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**Manipulating The Trace of Memory: The Narrative  
Structure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind***

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Manipulating The Trace of Memory: The Narrative Structure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

Premiered in 2004, Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* introduced the movie industry a new fashion to present the idea of memory in motion pictures. It is a story of the protagonist Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) literally erasing his ex-lover Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) from his memory after a hurtful breakup and regretting his decision upon his self-exploring process. With movies like *Memento* (2000), *50 First Dates* (2004), and *Paycheck* (2003), memory loss has become a new subject whose incorporation in contemporary films can be easily found (Berardinelli). Yet what makes *Eternal Sunshine* outstand is its unique narrative structure, which helps the film not only display the rupture of memory but endow its audience a sense of subjectivity to view the events from Joel's perspective. The success of the narrative has won the playwright Charlie Kaufman "The Best Original Screenplay" in the Academy Award (*IMDb*). However, it has been debated that, despite the number of compliments *Eternal Sunshine* received from many movie critics, such a narrative has challenged the audience's understanding of the film. Namely, the narrative is so complex that the audience walks out of the theater and fails to comprehend the beauty of the film. Is such confusion worth it in terms of the depth of the movie as an artistic creation, or has the director overdone the narrative form? This paper aims at attesting the director's accomplishment in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* by

choosing an unconventional form to tell a conventional memory-themed story. The unconventional narrative structure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* challenges the audience's understanding of the film., yet some critics consider the movie succeeds in realistically portraying the rupture of memory and life events by following a non-linear, fragmented structure. By examining carefully the repetitions of incidences, use of colors, and what happened to the protagonists after the erasure, the film does demonstrate a new, interesting narrative form for non-mainstream movies.

To begin with, some critics argue that the narrative structure in *Eternal Sunshine* takes too much risk of challenging the audience's understanding, and since the film has been too difficult to digest, it fails to convey its core meaning and has even lost a lot of audience. Linking the film with other baffling memory-themed films such as *Happy Endings* (2005), Andrew Butler marks *Eternal Sunshine*, despite the classical Hollywood traits in its film approaches, a "puzzle film." He indicates that such films "play games with their audiences, withholding information, blurring lines between real and imaginary/delusional diegeses, springing tricks, and twisted endings" (63). Namely, the complex storytelling fashion has become a challenging text to watch in that some viewers might have difficulty unraveling the mixed-up plot time. Accordingly, despite that the film has presented a "stimulus" to reflect upon the uncertainty and fragmentation of memory, it really depends on "how much the viewer has been prepared for the film, that is, made ready to handle the film's reversing of the story, or is prepared to reflect on it afterward" (Marsh). Hence, it seems that films with innovative moves of "complex" and "redundant" storytelling only become successful when they target audience who have a preference for offbeat movies or feature famous movie stars to play in them (Brodwell 73-74).

However, some scholars have different interpretations of the narrative in *Eternal Sunshine*. First, as introduced by film theorist and novelist Carolyn Jess-Cooke, the doubleness of the narrative in the movie can be marked specifically based on the idea of memory mediatization and narrativization. Mediatization refers to the film's practice of visualizing the concept of memory to blur the boundaries between reality and memory and to, consequently, guide the audience's interpretation of the given events in a certain way. Featuring a fictional clinic that erases the memory of traumatized patients, Michel Gondry makes the idea of memory distortion and reconstruction evident to the viewers and presents them with the process of narrativization, or, re-remembering (2-3). "Narrativization underlines mediatized memory's construction of a double subjectivity," as Jess-Cooke identifies the relationship between mediatization and narrativization, the film's double-sided entity has been revealed. The primary narrative begins when Joel's memory erasure ended. With his past memory of Clementine wiped out, he woke up on a gloomy valentine's, and on his way to work, he impulsively decided to ditch work and head for Montauk. The secondary narrative, however, is the memory world of Joel. During the erasure procedure, the primary and secondary narratives alternate constantly to portray the idea of memory erasure and Joel's re-experiencing of his past memory. However, the dual narratives cannot be seen as utterly respective, for they sometimes blend, or, in Jess-Cooke's words, "revise," to present the idea of memory distortion from the subjective view of Joel (4).

Similar to Jess-Cooke's double narrative theory, cinematic lecturer and author Matthew Campora separates the narrative structure in *Eternal Sunshine* into two narrative strands: the waking strand and the internal-subjective strand. The former is a narrative frame that includes the opening and ending sequence after Joel woke in the second morning after the procedure; the internal-subjective strand, on the other hand, unfolds the inner world of

Joel's mind under the erasure process. Campora marks the different levels of subjectivity in the two strands. In the waking strand, Joel and Clementine's story is presented in a relatively more objective view and the spectators watch the events unfold as observers. However, when the procedure began, in the internal-subjective strand, they are endowed with a higher level of subjectivity in which they experience Joel's first-hand feelings and see the story as if they were Joel (Campora). Particular emphasis on the level of subjectivity can also be identified by Steven Rawle, a senior lecturer in film studies. He categorizes the two narrative strands into the first and second levels of visual virtuality. The first is created with the movie's use of recollection-images. During the memory erasure, Joel re-experienced his memories and the director invokes the "recollection" of memory to create fragmentation. Presented with a fragmented narrative of Joel's memory pieces, the audience watches the actualization of images that are supposed to be virtual (46-48). Yet in the second level of visual virtuality, the audience sees the actual events become virtual as the memory is erased. In the film, Joel experienced unexplainable aftermaths and was inclined to repeat the past events after the erasure. The original events that were once actual, now virtual "[go] beyond recollection into attentive recognition, wherein the viewer shares in Joel's *deja vu*, his barely cognizant sensation of the past operating in the present" (49-50).

Delving further into the timeline in the film, the viewers are initially presented with an encounter of the protagonist Joel and a talkative, eccentric woman, Clementine. As they see Joel impulsively decided to ditch work and head for Montauk, Clementine reached over to a strange man on the train by stating that she "applies her personality in pastes" (*Eternal Sunshine* 00:05:54), they grow knowledge about the two but are unaware of their past since they were yet presented with the memory erasure. Later when the opening credit rolls on, in the viewers' sight reveals Joel sobbing in his car, and the sudden switch between Joel's

emotions unfolds the first confusion to the audience. In fact, this is when the director Michel Gondry brings the audience back to an earlier point of Joel and Clementine's relationship, a night before the encounter the audience previously sees, a time when Joel just found out that he had been erased from Clementine's memory, and he was overwhelmed with betrayal after Dr. Howard, from the clinic Lacuna that offered the procedure, confirmed the removal of him from his ex-lover's memory. It is also at this point that the primary narrative begins. Along with the chronological narrative, Joel returned to his apartment and met a neighbor who joked on the upcoming valentine's day. He then went upstairs to his place, took a pill (offered by Lacuna to put him into a deep sleep), changed into pajamas, and eventually went to bed. A while later, the technicians from Lacuna arrived at Joel's place and began preparing for the procedure. At about the twenty-first minute of the film, a blackout scene marks the beginning of the secondary narrative. Joel awoke and observed his surroundings as if he were an observer of his own real-life events. He reexperienced his conversation with his neighbor, skeptically thinking why everything seemed odd yet familiar at the same time. Then, with a continuously-reversed timeline, he discovered that he had been erased by Clementine and went to Lacuna for the same procedure. While the secondary narrative begins, the primary narrative remains. They constantly alternate and create a complex crisscrossed plotline, which, if separated, is actually fairly easily traceable and logical.

The overlapping of the primary and secondary narrative begins upon the memory erasure. The viewers see on one hand, in the primary narrative, the technicians performed the procedure and the subplots between Mary and Dr. Howard as well as Clementine and Patrick progressed. On the other hand, in the secondary narrative, they also watch Joel re-experiencing his memory as he was forced to travel through his past with Clementine along with the erasure. Whereas the present world unfolds the interactions of the characters in

chronological order, Joel's memory pieces were torn down in a sequence of the procedure introduced by Dr. Howard, "Let's start with your most recent memories and move backward from there, more or less" (*Eternal Sunshine* 00:30:35). In the secondary narrative, Joel discovered Clementine's erasure and asked for the same procedure; later in an earlier memory revealed their breakup and the unpleasant moments with unending quarrels and division; then, in an earlier phase of their relationship, they were passionate, bonding, and shared enjoyable moments; ultimately, the erasure came to their first encounter at Montauk beach where Joel left Clementine alone from their "beach house adventure." Hence, Joel's memory with Clementine unfolds backward, starting from their breakup to their initial encounter. On top of that, the audience also sees the repetition of a previous incident, which is Joel's brief conversation with his neighbor, as it is presented again in Joel's first memory piece under erasure. Such repetition of an incident marks the backward-moving plotline and suggests that Joel's journey of reexperiencing his memory and his self-exploration had begun. The secondary narrative is when the audience has a further understanding of the protagonists' relationship and gradually let their bond with the characters develop. For the viewers are presented with the bitterness of the relationship first, they see the unquestionable differences in the protagonists' personal traits and come to conclude that there is no chance that the relationship will work out. Still, as they perceive the early part of the relationship in which intimacy and chemistry are exhibited explicitly, they understand the special bond between them and begin thinking perhaps the relationship is workable. Accordingly, it is evident that the secondary narrative is arranged in this specific sequence to help the film guide the audience's interpretation of the story. By presenting Joel's inner world in an unconventional fashion, the film explains to the audience that, in order to progress forward in

his relationship with Clementine, he had to first go back to understand why the memory with Clementine was so significant to him.

Despite the seemingly logical, idealized narratives in Jess-Cooke's theory, the film still addresses its audience with significant confusion in, especially, the memory reconstruction during the erasure. When Joel reexperienced an earlier phase of his relationship with Clementine, he recollected the joyful intimacy and the childlike excitement. Hence, he began to change his mind as he whispered, "Please let me keep this memory, just this one" (*Eternal Sunshine* 00:52:51). He feared that the happy memories would be wiped out and thus intended to "rescue" Clementine from the erasure. Starting from this point, the secondary narrative does not exactly follow the procedure Dr. Howard introduced earlier, for Joel intensively fell off the mind map created by the Lacuna technicians in order to "escape" from the erasure. This is also the reason why the technicians had trouble locating him and Clementine from the program. In this case, the viewers are no longer presented with a backward-moving timeline but a mixture of Joel's childhood humiliation and his memory of Clementine. For instance, Joel once hid Clementine in a peer pressure memory in which he was irritated to kill an injured bird. Here the viewers witness the incident from present Joel's perspective. Nevertheless, though he had transformed into a grown-up's appearance, as this was actually the adult Joel traveling back to a childhood memory, he still possessed the strength of a child, and the humiliation he experienced still remained. Later the viewers see a little girl, in the form of Clementine, showed him empathy and offered him help. In this scene, the memory is distorted and falls out of the logic of a secondary narrative. As the two different timelines merge together, it is more like a reconstructed piece of several fractured past and present memories, as opposed to a simple backward-moving timeline.



Complex as the narrative in *Eternal Sunshine* is, the director Michel Gondry actually implanted clues implying the past of Joel and Clementine in the film. On the second morning of the procedure, with all the memory of his past relationship with Clementine and the procedure wiped out, Joel awoke and had trouble recalling the gouge on the side of his car and the ripped-off pages in his journal. His sudden impulse to visit Montauk can too be linked to his past connection with it, as the audience hears him explained, “I am not an impulsive person” (*Eternal Sunshine* 00:01:36). Likewise, Clementine experienced unexplainable insecurity and asked Patrick to travel to Montauk with her, which, ironically, Patrick learned from Clementine’s clinical records created during the memory erasure preparation. In addition, when Joel and Clementine met on the train during their second encounter, Clementine asked Joel, “Do I know you” (*Eternal Sunshine* 00:04:55), and this suspicious déjà vu can also be explained as the aftermath from the memory erasure. Even when the memory is gone, the feelings and emotions remain. And this is perhaps the reason why they failed to really get over each other and subconsciously continued to recreate the erased events.

In addition, the audience can also keep track of time via Clementine’s hair colors, including blue, orange, red, and green. Each color marks a different state of mind of Joel. At the beginning of the film, Joel met Clementine in a Montauk beach for the second time. Clementine’s hair was blue then. Later, after the opening credit, Joel traveled back to an earlier time when he had yet found out Clementine’s erasure, and in a bookstore, he met the blue-haired Clementine who had trouble recognizing him. Along with the secondary narrative, as Joel continued going through his past relationship with Clementine, he was first presented with the later phase in which they had constant fights and were eventually forced to end their relationship. In the unpleasant moments, Clementine’s hair was orange. Progressing

to an earlier part of the relationship, Joel met the joyful memory and regretted the erasure. Clementine's red hair, at the time, marked Joel's passion and affection toward their early relationship and the menace against the erasure. When the procedure was about to end, Joel failed again and again to stop the erasure. Hence, while he experienced the earliest memory of the relationship, he told Clementine that he could only enjoy it. Clementine's hair was green then, and the "revolution green," whose name was introduced by Clementine on the train, symbolized a revolutionary peace in Joel's mind when he finally realized there was nothing he could do about the procedure and that enjoying its preciousness was the only devotion he could make to the fading memory. Lastly, the procedure ended and the audience is again brought to the present world where Joel ditched work and encountered the blue-haired Clementine for the second time. The color blue functions as a hint suggesting that the audience has returned to the beginning of the film and that the most complex, baffling part of the movie has ended. By identifying different colors of Clementine's hair, the audience sees the sequence of time and is able to locate their presence in the timeline.

In conclusion, the narrative structure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* falls outside of a typically Hollywood movie pattern and presents a non-linear plotline. It challenges the viewers to reconsider the given circumstances and shifts their expectations for what might have become a tragic to a new promising beginning. Even though the complexity of the narrative has raised a discussion on the director Michel Gondry's overdoing an artistic creation, it actually reflects successfully on the nature of complicated human relationships and memory. Besides, the narrative structure is actually surprisingly logical and follows a double narrative that divides the plotline into the forward-moving present world and the inner world of the protagonist that progresses backward. During the memory distortion, however, the events fall off the logic of the backward moving narrative, yet it is actually based on the

protagonist's intention to "escape" from the created mind map. Furthermore, there are also clues that the audience can identify in the film to keep track of where they are on the timeline, including the aftermath Joel and Clementine experience after the memory erasure and the four hair colors of Clementine which represent Joel's different states of mind. All in all, *Eternal Sunshine* can be considered a successful non-mainstream movie for it exhibits an unconventional narrative pattern that portrays the rupture and beauty of memory and sublimates the audience's confusion to an emotional connection with the story.

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