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Forget Me Not: Film as Memory in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

In his semi-biographical depiction of F.W. Murnau in the 2000 film *Shadow of the Vampire*, actor John Malkovich once described the filmmaker as a “scientist engaged in the creation of memory, but our memory will neither blur nor fade” (Orr 1). It is certainly true that Murnau left an enduring legacy after his death in the form of twelve surviving landmark silent films that are, even today, regularly considered to be among the greatest films ever made. Yet, at the same time, eight of his films have been completely lost to time, raising the troubling question of whether an artist can ever be fully immortalized through their work. Can memories that never blur nor fade truly exist? In his 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, director Michel Gondry would seem to answer with a resolute no. The film revolves around a couple, Joel Barish and Clementine Kruczynski, who upon a rather unpleasant breakup decide to erase their memories of each other. Although Lacuna, the medical outfit that has invented the technology to perform this deed, promises them “eternal sunshine,” Joel soon finds himself questioning whether he really wants his memories of Clementine gone after all. Through an intricate narrative, innovative aesthetics, and layered motifs, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* compares the act of viewing a film to the process of reliving a memory, and in doing so comments on the limitations of art itself due to its ability to be forgotten.

Tracing back to the origins of filmmaking in the 1890s, motion pictures and memories have been intricately tied together by literary scholars due to their shared reliance on audiovisual impressions to produce a narrative. Pigott notes that the comparison originated with the popularization of photographs taken by figures such as J. W. Draper in the mid 19th century, observing, “As analogies for visual representations photographs particularly stress the immutability of what is stored as a memory: they suggest a memory that forgets nothing, that contains a perfect, permanent record of our visual experience” (183). Given the then widely held “conception of memory as the fixing of a moment into an unchanging image,” the appeal of photography as a mechanism to record historical memories is unsurprising (183). As technology advanced and the invention of motion picture cameras led to the birth and rapid growth of modern cinema, film studies scholars soon began to apply the same metaphor to movies as well, which combined the visuals of individual shots with dialogue, music, editing, and narrative to produce much richer evocations of memories. The new medium also allowed directors to explore this idea in creative ways, playing with devices such as flashbacks to portray recollections of the past within their films. In one example from the film *Wild Strawberries*, a character “sees a filmic scene just as the spectator does in the cinema…Bergman assumes that memory works like a film, so that a filmic scene can represent his character's act of remembering” (Fluck 213). In this way, film might function as a literal portal to the past, both for the audience member and for the character within the film’s narrative.

However, these same techniques also allowed directors to experiment with perspective and misdirection, challenging the reliability of filmic portrayals of memory. Fluck provides one example from the film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in which flashbacks are instead intentionally used to trick both the audience and the protagonist himself into arriving at a false conclusion regarding the identity of outlaw Liberty Valance’s true killer:

The two flashbacks show the same event twice, but each time from different camera angles. Since we only see Stoddard and Liberty Valance in the first flashback and never get any hint of Doniphon's presence, we do not even consider the possibility that a third figure might be involved. Then, in the second flashback, the camera is shifted in a 90° angle and reveals that Doniphon stands hidden in the dark, shooting at exactly the same moment as Stoddard. This retrospective correction, however, redefines the relation between filmic representation and collective memory…[and] questions the premise that the images which represent memory can be taken as reliable representations at all (221-222).

Fluck correctly identifies the unreliable, and often deceptive, nature of filmic images in portraying a past event, but he errs in leaping to the conclusion that this prevents filmic images from being accurate representations of memory. On the contrary, the example from *Liberty Valance* only strengthens film as a metaphor for remembering the past, as memories are inherently unreliable insofar as they are limited by the perspective of the person who creates them. In other words, although Stoddard did not actually kill Liberty Valance, he nevertheless remembers doing so. Thus, while film fails to serve as a fully accurate source of *history* (what actually happened in the narrative of the portrayed events), it does succeed in functioning as a representation for *memory* (what a character or the audience perceived to happen), a term that carries with it a connotation of subjective experience.

While several works evoke this idea of film as memory, few exemplify it as well as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,* which was specifically shot by Michael Gondry to immerse the audience in the experience of remembering. This is evident from the narrative structure of the film itself, which opens, unbeknownst to the viewer, with a scene of the main characters Joel and Clementine meeting “for the first time” after they have successfully erased their prior memories of each other, an event that occurs chronologically at the end of the story’s actual timeline. Gondry then proceeds to tell the story of Joel and Clementine’s relationship backwards in time through the frame of the Lacuna memory erasure procedure, as Joel revisits each memory he has of Clementine in reverse order only to have it erased. Although “the story-told-in-reverse is a common enough movie device, usually utilized to conceal information from the audience,” the technique is instead used by Gondry to place the audience, both literally and figuratively, inside Joel’s head, forcing the viewer to not just watch but *remember* Joel’s failed relationship with Clementine, “gradually uncovering not hidden facts but forgotten emotions. There are no unexpected twists or sudden revelations about Joel and Clementine, just a wistful backward view of love's decay” (Orr 1). By presenting the film through a nonlinear “multiform narrative…to represent the internal-subjective perspective of its central character, Joel Barish,” Gondry visualizes Joel’s subjective perception of his relationship through the lens of the memory erasure procedure, rather than depicting an unbiased account of it (Campora 122). In this way, he emphasizes the fact that in watching *Eternal Sunshine* we are viewing memories, not history.

Support for this interpretation of the film can be found in its aesthetics as well, which are carefully handpicked by Gondry to arouse faint impressions of memories throughout the film. For example, Gondry employs “radically different aesthetic techniques…such as expressionistic lighting, out-of-focus shots, and sonic distortions” to clearly distinguish the internal-subjective strand of the narrative that takes place in Joel’s mind, producing a dream-like feel (Campora 123-124). Sperb elaborates on the use of lighting in particular throughout the film, which “evoke[s] Deleuze’s notion of the recollection-image—something which actualizes a pure recollection of an unrealizable past, which can exist only as a virtual element. In other words, ‘memory is not in us’” (1). Sperb argues that the process of remembering is at heart a spectator sport, since we can never truly experience the past but only catch glimpses of it. Gondry highlights this fact with his clever use of spotlight throughout the film:

The spotlight follows the two of them as they visit memories of spending time with their friends and returning to the doctor’s office in a vain attempt to stop the procedure. Clementine is erased from these memories, and Joel is left only with his light. Here again, the spotlight signifies the limited perception of Joel’s remembering, which remains in and of the present. He cannot again completely experience the moments he thinks he remembers; Joel can only see limited illuminations, fragments in his imagination vaguely informed by his understanding of the past (Sperb 1).

The unifying element in all of the memory erasure scenes, the omnipresent spotlight serves to remind the audience of Joel’s inability to preserve his memories as they slow fade away. In some sense, this is due to the narrative device of the Lacuna treatment that is quite literally deleting Joel’s memories, but at a deeper level the imagery of the spotlight also visualizes the fact that the past is a Platonic ideal, forever inaccessible to both Joel and the audience.

If one accepts Sperb’s interpretation that “the small circle of light [represents] the limits of Joel’s memory, and, by extension, the limits of his recollection of a sealed past which remains outside him,” then the spotlight embodies not just the literal divide that exists between us and our memories, but also the physical divide that exists between the audience and the film itself (Sperb 1). The viewer of *Eternal Sunshine* cannot step into the world of the film; the screen acts as a physical barrier between film and reality, much like how the spotlight acts as an obstacle preventing Joel from holding on to his memories. In the end, Joel can only watch faint glimpses of Clementine from afar before they slowly fade from his mind. Similarly, the viewer too cannot cannot pause the current scene or rewind to earlier scenes in the film (assuming the film is being viewed in theater and not on DVD), preventing the viewer from holding onto the emotions or impressions left by the image on the screen as the reel continuously moves on to the next image. In this way, the spotlight becomes the literary embodiment of all that epitomizes film as the ultimate spectator sport: the viewer’s feeling of being “outside” the screen, the unremitting forward progression of the reel, and the subconscious meta-awareness of the simulated, not quite authentic nature of the experience. Thus Gondry’s use of aesthetics, and especially lighting, is designed as an elaborate conceit that implicitly compares the act of viewing the film to that of recalling a past memory.

Ultimately, Joel comes to a quiet acceptance with his fate, culminating in one of the most poignant yet simultaneously problematic moments of the film as Clementine tells Joel to “meet me in Montauk” while his final memory of her disintegrates. The film then cuts to the aforementioned opening scene, where Joel and Clementine meet each other at the Montauk train station with their memories of each other freshly erased, with the implication that their encounter was not one of chance but instead a planned reunion. A problem arises with such an interpretation: “this meeting out in Montauk couldn't be the result of a promise of a rendezvous, since (as Kaufman says) ‘Clementine's not there’: the Clementine who voices those words is ‘really Joel talking to himself’…one can’t expect Clementine to remember to keep a promise she didn’t make” (Day 132). Thus, this scene seems to point to an essential weakness in the “nature of film narrative” itself: through their “discontinuous presentation of a world—the effect of the technique, familiar since the early days of film, of cutting from one shot to another,” films can intentionally or unintentionally cause their viewers to misremember or misinterpret the story as it unfolds (Day 132). Herein lies Gondry’s genius: he uses his nuanced understanding of the limitations of the filmic medium to bolster, rather than undermine, his underlying argument.

In particular, the imperfect nature with which the audience forms an understanding of Joel and Clementine’s story as they watch *Eternal Sunshine* perfectly echoes the imperfections inherent to the process of recalling memories. In a study of the psychological phenomenon known as the misinformation effect, researcher Elizabeth Loftus found that our recollection of an event can be greatly distorted by subsequent events. In one example, “when participants viewed footage of a car accident, the question ‘How fast were the cars going when they *smashed* into each other?’ (italics added) elicited reports of 20% greater traveling speeds than the question ‘How fast were the cars going when they *hit* each other?’, despite the fact that participants in both conditions viewed the same footage” (Lacy). By juxtaposing the car crash footage with certain phrases, the researchers were able to manipulate the subjects’ very memories. Day comments on this feature of memory in the context of *Eternal Sunshine,* observing that when we attempt to recall the past, “We can supply only what we have in memory, what we have seen and felt. And what we have seen and felt is not a given: we may forget things, forever miss other things, fail to appreciate the importance of still other things on a first or fortieth viewing. Not the least virtue of Charlie Kaufman's narratively puzzling screenplay is that it replicates for the viewer the felt contingency of memory that we attribute to Joel and Clementine's experiences” (150). Gondry juxtaposes Joel’s imagined promise to Clementine with their actual encounter on the train in order to manipulate the audience’s understanding of the story, a narrative device that makes that very same encounter seem divinely ordained rather than purely coincidental. But by fooling audiences in this way, Gondry ultimately makes him film function much like a memory: vague, malleable, and open to misremembering and misinterpretation.

What is truly remarkable about Gondry’s attempts to produce a film that looks and feels like a memory, at least from a literary perspective, is how he ultimately uses the comparison to comment on the limitations of his work itself. In his review of *Eternal Sunshine,* Orr writes, “Charlie Kaufman and director Michel Gondry have created a film whose entire purpose is to blur and fade, a self-erasing tribute to the fragility of memory and of love” (1). In creating a film that is meant to function like a memory on multiple levels, Gondry displays, and in fact embraces, a courageous awareness that, much like memories, art too can be easily forgotten. In fact, this understanding seems to be at the heart of *Eternal Sunshine*’s message. Sperb finds that lighting is used throughout the film as a “powerful metaphor both for the artificiality of mental recollection and for the claustrophobia, the suffocating loss, of inevitably fading personal memory” (1). One reason *Eternal Sunshine* works so well as a film is that is speaks to universal feelings of loss and longing, an unsurprising fact given that Gondry was going through the splintering of his own relationship during filming. The multiple scenes in which Joel repeatedly struggles to run away with Clementine from the erasing spotlight, desperately hoping to preserve his treasured memories, pull at the heartstrings of the audience because they are all too familiar with the heartbreak of having to move on from or forget the past. By portraying the melancholic loss that Joel feels upon losing his memories, Gondry’s depiction of film as memory in *Eternal Sunshine* underscores the quintessential artistic fear that the effects of his work will fade over time as the audience stops viewing or thinking about his film.

This greater theme about the limitations of art is only highlighted by the persistent motif of quotations throughout the film. Much of the dialogue of *Eternal Sunshine* consists of characters turning to quotations as a mechanism to understand each other or define their identity:

Mary uses quotations cribbed from Bartlett's to charm Dr. Mierzwiak, shyly reciting bits of Nietzsche and Pope, including the quote that gives the film its title. Patrick, Clementine's wannabe boyfriend, quotes Joel in hopes of taking his place. Quotes from songs and shared reading, along with multiple pop culture references, are the conversational staples of Joel and Clementine's courtships. Clementine even quotes herself—especially in her repeated "impulsive" urges to dye her hair or to go back to spend the night on the frozen Charles River. Quotation, then, becomes a metaphor for repetition—for all the ways we both use the past and are constrained by it (Smith 8-9).

For a film preoccupied with memories, and thus the past, such a motif seems unsurprising. However, Carel observes that in many instances these quotations are robbed of their original context, obscuring the meaning of the quoted text. In one example, Lacuna’s secretary Mary “attempts to impress her boss, Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), by quoting from Nietszche’s *Beyond good and evil*: ‘Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders’…Mary then adds, ‘Nietzsche. *Beyond good and evil.* Found it in my Bartlett’s’. The quotation itself is presented ironically as taken from *Bartlett’s familiar quotations*. Nietzsche, or the original, has been forgotten” (Carel 1077). In reducing Nietzsche’s text to a simplified aphorism found in an anthology of quotations, Mary reveals that her society has, in some sense, pared down Nietzsche’s work into easily digestible stand-alone snippets, a kind of cultural forgetting that causes artistic masterpieces like *Beyond Good and Evil* to become irrelevant artifacts of the past. Just as the survival of our own personal memories depends on our continued attempts to recollect them, so too must art be revisited time and time again, lest it slowly fade from the popular realm.

By baring his fears of being forgotten as an artist in *Eternal Sunshine*, Gondry once again reminds us of the uncanny similarities between watching films and recalling memories. Such an analogy raises a natural question: what about film, specifically, as an artistic medium causes it to operate so similarly to memories? In his analysis of Gondry’s film, Hancock suggests one explanation:

Eternal Sunshine speaks to the insuppressible power of memory, even subtly suggesting that while we are custodians of our memories, we neither choose nor own them, but rather they own and choose us, making us who we are. Like the Jewish child at the Passover meal asking to be told once again the story of his ancestors' flight from Egypt and of God's miraculous acts―like the Christian who, baptized in infancy, is told in adulthood to "remember" her baptism―often our most significantly shaping memories are given to us, gifts of an O/other. In diverse ways, people of faith recall past events with which they have no immediate contact” (4).

Motivated by Hancock’s observations on the role of memory and the comparison Gondry draws between film and memory, *Eternal Sunshine* illustrates that film can function as a repository of collective memory, or the shared knowledge and ideas of large social or cultural groups of people. Since the beginnings of civilization, humanity has sought to pass down cultural memories from generation to generation through the form of stories: myths or folk tales that convey core historical traditions and beliefs. While technology has certainly progressed, the act of watching a film today functions in much the same way as sharing aloud creation stories in ancient Mayan or Greek civilizations, for instance. This can clearly be seen in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which acts as a perfect example of the quintessential story of love, loss, and nostalgic longing. That might just explain why one gets a distinct yet hard-to-place feeling of having seen this story unfold before upon watching Gondry’s film, almost like the feeling of some long buried memory about to resurface. After all, at the end of the day, isn’t the reason we all go to the movies just to watch—or remember—a great story?

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