Libération* stirred the pot by deriding this new national treasure as an example of spurious populism, characterizing its digitally enhanced Paris as a softcore analogue to Le Pen's racist National Front as well as an example of an idiot globalization that transposed the "fake magic" and inane gaiety of EuroDisney to Montmartre. Such attacks on a proven crowd-pleaser created an opportunity no politician could ignore. *Amélie* was ringingly endorsed by everyone from President Jacques Chirac (after a command screening at the Elysée palace) and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin to the Communist deputy mayor of Paris (who praised its anti-capitalist attitude).

In the U.S., *Amélie* is playing for higher stakes. Brace yourself. Given that the movie's U.S. distributor used Abraham Foxman and Jesse Jackson to flack last year's *Chocolat* toward the Oscar, the French pols' patriotic pull-quotes are but a warm-up for the inevitable Miramax hard sell.