

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND

Program Notes by Kimberley Jones

ALVY SINGER (v.o.)

After that it got pretty late. And we both had to go, but it was great seeing Annie again. I realized what a terrific person she was, and how much fun it was just knowing her. And I thought of that old joke. You know, this guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, uh, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." And the doctor says, "Well, why don't you turn him in?" And the guy says, "I would, but I need the eggs." Well, I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd. But I guess we keep going through it because most of us need the eggs.

- ANNIE HALL

(screenplay by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman)

As this series has progressed, we've traveled far from the original screwball comedies the philosopher Stanley Cavell was considering when he coined the term "comedy of remarriage." At first glance, the inclusion of ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004) might seem like shoehorning a square peg in a round hole. Produced some seven decades after screwball's heyday, the melancholic ETERNAL SUNSHINE could just as easily be classified as a drama, and it's two lovers – never married – spend the majority of the film interacting as figments of an imagination, not in "real life." Still, I'm not the first critic to make the comparison. At the time of the film's release, David Edelstein (then writing for Slate) and The New York Times' A.O. Scott both categorized the film as an heir to the Thirties' comedies of remarriage.

The film's origins happened casually, over dinner. The French video and film director Michel Gondry was chatting with an artist friend, Pierre Bismuth, in a Brussels restaurant. As Gondry recalled the moment in the introduction to the film's published shooting script, Bismuth "challenged me with this concept: 'What if in your mail you find a kind of official card stipulating: 'We are acknowledging, Monsieur Gondry Michel, that Lisa Brook had you erased from her memory. Please don't try to reach her.' Pierre wanted to randomly send these cards to people and study their reaction."

Charlie Kaufman, with whom Gondry collaborated on his feature directing debut, 2001's HUMAN NATURE, was brought on to take that conceptual kernel and find a story there, populate it with real people and knotty emotions. In fact, the outlandish, fantastical premise was the least creatively satisfying element of the film for Kaufman. "The idea that there's a memory-erasing machine – I'm so uninterested in that, you know," he told an interviewer. "I feel like such a Hollywood screenwriter 'cause that's in there."

What the memory-erasing machine did, however, was give Kaufman another angle to approach his interior-oriented point of view. He started in television; by his own account, he was miserable there, constitutionally ill-suited for the writers room. But with his first produced feature writing credit, BEING JOHN MALKOVICH (1999), Kaufman established himself as an idiosyncratic screenwriter with a distinctive voice and, very often, a yen for scratching at the same itches: Who are we? How did we get that way? What does it mean to be true to ourselves? True to our art? So much of Kaufman's work is about mapping our interior landscape, and he has consistently found unique and utterly beguiling ways to articulate his characters' innermost thoughts and struggles, from BEING JOHN MALKOVICH's portal into Malkovich's brain to the meta-shenanigans in ADAPTATION (2002) that both use and gleefully abuse screenwriting tropes to the sprawling city-stage and ongoing, obsessive dramatization of one man's life in Kaufman's directorial debut, the rapturous SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK (2008).

Edelstein called ETERNAL SUNSHINE a "topsy-turvy Orpheus and Eurydice, in which the hero *must* look back – and back and back – or his beloved will be lost forever." In the film's deliberately disorienting opening, we follow Joel (Jim Carrey) as he skips work and heads on a whim to Montauk. There, he meets Clementine (Kate Winslet), who is at once abrasive and irresistible. There is a connection there, although they don't quite understand it. They are both out of sorts, and they don't understand that either. 18 minutes in, the title sequence begins, and the truth of their situation slowly begins to emerge.

Joel and Clementine were once a couple, but in the aftermath of a nasty fight, Clementine impulsively had her memories of Joel erased by Dr. Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson). (And what a delicious analogy for the messiness of breakups, to literally wipe clean from our psyche the smudges of a former lover.) Stung, Joel decides to have the same procedure done. Only as he is forced to relive his relationship with Clementine in reverse – from vitriolic end to giddy beginning – does Joel realize he wants to keep these memories, even tries to hide them away in other parts of his brain, like buried treasure.

There is quite simply no wrong note hit here. Every element – from the dazzling visuals by Michel Gondry (working with DP Ellen Kuras) and Valdis Oskarsdottir's nimble edit to Jon Brion's aching original score and the leads' career-high performances – works in concert with Kaufman's Oscar-winning script to produce a veritable symphony of longing and long-suffering and, finally, acceptance. Kaufman and company have admirably refused to ingratiate themselves with the audience; there was never going to be a happily-ever-after to this story. But I think that's why it so deserves to be included in the comedy of remarriage canon. The end-solution of the comedies of remarriage were never about the reunited couple getting a "do over." Instead, they were about reconciliation with all the facts on the table. Not a do-over, but a start-again, with clear eyes.

When Joel and Clem become aware of their backstory, of all the ugliness and rancor of their last days together, they are faced with a decision: Walk away, or embark on a relationship anyway.

JOEL

I can't think of anything I don't
like about you right now.

CLEMENTINE

But you will. You will think of things.
And I'll get bored with you and feel
trapped because that's what happens with me.

And then, the moment of truth.

JOEL

Okay .

CLEMENTINE

Okay .

No pretty speeches. Just a shrug: They needed the eggs.

SOURCES:

Charlie Kaufman and Hollywood's Merry Band of Pranksters, Fabulists and Dreamers: An excursion into the American New Wave by Derek Hill (Oldcastle Books, 2008)

“Charlie Kaufman's Critique of Pure Comedy” by A.O. Scott (The New York Times, April 4, 2004)

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: The Shooting Script by Charlie Kaufman (Newmarket Press, 2004)

“Forget Me Not: The genius of Charlie Kaufman's Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” by David Edelstein (Slate, March 18, 2004)

Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage by Stanley Cavell (Harvard Film Studies, 1981)

Charlie Kaufman speech from 2011 BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series (Sept. 30, 2011); transcript from www.close-upfilm.com