Tautou's Face

JEFFREY N. PETERS

LE FABULEUX DESTIN D'AMÉLIE POULAIN IS A FILM ABOUT LOOKING closely. And nothing in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's 2001 work is offered up for visual inspection more emphatically than the face of Audrey Tautou. Not only is the film still immediately recognizable from the iconic image of Tautou on its now-cult poster (fig. 1), but in the months following the film's release, 8.85 million French viewers spent $42 million to look at their overnight international celebrity Tautou and decide that what they saw was themselves.[1] Tautou's face quickly came to embody both the film's near-obsessive hold on the public imagination in France and the often vitriolic debates in the French press concerning the problem of national identity at the turn of the twenty-first century, when the principles of universalist republicanism continued to be openly challenged by the particularist claims of diverse social constituencies (e.g., women, same-sex couples, North African immigrants, antiglobalism activists).[2] For Jeunet's defenders in France—those viewers who understood the film to be a populist rendering of "[les] gens de peu" 'the little people' (Belleret)—Tautou's face was so evocative as to be nearly allegorical.[3] Discovered by Jeunet in 1999, already magnified on a billboard for the Tonie Marshall film *Vénus beauté (institut)*, Tautou was, in the words of one ecstatic reviewer of Jeunet's film, "Vénus candeur, Vénus tendresse, Vénus séduction, Vénus délice" 'the Venus of candor, the Venus of tenderness, the Venus of seduction, the Venus of pleasure' (Alion).[4] For critics of the film, by contrast, the obvious digital enhancement of Tautou's appearance—like every visual aspect of the film, Tautou's face is color-graded, flattened, and often distorted by wide-angle cinematography (fig. 2)—exemplified the film's overall superficiality, and therefore its political significance. Writing for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Charles Tesson

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argued that Jeunet's Amélie presents a seductive visual metonymy of a cynically conceived French *peuple*. Like Amélie, Tesson writes, the "people" as it is imagined by France's politicians in 2001 is a caricature, a virtual entity available to politically expedient idealization, an absent thing restored by way of nostalgic cliché to a reassuring "lost unity." This point had been more spectacularly made several weeks earlier by Serge Kaganski, the editor of the pop culture weekly *Les inrockuptibles*, who suggested that the extreme-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen could find helpful propaganda for his xenophobic National Front platform in the film's racially sanitized depiction of Paris.[5]

But what do we see when we look at Tautou's face? And through what means is the specificity of the actor's face, shot in close-up at regular intervals throughout the film, so insistently generalized as to make Tautou, in the words of one enthusiastic reviewer, "la petite fiancée des Français" 'the little fiancée of the French' (Lorrain 72)? How, in short, does Tautou's face, cut off from the whole of which it is a part, as in any close-up, refer us beyond the image to a place where the meanings of images are themselves negotiated, beyond the visual scope of the frame to a problem of national seeing, or, perhaps more precisely, to a problem of seeing the national? That Tautou's face should do so much cultural work—by pitting those who find in the film a reassuring portrait of essentially French values against those who find in it a politically disturbing portrayal of regressive nostalgia—while showing so little situates Jeunet's film in a history of camera distance. From at least its earliest use in the films of D. W. Griffith, the close-up shot has raised theoretical problems about seeing and not seeing, surface and depth, parts and wholes, tensions in Jeunet's film that may

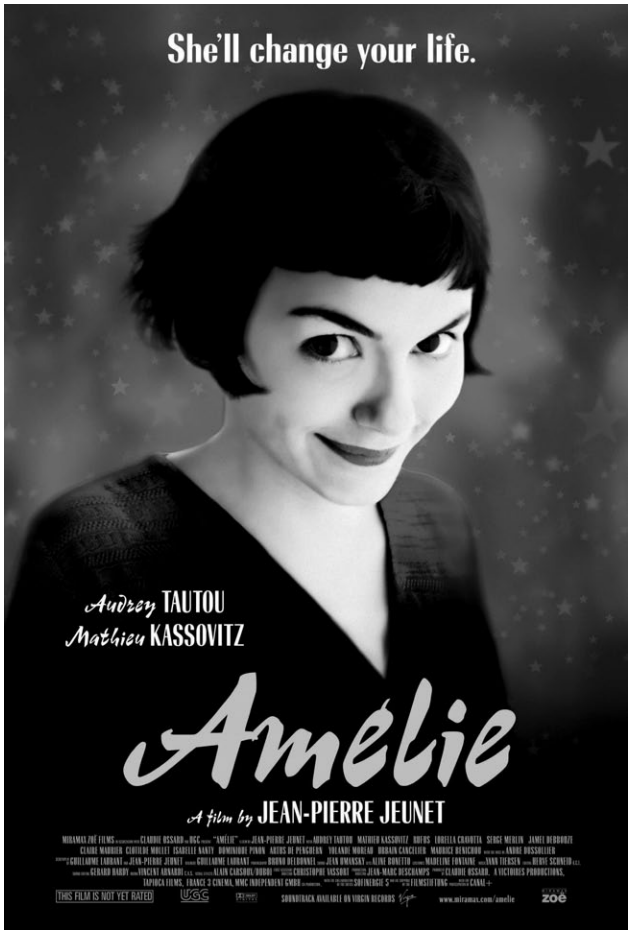


FIG. 1
Courtesy of Miramax.



FIG. 2
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001)

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be mapped onto the more fundamental and related poles of what have been called, with respect to the close-up, "expression" and "signification." In what follows, I want to suggest that the formal properties of the close-up embodied in Jeunet's film share something of the contradictions that lie at the heart of debates around national identity in France at the start of the twenty-first century. Because it opens a critical distance between what it shows us and our abstract understanding of what we cannot see, while at the same time drawing us near in an appeal to the intimacy of our senses, the close-up holds in place simultaneously the rational and the sentimental features of the French national ideal. As Roland Barthes put it with regard to the face of Greta Garbo in a famous essay whose title inspires this one, the cultural force of the celebrity face shot in close-up derives from a structure both intellectual and affective, at once of the idea and of the body.

Barthes's 1957 essay, however, identifies a period of transition specific to the iconography of 1950s Hollywood glamour. Garbo presented, in Barthes's words, an archetype, a Platonic idea of the human face, while at the same time constraining within her sculpted features a restless impulse toward individuation and mortality. The face of Garbo embodied what Barthes calls a fragile historical moment "during which the cinema would extract an existential beauty from an essential beauty, during which the archetype would bend toward a fascination with the perishable" (71), toward a new kind of more earthly star exemplified by the young Audrey Hepburn. Garbo was inaccessible transcendence; Hepburn, available charm. The specific allure of Tautou's face, by contrast, would appear to derive from the joining of apparently contradictory qualities: the conceptual remoteness and affective proximity offered by Jeunet's close-ups. Her face fills the screen, but only as a fragment; she is everything we see, but nothing we can understand. As a screen object built around its own internal logic, but one that also requires the investment of the viewing spectator to determine its meaning and value, the close-up of Tautou's face figures the encompassing social drama of celebrity in the twenty-first century. Like all the artfully arranged technologies of "public intimacy" characteristic of modern star culture, it is neither a person nor a thing, neither entirely public nor altogether private but something in between, at once an imagined friend and an inaccessible ideal (Roach 16–17; Thrift 303–05).

Smallism

If the most recognizable image of Tautou's face is the one presented on the film's poster, the shot of Amélie holding a spoon up to the camera is without question its second most emblematic image (fig. 3). As Amélie gently cracks the surface of her crème brûlée in the following shot (fig. 4), the film delineates an aesthetics of the detail and the small. The first in a series of Amélie's everyday "little pleasures," which include plunging her hand into a bag of lentils in the market, skipping stones on the Canal Saint-Martin, and watching the flickering faces of spectators in a movie theater,

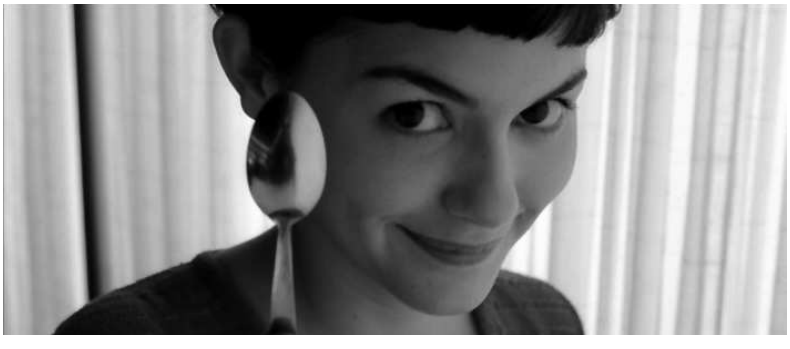


Fig. 3
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

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the smallness of the crème brûlée moment has been given inversely enormous importance by viewers of the film. For critics, scholars, and even politicians, the film presents this moment as a quintessentially "French" pleasure, and it is thus the defining image of Jeunet's explicitly nostalgic portrayal of an older France. Baptiste Roux reads these moments of intimate delight as images of the film's resistance to a twenty-first-century politics of globalization and individualism. John Westbrook reads them as a way to diagnose a nostalgic appeal in France at the turn of the century to traditional values of land and community in the spirit of the French antiglobalization activist José Bové (426). Mireille Rosello suggests that by directing the viewer to look away—from her face to the crème brûlée—Amélie disallows a masculinist fetishization of the female body and asks the audience instead to linger over the film's small pleasures (11).[6] Like Philippe Delerm's very popular miniaturist novel *La première petite gorgée de bière et autres plaisirs minuscules* ("The First Mouthful of Beer and Other Tiny Pleasures"), published several years earlier in 1997, Jeunet's film is understood to engage in an unproblematized celebration of traditional French values, construed in France as an example of *le petisme* (a recent French neologism signifying, roughly, "smallism"), a national reaction against all that is gigantic and growing—crime, violence, unemployment, and technological alienation—in an age of globalized modernity (Scatton-Tessier 199).

The sheer cultural volume of these and many similar responses to the smallness of the spoon shot suggests that there is something exemplary about its structure. By isolating Tautou's face, leaving it abstracted from any situating context or narrative environment, and conveying—wordlessly—the anticipated pleasure of the crème brûlée's cracked surface, the shot models characteristics of the film's visual language that are more broadly important. The shot of Tautou's face asks us to look closely, but to look at something that it is in fact organized not to show. Amélie gazes directly at a spectator whose presence is explicitly, and emphatically, denied. The reflecting surface of the spoon, held up mirrorlike to the camera, indicates the real conditions of any filmic environment: the spectator with whom Amélie seems to seek identification is absent, invisible on the spoon's reflecting surface, the only depth discernible in the otherwise shallow space of the shot. At the same time, the crème brûlée is also absent in the shot of Tautou's face. It is not given to us until later, in the next shot, where it is separated from Amélie's face by the ellipsis of Jeunet's cut. The spoon shot therefore gestures toward an object whose embodiment of small—French—pleasures is expressed in the close-up of Tautou's face but that is itself absent from the visual field of the shot. As it presents the spoon to the spectator, the shot of Tautou's face does not explicitly say anything. Instead, Amélie's silence, her immobility, and the seductive appeal of her gaze seem formulated to create a sense of meaningfulness whose origin, like the shot of the crème brûlée, is visually out of reach but whose affective substance is readable in the pleasure on Tautou's face. If *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* portrays France at the turn of the century, as both the film's defenders and critics claim it does, in different ways and for different reasons, it is perhaps because it models a structure of identification whereby reassuring unities and wholes—the values of France itself—are discovered in the proximity of objects, visually absent, whose smallness encloses a disproportionately rich store of meaning.

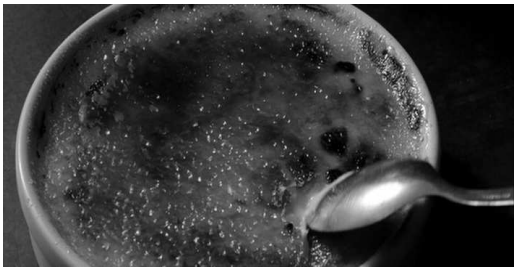


FIG. 4
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

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When Jeunet's film appeared early in 2001, moreover, a debate in France over national identity had come to center on the faces of young women, specifically young Muslim women. Between 1989, when Muslim dress first became politically volatile following the suspension of three schoolgirls who refused to remove their head scarves, and September 11, discussions in France concerning ethnic and religious communities had become increasingly tied to statements about the apparent threat posed by immigration to national integrity.[7] The current French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, brought renewed national attention to the head-scarf controversy in 2003 when, as the then president Jacques Chirac's interior minister, he insisted that Muslim women pose for official photographs without their head scarf, or hijab. More recently, during his successful presidential bid in 2007, Sarkozy returned to this theme, linking immigration to a crisis of national identity and stating flatly that "[l]e problème de la France, c'est qu'à force, pendant trop longtemps, de ne rien exiger de personne, même pas le respect de ses valeurs et de ses lois, elle a nourri l'une des plus graves crises d'identité de son histoire. C'est la raison pour laquelle il faut maîtriser l'immigration" 'France's problem is that because it has for too long asked nothing of anyone, not even a respect for its values and laws, it has fostered one of the most serious identity crises in its history. This is why we must control immigration' (qtd. in Noiriel 93).

The events of 9/11 brought renewed media attention in France to a series of terrorist incidents in Paris during the 1990s, and the time seemed ripe to French lawmakers to introduce legislation banning the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools.[8] The law, which went into effect in 2004, makes it illegal, in the name of French secular universalism, to wear signs of religious affiliation such as turbans or large crosses, but it was widely understood to target the Muslim hijab. That the hijab does not in fact cover the face and that the French translation *foulard*, or "scarf," became conflated over time with *voile*, or "veil," as Joan Scott has astutely pointed out (*Politics* 16), emphasize the extent to which the face, made visible through legislative enforcement, had become a privileged object of political anxiety. The new law seemed to suggest that to keep the faces of Muslim girls uncovered was somehow to make visible national unity itself. By 2007 President Sarkozy fulfilled a campaign promise by creating an entirely new government ministry devoted to immigration policy and national identity.[9]

The female face has long been associated in France with concepts of national solidarity. When the republic was first declared in 1792, the Roman allegory Liberty was chosen to give concrete form to the abstract political values derived from the Revolution (Hunt 93). The folkloric figure of Marianne, a Catholic-sounding everywoman wearing the ancient Phrygian cap of the freed slave, would appear throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on coins, stamps, and monuments; in painting; and as busts prominently displayed in city halls (fig. 5). This is the iconography that the French director Abel Gance would draw on in his epic 1927 film *Napoléon*, where close-ups of citizens singing the republic's new national anthem "La Marseillaise" would be superimposed onto

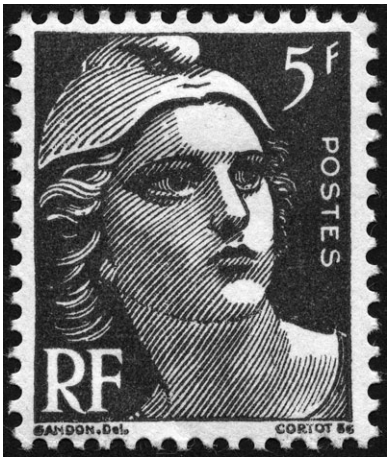


FIG. 5
French postage stamp from the series Marianne de Gandon, first issued in 1945. Drawn by Pierre Gandon and engraved by Henri Cortot. (Credits are given at the start of the notes.)

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an image of Marianne (figs. 6 and 7). When a bust of Brigitte Bardot as Marianne was made in 1969 for installation in city halls and the popular singer Mireille Mathieu appeared as Marianne on the cover of the magazine *Paris Match* in 1978, politics and national identity converged with celebrity. The face of Marianne, as Maurice Agulhon has shown, became a screen onto which nearly any political attitude or cultural value could be projected (*Marianne au pouvoir* 339–41; *Marianne into Battle* 10–33). The republican icon in France became the idea of iconicity itself, recalling what the director Rouben Mamoulian reportedly told Greta Garbo concerning her signature role in his film *Queen Christina* (1933): "I want your face to be a blank sheet of paper. I want the writing to be done by every member of the audience" (qtd. in Erkkila 613; see also Fischer 84).

In this context, Jeunet's regular, nearly rhythmic emphasis on Tautou's face throughout *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* is striking. That Jeunet so often shoots Tautou in close-up may offer some clues into the curiously hyperbolic outpouring of both affection and disdain for Amélie at all levels of French society in 2001. Shortly after the release of the film, President Jacques Chirac and his wife, Bernadette, invited Jeunet to screen the film at the Elysée Palace, along with the French prime minister and the mayor of Paris. Jeunet's response to the president's claim that the evening was the "best of his life" was telling: a shrug of the shoulders and a bewildered "quand même" 'really'—the film was after all just a film.[10] How indeed could a film that obviously flaunted its formal artifice, that was often criticized for lacking any kind of moral or political sincerity, that was famously lambasted by Philippe Lançon in the newspaper *Libération* as "Eurodisney in Montmartre" (the Paris neighborhood where the film is set)—in short, that was apparently devoid of significance—somehow convey such powerful cultural meaning?[11]



Fig. 6
Frame from *Napoléon* (1927).



Fig. 7
Frame from *Napoléon* (1927).

Looking at Surfaces, Deeply

But the close-up has always asked this question: how can a shot that shows so little say so much? The close-up stands at both outer limits of what the film image can mean, at once nothing and everything. In the early cinema, in fact, as an emphasis on mise-en-scène gave way to more intricate forms of editing and cinematography and the silent era gave way to sound, the close-up was understood both to offer the spectator a visually intimate mode of deep seeing and to constitute a modernist threat to perception. It was, in a version of film history exemplified by Béla Balázs, writing in the 1940s, a part *and* a whole, as well as an example of cinema at its most human and universal and at its most vulnerable to the alienating effects of aesthetic experimentation. A shot of fragments, of parts of things, the close-up, especially the close-up of the hu-

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man face prominent in silent film, enclosed, in Balázs's view, a near-mystical depth. It showed the "hidden life of little things" (54); it deepened our vision, revealing "the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well" (55); it "radiate[d] a tender human attitude . . . , a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-the-miniature, a warm sensibility" (56). But just as it promoted affective responses to the visual portrayal of life's secrets, the close-up threatened to devolve into merely another in a series of what Balázs called "sectional pictures" in the emerging era of classical editing. Changes in camera distance and angle among multiple shots sliced the world up, took apart the humanizing whole to which the close-up was supposed to refer and that it was supposed to deepen (62). The close-up could be abused, Balázs argues, when the camera lingered too long over the poetry of things, when faces, endowed with an abstract formal capacity, became autonomous aesthetic shapes rather than parts of a dramatic whole (59). As if in anticipation of Balázs's fear, this is exactly what Fernand Léger said of the close-up as he used it in his 1924 *Ballet mécanique* (fig. 8): the close-up shot abstracts an object and gives it an "entirely new lyric and plastic power" (97). Shooting an object in close-up, including parts of the human body, Léger wrote, does not give the object narrative meaning but rather endows it with a "soul" that is inseparable from the surface of the image.



FIG. 8
Frame from *Ballet mécanique* (1924).

It is precisely this dialectic of part and whole, surface and depth, that Jeunet's close-ups of Tautou's face seem so often to invoke. For more often than not in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, Balázs's "sectional pictures" predominate. Jeunet's film is a virtuoso collage of several thousand shots, nearly every one characterized by extreme angles or some exaggerated digital enhancement whose organization the viewer can appreciate only fleetingly, in passing.[12] When, however, Jeunet wants us to look closely, when looking itself becomes the focus of Jeunet's attention, the camera is brought to a stop and lingers, almost always in close-up, on Tautou's face. (Close-ups of the actor's face occur every two minutes, on average.) Inheritors of the film history described by Balázs, we are asked as viewers to forget, however briefly, the breadth of Jeunet's cinematography and editing in order to seek his film's depth, to find in this fragment—Tautou's face—the image of a secret whole, to look for pleasure within this small thing, in the manner of French *petisme*. As Bruno Delbonnel, Jeunet's director of photography, said in reference to Tautou's face in the film, the camera in close-up peers "into the actor's soul" (qtd. in Bergery 61). And though it is unclear what the meaning of these close-ups is, what whole it is we are looking for, certainly we are being asked to look at and for something. In the language of the filmmaker Jean Epstein, who in the 1920s offered an even more vigorous (and erotically charged) defense of the close-up than that of Balázs, the close-up calls for an act of looking that reestablishes intimacy between viewer and screen object and that closes the distances opened by the new sectional pictures:

> The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears.

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> Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. (13)

For Epstein, the close-up does not threaten the film viewer with alienation in an era of continuity-editing segmentation but rather beckons and brings the viewer closer so that he[13] can consider the whole *behind* or *within* the part. The close-up thereby reassures the viewer, by way of its stasis, of his own part in the construction of a coherent and ultimately linear diegetic whole. As in Epstein and Balázs, Jeunet gives us an object-fragment that apparently "lifts the mask" of the material world (Epstein 11), allows us to look within, and reassures us of its depth in the midst of what is often described as the film's onslaught of visually superficial images. Tautou's face is visually a detail, a fragment, and as such does not contain any immediately obvious meaning, and yet the close-up itself, as Epstein wrote memorably, "speaks the present imperative of the verb to understand" (13–15). It causes us to see, to *understand* that which is normally concealed beneath the world's surfaces.[14]

In classical cinema, the close-up has therefore always held a vexed relation to the narrative shape of which it may or may not be a part: is the close-up, as a part or fragment, necessarily subordinate to a whole, or can it stand alone, rich with meaning, its own whole? As we have seen briefly, the answer has usually been both. It is this doubleness Sergei Eisenstein holds in place when he suggests that the close-up gives, as Gilles Deleuze aptly summarizes it, "an affective reading of the whole film" (87). Not surprisingly, the power of the close-up, as Eisenstein wrote, lies primarily in the way it can be combined with other close-ups in montage: "[t]he first factor that attracted us in the method of the close-up was the discovery of its particularly astonishing feature: to create a new quality of the whole from a juxtaposition of the separate parts" (238). The close-up is a fragment, but as it is combined with other fragments in the kind of montage sequences for which Eisenstein's own films are so well known, it forms the basis of what Eisenstein calls "a unity of a higher order" (254), a transcendence of the limits of narrative situation to the achievement of a new understanding, a new "ideological conception" (239). Close-ups may thus be images of parts with respect to story, but they are also images of a potentiality, a qualitative whole designating in a register of ideas. They are both parts and wholes, or, in the vocabulary of Eisenstein, they are both individuals and collectives.

The conventional doubleness of the close-up shot may help us understand how Tautou's face seemed to French cinema audiences to assert things about French society in 2001 that, as "merely" a face, it did not show visually. Indeed, what is Jeunet showing us when, at the end of a long sequence involving a treasure hunt Amélie has designed for Nino that is intended to show us Amélie's playfulness, Amélie removes her sunglasses (part of a disguise) to peer into the camera (figs. 9 and 10)? This close-up of Tautou's face and others like it are of course part of the film's appeal. But they are also presented as more than simply one set of shots among many. Most often, Jeunet uses them to bring a sequence to a close, as looping crane shots, rapid zooms, and dizzying montage passages give way to several seconds of Tautou, absolutely still, staring directly into the camera, an object of our lingering gaze. How can this optical fragment, this image of a body part, tell us anything beyond the part itself? Does each shot of Tautou's face combine with others to generate a meaningful whole, a new conception in Eisenstein's sense? And, if so, how does each shot accomplish this and to what whole do the shots refer? Or can the close-up function autonomously, its own kind of whole, referring only to itself?

Certainly this is a question closely related to the one Christian Metz was asking

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FIG. 9
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).



FIG. 10
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

in the 1960s when he attempted to describe cinematic images in linguistic terms. Did a minimal unit of cinema exist that could be compared with the word or even the phoneme in linguistics, a basic building block of film language whose combination alone would create meaning? Metz's response was that such a minimal unit did not in fact exist. An instance of speech, of Saussurian parole, the film shot signifies, Metz wrote, by way of its "assertive" function rather than by its "quantity of meaning." Metz's illustration is the close-up, a shot that would appear to correspond to the word in linguistics because it seems so elementary, so minimal. But the close-up, Metz concluded, can only ever be compared to something like a sentence: "[a] close-up of a revolver does not mean 'revolver' (a purely virtual lexical unit), but at the very least, and without speaking of the connotations, it signifies 'Here is a revolver!' It carries with it a kind of *here*" (67). In other words, the shot, which in Metz's discussion the close-up exemplifies, is always actualized. Even the close-up becomes an act of speech, a specifically situational instance of enunciation, or language use, which, as Metz argues, is distinct from the object visually signified in the shot. The close-up, in Metz's conception, is a kind of pointing finger. It refers not to itself (only) but outward, to something it does not necessarily show.

In the light of this theoretical history, the affective resonances of Tautou's close-ups, which seem to say both so little ("here is Amélie's face") and so much ("here is . . ."), would appear to embody the more general language of Jeunet's film, also consistently described as saying both nothing at all and everything at once. The film Kaganski accused of being fascist and collaborationist in fact includes no references at all to Vichy France or the collaboration. An aspect of French history—fascism—is said to emerge in a film in which real history, as Kaganski himself argues, paradoxically, has been erased. In Kaganski's view, Jeunet has made a film somehow about history that is not historical enough (Austin 291). Reading the film like a close-up of French history, Kaganski identifies the film's assertive function, which has to do more with what the film gestures at culturally—namely, the negotiation in the media and among politicians over how the film's images gesture—than what it portrays cinematically. What gives these shots of Tautou's face meaning in fact is what can be found beyond the frame of the shot, beyond what can be visibly perceived in the close-up, or even in the film as a whole: the critical debate over what Jeunet's shots seemed to mean.

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Indeed, when Amélie removes her sunglasses and looks into the camera, we are led to ask what we are supposed to see when we look at Tautou's face. What, in Metz's terms, does this close-up actualize? What does it point to?

The treasure-hunt sequence of which the close-up of Tautou in figure 10 is the culminating image suggests, however, that this may be the wrong question. For what we learn in this treasure-hunt scene full of indicating arrows, pointing fingers, and overlapping sight lines, all organized by Amélie to lead Nino playfully from one location to another, is that objects do not reveal themselves to the gaze that seeks them out.[15] The blue arrows Amélie has painted on the ground to lead Nino from the Place Saint-Pierre up through the labyrinth of stairways to the terrace below Sacré-Coeur Basilica propel us forward from one shot to the next, promising Nino answers to Amélie's riddles. What Nino discovers at the end of the sequence of arrows is, I would suggest, an image crucial to the way Jeunet employs the close-up throughout the film: the pointing "statue" embodied by a Parisian street performer (fig. 11). The statue is the organizing center of an elaborate play of sight lines in this scene. But of particular interest is the close-up of the statue's face at the heart of a network of gazes (fig. 12). In this shot, Jeunet dramatizes visually the pointing function of the close-up. Even as it establishes a line of visual communication in shot / reverse shot between the street performer and Nino, the statue's face suggests that the interest of the shot lies neither in the shot itself nor in the look between the statue and Nino. Rather, it lies, again, as in the crème brûlée scene, beyond the frame of the shot, in a place we are explicitly encouraged to look (even the tip of the statue's pointing finger passes beyond the visual scope of the frame [fig. 12]). When Nino is slow to understand this, he is aided by the arrival of an anonymous boy, who tells him, "Quand le doigt montre le ciel, l'imbécile regarde le doigt" 'When the finger points at the sky, the fool looks at the finger.' Nino will then turn away from the statue to consider what the finger, emphasized visually throughout the sequence, points to, an emphasis further highlighted by the blue arrow painted on the ground and visible above Nino's shoulder, pointing to the characters pointing (fig. 13).

There are several important aspects of this scene to consider with respect to looking and the close-up. First, despite the intricate system of visual relays Amélie sets in place for Nino, the scene concludes on a note of continuing mystery: the sight lines organized to



Fig. 11
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).



Fig. 12
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

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FIG. 13
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

and away from the pointing statue ultimately tell Nino nothing at all. At the end of the scene, he still doesn't know who Amélie is, what her purpose is, or even what she looks like (in the photos of herself Amélie has given Nino in a scrapbook, Amélie, prolonging the mystery and her seduction of Nino visually, is masked or disguised).[16] Next, the very notion that close-ups are fundamentally about pointing and presenting is problematized and ultimately contradicted by the single shot of Tautou's face that brings the scene to a close (fig. 10). As is so often the case throughout the film, the labyrinthine structure of the scene, with its clues and obstacles, duly chronicled by Jeunet's intricate camerawork, gives way to the relative simplicity of Tautou's face, immobilized cinematographically by the stilled shot. All the pointing and looking preceding the close-up seems intended to force us back into lingering contemplation of Amélie's face. But what do we see? If we have learned during the film to understand the features of Tautou's face as referring us to something the shot does not show, what then is the object of the pointing function in this close-up?

Affect and the National Face

In the popular and critical reception of Jeunet's film, Tautou's face is understood to point at once to nothing at all and to the entirety of France itself. It is both a flattened, hollow thing—"le règne de la surface totalisante, univoque, sclérosée" 'the reign of a totalizing, univocal, and sclerotic surface'), as *Cahiers du cinéma* put it (Tesson)—and the image of a nation rendered whole and undivided: in the words of Raphaëlle Moine, "l'emblème d'une France unie et réconciliée" 'the emblem of a unified and reconciled France' (157). But the film's emphasis on looking, its attempts to keep our eyes focused up close on Amélie's face rather than on the object of her gaze, presents another useful feature of its statement concerning the French nation in the early twenty-first century. A film that, according to its critics, shows nothing of the social and economic alienation characteristic of French society at the turn of the century engages, in the very substance of the debates around what it does or does not show, basic questions about representing and seeing France in 2001. What exactly do we see in images said to be of or about France when the concept of the nation-state as a convincing form of collective identification is everywhere contested?

Over the last thirty years, writers and politicians whose commitments to the principles of republicanism cut across the political spectrum have responded to a perceived threat to, or at least a transformation in, the French nation and the French national heritage. As the leftist Occitan intellectual Robert Lafont wrote in 1994, France "has entered a phase in which the Nation-State necessarily appears archaic, for the new spaces under construction today are transnational and cultural" (qtd. in Lebovics xv). Responding also from the left to what she describes, in often highly incendiary terms, as the pervasive Islamicist threat to French national identity, the activist and journalist Caroline Fourest writes, "En France, le modèle républicain hérité de la Révolution n'a jamais été si proche d'être défait" 'In France, the Republican model inherited from the

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Revolution has never been so close to defeat' (*Dernière utopie* 11).[17] According to the 2002 presidential candidate Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the challenge that immigration poses to the French national ideal demands a renewed embrace of the values of cultural assimilation representative of the Third Republic. Politicians on the right, like Sarkozy today, have often been at pains to distinguish their thinking from that of far-right groups like Le Pen's National Front, which began its ascendency in the early 1980s, or that of the think tank Le Club de l'Horloge, which argued in 1985 that "l'identité de la France est en péril" 'the identity of France is in peril' because of "une immigration non maîtrisée" 'uncontrolled immigration.'[18] But if the French national heritage is to be redefined and renewed through a form of collective solidarity that incorporates something of its former colonial empire and that navigates the fine line between challenges to the idea of national autonomy on the one hand and an expansion of the definition of the abstract individual central to French republican universalism on the other, that form has yet to be defined (Lebovics 10).

How, then, could Tautou's face tell viewers of the film anything at all about a national ideal so often thought to be at risk? A final aspect of the statue sequence is crucial here: the little boy's aphoristic advice to Nino about the fool who looks at the pointing finger. To ask how the close-up functions referentially, as both the film's defenders and critics do when they argue, respectively, that the film refers to traditional French values and to nothing at all; to ask, as Metz does, what linguistic feature is actualized in the close-up when it portrays an object in isolation; to ask, most basically, how to *understand* the pointing function of the close-up may be to misunderstand the boy's insight. When Nino follows the statue's finger, he learns nothing. Instead, he looks back into the face of the statue performer, who, breaking character, opens his eyes wide (fig. 14) and winks, as if to draw attention to his face as image and to say to Nino: "trust me." To look at the finger when it points to the sky may be the act of a fool, as the little boy suggests, but it may also be that Jeunet's film calls for just this kind of "imbecilic looking." For at the end of the sequence, as we have seen, we are asked to look not at the object of Tautou's gaze but at Tautou herself: we are fools looking at the finger. We are asked not to seek understanding by looking beyond Tautou's face to the object of her gaze. We are asked rather to trust, to find reassurance in a place beyond the frame, as it were, and that we cannot see. In short, we are asked to feel. And many of the viewers of the film did just that.

As David Martin-Castelnau and Guillaume Bigot wrote in defense of the film, with more than a little sarcasm directed at those critics who impugned the film's perceived naïveté, "tel est sans doute le fabuleux secret d'Amélie Poulain: dans ce miroir qu'elle nous tend, si différent de la glace déformante à laquelle on nous a habitués, on se mire avec plaisir, insouciance et—*horresco referens*—espérance" 'such is without doubt the fabulous secret of Amélie Poulain: in this mirror that she holds out to us, so different from the disfiguring mirror to which we have become accustomed, we reflect upon ourselves with pleasure,



FIG. 14
Frame from *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

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nonchalance, and—*horresco referens*—hope.'[19] By experiencing *feelings* of pleasure and hope rather than submitting the film to rational critique, viewers of Jeunet's film invoke the historical and theoretical notion that the power of the close-up shot lies in its promotion of an affective rather than an analytic response. Staring into the camera, Amélie seems to embody a purely subjective expression of authentic humanity. Close-ups, Balázs argued, cannot be faked. The tears on a face shot in close-up signify the unconscious impulses and hidden emotions that emerge from the subject's communication with the objects of its own gaze (Balázs 74). Balázs believed that the close-up addressed the heart and not the mind (56, 78), while Epstein wrote that he could "see love" in the close-up (13). Certainly, the supposed intimacy provoked by the close-up is at work in the comparisons of Tautou to Venus and to a kind of national lover—"la petite fiancée des Français" 'the little fiancée of the French'—as well as in Jeunet's effort to portray what he referred to in interview after interview as the real France of a beloved older era. Indeed, the France of *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* is, as Jeunet makes quite clear, a France seen by a child: "I have retained a nostalgia for the France of my childhood, or rather for its images, its fashion, its objects" (qtd. in Vincendeau, "Café Society" 23).

It is initially surprising, then, but ultimately revealing, that Jeunet's film should provoke such a wide range of *affective* responses—both positive and negative, depending on the viewer—when the film is also so often described as being fundamentally "postmodern" in design.[20] By creating effects of historicalness without ever engaging anything like actual history; by emphasizing the act rather than the substance of seeing (characters who look at others looking at them looking, often through video cameras, binoculars, and photographs); by organizing its plot around nostalgic kitsch objects, the film appears to many commentators to formulate a postmodern aesthetics of flatness and depthlessness. But "postmodern culture" at the end of the twentieth century is often defined precisely by a "waning of affect." Expressions of emotion are no longer possible because, in Fredric Jameson's seminal view, expression itself depends on a notion of subjectivity whose coherence emerges out of its relation to an objective world to which it is opposed and that relies further on a characteristic metaphysics of inside and out. Affective expression as an external dramatization of internal psychology is no longer possible when the divisions and oppositions of modernity have been fatally blurred or undone by the theoretical apparatuses of the late capitalist period (Jameson 6–16).

Though they could be made to assume the basic postures of postmodern style according to these terms, the shots of Tautou's face in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* urge us to consider their singularity, without reference to space and time or the binaries of (inter)subjectivity. As Deleuze has written of the close-up, drawing on the tension already present in Balázs between part and whole, "the close-up does *not* tear away its object from a set of which it would form part, of which it would be a part, but on the contrary *it abstracts it from all spatio-temporal coordinates*" (95–96). The close-up of the human face is not, in this conception, fundamentally an image of interiority or subjectivity in contact with an objective world, nor is it a way into the unconscious, as Balázs (56) and, later, Walter Benjamin suggested it was.[21] Instead, it is, in Deleuze's words, an autonomous "entity," or an expression of pure affect, an example of what he calls "qualities or powers considered for themselves, without reference to anything else, independently of any question of their actualisation" (98).[22] It exemplifies what he and Félix Guattari elsewhere call "an abstract machine of faciality (*visagéité*)," the name they give to the social and historical forces that create meaning and subjectivity

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distinct from the specificities of the organic world (168, 180–81). Like the formal portrait, the close-up troubles us with its stillness, its particularity, its autonomy and therefore compels us to attach it to and fix it in a more expansive and reassuring temporal duration by giving it referential value (Brilliant 9, 58).

The close-up is difficult to define, Deleuze writes, because its power is felt rather than conceived (98). It concerns affect and thus exemplifies visually the kind of appeal to emotion that is often met with predictable critical consternation in an apparently postmodern period that, as Brian Massumi has argued, has no way of accounting for—no theoretical vocabulary for describing—the unqualified intensities of affect (221).[23] It is perhaps no surprise then that critics hostile to *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* should characterize its emotional appeal to apparently nostalgic French viewers as a form of violence: in the *Cahiers du cinéma* review, Tesson compares the derisive, hopeful appeal of Martin-Castelnau and Bigot to "[une] prise d'otage" 'a hostage taking.' The position of *Cahiers du cinéma*, as we have seen, is that the film is irresponsibly cut off from the political realities of France in 2001. Tesson and other critics seem to respond to the autonomous qualities of the close-up shot, abstracted, like the entirety of the film, from the "real" geography and history—Deleuze's spatiotemporal abstraction—of early-twenty-first-century France. We are left looking, once again, imbecilically in the view of Tesson, at the finger and not the sky, at Tautou's face, pulled up out of any situating coordinates, cut off from the world to which it might refer.

Deleuze's concept of affect in cinematic images is the most recent, and certainly the most complex and provocative, attempt by theorists of the close-up to explain the perceptual relations between the framed film image and a world of perceiving bodies, the relations, we might say, between part and whole that have occupied filmmakers ever since Griffith irritated his producers by showing only part of the actors (in close-up) for whose entire bodies those producers had handsomely paid. Drawing on Henri Bergson's account of visual perception, Deleuze interposes affect between perceptions coming in from the external world and the actions that these perceptions provoke in the bodies housing the perceiving material eye (61–66). As Deleuze puts it, qualities of perceived bodies persist beyond the boundaries of what the viewing eye chooses to perceive or ignore (such selections are the perceptual analog for Deleuze of the sifting function of the frame of the shot) and are transformed neither into objects of perception nor acts of a subject. Instead, they mark "the way in which the subject perceives itself, or rather experiences itself or feels itself 'from the inside'" (65). A precipice, Deleuze writes, citing Balázs, causes vertigo, but it does not explain the expression of fear that appears on a face and that may or may not precede the action of falling off a cliff (102).

Affect is thus a perceptual phenomenon that can be expressed and observed but not rationally comprehended. It creates a threatening openness or decentering, a passing beyond the organizing frame that seeks meaningful wholes. The qualities we perceive in Amélie's face slip past the rational, semiotic boundaries that the principles of classical film composition are designed to keep in place. They do not signify something else linguistically. They do not refer. They are expressed by a face, but they are not the face; they are distinct from the face, but not independent from it. Deleuze calls the couple formed by the self-referring affect and the face that expresses it the "icon" (97). The iconic features of Tautou's face in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, which have received much attention from journalists and critics, thus embody a long history of the close-up that has moved between the poles of "signification" (e.g., Metz) and "expression" (e.g., Deleuze). In Metz's conception, the close-up

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points at an objective and referentially available world; in Deleuze's reading, the close-up is extracted from space and time, from any actualized state of events. No wonder the nostalgia provoked by Tautou's face has been received as simultaneously irrational and seductive, both rich with (political) meaning and cut off from a social environment it somehow expresses without pointing to.

Jeunet's close-ups of Tautou's face in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* deliver what the film's viewers in France understood to be a (successful or unsuccessful) celebrity icon. And it was precisely the religious iconophilia at the historical origins of affective celebrity appeal (Rojek 51–99; Braudy 201–04; Roach 12–21) that French politicians evoked when they discovered in the film "une parcelle sacrée de l'esprit de la nation" 'a sacred bit of the national soul' (Péron 2). The politician Alain Madelin, a candidate for the French presidency in 2002, stated that Jeunet's film "réveille des sentiments qu'on croyait enfouis" 'awakens feelings that we thought were buried' (Bresson, Dely, and Hassoux 3), while another 2002 presidential candidate, François Bayrou, connected the film to his own campaign platform: "Si j'ai appelé mon projet '*la France humaine*' c'est bien avec cette idée-là. [Le] film traduit un immense besoin de bonheur simple" 'If I have called my project *la France humaine* it is by way of that idea. The film conveys an immense need for simple happiness' (Bresson, Dely, and Hassoux 3). Tautou's celebrity and the success of Jeunet's film derived not only from the money the film made worldwide ($130 million) and the awards it won but also from the power of Tautou's face to generate enchantment, to captivate the viewer through what Nigel Thrift calls the "secular magic" of commodified allure (290). As still another prominent French politician, Roselyne Bachelot, put it in 2001, "le phénomène d'identification est puissant. D'où son succès massif. J'ai flashé sur Audrey Tautou qui est craquante" 'the phenomenon of identification is powerful. Whence the film's huge success. I fell for Audrey Tautou; she is irresistible' (Bresson, Dely, and Hassoux 3).

But as a national emblem Tautou's face expresses only the contested present of a collective identity under (re)negotiation. The film keeps the viewer's gaze fixed on Amélie, and in so doing it is in keeping with an entire theoretical history of the close-up that suggests that what lies beyond the visual borders of the shot—what can be felt there rather than seen—is the unifying whole of which Amélie is a nostalgically reassuring part. In each of the theories of the close-up we have considered, the fragmentary quality of the face draws us in and either opens a path to something to which we can attribute meaning as an abstraction but that we cannot see or presents as autonomous something we can see but cannot understand. In critical reactions to Jeunet's film, we find precisely these tensions concerning national identity. In each case, the language of these reactions refers us to the formal design of the close-up shot: the face of Tautou reveals the heart and soul of France (Balázs; Epstein; Eisenstein); it signifies or points to a visually absent national object (Metz); it expresses the Frenchness whose perceptible qualities are virtual, affective potentialities to be actualized in the material and discursive world of critical reception (Deleuze).

In this situation of intensified, close-up looking in which there is vanishingly little to be seen, it is therefore the spectator in the act of watching, rather than the object of the spectator's gaze, who seems to be a primary spectacle of Jeunet's film. Watchers, observers, and Peeping Toms are the featured players of the film. They are also, as Marc Augé has written, the emblematic figures of today's supermodernity, where citizens are brought together only through their common reception of images that are aimed "simultaneously and discriminately" to any of them and thus to each of them (100). United by their anonymity and interchangeability, individuals are identi-

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fied now by the spectacle of their own passing through. Cut off from the place—or ideas of place—to which they might once have been thought to have some defining, even essential relation, individuals are now left with the often fleeting images through which this relation is visually portrayed in its contingency.[24] Since the idea of the nation in France is at stake, films like Jeunet's, which offer nostalgic and reassuring identification with a collectivity, provide images from which the nation has been visually excised and that turn our attention back to the objects that take its place and fill the screen. We are required not merely to ask what the nation is but to ask how the act of asking what the nation is is itself a form collective affiliation. The nation is not a thing to be pointed at. It is instead to be found in the pointing itself and in the critical debates around what that pointing might mean.

Notes

I am indebted to Leon Sachs, whose insight, advice, and encouragement during my work on this essay were invaluable.

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1. For detailed discussions of the film's dizzying box-office success around the world, see Vincendeau ("Café Society"; "Miss France"); Mulard and Sotinel; Péron; Bresson, Dely, and Hassoux; and Vanderschelden.

2. The terms *universalism* and *republicanism* have specific meanings in the French context. *Universalism* describes a proposed sameness and equality of individual citizens in the public sphere, irrespective of social, religious, ethnic, or other origins. In this understanding, no group identity—which the French call a *communautarisme*—should take priority over national identity. Republicanism, similarly, grows out of a political ideology associated with France's Third Republic (1870–1940). It is rooted in secularism and individualism, and promises equal protection in theory to all citizens against the particular claims of any group, including religious groups. See Scott, *Parité!*; Celestin and DalMolin; Agacinski; and the essays in Blanchard and Bancel, esp. Geisser. See also note 9 below.

3. All translations from French are my own.

4. For similarly enthusiastic statements, see also Frodon; Haun; Lorrain; Lavoignat; O'Sullivan; and Zalewski.

5. In a related vein, see Frédéric Bonnaud.

6. In Rosello's reading, Amélie exemplifies the female characters in a number of French films from the 1990s that, informed by the politics of France's recent parity and civil union laws and by France's more general confrontation with the issue of social difference, reconfigure the relation between spectator and feminine object of the gaze. See also Powrie (87, 89). On the relation of the parity and civil union laws to debates concerning immigration and national identity, see Scott, *Parité!* and *Politics*; Agacinski.

7. For discussion of these developments, as well as their historical and political origins in France, see Noiriel 57–75.

8. On the Paris terrorist attacks and increasing Islamophobia in France, see Deltombe 240–63.

9. As recently as November 2009, Eric Besson, the French immigration minister under President Sarkozy at the time, announced a government-sponsored nationwide "debate" on French national identity necessitated by proposed new laws prohibiting Muslim women from appearing in public wearing the traditional burka: "Ce débat répond aux préoccupations soulevées par la résurgence de certains communautarismes, dont l'affaire de la Burqa est l'une des illustrations. Au moment même où l'Union européenne franchit une nouvelle étape de son intégration, et où la crise économique et financière internationale démontre combien la mondialisation rend l'avenir des Nations interdépendant, il a pour objectif d'associer l'ensemble de nos concitoyens à une réflexion de fond sur ce que signifie, en ce début de 21ème siècle, 'être Français'" 'This debate grows out of issues raised by the resurgence of certain communalisms, of which the question of the Burka is one illustration. At the very moment when the European Union is traversing a new stage of its integration, and when the international economic and financial crisis demonstrates how much globalization makes the future of Nations interdependent, its objective is to bring together the totality of our citizens in a substantive reflection on what it means, at this start of the twenty-first century, "to be French"' (*Grand débat*). This debate was roundly criticized in the French media and abandoned early in 2010. Sarkozy's ministry of "national identity" was so generally considered to be an embarrassing debacle that it was eliminated in November 2010 when Sarkozy reorganized his government.

10. Jeunet tells the story of meeting Chirac and of the president's reaction in an interview included in the DVD release of the film.

11. Even Kenneth Turan, who reviewed the film in the *Los Angeles Times* for an American audience that generally responded to it positively and that, according to many in the French press, found it particularly persuasive as a

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shallow form of cinetourism, identifies the film as fundamentally devoid of meaning.

12. For a discussion of Jeunet's style in the film, as well as his complicated relation to both the French new wave and the poetic realists, see Andrew.

13. I use the masculine form intentionally in this instance because, as Mary Ann Doane has shown, a defense of the close-up has often derived from a masculinist effort to deflect the threat of effeminacy and female power contained, throughout the history of both Western literature and cinema, in the fragment or detail. See Doane, "Veiling"; "Close-up." In an important related analysis, Naomi Schor demonstrates more generally that the fragment and detail have traditionally been deemed threatening by virtue of their apparent superfluousness, by their "feminine" and "effeminizing" marginality with respect to the unifying centrality and wholeness of meaning.

14. For a persuasive argument concerning Epstein's influence on Léger and the latter's *Ballet mécanique*, see Turvey. See also Aumont 78–94.

15. For a discussion of the centrality of the visual in the film, see Ezra.

16. On the importance of veiling and masking in close-ups of women in classical cinema, see Doane, "Veiling."

17. See also Fourest, *Tentation*, where the Islamicist threat, which she seeks to distinguish from Islam itself, is compared with the threat of Stalinism and its seduction of the leftist French intelligentsia in the postwar period. See also Guilluy 125–26.

18. On this history, see Thiesse.

19. For a related view that argues that the film is refreshingly optimistic and thus at odds with the gritty realism of many late-1990s French films, see Pardo; Jeancolas.

20. For a typical discussion of the film's postmodernist aesthetic, see Vanderschelden 71–73.

21. Benjamin: "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (237). But see also Deleuze's insistent opposition to psychoanalytic (and linguistic) film theories (86–101).

22. Deleuze is referring specifically here to the logician C. S. Peirce's concept of semiotic firstness, which underlies Deleuze's understanding of the close-up, or what he calls the "affection-image."

23. Massumi points out that what has waned in postmodernism is perhaps belief but not affect. Later responses to Jameson, as Massumi notes, demonstrate that in fact late-twentieth-century culture is replete with often-excessive expressions of affect but that theorists typically lack the set of theoretical tools necessary for describing or analyzing it.

24. This is not the place to argue that Augé seems to offer a subtle critique of Pierre Nora's notion of the "lieu de mémoire" 'site of memory,' which continues to rely on a place-centric, universalist notion of the French nation.

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