

Reviewing michel gondry's movie eternal sunshine of the spotless mind

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Independent Film Critique – Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

One of the various reasons that Americans go to the cinema is to get away from the stress and monotony of daily life. Curiously, one of the most powerful aspects of independent film is its ability to allow viewers to see the blasé aspects of human life as something enchanting, puzzling, and beautiful. This is definitely the case for Michel Gondry's film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* which provides viewers with a unique perspective on the role of science in our lives, the mystery of our dreams, and the power of love. Not only is the film an entertaining and fresh piece but it also delves into these deep curiosities of life through its cinematography, narrative structure, and editing.

The film begins with a daily chronicle of a seemingly ordinary man, Joel (Carrey). Joel wakes up in the morning and goes through his usual routine but decides to take a different train than he usually does. On this train the quiet and introverted Joel meets bubbly and extroverted Clementine (Winslet), a free-spirit with bright blue hair to match her mood and energy. Clementine recognizes Joel somehow while he does not remember her and the two very different personalities end up hitting it off and dating. The film then has a change in plot and time when Joel realizes that Clementine underwent a new procedure to have him removed from her memory after a tough break-up. Joel is so upset by this that he decides to have the procedure himself and the remainder of the film is a chronicle of what happens during his procedure. While Joel is asleep undergoing the mind

erasing procedure the viewer is introduced to another plot when Lacuna Inc. technician Mary (Dunst) and her co-worker (Ruffalo) share each others company during the procedure. After putting the memory erasing machine into auto-pilot the two smoke, drink, dance, and have a good time. At the same time Patrick (Wood), another technician is dating and winning over Clementine by stealing the techniques that Joel once used. Everyone is happy and content until there is a malfunction in the machine and Lacuna's leader, Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Wilkinson) is called over to Joel's apartment. Dr. Mierzwiak and Mary are left alone in Joel's apartment and strike up a conversation after Mary quotes Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard" the work from which the title of the film originated (Silvey 2009). The two then end up kissing which the doctor's wife witnesses and it is revealed that Mary underwent the procedure herself in order to forget her love for Dr. Mierzwiak. Mary, clearly knowing that the procedure is wrong, decides to quit her job and takes all of the patient records and testimony with her. She then mails every record back to each patient and it is at this point that Joel and Clementine learn that they both underwent the procedure. During the film's closing scene, despite the fact that they will get tired of each other and their relationship may end, the two decide to follow their hearts and pursue a relationship.

Throughout this fascinating plot there are three elements of production well worth focusing on, as stated above. The first of these three elements is the power of the cinematography. The first way that cinematography contributes to the plot and the film as a whole is through the use of a wide array of

camera zooms. For example, when characters are speaking to one another the camera is always either facing the speaker or the listener directly. This is a valuable technique because it makes the viewer feel as if they are actually a part of the conversation. Another interesting element of cinematography is the use of different camera zooms. There is great power in the ability of the camera to create a certain degree of intimacy or distance through a simple zoom (Edwards 2008). For instance, for scenes that require intimacy and closeness the camera is zoomed very closely on the characters' faces. This is shown in the scene where Joel and Clementine are under a blanket discussing insecurities, a very private matter. On the other hand zooms are also used to create distance which is demonstrated in the scene where Clementine and Joel are laying on the frozen lake. The scenery and setting are so bare and natural that it makes one feel like a very small part of nature, which is further exemplified by the camera creating a very long or broad zoom-out, making Joel and Clementine appear very small in their surroundings. As Roger Ebert phrased it, " this movie is a labyrinth" and there is perhaps nothing that supports this statement more than the cinematography technique of shooting in motion. Most of Joel's dreams during the procedure include him running around aimlessly from morphing settings where objects and places appear randomly and disappear in a flash. This is such a confusing state for Joel but with this technical aspect of the cinematography it also becomes a confusing state for the viewer. All of these elements combined are incredibly important to the film because they encourage and almost demand viewer involvement. Through the use of

effective cinematography the viewer has the ability to feel like they are also in the film creating a very powerful cinematic adventure.

Another interesting production element within the film is the fascinating narrative structure. The most obvious, yet the most powerful element of the narrative structure is the non-sequential plot. Initially unknown to the viewer, the film actually begins at the end. Joel and Clementine meet on the train and begin their new relationship after they have both undergone the memory erasing procedure and the narrative actually picks up at this point at the very end of the film. Another addition to the non-sequential plot is Joel's random dream sequences. The powerful dose of reality associated with these randomized dream sequences experienced by practically all of us aids in creating a sense of confusion and disorientation in the viewer much like that which Joel is feeling. This dreaming is also the second ingredient in creating this ingenious narrative structure (JWin 2004). Although Joel's random dream sequences are a fascinating look into the human mind themselves, there is also significance in the fact that the film taps into one of our human phobias; waking up during surgery. During this awful, "brain damaging" procedure, Joel actually wakes up and changes his mind, he does not want to go through with the procedure. The viewer is then forced to suffer with Joel as he is in this awakened state begging for help while the technicians are joyously playing around him, not paying him any mind. Joel's dreams also add to the narrative because it appears that Clem is actually actively engaged with him in his dreams. Because our perception as viewers is the same as Joel's it is almost as if there is another narrative or story

taking place in the adventures that the two have during his dreams because these adventures and dialogue seem typical of a story more closely connected to reality than a dream. Aside from this element of entertainment in the narrative, one of the most fascinating aspects of the film is that it seamlessly coordinates four different narratives and ultimately cohesively joins all four into one main narrative that is central to the film. These “side” narratives include the relationship between Clem and Patrick, the relationship between Mary and Stan, and the relationship between Mary and Dr. Howard. The fact that all of these different narrative plots are able to keep the viewer almost equally engaged is a genuine acknowledgment of the strength of the writing and directing of this film.

Aside from the cinematography and narrative structure, the last production element worth analysis is the film’s enchanting editing. Due to the fact that Joel’s dreams are such a vital aspect of the film’s value there is a definite need for superb editing to make these scenes special, something that the editors definitely achieved. In terms of Joel’s actual dreams there are two distinct transitions that occur - either smooth or not smooth and this is the case for transitions between Joel’s dreams as well as transitions between Joel’s dreams and reality. There are instances during Joel’s dreams when he will be in one place and it will cohesively turn into another place within the same dream. Meanwhile there are instances where the transitions from dream sequences and especially from dreams to reality are very choppy. This style of editing is incredibly valuable because it gives the viewer a sense of involvement and an area of relation to the main character in that nearly

all humans have experienced such disjunctions in their own dreams and therefore they can sympathize and identify with Joel's experience. There are also various aesthetic editing effects within the film, also found within Joel's dreams. For example, there are dreams where sand turns into snow or weather magically changes. Change is also present when Joel and Clementine are running only to find that the setting or objects around them are disappearing into thin air. Lastly, there are instances where various characters such as Patrick or Dr. Howard actually appear in Joel's dreams as neither having a face nor having human features. Added to the fact that this aesthetic editing gives the film a more science-fiction flair, it also adds to the perplexity and oddity of dreams and acts as a sort of twister, capturing the viewer and transporting them into Joel's dreamland, making the film more engaging.

All three of these different production elements are effectively combined to create an incredibly powerful characteristic of strong film, the generation of viewer involvement in the characters' actions. By first creating a strong narrative, then adding the visual impact of powerful cinematography, and topping it all off with seamless editing, the creators of this film manage to create a very interesting work. Unlike many other films, this element of interest crosses the basic level of wonderful entertainment and reaches into an area of complex questioning about core issues of humanity and social justice. In addition to the film's entertainment value, there is value in the fact that the film presents us with the question of scientific boundaries and how far science should be able to change the human condition and whether

or not there should be associated ethical boundaries. The film also allows us to be scientists ourselves in being able to observe one of the most fascinating experiences of human life, dreaming. Ultimately, as the film's last scene shows us, the audience is presented with one of life's most fascinating aspects - the power of love. Although science has come so far and we are now able to manipulate it into creating practically whatever we want, there are areas of human life that even science cannot touch. At the core of every human being is the innate desire to love and be loved and there is not a single way that new innovations in technology can defeat this eternal sunshine found within each and everyone of us as demonstrated by the poignant story of Joel and Clementine.