

Film studies movie review

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Genre and ‘ Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind’.

The 2004 film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* raises the question of ‘ if you could erase the memories of your ex-lover, would you?’ As a film, its genre is seemingly quite ambiguous: it switches back and forth between memories and reality; love and un-love in a non-linear fashion that also skips between romance and science fiction. The genre of a film is traditionally seen as being a form of classification; it refers to a number of factors that go some way to defining it: “ type of presentation (epic/lyric/dramatic), relation to reality (fiction/non-fiction), level of style (epic/novel), kind of plot (comedy/tragedy), nature of content (sentimental novel/historical novel/adventure novel) and so forth.” (Altman 276) In the course of this essay, the discussion will focus on these key elements and Altman’s discussion of ‘ semantics’ and ‘ syntactics’ as going some way to defining the genre of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Altman discusses the concepts of ‘ semantics’ and ‘ syntactics.’ He defines semantics as being the central, key elements to a genre: “ we recognise a film as a Western when we see some combination of horses, rough-and-tumble characters, illegal acts, semi-settled wilderness, natural earth colours, tracking shots, and a general respect for the history of the American West...” (Altman 283) This implies that we are taught to recognise key semantic qualities that indicate a film’s genre; in the case of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, this includes recognising that the male and female central protagonists are falling in and out of love, their anguish that they feel at the loss of one another, the various signs of affection displayed and the use of the words ‘ we’ and ‘ us’ a lot. Altman adds that the semantic

qualities tend to refer quite generally to a film's genre and its elements, whereas the film's syntax will go deeper into detailing its genre: "When genres are said to fulfil a given function within society, it is almost always to the syntax that critics refer." (Altman 283) His discussion of these two elements revolves around the idea that they are two sides of the same coin and are both equally as relevant to the definition of a film's genre.

The audience are introduced to Joel Barish: a quiet, unassuming man who, when spontaneously skipping work, meets Clementine Kruczynski and they fall in love. The immediate feeling is that it will be a romantic film: its presentation is romantic and sentimental because the two characters' interaction suggests that they are attracted to one another. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has an avant garde approach to the romance genre: the audience is presented with a couple who, having fallen out of love, attempt to erase one another from each other's lives. However, during the erase process, Joel begins to regret his decision and attempts to set right the feeling between them both. In the end, Joel and Clementine attempt to restart their relationship from scratch (with their memories still erased) which lures the viewer into re-assessing its romantic genre status. Like other romantic comedies, the viewer is given the feeling that true love always wins out: the sentimental element of the film assures the viewer that it is of the romantic genre. Its realism is cemented when, despite hearing tapes of each other discussing the things they hate most about the other, Joel and Clementine decide to resurrect their relationship. The romantic notion is that fate and true love is a part of all of our destinies. This, by itself, defines the film as being part of the romantic genre.

Early films were awarded loosely fitting genre classifications (Altman 276) but as film has evolved, so has its ability to be complicated by concepts such as sub-genre. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is one such film: it begins simply as a romance film but quickly introduces concepts such as the ability to manipulate memories through the use of technology. This is a futuristic, almost dystopian presentation and as such, the genre's definition becomes muddled by the science fictional elements. Bordwell agrees: "Most scholars now agree that no genre can be defined in a single hard-and-fast way." (Bordwell 109) He develops this by explaining that genres are "more or less broad" now. (Bordwell 109) The scientific notion of the involvement of technology in our psyches is a futuristic one which causes the viewer to be uncertain of how the film may end (unlike in many other, more generic romantic comedies), which also causes confusion with regard to its genre too. Bordwell's discussion of the broad nature of film genres is demonstrated here because whilst the film has romantic tendencies, it also includes science fictional notions and overtones of horror: the idea of being able to remove whole sections of our memories is a distinctly horrific idea.

Altman's discussion of a film's syntax refers to its structure and plot. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has a complicated syntax which does not lend itself to the genre definition. Neither the structure or plot are linear and therefore, it is difficult for the viewer to keep track of events in a coherent sense. That said, this lends itself to the film's entertainment factor: the viewer is forced to let themselves be absorbed by the random direction of the film, and its genre: "syntactic features, on the other hand, more fully express the specific meaning of a particular genre." (Altman 283) This is

demonstrated by *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*'s satirical take on modern relationships: romance no longer exists in a singular sense, like older – more traditional – romance films. Instead, it reflects the complicated nature of relationships: the uncertainty, the intensity and the speed at which modern relationships operate. Its syntax is developed to deliberately reflect this idea: the film's lack of cohesive, linear plot and its characters' bi-polar-like opinions of one another, reflect modern love stories.

In terms of Altman's semantic discussion of a film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is intrinsically difficult to define due to it having key romantic elements but also key elements of science fiction too. Its syntactical presentation is demonstrative of modern life: hectic, uncertain and nonlinear. Combined, the film's genre is ambiguous, albeit with a significant nod to the romance genre. Its semantic features, which connect directly to our own socially-constructed, pre-conceived ideas of specific genres, point to its romance status whilst its syntactical structure signifies a more complicated approach. Ultimately, the film's subject is not so much the love between its central characters, but rather as a question concerned with whether we would choose to forget our former lovers or not. The film's syntax refers directly to this through its lack of coherent opinion on the matter: the characters want to forget one another and then they don't. The film's genre is, if pushed, romance: it is sentimental, fuelled by a passionate love, and comments on the modern take on relationships; but its semantics are quite undefined meaning it is ambiguous to the end.

References

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