Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind: Opinion Essay

Boy meets girl. Girl forgets boy. Boy forgets girl. And then things really start to get interesting.

Jim Carrey hides while Kate Winslet looks on in a surprisingly original sequence

If you've seen any film penned by Charlie Kaufman, such as Being John Malkovich or Adaptation, you may assume you're in for a zany, envelope-pushing, strangely deep character-twisted story. And unlike viewers of Kevin Smith's latest Jersey Girl, your assumption would be pleasantly validated, for the most part.

Director Michael Gondry (Human Nature) draws a surprisingly nuanced and restrained performance from Jim Carrey, playing the boyfriend Joel. Carrey isn't completely out of his element though, since the script pulls the introverted Joel into extreme psychic contortions that are more Carrey's milieu. Yet his dramatic poise is uncanny, reminiscent of his turn in The Truman Show. Equally surprising and dazzling is Kate Winslet as a wild spirit named Clementine with a penchant for hair coloring. Although her performances in films such as Sense and Sensibility leave little doubt about her acting mastery, her fiery dead-on performance of a wildly careening passionate woman shocks like a bolt of lightening – just the thing to keep pace with the frenetic plot.

The main conceit of the story supposes that there is a computer-controlled medical procedure that allows a private practice doctor to erase specific memories from a patient's mind. While this has more of a Rod Serling slash Philip K. Dick feeling to it, the inevitable grand social impact of this pinch of science fiction plays no role at all in the film. Instead, it's all about the people. Luckily, that doesn't mean they've turned Total Recall into Solaris, but instead into When Harry Met Sally After Sally Forgot Harry. The nature of love and human interaction is front and center in the script, explored with originality and honest zeal, two exceedingly rare qualities in modern cinema.

However, all is not perfect. While Malkovich and Adaptation offer truly surreal adventures both literally and figuratively into the human mind, this film is bounded by standard film conventions. While those films achieve high-brow status through sheer writing talent, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind keeps that brow high through the cinematic botox of time-shifted overlapping narratives. This technique was used brilliantly and with complete legitimacy in Memento. It was repeated with far less legitimacy in the otherwise brilliant 21 Grams. Here, it does make sense, given the exploration of memories, although the effect does become tiresome. The love story element offers a unifying force, but the alignment is all too familiar.

Adding to the artificiality of the experience, the title, a fragment of a quotation recited by a stoned receptionist, carries that air of affected importance through obscurity, not unlike The Cider House Rules and House of Sand and Fog. While this is hardly dispositive, it is symptomatic of the overall feeling of greatness this film thinks it has, while only achieving two-thirds of it.