

Meet me In Montauk: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and Film Escapism

By Riley Wong (01.03.2018)

Film escapism is often linked to high-concept blockbusters, or fantasy movies. It is often thought that audiences yearn to run away to the cinema and be lost in another world for two hours. However, escapism does not always have to be to a place that is far from our reality. It is still possible to escape to a realist, naturalistic drama, for instance. Whilst it may not seem far away from home, getting lost in the drama of someone else's life is just as satisfying of an escape as any – as escapism can take many forms. Ultimately, it can be compared to the attraction of the rollercoaster. We want to feel the extent of our emotions, such as fear, sadness, or grief, but within the safety of a seat, and with no danger to our actual lives. Whether taking shape in a far away galaxy, or within a suburban household, film is a safe space to explore the extent of our feelings and emotions, without having to live them.

Eternal Sunshine takes place in a version of our reality where technology is able to erase our memories of a certain person, thanks to the fictitious company Lacuna Inc. In puzzle-like fashion, we follow Joel Barish's (Jim Carey), memory removal of his relationship with Clementine Kruzynski (Kate Winslet), who has already undergone the same process. Our understanding of Joel and Clementine's previous relationship is unconventional. As opposed to the traditional form of the romance narrative, this story is told in reverse; we see them falling apart first, and then gradually see them fall in love. It is a fragmented and dream-like journey turned into an adventure, as the unconscious Joel begins to regret the procedure, and desperately attempts to evade it.

The triumph of *Eternal Sunshine* as an escapist film is the blur between reality and fiction. It blends the attraction of fantasy, with the authenticity of real-world problems – in this case, a failed relationship. It is a whimsical experience to watch the world of *Eternal Sunshine* unfold; to discover the logic of memory erasure, which is so far from the science we understand. Yet, it never feels too far-fetched, as the film is grounded in the feelings that are real to us - the sorrow of heartbreak. Even in a scenario which is totally unrecognisable from our own lives, we feel great empathy. The sadness as Joel desperately clings onto a treasured memory of him and Clementine, attempting to claw back to her feels recognisable somehow, even though it is not a situation we would ever find ourselves in. However, it reminds us of those times in an ending relationship, where you wish everything could turn back to when it was happy and care-free.

"Please let me keep this memory. Just this one."

In this *Eternal Sunshine* world which feels distant yet tangible, scenes within Joel's mind follow the same hybrid logic; although rooted in real circumstances from his life, they are warped and often a mixture of various elements – like the infamous image of the bed on the beach. Locations constantly weave in and out of each other in a dream-like manner. Cinematography often becomes claustrophobic, a harsh vignettted spotlight, as the memories collapse. Jon Brion's melancholy score echoes throughout, walking the fine line between happy and sad; the instruments in themselves are sweet – a plucky guitar, some lush strings, but they are distorted to sound wobbly and incongruent to remind ourselves that something is not quite right. Parts of the score are sampled in reverse, a literal representation of the memory rewinding itself. All this crafts a nostalgic landscape, like a dream we pass through.

In my teenage years I had my first relationship, which led to my first inevitable break-up. In some strangely masochistic act, I turned to my copy of *Eternal Sunshine*. It might seem like an odd choice at first, because it is. Why would I choose to escape to a world facing the same problems which were present in my real life?

At the time, I desperately clung to the idea that Joel and Clementine's love was infinite. In the ending, their post-memory erased selves find out that they had already experienced a serious relationship together, and it had fallen apart. Despite this, they choose to pursue each other again, regardless of knowing it would likely fail again.

"Clementine: I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked up girl looking for my own piece of mind. I'm not perfect.

Joel: I can't see anything that I don't like about you.

Clementine: But you will! But you will. You know, 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."

Teenage-Me thought that exchange was romantic. Present-Me finds it bittersweet.

In my youthful optimism, I took this ending to mean that despite knowing that all things were likely to fail, they were both willing to go through with it anyway, because the good-times would be worth it. A living metaphor for the cliché: "Don't cry because it ended, smile because it happened". What a grand romantic gesture, I thought. That two people loved each other enough to persist, despite the inevitable pain that would follow.

Present-Me, long past the young heartbreak and now with an edge of cynicism, is no longer able to see this conversation as anything but tragic. What follows the scene is a sequence of the couple running and playing in the snow. It repeatedly cuts, jarringly, as if looping over and over again – implying that Joel and Clementine are doomed to repeat the same cycle, over and over again. This idea is strongly supported by writer Charlie Kaufman's original ending to the script, which reveals that the couple continue to meet, break-up, and erase

their memories of each other repeatedly for years. Director Spike Jonze's version of the film ends with more subtle ambiguity, but the idea is still there should you seek it. With Beck's moody track '*Everybody's Gotta Learn Sometime*' playing over the snowy sequence, I cannot see anything but tragedy.

In my post-teenage-break-up haze, my escape to *Eternal Sunshine* was indeed shrouded with desperately hopeful optimism. However in retrospect, I believe that there was also an element of cathartic escapism. The misconception is that escapism is synonymous with distraction. My chosen escape was not to run away from my problems, it was to face them head-on. It was to envelope myself in this world and see that the feelings of Joel were felt by me too – and in some way, grieve together.

The nature of escapism exists within the film itself too. Joel and Clementine's connection to Montauk folds into an idea which is imitated in many stories of romance. Whether it's Rick and Ilsa's classic escape to Paris in *Casablanca*, or Carol and Therese's road-trip away from the city in *Carol*. Lovers often flee to a place away from home to pursue their infatuations. Perhaps it is out of the poetic desire to create a literal setting for love; when the feeling of desire is so mutually strong and solely understood by the participants, it only makes sense to apply it to a real location, to create a living symbol of their love – a place that is for them and them alone.

"Meet me in Montauk"

Joel and Clementine's location of escape is Montauk because it is the first place they met, and it is where they unconsciously decide to meet again, even after their memories have been erased. By casting their love onto a literal destination, they were able to preserve it. And so, even after their minds were wiped, the memories embedded in Montauk were permanent, and led them both to gravitate to the same spot. It is noteworthy that Joel and Clementine's place of escape does not echo the romanticism of Paris, or the warm countryside. The landscape of Montauk is the cold and blue. This unromantic setting and subversion of expectation is part and parcel of the unconventional world of *Eternal Sunshine*; this may be a story of romance, but it is not romantic.

In addition to the literal escape to Montauk, the entire premise of *Eternal Sunshine* itself, is an allegory for escapism. Instead of confronting problems face on, Lacuna Inc's memory removal procedure is an easy way out of it - an escape from responsibility. When grief strikes, healing from it is a long and arduous process that can only be achieved through time. *Eternal Sunshine* entertains the idea of what would happen if we could just skip it entirely.

We soon realise quite plainly that, it doesn't work. Whilst it may be a temporary release from the symptom of grief, it is no cure. Joel and Clementine are inevitably drawn back together, and the same case happens to Mary (Kirsten Dunst), Lacuna Inc's receptionist, who is infatuated with her boss Howard, the leading mind behind Lacuna Inc's technology. After Mary kisses him in an act of impulse, Howard's wife reveals that this has all happened before. Mary and Howard had already engaged in an affair, which led to Mary's choice to have her memories erased. Thus, much like Joel and Clementine, the cycle repeats. The procedure may remove the memories, but it is unable to remove the desire, and for that, the participants are doomed to fall for each other inevitably.

Although the temptation of escape is desirable, it is no way to grieve. The memories are there to remind us and to teach us. To forget them is to never grow. Casting back to my personal viewing, my chosen escape to watch this film after the throes of my first breakup began with hope; clinging onto the idea that love could persist despite all uncrossable boundaries. However, what I was really faced with was the reality that my grief could not be evaded. That there was no way for me to skip past the pain of heartbreak. Escaping to film, in order to avoid confronting my grief, was a temporary solution, but not a cure. I could continue to escape, jumping from film to film in a cycle of grief, or I could learn to accept, and move on.