

The Eternally Maniacal Memory

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For several decades numerous films and literature pieces have brought together various nuances of memory as a plot device. Considering the various utopian ideas portrayed in them, a paramount question cannot be ignored – is it all really possible? Can creative liberties typically taken by filmmakers to manipulate the very idea of the human memory actually become the truth one day? This paper examines these possibilities.

“Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders.”

—Mary, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Memory as a theme has fascinated both filmmakers and authors alike. From David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001) to Peter Segal’s *50 First Dates* (2004), from Agatha Christie’s mysteries that require the reconstruction of memory to Kazuo Ishiguro’s book *Never Let Me Go* (2005), literature and media have provided us with abundant material on the range of massive, mysterious memory. “The term ‘mimesis of memory’ describes both the ability of literature to (re) present memory and the narrative strategies depicting processes of individual remembering within works of fiction.” (Nungesser 33) According to eminent psychologist John Seamon, known for his book *Memory & Movies: What Films Can Teach Us about Memory* (2015), “the modern marriage of memory science and movies was launched by Christopher Nolan’s film, *Memento* (2000), an account of a man with severe anterograde amnesia” (Stone).

Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) is a meditation on memory’s role in “love and love lost” (Sperb). In an almost surreal manner, it documents the attempt of one man, Joel Barrish (Jim Carrey), to literally erase all the memories of his ex-girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) from his mind, with the help of a futuristic medical procedure offered by a company named Lacuna Inc., only to regret the decision once the procedure begins taking effect.

As Joel attempts to penetrate through his recollections and past, and save his memories of Clementine, he makes use of re-contextualization, making Clementine and himself “fugitives [in his head], try[ing] to undo the current procedure by hiding their common experiences within memories that have nothing to do with their relationship” (Nungesser 33). Gondry, through *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, falls back on traditional devices such the voice-over or the flashback while experimenting with the film’s narrative structure to

convey the protagonist's disorientation that traces back to the continuous loss and uncertainty of his memories. In his book, John Seamon categorizes the film as being one that is "based on long-term memories" which are a part of the conscious mind (14). Tanya Lewis writes in *LiveScience*,

The memories depicted in the film — such as Joel's memory of meeting Clementine on Montauk beach on Long Island, N.Y. — are a form of conscious memory. A brain region called the hippocampus, tucked away in the temporal lobe, consolidates short-term memories to long-term conscious memories. (Lewis)

Moving from reel to real life, if Joel was a real man living today, would the erasure of his memories have been possible? We must keep in mind that "every experience leaves physical traces throughout the brain" and hence cannot completely be erased (Shea 27).

Significant research has been done on the unconscious mind and memory. We could take into consideration well-known psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic perspective that looked at the unconscious mind instead of the conscious mind. He coined the term 'repression', which is "a psychological defence mechanism that occurs when a person consistently pushes away a particularly painful or disturbing thought, memory or desire into the unconscious in an attempt to keep his or her mind in a more pleasurable, less anxious state" (Pedersen). Can these unconscious memories be erased, thus compelling the individual to completely forget?

Acclaimed neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux, known for his work on emotional circuits in the brain, has, through the years, sought to erase unconscious forms of memory. His major research was based on the amygdala, a region of the brain deep in the temporal lobe that processes memory to create responses to a particular stimulus, such as learning to fear a threat (Lewis). "Emotions [...] turn an experience into a long-term memory" and "the stronger the emotion", such as fear, associated with an event or object, "the longer-lasting the memory" (Alberini). Research conducted by Jun-Hyeong Cho and his colleague Woong Bin Kim, through their study of genetically modified mice revealed that through a technique called optogenetics, it was possible to truly erase unpleasant memories. "It permanently erases the fear memory," said Cho. "We no longer see the relapse of fear" (Davis). Similarly, neuroscientist Steve Ramirez, with his team at Boston University has come up with a technique to do away with negative memories by "genetically engineering brain cells to suppress bad memories by activating good ones" in mice (Shea 27).

A TV show dealing with similar concepts is director Cary Joji Fukunaga and writer Patrick Somerville's *Maniac*, set in 21st-century New York. It tells the tale of two individuals, Owen Milgrim (Jonah Hill), who is the depressed, neglected, possibly schizophrenic fifth son of a wealthy Manhattan family, and Annie Landsberg (Emma Stone), a penniless young woman who can't move on from a terrible family tragedy. In an attempt to rid themselves of their psychological baggage, they sign up for a drug trial at the sinister Neberdine Pharmaceutical Biotech. Rather than simply erasing forms of memories, the Neberdine trial uses pills to impact the dreams that subjects have using a supercomputer named Greta or Gertie which is programmed to increase empathy, to help them get rid of their demons, thus causing hallucinations. Through the series, Fukunaga and Somerville try to look at how memories can be manipulated, fusing them into hallucinations through colourful, vivid imagery with gangs and lemurs, exuberant costumes and references to *The Lord of the Rings*. This has given audiences a chance to experience what hallucinations might look like.

Both *Eternal Sunshine* and *Maniac* are works of fiction and fantasy that feature creative liberties taken by their directors and writers. They explore the possibility of a utopian world where humans can now control various aspects of human memory and choose to erase the ones that cause pain. On the other hand, they can also choose to keep the ones that bring joy and remodel their worlds, their pasts and presents in their own ways. There is a constant back and forth, a switch between the present and the past. Further, in *Maniac*, past memories fuse with the present in the form of hallucinations to help subjects come to terms with their trauma.

Is it possible to help individuals deal with traumatic memories through hallucinations in real life like it takes place for Annie? Craig Steel, University of Reading, writes that "stressful and traumatic memories may be relevant to the content of hallucinatory experiences. [...] Freud argued that the phenomenon of hallucinations was a product of forgotten or repressed traumatic memories entering the conscious mind." (Steel) Drug researcher David Nutt, in numerous studies published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that when subjects were injected with a large dose of LSD, a psychedelic that produces a "long trip", disparate regions in the brain could communicate with each other. "In particular, the visual cortex increased its communication with other areas of the brain, which helped explain the vivid, complex hallucinations experienced under LSD." (Nutt quoted by Cormier)

Psychedelics or psychoactive drugs, chemical substances that act primarily upon the central nervous system altering brain function, result in temporary

changes in perception, mood, consciousness and behaviour and have had a long history of being used to treat psychological disorders related to trauma memories. The most relevant drug in this discussion would be ibogaine, illegal in most countries. As reported in *New Scientist* in 2013, there is anecdotal evidence that even a single dose of ibogaine can reduce cravings for heroin and other drugs and is used in guided, hallucinatory therapy in some countries (Hooper).

It is critical to understand that using psychedelics for treating mental disorders and for the erasure of traumatic memories is a long shot, one that currently comes with little supporting evidence and could potentially cause a variety of repercussions. High doses can be incapacitating, thus becoming difficult to deal with. Through various studies it has been found that large doses of various psychedelics like Ayahuasca, DMT, LSD and Psilocybin on subjects showed highly problematic reactions that included “hedonism, overestimation of the importance of specific insights, an inadequate cognitive framework for understanding experiences, and the failure to undertake mental training to voluntarily unveil the capacities revealed” (Walsh). Subjects have also known to experience paranoia, extreme nausea, dissolution of self-identity, dehydration, heart failure etc.

Are the procedures in both works of fiction discussed above shown as foolproof? In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the procedure ignites its own thread of drama and turmoil, as we see Joel fight to keep his memories of Clementine, but to no avail. In *Maniac*, the last episode shows viewers how Greta, due to technical glitches in her system could have caused enormous mental trauma to her subjects, had the scientists not decided to shut her down at the last moment. The reason we cannot object in this scenario is the whole debate of consent – protagonists are shown consenting to the procedure, keeping in mind that things could go wrong.

The American Psychological Association stresses informed consent as an ethic while conducting research experiments:

When done properly, the consent process ensures that individuals are voluntarily participating in the research with full knowledge of relevant risks and benefits. Experts also suggest covering the likelihood, magnitude and duration of harm or benefit of participation, emphasizing that their involvement is voluntary and discussing treatment alternatives, if relevant to the research. If research participants or clients are not competent to evaluate the

the risks and benefits of participation themselves – for example, minors or people with cognitive disabilities – then the person who’s giving permission must have access to that same information, says Koocher, dean of Simmons College’s School for Health Studies. (Smith)

In *Maniac*, Owen suffers from schizophrenia, a cognitive disability, but is allowed to undergo the procedure with his consent alone, whereas Annie coerces her way into the study without any knowledge about its actual implications. We reach a problem here: do the media understand their responsibility while portraying such utopian ideas? Even though these ideas have given impetus to extensive research work, is it really safe to think that we are progressing when it comes to understanding the brain and its intricacies? It would be splendid to have unpleasant memories wiped out and grief forgotten but the past shapes us in ways we do not understand and what would the human experience be without this past?

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, when Joel realizes that he doesn’t want the procedure anymore, he perhaps begins to realize not only his love for Clementine, but also “the need for a past, a pre-existence, which cannot be reclaimed or reshaped, but which also cannot be ruptured from his existence either” (Sperb).

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