Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind: Digital Love And Searching For An Authentic Human Connection

The 1990s was a launching ground for indie filmmaking to become a major success thanks to the Sundance Film Festival's increased presence with alumni's like Steven Soderbergh or Quentin Tarantino, but when the 2000s came along independent productions exerted more creative influence in the typical major Hollywood-dominated market. Additionally, a new type of social culture was emerging, one that was slowly integrating into our daily activities: digital technology. From a fully developed internet system to Apple devices, the public and Hollywood embraced these new technological advancements, but it was then that 1990s indie-roots music video directors turned filmmaking auteurs such as Sofia Coppola, Michel Gondry, and Spike Jonze, amongst others, started to create stories revolving around human relationships and growing digital trends. This growing indie genre style was covering themes ranging from loneliness to integrated technology, addressing them for a growing Generation X and millennial crowd seeking to escape the turn of the century angst while setting a trend for dreamy, atmospheric narratives that would be picked up by A24-like productions. While other mainstream productions continued to reign at the box office, this intimate, digital era-influenced genre was an important development in American cinema as it was a commentary on redefining love, existentialism, and interpersonal technology in the 2000s social culture and beyond.

A big focus within this genre was the emphasis on what love means in this 2000s decade. Sofia Coppola's 2003 Lost in Translation focuses on a relationship between aging actor Bob, played by Bill Murray, and a younger college graduate Charlotte, played by Scarlett Johansson, in the backdrop of a modern Tokyo setting, exploring the alienated, bored, lonely, and intimate feelings as they figure out what they want from each other. While not as technologically prevalent as the other two films in terms of science fiction, V Renee in her No Film School article "What the Hell Did He Say to Her? An Analysis of Sofia Coppola's Lost in Translation" quotes Darren Foley's video essay, going over the juxtaposition between the advanced Tokyo setting and the emotional bond between the American visitors stating "…[Bob and Charlotte] are both emotionally unbalanced and unsatisfied, so the way they are composed in several shots reflects that visually -- they take up one side of the frame without much to counterbalance them. When they finally meet each other, however, she begins to bring that balance to his life, and thus, to the frame" utilizing the setting as an emotional reflection (qtd. in Renee, "What the Hell Did…"). This yearning of genuine intimacy and happiness is further explored in Michel Gondry's 2004 Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind which focuses on former lovers Joel and Clementine, played by Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet, who have their relationship memories wiped out with experimental technology, and Spike Jonze's 2013 Her centering on Joaquin Phoenix as recently-divorced loner Theodore who develops feelings with an A.I. system Samantha voiced by Scarlett Johansson. This thematic examination of love and relationships was an important integral part of the buildup for the genre because it was created as commentary for a generation that was starting to see shifting interpretations of what a genuine relationship means despite pre-existing social norms still looming at the beginning of the 21st century. Nonetheless, portraying current atmospheres of relationship cultures was an important starting thematic point of the indie genre's development.

In contrast to striking up genuine human connections, another thematic element was the

growing existential crisis in the young adult demographic. All three films go deep into character psychology and development, recognizing certain characters may feel that in an ever-changing landscape they do not have a truly meaningful purpose or intention. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind covers this topic greatly through its narrative as Michel Gondry guides into the mindset of Joel and Clementine's vulnerable mental and relationship states, with Vanity Fair writer K. Austin Collins in his retrospective article "Why Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind Still Resonates" dissecting Joel's personality, mentioning that "He's the kind of guy who doesn't talk much because he thinks he's got nothing going on—a sorta-funny sad sack whose creative energies seem stifled by the rigmarole of the everyday. A guy whose dissatisfaction seems incurable—a guy who's a little unbearable, in other words," but brings up the ironic reality "that the manic pixie girl and indie hero probably aren't actually very well suited for each other—not because either one is a villain, but because of basic incompatibility. And yet they choose in the end to give their romance a shot anyway" (Collins, "Why Eternal Sunshine…"). Her also confronts similar mental health stigmas, using Theodore's pursuit of an intangible digital love to create a message about deviating from human bonding to compensate for a physical loss. These narrative points are essential to the development of the genre because it is reflective of issues that twenty to thirty-something-year-olds were facing in growing technologically-influenced interactions. The enhancements in communications may have helped improve connections across the world, but regardless of that people were still going to suffer from mental health stigmas such as loneliness or depression. Consequently, the commentary of existentialism reinforced the need to tackle sensitive topics properly within the indie film genre and shifting decade views.

The uniting element that these three important films share is the usage of technology as interference in human interactions. Her has the most prevalent usage as the story is set in a near-future Shanghai-influenced Los Angeles that draws up realistic possibilities when considering current advancements in the likes of VR headsets, personified A.I., or augmented reality. The personified A.I. system that Theodore bonds with serves as a distraction to his inability to secure a genuine human relationship, however, the A.I. system upon examining his psychology begins to develop feelings in the hope of recreating an authentic human experience outside of its operating system. Similarly, the experimental procedure in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind tries to replicate relationship memories within its artificial dreamscapes before removing them from their patients. In both cases the filmmakers focused on dealing with the polarizing or alienating effects of having technology disrupt relationship and mental developments, however BBC writer Solvej Schou quotes MIT associate professor D Fox Harrell in her analysis of Her who reminds that "We should never mystify technology to the point where we forget that it was imagined, and then created, by humans based on human values to attempt to fill human needs and desires" and "The technologies shown in Her reveal some of the values of their creators and [the society in which they exist]" reinforcing the psychological factor influencing a domino effect with these digital interactions (Schou, "Spike Jonze's Her"). This was an important topic to cover because it helped guide the conversation in pop culture on how to treat these new digital anxieties while being cautiously optimistic about the potential these devices may hold for society. All-in-all, technology served as a driving force for topical plot devices, creating a distinctive, informative, and emotionally connected narrative style.

The indie film genre in the 2000s was a cultural milestone and hotbed for young auteur filmmakers to carry on their creative music video and experimental short styles to the big screen. Independent distributors like A24 can have their roots traced back to this style of independent filmmaking, which felt like a response to the challenges that Generation X and

millennials wanted to overcome as it dealt with growing changes impacting their interpersonal lives. These narratives and their realistic characters were more relatable than ever before as filmmakers did not hold back on confronting the new social trends that affect the way people want to interact with each other and use technology. Overall, filmmakers reflected these newfound worries and translated them onto the big screen, offering an optimistic resolution of the digital age.

Works Cited

1. Collins, K. Austin. “Why Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind Still Resonates.” Vanity Fair, Conde Nast, 19 Mar. 2019, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/03/-eternal-sunshine-of-the-spotless-mind-anniversary.
2. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. Directed by Michel Gondry, performances by Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet, Kirsten Dunst, Mark Ruffalo, Elijah Wood, and Tom Wilkinson, Focus Features, 2004.
3. Her. Directed by Spike Jonze, performances by Joaquin Phoenix, Amy Adams, Rooney Mara, Olivia Wilde, and Scarlet Johansson, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013.
4. Lost in Translation. Directed by Sofia Coppola, performances by Bill Murray, Scarlett Johansson, Giovanni Ribisi, Anna Faris, and Fumihiro Hayashi, Focus Features, 2003.
5. Renée, V. “What the Hell Did He Say to Her?: An Analysis of Sofia Coppola's 'Lost in Translation'.” No Film School, NONETWORK, LLC, 30 May 2014, nofilmschool.com/2014/05/sofia-coppola-lost-in-translation-film-analysis.
6. Schou, Solvej. “Spike Jonze's Her: Sci-Fi as Social Criticism.” BBC, BBC, 13 Jan. 2014, www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140113-how-her-makes-sci-fi-smart-again.