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Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

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Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Abstract
This is a review of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).
The latest film from Charlie Kaufman, the rare screenwriter whose reputation equals, if not exceeds, that of stars and directors, transports us once again into the innermost realms of the mind. As with Being John Malkovich (1999), Adaptation and Confessions of a Dangerous Mind (both 2002), Kaufman demonstrates his preoccupation with the rupture of identity, memory, and the human psyche.

Imaginatively constructed and beautifully filmed, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (a collaboration with director Michel Gondry) is on one level simply a case of 'boy meets girl,' following the conventional typology of the romance tale: encounter, attraction, excitement, relational growth, conflict, dissolution, despair, eventual reconciliation and the possibility of reunion. However, what unfolds—a fantastically-Freudian journey through the psychic jungle-gym of Joel Barrish's (Jim Carrey) mind—completely eschews this sort of conventional linearity.

Joel and Clementine (Kate Winslet) meet unexpectedly; a lengthy and tumultuous romance ensues. When relationship ends painfully, Clem, with the help of cleverly-named "Lacuna, Inc," erases Joel from her memory. Lacuna's Dr. Mierziwak (Tom Wilkinson) assists clients by eradicating unwanted memories through a high-tech neurological procedure. That Clem has completely forgotten him leaves Joel devastated. He decides to undergo the procedure himself. Yet, even as his memories of Clementine are being systematically wiped-out, he comes to his
senses, admitting that, despite his pain, these memories are precious to him and worth keeping.

The majority of the film involves Joel and his mental construction of Clementine frantically fleeing the "eraser guys," hiding out in the most remote, suppressed parts of Joel's memory—his childhood, his humiliation—although they are always eventually caught. He cannot "call it off;" his memories of Clem will all soon be gone. As his memorial world crumbles around him, Joel realizes the folly of forgetting. He and Clem say their previously unfinished goodbyes, but, in the end, memory prevails over the machine, and hope remains.

The film takes its title from Alexander Pope's 18th-century poem, "Eloisa to Abelard," the two star-crossed lovers Kaufman also employs in Being John Malkovich's puppet show. In the poem, mourning the loss of her fallen Abelard, Eloisa learns that it is "the hardest science to forget!" She longs to replace her lingering love for Abelard with "God alone, for he / alone can rival, can succeed to thee." But memories of Abelard still haunt Eloisa, separating her from God and driving her to suicidal despair, for as she expresses, "If I lose thy love, I lose my all."

The notion that a person's being is ultimately grounded in relationality has been explored by various philosophers and theologians (Buber, Bonhoeffer,
Levinas). In light of this construction of the self according to the other, the film's idea of erasing another from one's memory becomes a metaphoric act of murder—the subject's desire to be freed from the other is essentially to will the other's death. But, like Eloisa, this becomes an act of suicide, for to vanquish the other is to vanquish oneself. In this way the service Lacuna provides its clients is a curse disguised as a blessing, for these images and narratives are the constituent parts of our very being and cannot truly be expunged—memory wins out, on more than one occasion. The film reflects on this theme, ironically employing a Nietzschean aphorism from Beyond Good and Evil: "Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders."

Worthy of theological reflection is the film's theodical position that even negative, painful experiences contribute to the greater scheme of the universe or to our overall personhood in an incomprehensible way. If, following Augustine, we are but the sum of our memories and can only know ourselves as such, might we over time come to equally appreciate both our good and bad experiences, and allow that they might all be either redemptive or redeemed? As when Dr. Mierzwiak's secretary, Mary (Kirsten Dunst), "returns" to Lacuna's clients their files of erased memories, might we conclude that one is able to truly move on only by facing, not erasing, these memories?
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, and simultaneously look ahead to the telos of their faith: the Kingdom coming, peace, liberation, the "real presence" of the object of love and devotion, hope and desire fulfilled—in Pope's words, "every pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd."