

Guilty Pleasures: Questions of Taste

By Grace Martin

*The Notebook*¹ is the quintessential example of the romantic, melodramatic woman's film, having caused countless tears and spurred innumerable fantasies of perfect romance. It follows the story of two seemingly star-crossed lovers, Noah (Ryan Gosling) and Allie (Rachel McAdams), as they meet, fall in love, are torn apart by social differences and ultimately find their way back to each other. The film is formulaic, and is often excessively emotionally romantic to the point where it seems to exaggerate all of the conventions of its genre. Yet, it is possibly the most successful addition to the category of melodrama in the past decade as is evident by its abundant popularity. Thus, *The Notebook* is the perfect case study for where the melodramatic woman's film finds its placement in film theory today.

The melodrama has a long and controversial history in the realm of film theory, as a genre often categorized under the heading of low art or popular cinema. It is an example of the type of cinematic spectacle 1970s film theory was founded to reject. Melodrama creates a mystifying world of images that if successful, can be engrossing even to the point of causing a bodily reaction in the viewer (tears). It is also exactly the kind of film that Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey would have confessed to be secretly, and even guiltily, fascinated by; causing them to call for the "break[ing] open the toy"² of cinema and the rejection of "visual pleasures."³

These instances are singular examples, however, from a long history of rejection of popular

¹ *The Notebook*. Dir. Nick Cassavetes. Perf. Ryan Gosling, Rachel McAdams, Gena Rowlands and James Garner. New Line Cinema, 2004. DVD.

² Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzertti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 93.

³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986).

cinema in film theory. The melodrama is unique in its assumption of a female spectator and in its ability to generate tears in the viewer, yet is merely one example of many types of films to be qualified under the dubious heading of “visual pleasure.”⁴

Film theory has evolved over time, and the 1970s rejection of the filmic image has come into question, yet, the status of the melodrama has remained fairly static. Thomas Elsaesser and others have written about melodramas, focusing primarily on canonized classics by Douglas Sirk. However, the non-canonized, popular film often remains a problem left unsolved by film theory. Therefore, the question must be asked: where does a film like *The Notebook* fit into film theory or does it at all? In answering this question, it will become possible to examine how film theory deals with questions of taste and popularity, and to explore the artistic status of the guilty pleasure.

Excessive Emotion

The film reaches its height of pathos towards the end, when both storylines come to a close. Throughout, the film switches temporalities between the story of how the young couple meets and comes together against adversity in the 1940s South and their retelling of this story in their old age in the modern world as they reach the ends of their lives. At one point in the narrative, Allie and Noah have an impassioned fight when Noah beseeches her to make a decision between him and her wealthier, more socially acceptable fiancé. They shout and scream at each other, use expletives that would have been considered controversial for the time period, slam car doors and knock over chairs. Finally, he tells her “it’s not gonna be easy. It’s gonna be really hard and we’re gonna have to work at this every day, but I wanna do that because I want

⁴ Ibid.

you. I want all of you. Forever...”⁵ In hearing this, she begins to cry hysterically, then soon jumps into her car and drives away, nearly crashing it due to her excessive fit of tears. The film displays excessive emotion varying from the poles of anger to hysteria in a matter of minutes. Soon after, the temporality of the film switches to Allie and Noah in their old age. Allie (Gena Rowlands) is revealed as having advanced Alzheimer’s disease, yet Noah (James Garner) remains faithful to her. For a brief moment, she remembers who her husband is and they embrace as the music swells and the film cross cuts to a scene of their final reunion in their young lives as Allie chooses Noah and returns to him to begin their lives together. However, this moment of excessive romance then quickly turns to anguish as Allie promptly forgets her husband of fifty-years and begins to scream in terror for help as Noah then crumples onto the bed and cries hysterically. Again, emotions pull from every possible extreme; for both characters run the gamete of extreme convulsing emotions within a ten minute time span. It becomes nearly impossible to watch this sequence of events without breaking into tears.

As is evident by this sequence, *The Notebook* is a film that thrives on an excess of emotion. Reasonably, it could be categorized as belonging to one of Linda Williams’s body genres, or types of films that create a mimetic bodily response in the viewer based on displays of excessive emotion in the female (or in this case, both the male and female) body.⁶ In her article “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Williams defines the genre by stating that, “melodramas are deemed excessive for their gender- and sex- linked pathos, for their naked

⁵ *The Notebook*, Cassavetes.

⁶ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991).

displays of emotion.”⁷ This description is what *The Notebook* thrives on; “naked displays of emotion.” It draws its strength from displaying the widest possible extent of human emotion. It is linked to the body because it causes a bodily reaction of tears. However, what the film thrives on is also what condemns *The Notebook* to always being considered a low art film. For the excess of emotion in the film causes it to become a spectacle, and once the film becomes a spectacle, it will often be condemned into being in bad taste due to a lack of depth.

According to Williams, the amount of bodily response to a body genre film marks its success. She writes that there is a “long standing tradition of the women’s films measuring their success in terms of one-, two-, or three-handkerchief movies.”⁸ Thus, the fact that the tears of Allie and Noah respectively, lead the audience to cry and that the film ends with both characters deaths (which also creates an emotional response), marks the film as a “three-handkerchief” success. However, this seems paradoxical for these spectacles also mark the film as excessive and therefore, unsuccessful according to a theoretical, and possibly even critical, standpoint. By which standard of success should the film be judged? Or, is spectacle something that cannot be truly accounted for in theory whatsoever?

Williams give no definitive answer to these questions of taste. She ends the article with a description of the roles of fantasy in body genre films as being capable of expanding out psychoanalytical depth into the films. She describes “the lovers’ fantasy of possessing one another in romantic weepies”⁹ or in other words, that a film like *The Notebook* can reflect the

⁷ Ibid. 3.

⁸ Ibid. 5.

⁹ Ibid. 11.

innate desire in humans to connect to one another; to “possess” one another. For possession is central to the romantic fantasy of the film, as is evident by Noah telling Allie “I want all of you, forever.”¹⁰ Thus, even the “romantic weepie” has value because of it speaks to basic human impulse; or perhaps it corresponds to the process of regression rejected by 1970s film theorists.

The Modern Woman Goes to the Movies

The excessive emotion in *The Notebook* creates an uncertainty as to its taste level, however, the role of popular reception may also be indicative of whether or not the film is deemed worthy of theoretical study. It is important to look at the most popularly referenced scene in the film, where Allie and Noah kiss in the rain. In this scene, Noah takes Allie on a romantic boat ride upon their reconnection after a long and painful estrangement. As they are returning to the dock, they are caught in a rainstorm and suddenly, tension that had existed between them upon their reencounter, is broken. After exchanging a series of intense gazes, they kiss amidst the rain and the lightning. This scene plays out a form of romantic convention. It builds tension through a mounting desire between the characters resulting in a passionate kiss in the rain- a romantic cliché harkening back to sentimental women’s novels such as Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women. It follows a familiar structure, complete with swelling, romantic music, attractive actors and a dreamlike location. It is the ultimate romantic fantasy that many would expect female populations of society to feed off of. The end of the film plays into the fantasy as well, as the final shot of the lead characters is perfectly composed with a bird’s-eye-view tracking shot of them lying in bed having died in their sleep holding each other’s hands. The technical spectacle serves to confirm the romantic fantasy, as this end represents the idealization

¹⁰ *The Notebook*, Cassavetes.

of a love so strong that one could never possibly live without the other; again, a familiar fantasy dating back as far as William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

It would seem that convention makes for popular reception, a concept that is reiterated in Siegfried Kracauer's essay entitled "The Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies," which states that "In the endless sequences of films, a limited number of typical themes recur again and again; they reveal how society wants to see itself."¹¹ According to Kracauer, a film like *The Notebook*, which is inundated with romantic clichés, reveals how society wishes to view itself. This has two implications: first, that society looks at the love story of popular films such as *The Notebook* as a desired experience, and second, that it is unable to achieve this desire in reality. Kracauer later expands on this idea as he explains, "Life is an invention of the haves, which the have-nots try to imitate to the best of their inability."¹² In other words, popular film is only popular because it depicts an unobtainable ideal reality. The unobtainable ideal is a concept seen throughout *The Notebook*. First of all, the film is set in the South in the 1940s and thrives on nostalgia for a simpler and more glamorous time that never really existed. It pretends that the only thing people worried about during this time was finding their perfect mate, completely ignoring the societal turmoil of the time surrounding segregation and World War II. Also, the poverty of Noah's character in the film has no effect on his quality of life other than placing him in a separate social sphere from Allie. The film ignores social context in order to make the audience believe that love is all that matters in life; that passionate kisses in the rain are an obtainable fantasy. Then the film fast-forwards into the modern era, suggesting that these same values are still relevant

¹¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 294.

¹² *Ibid.* 296.

today and that even in battling Alzheimer's, love can still succeed. It is no wonder that *The Notebook* is popular, for it takes an idealized and glamorous nostalgia for the past and makes it relevant in the modern world. It offers a view of the world free of the influences of social turmoil.

Kracauer, however, as a film theorist, is not interested in allowing the masses to believe in these fantasies. He writes, "The quintessence of these film themes is at the same time the sum of society's ideologies, whose spell is broken by means of interpretation of the themes."¹³ Kracauer's point is to reveal and to expose the falseness of these images. In this quote, he explains that these idealistic themes are the purest views of societies ideology, but they are broken by interpretation, as the fantasy of *The Notebook* would be. To explain the simplicity and conventionality of the film is to destroy the possibility for engrossment in the film. In a way, to theorize *The Notebook* is to destroy it; it cannot be theorized and remain beloved. This dilemma may underline the reasoning for the rejection of popular melodramas in film theory.

Yet, is the answer this simple? It could be, but it is dangerous to place an entire society of people into one category of spectator, as for Kracauer it is only "the little shop girls" who go to the movies and no one else- he assumes that every viewer is the same, and therefore, buys into the same ideology. Though the article makes some very important points on the status of the popular film in society, it makes the mistake of overt sexism and patronizes the female viewer to a simplistic weepie-eyed, girl looking to land "one of the famous millionaires from the illustrated magazines."¹⁴ How then, can *The Notebook* fit into this stereotype of female fantasy when it

¹³ Ibid. 294.

¹⁴ Ibid. 302.

markedly creates a role reversal having the male character play the poor man who marries the educated rich female? Are the little shop girls supposed to identify with Noah? Perhaps there are more important, gender related complexities to this quintessential women's film that make it impossible to entirely define under Kracauer's phallogocentric theory.

The Pretty

Finally, the film must be looked at for what it is- a woman's film. This is not to say, that a male audience is impossible, but that the film is created with a female spectator in mind and that at its core, it holds an intrinsic femininity that much of film theory is not equipped to discuss. A melodramatic romance often does not fall into the scope of feminist film theory as readily as a film either geared towards a male spectator, or meant with a feminist purpose. Rather, *The Notebook* falls into the mysterious realm of Rosalind Galt's the "pretty,"¹⁵ as is evident by the scene in the rain.

While this scene still fits into the stereotypical romantic conventions explored above, it also has a wondrous and ineffable quality that evades description. The scene is full of lush and enchanting wide shots of the southern landscape. One shot in particular, a bird's eye view as the couple passes through a flock of swimming ducks on their boat, is simply stunning; full of contrasts in color and light exaggerated by the swirling motions of the birds around the boat. The scene is "pretty" in every sense of the word, from the dream-like scenery, to the fabulously gorgeous actors, to the hyper-romantic music, to the view of the kiss in the rain that literally fills the entire screen. Yet as Galt explains in "Pretty: Film Theory, Aesthetics, and the History of the Troublesome Image," the overt prettiness of a scene like this, or for that matter of a film like *The*

¹⁵ Rosalind Galt, "Pretty: Film Theory, Aesthetics, and the History of the Troublesome Image," *Camera Obscura* 71, vol. 24, no.2 (2009).

Notebook as a whole, becomes problematic in terms of film theory. On this matter, Galt states, “The rhetoric of film theory has insistently denigrated surface decoration, finding the attractive skin of the screen to be false, shallow, feminine or apolitical.”¹⁶ Thus, because *The Notebook* is a film filled with spectacular images such as the ducks on the lake, it is rejected by film theory as being only surface. It is called feminine, for across academia, beauty and emotion are often relegated to women, while men stand for reason. Galt however, sees reason to explore “the pretty” by writing “I would suggest that this critique [of the pretty] itself must be interrogated.”¹⁷ Again it comes down to a question of taste. Excess amounts of beauty in a film often correspond to the film having a lack of value in the eyes of film theory. Galt suggests that this perception must be challenged.

She continues on to explain, “the pretty evokes a patriarchal fear of popular pleasures and its uncontrollable audiences. But although it intersects with a notion of ‘mass culture as woman,’ the pretty also cuts across the high/low divide.”¹⁸ Thus the rejection of the pretty, and *The Notebook* in tangent, becomes a problem of gender. Galt links femininity to mass culture in a similar way as Kracauer, yet refuses Kracauer’s condescension. In this case, femininity is a powerful force instilling fear in what Galt refers to as a patriarchal system of criticism. A film like *The Notebook* adheres to a world of popular pleasures rather than logic, thus it becomes antithetical to theoretical systems. Also, it is important to note that Galt does not relegate “the pretty” to a low status, but rather characterizes it as transcendent.

¹⁶ Ibid. 2.

¹⁷ Ibid. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid. 6.

Why then should a pretty film like this be studied? Galt explains that “this recurring tendency to dismiss the pretty tells us something about where and how we are willing to find meaning and value.”¹⁹ The fact that *The Notebook* is dismissed, reveals a value system of taste in which certain films are rejected based on a dependence to an aesthetic of “the pretty”. This system is linked to femininity. Thus, despite the presence of feminist writings in film theory, the feminine as a visual aesthetic is deemed valueless and *The Notebook* has no place to be theorized, even though it is a film that plays with gender roles and deals with modern social anxieties including the resilience of marriage against adversity in the modern world.

The Notebook is rich with excessive visual spectacles and emotion, which creates doubts as to the tastefulness of the film. It is cliché, formulaic and visually pleasing in a way that speaks to an inherent femininity, therefore, it is considered ineligible for theoretical discussion. It is a guilty pleasure, which implies that it is to be enjoyed, but kept at a distance from serious consideration. To create a theoretical argument around the film would be to accept the film- to accept the “visual pleasure” as having value. Indeed, Williams, Kracauer and Galt acknowledge the exile of the melodramatic women’s film from being a viable commodity for study. The problem has been recognized, yet as of now, there is no place for the excessive woman’s film to be dealt with as a viable piece of cinematic work. Above all, discussion of *The Notebook* reveals a limit in film theory defined by qualifications of taste. Perhaps, it is time to reassess this limit in order to better understand film in all of its variances.

¹⁹ Ibid. 7.