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## Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Question of Transcendence

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# Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Question of Transcendence

## **Abstract**

The screenplays of Charlie Kaufman explore possibilities of transcendence within the limits of a wholly natural world. From *Being John Malkovich* through *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, his characters struggle to transform their lives or to get beyond the limits of their circumstances. Most of these quests end in paradox, but some, especially in Kaufman's most recent films, point in more promising directions. In this paper, I interpret *Eternal Sunshine* as offering something very much like Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence as a way to transform the conditions of life from within.

Is it possible to change? In an everyday sense, of course it is. We routinely make choices that change the future and revise our views of the past. For example, like Joel Barish in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, I could decide not to go to work this morning and instead take a train in the opposite direction. Like Clementine Kruszyński, I could dye my hair blue or tangerine. I could leave the relationship I'm in or settle for what I think I have.

Let the question resonate in a wider context, though, and the answer becomes less clear. Am I the kind of person who bolts from work, dyes her hair, or abandons old loves? Apparently so, if I've done it. And come to think of it, haven't I done things very much like this before? Being a kind of person—having a personality, in the usual sense—means behaving in certain ways. And those ways or patterns, once recognized, can come to feel like traps. I make choices, but my choices already seem over-determined by who I am—by the behaviors in my repertoire. Can that change? More to the point, what can I do to change myself, given that my own limitations are what I want to overcome? I seem to be caught in a paradox. Whatever I do will simply be more of the kind of thing I do. However I exercise my freedom I am only rattling my chains.

Charlie Kaufman is the lyricist of this particular sense of entrapment in life, and his screenplays are explorations of various means by which people try to break out. His characteristic worries are stated concisely in the introduction to the

published script for *Being John Malkovich* (1999). After spinning his wheels for several pages, stewing over how impossible it is for a writer to say anything worthwhile, he suddenly turns to the reader for the very thing he feels unable to give: "Maybe you have the one thought that'll change everything for me. The one thing I haven't considered in my relentless, obsessive, circular thought process. Is there that one thing? Is it possible for one person to impart any transformative notion to another person?"<sup>1</sup> First, there is the trap, the sense of being imprisoned in your own form of life or habits of mind. Then there is the desire to change, the hope that something could come into your life and make the world new. But then there is the doubt-is there such a key? Given your own profound cluelessness, would you even be able to recognize it if it were offered?

Kaufman's screenplays are typically about people who think they have found the "transformative notion" they need, or who find themselves in circumstances where a possibility of change is suddenly opened to them, sometimes by fantastic means. The films unfold, in turn, as critiques of the particular means of change under examination. In *Being John Malkovich*, the principal motive of the characters is to become someone else. In *Human Nature* (2001), characters strive to become either ideally civilized or ideally natural-to achieve transcendence either upwards or downwards.<sup>2</sup> In *Adaptation* (2002), the preferred means of liberation is passion or absorption; in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, it is

forgetting.<sup>3</sup> The ways are many, but in each case the route turns out to be blocked. Life, it seems, is too entangled and interrelated for our choices to make much difference. The harder we press toward the object of desire, the more we drag along the thing we are trying to escape. Nature is always shadowed by culture; the self I want is shadowed by the self I am, the self that does the wanting. The more things change..

Some of Kaufman's scripts, especially *Being John Malkovich* and *Human Nature*, are all about these gloomy ironies-levitating them into comedy, but essentially letting entrapment have the last word. In his most recent work, however, and especially in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a different sense of our possibilities begins to take shape. Kaufman does not soften his analysis of the paradox of change. He continues to set his stories in worlds constrained by circumstance and haunted by fate. Nevertheless, Kaufman seems to have become more willing to entertain the possibility that humanly meaningful change sometimes happens-that the fatal character of conditions can be, if not evaded, then somehow transformed from within. To risk a rather grand formula, Kaufman's interest has begun to turn towards the possibility of transcendence within the limits and on the terms of a wholly natural world.

Grand as it may sound, this way of understanding Kaufman's creative project simply acknowledges a context that he creates for himself. Through plot

devices and explicit references, he frequently invokes the science that underlies contemporary naturalism (evolution in *Adaptation*; neuroscience in *Eternal Sunshine*). Moreover, references and allusions sprinkled throughout his scripts show his interest in philosophers and essayists who have explored the human consequences of this way of seeing the world, especially those who have transformed the sense of natural limits into a new and peculiar kind of spiritual poetry. Nietzsche in particular is mentioned or quoted in every one of Kaufman's scripts and will appear prominently in what follows.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, then, is first of all a love story. Joel Barish and Clementine Kruszynski meet, become lovers, get fed up with each other's foibles, reject each other, and finally meet again-although not exactly in that order. Among these familiar story elements, Kaufman's particular interest is the break-up. Thus, the film turns the timeline of the story inside out to highlight its conclusion, making the urge to wipe someone totally out of one's memory its principal subject. The film's main plot device, in turn, offers its characters a fantastically literal way to act on this urge. Lacuna, Inc., run by Dr. Howard Mierzwiak, is a low-rent neighborhood clinic that provides a revolutionary service. Lacuna will eliminate the memory of anyone you choose from your life, be it a dog, a lover, or a dead child. The aim of this service, as explained by Dr. Mierzwiak's dotting secretary, Mary, is "to let people begin again. It's beautiful. You

look at a baby and it's so fresh, so clean, so free. Adults.they're like this mess of anger and phobias and sadness.hopelessness. And Howard just makes it go away."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the film introduces Kaufman's typical problematic: there is a) a problem characterized by a sense of entrapment and b) a prospective way out. The trap here is the debilitating "mess" of anger and sadness that seems to accumulate in adult life, and in bad relationships in particular. Joel's friends, Rob and Carrie, are a case in point-a comic example of a couple trapped in patterned behaviors, endlessly feeding off each other's complexes. It is not a situation any reflective person would choose to be in. As Dr. Mierzwiak says in his pitch to potential clients, it amounts to "a psyche forever spinning its wheels" (38). Lacuna's extraordinary claim, then, is that it can break the cycle by eliminating some of the links to the past from which your complexes are forged. By editing your memories, the theory goes, you can change your life.

The film unfolds, then, as a critique of this theory. Above all, it raises the question whether a change in what one remembers amounts to a change in who one is. Its answer, in turn, is that behind memory there lie affinities and predilections that more deeply define and constrain us-call it the mystery of character.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Joel and Clementine are shown throughout the film to have marked and persistent defining traits. Clementine is impulsive, willfully spontaneous (oxymoron intended), fun loving, and inclined to be harsh with those who don't rise to her pitch

of intensity. Joel, by contrast, is "nice" in a way that occasionally draws Clementine's scorn (9-10). He keeps a low, self-protective profile; he evades responsibility for expressing himself by mumbling or insisting that he really has nothing to say (53). Much more could be said about each, of course, but the point is simply that these-the characteristic forms of their behavior-are the things that matter. Whatever changes they make in their circumstances-whether they dye their hair, switch lovers, or radically edit their memories-they are still essentially themselves.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when Joel and Clementine meet again after both have been treated by Lacuna, they are attracted to each other all over again for exactly the same reasons as before. Likewise, Howard and Mary, in spite of Howard's attempt to cover up their prior affair by erasing Mary's memory, eventually fall back into each others' arms. Character begins to look a lot like fate.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason why the erasure of memory fails to have the desired effect is the interrelated character of reality as Kaufman understands it. Throughout his writing, Kaufman tends to see the world in terms of fields of mutually defining polarities: nature and civilization in *Human Nature*, authenticity and artificiality in *Being John Malkovich*, and originality and convention in *Adaptation*. His characters, however, tend to want it all one way. They want things without their shadows-nature without culture, or originality without convention. The characters in *Eternal Sunshine* who opt for Lacuna's brand of therapy are, in effect, making

the same mistake. They want to discard a piece of their lives. But experience is a delicate network, and no one thread of it can be pulled without threatening to unravel the whole. Nietzsche, from a similar view of the nature of things, drew a similar conclusion in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said 'You please me happiness! Abide, moment!' then you wanted all back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored.."8 There are parts of life that are painful, that is, and parts that we love, but to want one part to the exclusion of the rest is to want something that is not life.

This is exactly what Joel comes to realize in the midst of the procedure that is erasing his memories of Clementine. At first he is exhilarated by the loss, seeing it as "a perfect ending to this piece of shit story" (46). But then he recalls a moment of unqualified joy. Lying on his back on a frozen river with Clementine, he had once made a perfect affirmation: "I could die right now, Clem. I'm just happy. I've never felt this before. I'm just exactly where I want to be" (60). He simultaneously realizes, moreover, that to hold on to this he has to hold on to everything. He has to stop the procedure (61). His struggle to do so-involving a sort of metaphysical chase scene through his own past-leads him back into some of his sharpest memories of shame and humiliation. These parts of himself, however, turn out to

be the necessary enabling context for preserving the things he loves. To want any of it back is to want it all back.

These points about the fateful influence of character and the interrelated character of reality are reinforced and extended, in turn, through the film's wider meditation on quotation. *Eternal Sunshine* swarms with quotations. The title of the movie is itself a quote, and specifically a quote about the desire to escape from painful memories. In Alexander Pope's "Eloise to Abelard," Eloise yearns to erase her past-and Abelard in particular-by withdrawing into a convent:

How happy is the blameless Vestal's lot?

The world forgetting, by the world forgot:

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!

Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd .<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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. Psychologically, we constantly quote ourselves through our complexes, repeating behavior patterns fixed by our character. Everything we can say quotes the forms of grammatical speech and the content of what we have learned. Biologically, every individual quotes its ancestors through its genes.

Is quotation, then, a help or a hindrance to life? Some of the examples above indicate how, for better or worse, it facilitates human relationships. It enables both what Mary calls the "constant conversation" of the human race and the particular conversations of couples (52). The film's main preoccupation, however, is with quotation's darker, fateful implications, which is highlighted by contrast with the ideal of the "spotless mind"-a state completely free from memory and its constraints. This ideal is expressed by Clementine early in the film (which is actually late in the chronology of the story-though significantly it's still the same Clementine, with or without her memories): "My goal, Joel, is to just let it flow through me? Do you know what I mean? I think we're all taught we should be consistent. Y'know? You love someone - that's it. Forever. You choose to do something with your life - that's it, that's what you do. It's a sign of maturity to stick with that and see things through. And my feeling is that's how you die, because you stop listening to what is true, and what is true is constantly changing. You know?" (19-20) The idea of flow here is one of pure spontaneity or originality. Clementine's

ideal self-reliant person quotes no one and adheres to no fixed standards, not even the internal standard of consistency.<sup>11</sup> Formulaic, quoted thought and behavior spell death. Life and truth, by contrast, are "constantly changing."

The opposing modes of life represented by quotation and flow are framed somewhat differently in another statement of Clementine's philosophy: "Joel, I'm not a concept. I want you to just keep that in your head. Too many guys think I'm a concept or I complete them or I'm going to make them alive, but I'm just a fucked-up girl who is looking for my own peace of mind. Don't assign me yours." (96) The tendency is strong, that is, to turn other people into concepts or formulaic characters, quotes from some preestablished story of how things should be. The concept of the soul mate, of the other who will complete us, is one of the most seductive such formulas.<sup>12</sup> The will to reduce life to story, however, is countered by the demand we make to be taken for nothing but ourselves. Conventional forms of meaning exercise a fatal attraction, but freedom kicks back against them.

Fate, however, generally seems to come out on top in this contest. The self insists on its uniqueness, but what, after all, is this self that wants to be free? The irony is that, left to itself, it behaves in highly predictable and stereotypical ways. Clementine, when she is at her most impulsive, enacts Clementine. She drives all night to the river, dyes her hair, "gets bored," "feels trapped," and moves on (129). She is a repertoire of behaviors, a pattern of patterns. At her most free,

she is most fated to be herself. Likewise with Joel, Howard, Mary, Rob, and Carrie: simply by doing what they do, they find themselves repeatedly quoting themselves, striking the same poses, acting exactly as if they had ".nowhere to go except where [they're] headed, like a train on a track. Inevitable, unalterable" (88).

Is this endless round of self-quotation, then, the last word-the trap from which there is no escape? This question is addressed in the film in several ways,<sup>13</sup> but especially through its final sequence. The end of the story begins with Mary's discovery that Dr. Mierzwiak used the procedure on her in an unethical, coercive way to cover up the traces of their affair and her abortion. Her response is to send all of Lacuna's files back to its clients, thinking that they too should be able (or be forced) to come to terms with what they have lost. As a result of her actions, Joel and Clementine discover, immediately after their promising "first" meeting free from memories of each other, that they have what Dr. Mierzwiak calls "a history" (87). They already know the worst about each other. On the tapes sent from the Lacuna offices, we hear Clementine say how sick she is of Joel's "pathetic, wimpy, apologetic smile. That sort of wounded puppy shit he does" (121). We hear what Joel thinks about Clementine's "complete selfishness," her promiscuity, and her insecure pretense of free-spiritedness (125).

So what do they do, knowing what they know, being who they are? Clementine's impulse is to leave it all behind again, but Joel persuades her to

wait. And so the final scene plays out, simply and unforgettably. It starts with Clementine quoting once again from her own rather fixed philosophy of freedom:

CLEMENTINE

I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked-up girl who is looking for my own peace of mind. I'm not perfect.

JOEL

I can't think of anything I don't like about you right now.

CLEMENTINE

But you will. You will think of things. And I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me.

JOEL

Okay.

CLEMENTINE

Okay (129).

What is there in this final, flat "Okay" that feels so resonant and promising?<sup>14</sup> The power of the scene owes much, I believe, not only to the way it grows from the themes of entrapment and repetition developed throughout the film, but to the way it recapitulates a crucial moment in modern intellectual history when a similar sense of fatality flipped dramatically into its opposite: namely, Nietzsche's discovery of the concept of eternal recurrence. Like Kaufman, Nietzsche envisioned no way out of the traps set for us by our own natures or the nature of the world. Nevertheless,

in eternal recurrence he believed he had found an idea that effectively transformed that trap from within. "My formula for greatness for a human being," wrote Nietzsche, "is amor fati [love of fate]: that one wants nothing to be different."<sup>15</sup> "A new will I teach to men: to will this way which man has walked blindly and to affirm it."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Nietzsche believed that the only way to affirm life completely is to want it forever-to want "what was and is repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably da capo."<sup>17</sup> Eternal recurrence, then, is not a cosmological theory but a practical response to the knowledge that life is inevitably bound by its own character and that we have nowhere else to go.<sup>18</sup> It affirms liberty in spite of the prospect of endless quotation. It achieves transcendence, not by recourse to an imagined "elsewhere," but precisely through the renunciation of supernaturalistic notions of transcendence-rejecting the desire for a different world in favor of the world we actually inhabit.

*Eternal Sunshine* either echoes or rediscovers this response to the essential problem it sets for itself-the problem of achieving significant change in a world characterized by repetition. We know by the end just how deeply human life is constrained by its conditions. Likewise, Joel and Clementine know how likely it is that their relationship will only repeat itself. Nevertheless, by saying "Okay" to each other, they say yes with open eyes to the whole foreseeable mess, and the moment feels like liberation-like the change they had been seeking all along.

Granted: Joel and Clementine's "Okay" strikes a different note from Nietzsche's Dionysian "Eternal Yea." It is all a bit tentative, a bit hedged. The concluding scene, which may at first seem like a straightforward feel-good moment, is in fact hard to read, leaving the protagonists' prospects far from clear. Will they just play out the whole cycle again, ending in bitterness, wiping it all away, and beginning again in (false) hope? An early draft of Kaufman's script foresees them doing exactly that.<sup>19</sup> Or might it all be different, as Joel hopes, "if we could just give it another go around" (97)? Amor fati brings some sort of change—a curious infusion of spirit into circumstance, like a rush of oxygen into the room—but is it the sort of change that will make a practical difference for Joel and Clementine? *Eternal Sunshine* offers no clues, leaving the question of the value, for life, of this sort of transcendence open.<sup>20</sup>

So what good in the end is vision, insight, or ecstatic affirmation if it leaves us largely where it finds us? It is hard to say—ultimately hard—and Kaufman offers no pat response. What he gives us in the meantime, however, is a work of art that resonates powerfully on several levels. It works intellectually by recalling wider themes in modern intellectual history; it works artistically by conjuring up a sense of spiritual possibility from the very circumstances that constrain us; and it works in a surprisingly powerful way with audiences.<sup>21</sup> The sense of possibility it communicates is at once accessible and subtle, simple and complex—as immediate

as a declaration of love and as abstract as Zarathustra's victory over time. At the heart of a familiar story, that is, *Eternal Sunshine* rediscovers one of the most searching and intellectually responsible ways to think about transcendence in the modern world.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> On these modes of transcendence, see Kenneth Burke's essay on Emerson, "I, Eye, Ay - Concerning Emerson's Early Essay on 'Nature,' and the Machinery of Transcendence," in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 186-200.

<sup>3</sup> I exclude *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* from this list and from our discussion generally. My reason is that Kaufman was not involved in the changes made to his script during filming, was less than happy with the results, and has tended himself to leave it out in discussing the films he considers his own.

<sup>4</sup> Charlie Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004) p. 71. Subsequent page references to this script will be included in the text.

<sup>5</sup> One way to make this point might be in terms of neuroscience itself. As Dr. Mierzwiak explains, and as contemporary research in neuroscience largely confirms, memory is linked to emotion (See Steven Johnson, "The Science of Eternal Sunshine," *Slate* 22 March 2004. 16 July 2004 [<http://slate.msn.com/id/2097502>]). "There is an emotional core to each of our memories," says Dr. Mierzwiak. "As we eradicate this core, it starts its degradation process." Without their core, memories wither and disappear "as in a dream upon waking" (38). Of course, what Dr. Mierzwiak proposes is beyond current science and technology; we cannot erase particular networks of neural response. The important point, however, is that even if we could, it would not accomplish the doctor's aims. Erasing particular emotional episodes would not affect our propensity to have those emotions or to act in the ways they inspire.

<sup>6</sup> The point is made explicitly in the shooting script, though not in the film as released, when Joel's previous lover, Naomi, tells him that whatever woman he takes up with, "You're just going to be Joel with the same fucking problems" (95).

<sup>7</sup> Deleted scenes reinforce the view of *Eternal Sunshine* as a film haunted by fate. In a scene from the shooting script that did not make it to the screen, a younger Joel is warned by his father, "Don't be like me." Don't let your life quote mine, or "you'll be sewn into your fate" (88). An early draft of the script also includes the interesting detail that Naomi, Joel's former lover, is writing a

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dissertation on Calvin. See Charlie Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. First draft, undated. 29 June 2004, p. 89 (<http://www.beingcharliekaufman.com/spotless.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p. 435.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Pope, *Pope: Poetical Works* Herbert Davis, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 115. The paradox implicit in the use of this quote - namely, that a quote is being used to express a desire to be free from the past - indicates how tortured the problem of entrapment can become. Not coincidentally, this quote also recalls the Abelard and Heloise puppet show in *Being John Malkovich* that epitomizes its central character Craig's sense of estrangement and his sexualized approach to transcendence (See Kaufman, *Malkovich*, pp. 4-5).

<sup>10</sup> There are even more explicit quotes and references in the script that don't make it to the screen: e.g. citations of Tom Waits (7, 35), Robert Frost (15), Anna Akhmatova (102-3), *The Velveteen Rabbit* (57), and most strikingly, *The Red Right Hand*, a mystery novel by Joel Townsley Rogers (10, 66).

<sup>11</sup> As the author of "Self-Reliance" put the same point, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 265.

<sup>12</sup> s Joel admits, recalling Clementine's statement, "I still thought you were going to save me. Even after that" (97).

<sup>13</sup> For example, there is a visual image - a drawing by Joel of Clementine in a skeleton costume, apparently done at a time when the problem of fate was on his mind (88) - which is a striking juxtaposition of contraries. Why should Clementine, the spokesperson for ever-renewed instinctual life, be represented as death (i.e. as fatality, fate)? The answer, perhaps, lies in another one of Clementine's set-speeches from early in the film: "I'm always anxious thinking I'm not living my life to the fullest, y'know? Taking advantage of every possibility? Just making sure that I'm not wasting one second of the little time I have" (18-19). Her desire to live life to the fullest here is inspired by thoughts of death and finitude. For Joel, Clementine herself functions as an inspiration to live, and so plays a role parallel to the thought of death. The drawing thus presents her as a memento mori - a specter of death, a ghost of time-future whose purpose is to recall us to life. "Like that thing in Scrooge!" Clementine remarks in another context. "Maybe some force is trying to help us" (122). The Dickens reference may make the point seem trite, but its implications are subtle. An awareness of fate can enable freedom, as the awareness of death here inspires life.

<sup>14</sup> Some critics have noted a parallel here to the classic Hollywood genre pictures that Stanley Cavell has dubbed "comedies of remarriage." (See David Edelstein, "Forget Me Not: The Genius of Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*" in *Slate* 18 March 2004. 16 July 2004; and A. O. Scott, "Charlie Kaufman's Critique of Pure Comedy," in *The New York Times* April 4, 2004: AR16 col.1. [["http://slate.msn.com/id/2097362/"\]](http://slate.msn.com/id/2097362/)) In these, as in *Eternal Sunshine*, a broken relationship is restored, and the couple sets off again into the old, spoiled world, sadder but wiser. I find this comparison suggestive but superficial. While the main concern of the comedies of remarriage was moral and even political, according to Cavell (see Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters On a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA:

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 9-18), Kaufman's interest is more frankly spiritual. That is, he is less concerned with the gradual processes by which characters learn their lessons than with moments or insights that can bring a sudden change of perspective.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 258.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion of eternal recurrence in Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 141-169.

<sup>19</sup> See Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine* First draft.

<sup>20</sup> This ending was not originally planned by Kaufman. In fact, he and his director reportedly struggled right up to the final edits to devise an ending that "worked" on as many levels as possible (Interview in Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine*, p. 143). Accordingly, it would be a mistake to make too much of the "lesson" of the ending, as if it had anything clear or conclusive to teach. In any case, in its current form, it is true to Kaufman's desire to keep things inconclusive on principle: "I try to write things so that there's an opportunity to have various experiences" (Interview in Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2002), p. 127).

<sup>21</sup> The film's website includes a "share your experience" bulletin board. The responses here are admittedly selected, but the prevalence of "it changed my life" comments is striking. For instance, to note a few entries toward the top of the list, see the statements by Chris, Virginia, and Malcolm Nevada, at *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* 2004. Official website. 16 July 2004.