

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Don't Look Back

"Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

By Anthony Lane

Do you feel clever, punk? Well, do you? Because that's the only way to get your head around the latest Charlie Kaufman flick. "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" is written by Kaufman, directed by Michel Gondry, and set in the kind of weather that makes you pray for five minutes of sunshine, never mind the eternal variety. On a biting Valentine's Day, Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) calls in sick and sneaks off to the beach—a glum arena for the battle of sand and snow, and as vacant as the moon until the arrival of a snuffling figure in flame red. This is Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet), and she and Joel are strangers. Or, to be accurate, they have met before, on this same bleak strand, and spent the night together, and tumbled into love, and split in some distress. But today, unbeknownst to each other, they are starting from scratch.

The premise of "Eternal Sunshine" is that scratch is a pretty radical place to be. Kaufman, as he showed with "Being John Malkovich" and "Adaptation," is not so much a conjurer with a trick up his sleeve as a guy madly sewing extra sleeves onto his jacket, and this mischievous new movie cannot restrain itself from pouring forth conceits. The two big ideas are as follows. First, the story runs backward, yanking us from the lovers on the frozen shore, through the fall and rise of their affair, and so on, until their original meeting. Second, both Clementine and Joel call on Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), who runs a sleazy little operation called Lacuna. There, with help from his assistants, Stan (Mark Ruffalo) and Patrick (Elijah Wood), Dr. Mierzwiak will take your money and blow your mind. Specifically, he will put you to sleep, set up a brain scan, and blow away portions of your mind, like cobwebs or particles of dirt, leaving you with a nice clean space where a memory used to be. Thus, one mournful lady sits in the waiting room with a dog's bowl and bone, unable to bear the loss of her late Buster. She will presumably hand over his effects and then, after a blast from the Lacuna zapper, forget that the poor pooch ever existed. And so it is with Joel and Clementine: each deletes all traces of the other.

This is, of course, unrefined sci-fi, but one of the virtues of "Eternal Sunshine" is that, thanks to some careful roughening from Michel Gondry, it maintains the beautiful illusion of looking like shit. How tiring it was, as "The Matrix" plodded along its interminable paths, to watch the digital effects unfurl against a backdrop—of gesture, dress, and architectural design—that already gleamed with meticulous artifice. You felt at once dazzled and unsurprised, whereas much of "Eternal Sunshine" resembles one of those independent movies which are shot with a borrowed camera for ten thousand dollars. Clementine works in a Barnes & Noble, and, when Joel pays a visit there, we expect nothing more than a snatch of conversation under the glare of the store lights; instead, the signs marking the sections suddenly go blank—there goes Fiction, there goes History—and the titles themselves start to vanish from the spines of the books, and before we know it the lovers are left standing next to shelves of nothingness, with Clementine leafing through pages of pure white. What is happening is that Dr. Mierzwiak's machine is scrubbing this particular episode—tiny, but steeped in feeling—from Joel's recollection. (The machine scrolls backward through the patient's history, piece by piece, and the entire scrub takes a night to complete.) In a poem, you can hanker after your beloved in isolation, itemizing her perfections and flaws, but onscreen she is surrounded by the physical flotsam of your shared existence, and that, too, must be wiped away, as if you were a teacher erasing a blackboard, turning complex equations into dust.

That is just one instance of the film's unlovely elegance. It deepens to an amazing finale, in which Joel and Clementine fight to hang on to each other—to the knowledge that they were once intertwined—while the beach house where they met collapses around them. If you ever wondered what the sands of time look like, there's your answer. The lyrical plausibility of such scenes is so winning that one barely notices the more prosaic rifts opening up in the picture's credibility. The idea that Clementine might grow weary of her man and seek a swift oblivion with the aid of Lacuna is fair enough; but would Joel, when he discovers her treachery, really follow suit? And is it only those well versed in the neural sciences who will find something overcooked in the notion that Joel and Clementine might change their minds in mid-wipe and beg, with wounded cries, to be left with a handful of details by which to remember their love? Aren't they supposed to be asleep during all this?

If Gondry and Kaufman are straining here, it's not hard to fathom their reasons. After all, they are making a romantic movie. In creating a pair of lovers who forget each other and then click all over again, they suggest that every one of us harbors an inextinguishable need, and that we helplessly swing back toward our soul mate, as if he or she were a living magnetic north. There aren't many performers who can deliver the fullness of heart that such a plot demands, but Winslet is one of them, allowing herself to be driven by needs and whims, as signalled by the changing hues of her hair. Her Clementine plays life with the volume up, and she scowls at meek moderation:

Joel: I had a really nice time last night.
Clementine: *Nice?*
Joel: I had the best fucking time of my entire fucking life.
Clementine: Thaaaaat's better.

It is a treat to see Jim Carrey, the jester of any court he pleases, cower beneath this blast of womanhood. Whether he survives and prospers in the picture is open to question. He can certainly shift from his usual rubbery persona to the grunge of "Eternal Sunshine," and Gondry helps him out, on more than one occasion, by filming him from a highly unflattering point somewhere behind his right shoulder, so that the side of his face seems stubbled, unfunny, and riven with fatigue. The more nagging problem is that, as a comic, Carrey has been so ceaselessly (and profitably) self-involved that to ask him to swivel outward and focus his yearning on another being—in short, to pretend to love—is not so much to cast him against type as to argue the case for genetic modification. His agent would howl with derision, but I would have had Carrey switch roles with Mark Ruffalo and take the part of Stan, the twitchy, cynical computer ace who runs the Lacuna program, while the intense Ruffalo could have doffed his thick-rimmed spectacles and gazed with untrammelled longing at the girl with the blue hair.

Instead, Ruffalo is part of a subplot that seems molded to strip the central love of its allure. Stan's sidekick, Patrick, takes advantage of Clementine's involvement in Lacuna to wrangle her, by fair means or foul, into becoming his girlfriend. (He steals a necklace that Joel had already picked out for her, then offers it himself, knowing that it will find favor.) Even Dr. Mierzwiak, we learn, has played God with his own invention, to the detriment of his receptionist, Mary Svevo (Kirsten Dunst). If I were Mr. or Mrs. Dunst, I would be *slightly* worried that my radiant daughter is able to feign the effects of inhaling the effusions of marijuana with quite such convincing ease. But then her trademark gaze is forever faraway, and when the movie, almost as an afterthought, asks her to wreak revenge, it seems too strong for so mild a character. Indeed, as in "Adaptation," this Kaufman script grows so manic in pursuit of its own tail that it continues to lash when it should be wrapping itself up in a neat knot; Gondry and Kaufman could have ended the story where it began, but they cannot deny themselves the shudder of a final twist.

That, however, may be the draw of this singular enterprise. Who can resist the

spectacle of large-brained writers and directors struggling to pay homage to the heart, an altogether less controllable organ? (One half suspects that Kaufman set himself a deliberate challenge, risking a tale of devotion in order to dispel previous charges that he was a smart-ass and nothing more.) Any other organs, by the way, are strictly out of bounds. I happen to think that “Eternal Sunshine” could have used a lengthy sex scene; just imagine the erotic horror of one body being hauled like Eurydice, lip and bosom, limb by limb, from the desperate embrace of another. Winslet, one knows, would have gone for it, although her co-star might have grown pale at the thought. In truth, when one looks back on “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,” one realizes how little of the movie has been devoted to the business of loving, let alone of making love. We get a double helping of first dates, and a bunch of barking arguments, but this is a romance assailed by time, and the promise of uncluttered bliss that is proffered by the title is held witheringly at bay. That title comes from “Eloisa to Abelard,” by Alexander Pope (or, as a dozy-eyed Dunst calls him, Pope Alexander), who was less abashed by sex in 1717 than we are in 2004, and plainly an early master of special effects:

I hear thee, view thee, gaze o’er all thy charms,
And round thy phantom glue my clasping arms. . . .
I call aloud; it hears not what I say;
I stretch my empty arms; it glides away.