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POST MODERN BİR FİLM OLARAK ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (SİL BAŞTAN)

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Sil Baştan), post modernizm, gerçeküstü, bilgi, teknoloji.
ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND AS A POSTMODERN FILM

Abstract

As well as being among the most popular romantic films, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is noticeable in terms of reflecting postmodern ideas and concepts. Main postmodern concerns such as narrating the story in a nonlinear way, criticizing the world order which is described as hyperreal and excessive use of technology and knowledge are among the primary focal points of Charlie Kaufman’s Eternal Sunshine. The film, which is about a couple who apply to a company to erase each other from their memories, tells the story in a fantastic way. This way of narration enables the audience to follow the story through postmodern glasses.

Keywords: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, postmodernism, hyperreality, knowledge, technology.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is a very popular romantic film which can make its audience leave the cinema hall crying. However, apart from that, it is one of the best examples in which many postmodern ideas and concepts are reflected. Main postmodern concerns such as narrating the story in a nonlinear way, criticizing the world order which is described as hyperreal and excessive use of technology and knowledge are among the primary focal points of Charlie Kaufman’s Eternal Sunshine. It is the story of couple’s struggle to forget or not to forget each other. Joel and Clementine love each other but cannot have a stable and happy relationship together. After they break up, Clementine erases Joel from her memory. When Joel learns that Clementine has undergone the procedure to forget him, he decides to do the same. However, it does not take him long to give up the idea. As he watches his memories fade away, he realizes that he still loves her and tries to stop the procedure. The fantastic story of the film enables us to look it through postmodernist glasses.

In their book, Handbook of Narrative Analysis, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck state that “Whereas structuralists would try to arrive at a decision by investigating other textual elements, postmodernists would say that the undecidability of the question is crucial to any story and particularly to this one: it shows how unimportant the differences between the two protagonists are” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005: 110). In Eternal Sunshine, there is not a clear line between the worlds of the protagonists, in fact. Joel’s world – the one in his mind - is always disrupted by the outside world. He constantly hears the erasers’ voice. As Herman and Vervaeck state, the film also stresses that the difference between two groups of protagonists is not that important because none of them is real, in fact. When Joel’s world is taken into consideration, it consists of Joel’s memories which do not bear any reality at all, according to postmodern theory, as those memories are thought to be very subjective. The outside world is also not real according to the postmodern theory, as Baudrillard argues that the world where we live is just an illusion, a hyperreality.
An important characteristic of the postmodern narrative is that it includes everything that does not fit into a neat system. In his *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, Andrew Gibson talks about a “monster” which is an accumulation of elements that cannot be classified in any structure (Gibson, 1997: 236-74). In other words, what is excluded by classical narratives is included in postmodern texts. There is a streamline in classical narratives, but the postmodern ones deny it. The most significant element of this postmodern quality is the non-linear time sequence: “Postmodern narrative analyses show a preference for textual passages that are hard to date or that go against the separation of past, present, and future” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005: 111). The postmodern refuses to be limited to a generally accepted framework and prefers to compose the text in different time frames and scales. *Eternal Sunshine* starts with Joel when he gets up in the morning. It seems to be a normal morning: he gets up, leaves home, sees that his car has been damaged by another one and sets out to go work. Suddenly, at the train station, he decides not to go to work but to Montauk though he defines himself “not an impulsive man.” In Montauk, he sees Clementine and at the train back to Rockville Centre they meet. After, he sees her walking on the street, gives her a lift home, has a drink with her at her home, leaves her home, calls her, goes to Charles River with her the following night, and in the morning he drives her back her home. While he waits for her to get her toothbrush in front of her house, a young boy comes and asks him whether he can help Joel. Joel cannot understand what he means, and the boy leaves. Up to this moment, the story develops following a linear path. Nevertheless, right after this scene, Joel is seen crying helplessly in his car. The situation he is in has no relationship to what happened in the scene just before it. In other words, the linearity of the story is first broken with this scene. The remaining part of the film is completely in a non-linear path as the present and the past, his memories and the reality, and even the order of his memories are interwoven to each other, and the director disables the audience to follow the events in a “rational” order. In one of the scenes, we see the doctor or his assistant erasing Joel’s memories at his home. Next, Joel is seen in a memory of his with Clementine when they were together and the following scene is one from Joel’s childhood. Also, the main organization of the story is not a linear one. The opening scene of the story where the audience sees Joel wake up and go to Montauk is a part of the story that takes place towards the end if it is put in a linear order.

Herman and Vervaeck argue that there are two time scopes that are taking place simultaneously in the postmodern experience of time, saying:

On the one hand, there is the fast and microscopic time, the nanosecond, the immediacy of so-called real time, which characterizes not only computer technology but also the economic distribution of goods. On the other hand, there is the slow and extended time of cosmology, which speculates about millions of years and the Big Bang. The two-time dimensions cross each other in many different ways and make it impossible to establish a primary and normative time scale. (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005: 111)

Likewise, in *Eternal Sunshine*, there are two scopes of time; the one flowing in Joel’s mind and the other one in the outside world. Time in the outside world might cover two or three days, and most of it is taken by the night when the procedure is operated on Joel. The second scope of time is in Joel’s mind. Indeed, it is not possible to say that it is fast or slow because it
has no linearity in it making it impossible to evaluate it in terms of its speed. What is certain is that these two scopes of time are following completely different paths.

That the postmodern does not prefer to establish a linear flow in a story; and focusing on temporal elements to make a “rational flow” of events impossible shows that the postmodernists believe that “real” time cannot be established or there is not a stable subject giving sense and direction to that time. (Gibson, 2005: 179-84) As Herman and Vervaeck suggest “Narrators who reconstruct themselves through their memories do not end up with their “real” or “original” selves but with yet another construction, another story about themselves” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005: 112). Temporal elements are at the center of Eternal Sunshine, too, as there is not a linear improvement. The most non-linear part of the film, Joel’s memory erasing process, is an example that reconstructing one’s self through memories does not make him/her find his/her real self. From Herman and Vervaeck’s suggestion that reconstructing the memories in a way does not enable to find your true self, it can be inferred that one’s memory does not store the information in a way that the information is not changed; indeed, the memories are stored after being affected by that person’s experiences, thoughts, the environment, etc. Likewise, Joel’s memories are not unchangeable; they are affected both by his own effort and also by the events in his bedroom. While he is trying to escape from the erasers in his mind, he hears their voice and understands who Patrick – whom he sees with Clementine after she erases him from her mind - is. Hence, this quality of Joel’s memories and his movement in them can be accepted as the symbolization of the idea that the knowledge is not stored in the way that it is experienced, in the postmodern idea.

The notion of non-linearity in time also affects the concept of space as it affects the cause and effect order in life. A linear construction of time sees the action as a movement in a clearly definable space. However, the postmodern has no established points and centers in time and space. Herman and Vervaeck state that “space can never be defined in terms of its own characteristics and coordinates, because the definition depends on the reference to other spaces” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005: 113). For that reason, “Postmodern narratologists do not establish temporal or spatial axes in order to situate the events of a story. They consider the act of situating a misunderstanding because of its anthropomorphous and referentialist connection of the text with everyday human reality” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005: 113). In Eternal Sunshine, there are not spatial fixings to provide the story with a linear flow of the story: the places are various and changeable through the scenes which are very fast and do not normally make sense. For instance, they are in his bed when Joel is a teenager, possibly, but suddenly, they find themselves on a beach in that bed, or they are in a washbasin – which is complete nonsense when analyzed in a “rationalist” sense - then Joel finds himself in his car with wet hair. All these kinds of scenes in the movie definitely blurs the line between time scopes and spatial boundaries.

Apart from the non-linear structure of time and space of the film, the most significant characteristics of it are its reflection of “hyperreality” theory of Baudrillard. Eternal Sunshine’s theme of memories and technology can be linked to Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality. Baudrillard suggests that the postmodern points out the point where rationalized models replaced and transfigured the real. He analyzes the relation between the actual and rational in a term he calls “hyperreal”:
There is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the rational. There is no longer really even any projection of models in the real [...] but an in-the-field, here-and-now transfiguration of the real into model. A fantastic short-circuit: the real is hyperrealized. Neither realized nor idealized: but hyperrealized. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent distinction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model. (Baudrillard, 1983b: 83-4)

In Simulations, Baudrillard suggests that the real is “produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models [...] It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (Baudrillard, 1983a: 25) with the current developments in information technology. He gives Disneyland as an example to show how a simulation operates to produce hyperreality:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the “real” country, all of the “real” America, which is Disneyland [...] Disneyland is present as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real. (Baudrillard, 1983a: 25)

According to Baudrillard, Disneyland is not a fantasy providing the Americans an escape from the everyday reality of their lives. Instead, it is a camouflage hiding the fantastical nature of daily life in all of American society: he claims it is “a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real” (Baudrillard, 1983a: 25). In American society, there is no contact with the reality, but only with the constant simulations which are the parts of hyperreality. Disneyland is there to conceal this fact that there is no more reality. Prisons are another example that Baudrillard gives to explain hyperreality. For him, prisons are there to make us think that those who are outside are free. Also, Watergate example, which is called a “scandal” as the President was found spying on his critics, Baudrillard claims, functions to delude people that the remaining part of the politics is not corrupted. In other words, as Simon Malpas states, “The point is that in the contemporary media-dominated world, everything partakes of fantasy, incarceration and corruption, and reality, freedom and truth have been banished entirely from day-to-day experience” (Malpas, 2005: 126).

In Eternal Sunshine, the life that is created for people by the Lacuna Inc. is the hyperreality. By using the means of technology, they create a new world for their customers just like some create a world for us to live in. According to Baudrillard’s thesis, the current system creates a false “reality” for us and makes us believe that we are happy living that life as the Lacuna Inc.’s doctor and other workers believe that they provide people with a chance to be happy, “Yeah, it's totally incredible. What Howard gives to the world. To let people begin again. It's beautiful. You look at a baby, and it's so pure and so free and so clean. And adults are, like this mess of sadness... and... phobias. Howard just makes it all go away.”

Baudrillard claims that hyperreality destroys the possibility of a “critical and speculative distance” between the rationalized models and the real. We cannot use reason to follow reality as our models are precise and complex, the two have become identical. By this, Baudrillard
means that the new scientific developments, technological products, and technologies, the models are produced in a more real and sophisticated way than the reality itself. According to him, people have been lost in a circle of hyperreality that makes it impossible for us to have the distance to stand back from our experiences and question them because “capitalism crosses the entire network of natural, social, sexual and cultural forces, all languages, and codes” (Baudrillard, 1975: 138).

In other words, we are so stuck in the system that we cannot have a stance to see what is really happening and we continue to hold the same position. As a result, possibly, we would not be as happy and ignorant as we are now if we had any idea about it. In Eternal Sunshine, Mary is the one stuck in the system blindly. From the moment the audience meets her, she attracts attention as a happy and cheerful girl, who loves her job. She defends the procedure claiming it is for people’s good, “Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders” being unaware of the fact that she has undergone the same procedure; that is, she has lost her distance to look at her life. Nevertheless, she has a revival point when she learns what has happened to her and it marks the beginning of rejecting the righteousness of the operation, the hyperreality.

The hyperreal world created among us by purpose can be sustained by promoting consumerism, which composes another important aspect of the link between Baudrillard’s theory and Eternal Sunshine. For Baudrillard, capitalism does not only mean the circulation of money and commodities; instead, it damages every aspect of the experience. Buying a commodity does not mean buying the object; you buy the signs it symbolizes. In The Consumer Society, he argues that this purchasing process produces the language and the codes that shape postmodern identity:

The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society communicates and converses. Such is the structure of consumption, its language, by comparison with which individual needs and pleasures are merely speech effects. (Baudrillard, 1998: 79-80)

According to his view, individual actions are tied to consumption being the sentences of the capitalism’s language. Baudrillard argues that we are what we consume, and it is related to our inner desires. The consumer desires to be happy as he claims the postmodern consumer “sets in place a whole array of sham objects of characteristic signs of happiness and then waits […] for happiness to alight” (Baudrillard, 1998: 31). However, consumption is not capable of making anybody happy since a human being always desires more.

Like Baudrillard’s theory which brings forth the idea that consuming constitutes our lives, and people consume to be happy taking advantage of the signs that their commodities symbolize, Eternal Sunshine raises the question of consuming and its so-called positive effects on people. The office of Lacuna Inc. in the film is a commercial enterprise. They sell the erasing memory procedure to miserable people. The office is really busy and whenever we see it, there are people calling and waiting there to undergo the procedure. In other words, they make money out of selling technology and knowledge to unhappy people. Moreover, Mary, the secretary at
the office, replies somebody saying, “I’m sorry. That campaign is over,” on the phone. Having campaigns, making discounts are things that are common in the capitalist type of economy to make people more included in the process of consuming and in the film we see the company use these kinds of strategies to sell their knowledge and technology. In other words, the procedure practiced on people’s memory is the product which is offered by consumerism. It is imposed by high technology, and it promises to make people happier as Baudrillard’s objects do. When Joel learns that Clementine has erased him from her memory, he goes to The Lacuna Inc. and talks to the doctor who tells him, “Miss Kruczynski was not happy and wanted to move on. We provide that possibility.” In other words, they help Clementine and others like her to be happy by leaving their own reality behind and sticking to the sign the product offers.

To conclude, although Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is an impressive love story, its reflections of the postmodern theory and criticism of postmodern society are the leading perspectives of the film. The most important characteristic of the film is its nonlinear order in time and space. Before the postmodernist thinking, it was required to put the things in a time sequence while telling a story; however, with the postmodern way of thinking it was rejected as the postmodern thinkers believe real time cannot be established and through Joel’s memories which are dependent on temporal elements, we see that there is no real construction of time and events: they are shaped by individuals. This lack of establishment of time order results in the setting of spaces in an order that is not “rational” and it is seen a lot in the film as the characters move among Joel’s memories. The unreal world of Joel’s memory and people’s effort to create a world for themselves by having their memory erased lead us to mention Baudrillard’s “hyperreality” idea. Just as the artificial world that the Lacuna Inc.’s customers prefer to live in, we live in a world that is established to make us unaware of the real one, suggests Baudrillard. One of the most important elements of the hyperreal world is consumerism and the Lacuna Inc. is the tool which leads people to buy the procedure and spend money nurturing the system by using the profits of knowledge and technology.

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