A letter from a reader on “(500) Days of Summer: The eternally sunlit paradise that is Los Angeles”

25 February 2010

To whom it may concern,

(500) Days of Summer was released on July 17, 2009. The *World Socialist Web Site* published a review by Jordan Mattos which was highly critical of the film’s lack of focus on the poorer areas of Los Angeles. This reader was impressed by the film and believed it deserved a second look. The film seems to be a rare phenomenon in American filmmaking today: a serious and honest piece of art.

(500) Days of Summer focuses on a young man named Thomas Hansen (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) who writes Hallmark-style cards for a Los Angeles firm, despite his training as an architect. He meets a girl named Summer (Zooey Deschanel) at work, and instantly becomes convinced that she is his one and only soulmate. Even though she tells him she does not believe in love, the two quickly become an item.

Presented as a sort of anti-love story, the film primarily deals with the incongruity between Tom’s expectations of reality, and the reality itself. Repeated dream sequences show his vision of the world: after he has sex with Summer for the first time, he walks out of his apartment and is greeted by a Ferris Bueller-esque parade complete with marching band horns and an animated bird. When she breaks up with him, he goes to the movies and is treated to an imaginary procession of films which all reinforce his misery.

One of the most powerful scenes comes when a split screen is cleverly used to show, on the left, his expectations for a meeting of theirs, and on the right, the reality. As the two become increasingly and heartbreakingly different, the expectations disappear entirely. Suddenly, the scene is replaced by a duplicate sketched version, as from an architect’s blueprint. Every perfect building is erased, and finally so is Tom. His idealized version of the world, with its true love and perfect architecture, has suffered a mortal blow.

He lays the blame for his own unrealistic expectations at the feet of a society in which easy-to-understand fairy-tales are preferred to reality. In a fit of anger, he asks his card-writing co-workers what words like “love” really mean, and why people need cards to express caring and compassion. “It’s these cards, and the movies and the pop songs, they’re to blame for all the lies, and the heartache, everything,” he tells his co-workers, “I think we do a bad thing here. People should be able to say how they feel, how they really feel, not some words that some strangers put in their mouths.”

It is a fairly accurate description of a world in which there is little thought given to such phenomena as love. Popular music and movies give an incredibly warped view, often presenting it as eternal, everlasting, easy, and spontaneous. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who share Summer’s original position: that love does not exist at all. Equally wrong and mired in cynicism, these critics of all human emotion are mocked when Summer herself falls in love and tells Tom that he was right about soulmates and destiny being real all along.

One of the film’s limitations lies in its inability to provide any hints as to what actual love entails. Love is perhaps the most deeply felt and deeply varied “human emotion”: a full explanation of it in all its forms is probably impossible in the frame of an hour-and-a-half-long movie.

When Summer tells Tom that he was right, she notes that one day she simply “woke up knowing” that she was with the right man. This is presented uncritically, with no irony. If she is right, then we as an audience are

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right back where we began: with Tom's perfect conception of soulmates and everlasting harmony. There is no problem with Summer believing what she does: the trouble lies in the fact that the filmmakers make no final attempt to disprove her. The entire film has been an exercise in showing Hollywood and Disney romance for the fraud that it is, and somehow one of the last scenes seems to say the exact opposite. Luckily, the rest of the film is convincing enough that this one scene is unable to erase the conclusions we as an audience have drawn.

The film deserves praise for treating its subject seriously and in a well-thought-out manner. Despite critiquing misconceptions about love, it refuses to end in pessimism. Tom's optimistic hopes of finding the girl he can honestly say he loves do not ultimately disappear. Moreover, it attempts to achieve its message not simply through preaching, but through clever uses of cinematic motifs and indirect characterization. After watching the film, the audience members feel that they have experienced something genuine, rather than an obvious parable made to prove a point.

Whatever confusion *(500) Days of Summer* might have, its humanity, plausibility, and thoroughly considered nature shine through. It stands out from the crowd of formulaic romantic comedies as an example of a second take on the "modern relationship."

Anthony G
Michigan
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