# The science of remembering

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**26 March 2004**

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, directed by Michel Gondry, screenplay by Charlie Kaufman

Michel Gondry, the French-born maker of music videos and feature films, and Charlie Kaufman, screenwriter known for his unusual scripts (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, etc.), have joined forces to create *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

The film's title comes from a poem by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), *Eloisa to Abelard*, about the famous and tragic lovers in medieval France. Eloisa is praising the lot of those "blameless" and virginal ones stuck away in the convent, "The world forgetting, by the world forgot." She goes on to celebrate the "Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!" Whether Pope meant the line to be ironic or not, the poem clearly comes down on the side of earthly, physical love and remembering, as opposed to the "vestals" who have never lived at all and have nothing to forget.

*Eternal Sunshine* also comes down on the side of love and remembering, despite the pain and suffering involved.

The film's structure is complicated, perhaps unnecessarily so. It winds back upon itself. Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) is a stifled middle-class New Yorker who skips work one winter day and encounters a free-spirited young woman with blue hair, Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet), on the Long Island Railroad.

In fact, we learn, the two once had a relationship, but their memories of it have been erased thanks to the efforts of Lacuna, Inc. The company pinpoints and eliminates memories of unhappy relationships. Clementine had the procedure done first, followed by Joel.

Lacuna, despite its remarkable service, is a rather unimpressive outfit, headed by Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson). He has a small staff, including receptionist Mary (Kirsten Dunst) and two bumbling technicians, Stan (Mark Ruffalo) and Patrick (Elijah Wood). The latter pair—armed only with a laptop and silly-looking headgear—more or less botch Joel's brainwashing, opening up the possibility of his resistance.

(Incidentally, why the Polish names Kruczynski and Mierzwiak? A tribute to Polish science fiction of a cerebral, non-technological kind? And we note on the nameplate on her desk that Mary's last name is "Svevo"—an homage to Italo Svevo, the Italian novelist who pioneered the modern internal-psychological novel? Clementine presumably refers to the girl in the folk song who is "lost and gone forever." Barish suggests "banish," "perish," perhaps "nebbish." Some of this is too clever by half.)

Part way through the procedure (which takes place in the client's apartment), perhaps made possible by technical glitches, the unconscious Joel suddenly discovers that he doesn't want to lose his memory of Clementine. He's like the individual who realizes he's dreaming and attempts to wake himself up. Much of the film takes place inside his head. Joel tries to hide Clementine somewhere inaccessible in his brain, even as people and objects around him are disappearing, victims of the memory erasing.

In a remarkable scene, Joel remembers Clementine breaking into a beach house when he was with her. As they quarrel about the wisdom of staying there, the memory comes under attack; the building breaks up and collapses around the lovers. Or, the pair are in a bookstore and the signs designating the shop's different sections ("Fiction," "History" and so forth) go blank one by one, then the book covers disappear and the books themselves end up nothing but empty pages. The image itself becomes less and less distinct.

While Joel is engaged in this interior battle to salvage some memory of Clementine, who threatens to be torn entirely from him, Stan and Mary are cavorting, stoned, over his inert body. Patrick has been pursuing his own relationship with Clementine. He's taken items belonging to Joel and associated with Clementine; he tells the young woman things that Joel once said to her. Somehow it feels inauthentic to her. It turns out as well that Mary and her boss have their own secrets.

Then there's that winter day on the train again.

To his credit, Gondry does not resort to special effects trickery to establish the film's premises. He captures the sense of the dreamlike, the manner in which memory, inevitably faulty or inadequate, fills in spaces with borrowed or invented elements, all with relatively primitive technique: lighting, focus, montage. Genuine cleverness and ingenuity

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have gone into the film. A serious playfulness is at work.

Moreover, the film is making a case, perhaps not the most earthshaking or compelling case, but nonetheless...

Americans all too often favor the quick-fix. (One reviewer comments that the memory erasure procedure invented by the filmmakers is tempting!) A pill, a potion, a 30-day program—only 10 minutes a day—for every problem. Everything unpleasant can be removed from your life for only $19.95! Instant amnesia! Order today!

Then there's that most disgusting phrase of all: "Move on." Considering the past (and presumably learning anything from it), as Henry Ford suggested, is more or less bunk. Americans are always being urged to "Move on," from a rotten job, an unhappy relationship, or even perhaps a disastrous war. "Put it behind you!" And "move on" to what? Often, more disasters.

So *Eternal Sunshine* argues for experience and memory, and the inevitable pain (and wisdom) that goes with them. And against the tendency to drop experience as though it burned one's fingers. To take the film at face value, it also has something to say against the dreadfully pragmatic notion that a single critical relationship could be excised from the memory without the entire psyche collapsing like a house of cards. The events, pleasant and unpleasant, of one's life form an interconnected whole.

When Joel asks Dr. Mierzwiak whether the memory expunging carries any risk of brain damage, the latter mildly replies, "Technically speaking, the procedure *is* brain damage." And of course it is. The characters to whom the procedure has "successfully" been done walk around in a bit of a daze; who they are and what they've become do not entirely make sense to them. How could they? There are gaps (Lacuna = an empty space or missing part). In any case, since the experience is not present in the mind to be learned from, they inevitably make the same mistakes. They're like the proverbial broken records.

Moreover, whether the Lacuna procedure is voluntary or not, there's something Orwellian about it, and Joel's futile effort to "escape" with Clementine has an anti-authoritarian quality.

The film suggests that love has considerable power, even against the implacable techno-scrubbing of the brain. Theoretically rid of one another, Joel and Clementine nonetheless find themselves drawn together. Something survives the removal of love's traces by a wretched computer program. There is another couplet in *Eloisa to Abelard* that perhaps has a bearing on the Gondry-Kaufman film: "Of all affliction taught a lover yet,/'Tis sure the hardest science to forget."

There is both more and less to *Eternal Sunshine* than meets the eye. Like its subject, memory, it both looms toward and recedes from the spectator. Unwarranted claims are being made for the work. Its weakness lies in the direction of character; and the problem of character is bound up with the concrete appraisal of modern social life.

The screenwriter and director have paid a good deal of attention to certain aspects of their work, but not to others. In fact, the characters portrayed by Winslet and Carrey are rather clichéd, limited, even banal. Clementine is "quirky," moody, easy to take offense. She changes her hair color often, she's impulsive, she drinks too much. We've seen her kind before in films, at least once or twice. Joel is her opposite: introspective, repressed, frightened of spontaneity. We've seen this before, too. The pair are rather abstract, generic types.

Winslet brings a great deal of humanity to her role; she makes us care about her Clementine, frankly, more than the character as Kaufman has written it deserves. The thought of losing her becomes painful to us, too. Carrey's performance is not as consistently acute or concentrated; occasionally he is the stereotypical nebbish, but he too has his moments of depth. But the performers, in the end, are limited by the material.

The filmmakers have created an intriguing set of circumstances, but they forget, as do most of their counterparts at present, that love relationships do not take place in a void. Every love affair has certain universal psychological and physiological features, but it also bears the imprint of its particular historical "here and now."

The film's "purchase" on contemporary American life and its specific dilemmas is relatively weak. The formal aspects of the characters' relations—their coming together, their breaking apart, the eradication of memory and the rebellion that ensues—are sharply delineated. The content of their life together, however, remains largely as blank and unenlightening as the volumes in that vanishing bookshop. What threatens them is quite vivid, but the human figures themselves are specters, devoid of specificity, as is the social world beyond them. This prevents the work from having the deepest impact.

If the writer and director had developed their legitimate concerns about love and memory as part of broader, more insightful artistic examination of reality, the results might have been extraordinary. As it is, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a considerable minor effort.

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