

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: Visualization of Literary Modernism By

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Abstract: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* visualizes the obscure aesthetic features of modernist literature through intricate cinematography. This paper analyzes the modernistic form of the film from stream-of-consciousness, symbolism and magical realism to encapsulate how film, as an audio-visual form, presents the experimental writing skills of modernist texts. Then it expounds on the modernist motif of the film, including anti-scientific rationalism, the desolation and alienation of modern men and the dilemma of life through exploring the key line—the disillusioned love. On the whole, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a creative representation of the modernist genre. Its ingeniously structured narrative with stunning verisimilitude which offers unusual perceptive experience to audiences proves to be of unique artistic appeal.

1. Introduction

The film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (*Eternal Sunshine*) won unanimous praise after its initial release. Its success owes primarily to Director Michel Gondry's hallucinatory scenes and deft camerawork, and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's dazzling and vigorous imagination shown in his script [1]. Therefore, it won a number of awards including Best Original Screenplay in the 2005 Oscar, and nominated for a great many other film prizes.

The film tells a melancholic love story setting against a backdrop of powerful memory-erasure technology [2]. Joel and Clementine, a couple with polar personalities, remove each other's memory successively by Lacuna Company after a bitter fight. However, during Joel's memory erasing process, he rediscovers his deep-buried love for Clementine and struggles, but in vain, to keep his memory [3]. The next day Joel, waking up without any trace of this relationship in his mind, fatalistically meets and falls in love with Clementine again. Nevertheless, their growing intimacy suffers a hard blow as Mary, an employee of Lacuna, sends them the erasure tapes. Joel and Clementine are shocked and embarrassed at the truth, and the film ends with the two smile and say "okay" to each other [4-5].

This bewildering ending, together with the bizarre visual effects, touching music and enigmatic plot-setting helps to "... achieve the cult-like status" (Grau 119) of this film, evoking considerable critical interest in film academe[6]. Many critics explore the philosophical issues and moral implications of the film to interpret the final fate of their romance^①. Christopher Grau, for example, discloses the troubling nature of memory erasure through relating on a variety of philosophical insights (119-129). As to the structure of this film, Bruce Clarke ingeniously elucidates "the techniques of diegetic reentry" in "the loopy storyworld" (100) by disassembling the multiple levels of narration in this film. However, although plenty of insightful observations have been made, the intricately structured disjunction and inconsistency of the cinematic form have not receive much attention [7-9]. Bert Cardullo notes the style of this film which "... can be a form of visual poetry" (302), but he does not go further to discuss what exact form of visual poetry it embodies. In fact, if scrutinized closely, the traits of this "visual poetry" is distinctly modernistic.

To be exact, the form and motif of *Eternal Sunshine* render a perception that can be compared to modernist texts. At the formal level, Gondry employs the space-time shifting, montage and other artistic techniques to interweave dreams with reality, presenting a complicated and interactive dual-structured visual text [10-12]. At the thematic level, the film clearly demonstrates a sense of

modernistic pessimism—Joel and Clementine's desolate and inexplicable mental world which incapacitates them to communication and love, Mary's tragic obsession with Dr. Mierzwiak (Principal of Lacuna), Patrick's hopeless pursuit of Clementine, etc. In *Eternal Sunshine*, the characters are spiritually void and emotionally unsatisfied. They struggle desperately to escape the depressed and hopeless life, but it only leads to their ultimate failure [13].

This essay starts from examining the non-linear narrative structure of *Eternal Sunshine* to explore how the film, as an audio-visual art form, displays the aesthetic features of modernist novelists' experimental writing skills. Then, it illustrates the modernist themes of anti-scientific rationality, desolation and alienation of modern people and the predicament of life through analyzing the key line of *Eternal Sunshine*—the disillusioned love [14]. Precisely speaking, *Eternal Sunshine* is peculiar "adaptation"—visualization of a literature genre, not a particular text. And its modernistic structure and style with revolutionary verisimilitude which offers unusual perceptive experience to audiences proves to be of unique artistic appeal.

2. Modernist Form of *Eternal Sunshine*

The narrative of *Eternal Sunshine* takes on apparent traits of modernism by employing the expressing device of stream-of-consciousness, expressionist imagery and synaesthesia, and the supernatural manifestation of magical realism, which induces novel and mystical perceptive experience to the audience.

2.1 Stream of Consciousness

Eternal Sunshine presents the streaming of human consciousness by adopting non-linear narrative interwoven with flashbacks. This feature coincides with the modernist literati's writing purpose—"To represent the full richness, speed, and subtlety of the mind at work" ("Stream of consciousness", Encyclopaedia Britannica Online). As an artistic means authentically exhibiting man's spiritual world, stream-of-consciousness vividly illustrates the persona's complex spiritual activities and subtle emotional changes. In this field, compared to writers, filmmakers are more advantageous for they can create a structured experience that will involve the audience keenly (Bordwell and Thompson 7) by directly impacting on men's sensory system [15]. The audience, therefore, naturally immerse themselves in the simulated dreamland and enjoy the audio-visual feast without mindful transformation from words in the literally texts to visual images.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, Faulkner showcases the imbecile—Benjie's stream of highly chaotic and disordered consciousness through free association. Within seconds, Benjie's thoughts flow randomly back and forth in tens of years. To experience fully this rapidly changing dynamics of human mind, it is compulsory for readers to transform the abstract semiotic symbols into images in their brain and conjure up a picture of the whole story. Readers' perceptive pleasure (or desire) is fulfilled through—in Lyotard's term—the secondary process by operating in terms of the Freudian reality principle (Lash 177). According to this principle, the ego discharges the energy mainly " ... through the use of language ... " (Lyotard 58). Words act as the trans-coder between the reality and human's perceptive senses. In this way, it is difficult for readers to obtain pleasure directly.

Film, on the other hand, visualizes the perceptive process. Its rich color, motional images and appealing music effectively engage the audience. Therein their desire is fulfilled "through cathexis" (Lash 177).

Joel and Clementine's scene in a Chinese restaurant in *Eternal Sunshine* well exemplifies this cinematic charm. When they are dining in the dream, Joel overhears Patrick's phoning to Clementine in the real world. Joel is confused at the *deja vu* voice, and anxious to know the real identity of this man. Suddenly, it comes to him that the man previously conversing with Clementine intimately in the book store is also called Patrick. Hence, the next second Joel appears in the book store with the chopsticks still in his hand, trying to look closely at Patrick's face. This spacious and temporal jump as he wishes is far from abrupt, for the audience have already take on the viewing angle of Joel through immersive sensory experience [16]. Naturally, they are expecting the

disclosure of the suspension, i.e. how Joel probes into this puzzle. The film demonstrates ingeniously the perpetual roving of human thoughts. And the audience is able to experience the aesthetic features of the modernistic focus of subjectivity and psychological authenticity, which constitutes the peculiar enchantment of *Eternal Sunshine*.

2.2. Symbolism

Symbolism emphasizes multi-sensory experience, seeking the integrating point between the subjective and the objective, presenting the writer's complex feelings through the techniques of association, implication, imagery and metaphor. *Eternal Sunshine* is a very example of this style through creating emblematic objects to display the poetic features of symbolism through intricate camera language.

Clementine's varied and unusual hair color, in stark contrast with the film's gloomy scheme, is the concretization of this artistic style. It symbolizes vibrant and vigorous force in the tedious and depressing world in the film. Her four kinds of hair color represent four different keynotes: blue is the lovelorn Clementine's melancholy, the newly dyed orange is her passionate love, green is the sprouted love between Joel and Clementine; and the faded orange is their dying relationship. The visualization of these highly connotative symbols, elaborately fitting into the on-going story line, accurately passes on the intended meanings to the audience.

Synaesthesia, an important element of symbolism, can also be tracked in *Eternal Sunshine*. Charles Baudelaire illuminates the meaning of synaesthesia in "Correspondances":

...

Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.
There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
Sweet as oboes, green as meadows
— And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,
With power to expand into infinity,
Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses (Baudelaire).

To Baudelaire, perfumes can be heard like oboes and seen as meadows. This shows vividly the meaning of synaesthesia—the transferral and interaction of modality. In *Eternal Sunshine*, when Clementine newly dyes her hair orange, Joel is so drawn by her that he calls her "My Tangerine". This metaphorization of Clementine's orange hair (visual image) for sweet and juicy tangerine (gustatory sensation), stresses their intense and passionate love, fully manifesting what Bacon indicates as "... the same footsteps of nature, treading or printing upon several subjects or matters" (Bacon).

2.3. Magical Realism

Magical realism is a narrative strategy by merging the supernatural elements with reality, creating a form of presenting truth through hallucination. In magical realistic works, authors "... rejoices in denouncing the principles of logic and in simulating miracles which turn the laws of nature upside down" (Imbert 4) .

In *Eternal Sunshine*, magical scenes can be found abundantly in Joel's dream. For example, things and persons around him suddenly disappear; cars fall from the above; rain drips in the room; the house decays in seconds; etc. These supernatural scenes produce effects of defamiliarization, enabling the audience to experience authentically the collapse and fading of human memory. Compared to written descriptions, these visual scenes effectively raise their viewing interest and enhance the aesthetic experience.

Magical realism is also deftly employed in Dr. Mierzwiak's two identical appearance in the Joel's dream. In the first appearance, Dr. Mierzwiak explains to Joel the reason he cannot stop this erasure process: "I am in your brain. I am you!" At that moment, Joel still remembers what Dr. Mierzwiak says and looks like. In the second appearance, however, Dr. Mierzwiak's five sense organs have

completely disappeared, his voice blurred and indistinct. This faceless image displays vividly the fading progress of Joel's memory. With the stunning visual effects, the audience are surprised, even terrified, at this powerful technology. It is shown here that magical realism, especially visualized, is unparalleled in presenting fantasies to the recipients.

3. Modernist Motif of Eternal Sunshine

The rigid social reality and hopeless condition confronted with modern people motivate and generate many great modernist works. To modernist writers, "the depiction of a anguished, even morbid "self" is the central motif in their works" (Li 54). The themes of *Eternal Sunshine* fit it appropriately—the characters' deeply repressed, desolate and twisted mind in a spiritual wasteland. Precisely speaking, this film demonstrates themes of anti-scientific rationality, modern men's sense of desolation and alienation, and the dilemma of life.

3.1. Anti-scientific Rationality

Reason functions as innovative force to push social progress forward since Enlightenment. Observing the maxim of rationalism, science and technology gain great progress, and it was expected that this progress will finally lead to a better society, as evidenced in Condorcet's predictions that people live harmoniously together " ... in a paradise that his reason has been able to create. (82)"

However, the scientific achievement brings wars and sufferings instead of peaceful life. The two world wars, fought by people equipped with hi-tech weapons, claimed millions of life. People, then, wonder whether this rationality can ultimately bring happiness to human beings. Max Horkheimer's answer is negative: "Reason as an organ for perceiving the true nature of reality and determining the guiding principles of our lives has come to be regarded as obsolete..."(13). It is because reason engenders elaborate division of knowledge which confines people's thoughts and jeopardizes critical thinking ability.

Dr. Mierzwiak is the embodiment of this scientific rationality. He invents the memory-erasure machine, which, in Mary's words, "Let people begin again." Many swarm to his office trying to forget their miserable past. He has a history with Mary, but he still keeps her in his office after having her memory of this love affair erased. This clearly shows his strong confidence in the power of his machine and his cool rationality.

However, each one receiving this cure, instead of embracing the rebirth, is inevitably trapped in depression and misery. Clementine fails to start a new relationship no matter how Patrick tries every means to court her. Moreover, she always feels inexplicably sorrow and grievous. Joel is extremely depressed just the next day he gets his memory erased. He curses the coming of Valentine's Day and ditches work without any reason. Even Mary, after her memory is removed, indulges herself in liquor and sex, and cannot help falling in love with Dr. Mierzwiak again. Dr. Mierzwiak's wife Hollis adds the last straw to the uselessness of this seemingly cutting-edge technology. After she sees Mary and Dr. Mierzwiak kiss each other, she says to the self-reproving Mary desperately: "Oh, you poor kid. You can have him. You did."

Scientific reason is under the most poignant satire here—memory erasure cannot remove man's sadness, but brings further pains. It warns implicitly that human's arrogance fueled by advanced technology will lead to disastrous consequence.

3.2. Man's Desolation and Alienation

The inner world of the characters in modernist literature is like wasteland, barren due to the inability of effective communication. Even the most intimate ones fail to reach mutual understanding. This sense of desolation and alienation, exemplified in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, T. S. Elliot's *Wasteland*, and many other modernist works, best illustrates the Sartres' existentialist claim: "Hell is other people".

This tragic sense in literally works is also reflected in *Eternal Sunshine*. Joel is a dull, unsociable and inarticulate man. Clementine is his opposite—passionate, vivacious, and sensitive with various

flights of fancy. They are drawn to each other due to their different personalities. Unfortunately, their break-up owes exactly to the same characteristics. In the film, the two attempt to understand each other, but fail almost every time. For example, Clementine deems it necessary that lovers should keep no secrets from each other: “People have to share things, Joe. That’s what intimacy is.” Nevertheless, Joel values more the quality of communication: “Constantly talking isn’t necessarily communicating”. Due to this irreconcilable difference, they quarrel frequently and finally break up.

Another example of this mental desolation is Patrick. He is self-abased and “never has much luck with women”. Stan orders him about while Mary totally neglects him. His very existence—his need and desire—is of no significance. Consequently, his being completely slighted turns him into a distorted figure—shamelessly stealing Clementine’s underwear and disguising himself as Joel to tempt Clementine into love. It should be noted that when Patrick told Stan he stole Clementine’s underwear, they burst into a loud and creepy guffaw together after Stan’s initial shock. This laughter is terrifying—it signifies abnormality and evil, indicating Patrick’s eery pride in his secret sexual harassment to Clementine.

In addition, Stan and Mary are physically close but spiritually alienated and the Robs constantly fight with each other over trifles. The persona in *Eternal Sunshine* are keen to acquire the true happiness in life, but without exception, their efforts all turn out futile. In this sense, loneliness is the core of modern men’s spiritual world. Modern men are in isolated circumstances, suffered from uncommunicable pain.

3.3. The Dilemma of Life

Eternal Sunshine exhibits modern men’s struggle against the boring life and unbearable social stress. They are stranded at their problems and anxious to find a way out through falling in or out of love. Nevertheless, they all prove in vain.

Joel and Clementine are trapped in this modernist plight—the very peculiarity of their mutual attraction becomes the insurmountable obstacle in their love. The open ending of *Eternal Sunshine* implies their inability to escape the endless loop of encounter-falling in love-quarrel-breakup. Just as film critic C. D. C. Reeve indicates: “if we could just give it another go round ...Why believe that Joel and Clementine wouldn’t in fact behave in just the same old ways?” (21) To love or not to love, then, is a dilemma placed before Joel and Clementine. They are incompatible when close, but distressed when apart. The difficult choice turns love into torment. This signifies modernists’ depiction of their characters’ useless efforts to seek for true meaning in a disordered and meaningless society. Just as Terry Eagleton claims: “In this tension between the persisting need for meaning and the gnawing sense of its elusiveness, modernism can be genuinely tragic.” (58)

4. Conclusion

Instead of directly adapting a modernist text into a film, *Eternal Sunshine* is a creative representation of the modernist genre. The essence and particularity of modernist literature is better exemplified in this way than the simple text-to-cinema adaptation. Just as Verrone points out: “The discordant and juxtaposed images in the film force us to reflect upon modern society...because they are so uncanny and provocative” (46). Indeed, the verisimilitude and sense-provocative nature of the cinema makes it easier for audiences to obtain a more profound perception of the modernist form and motif and appreciate the unique charm of modernist aestheticism. Hence, the film, as a revolutionary means of artistic expression, indeed possess irreplaceable charm compared with literature.

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