



# Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Edited by Christopher Grau

with a foreword by Michel Gondry

Philosophers on Film



# Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is one of the most widely discussed and thought-provoking films of recent years. Bringing together the innovative visual creativity of director Michel Gondry and the trenchant intelligence of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, the film explores a future where it is possible to have memories erased, and raises many intriguing and important philosophical questions spanning ethics, the emotions, philosophy of mind, and the aesthetics of motion pictures.

This is the first book to explore and address the philosophical aspects of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Beginning with a helpful introduction that places each essay in context, specially commissioned chapters examine the following topics:

- Philosophical issues surrounding love, friendship, affirmation and repetition
- The role of memory (and the emotions) in personal identity and decision-making
- The morality of imagination and ethical importance of memory
- Philosophical questions about self-knowledge and knowing the minds of others
- The aesthetics of the film considered in relation to Gondry's other works and issues in the philosophy of perception

Including a foreword by Michel Gondry and a list of further reading, this volume is essential reading for students interested in philosophy and film studies.

**Contributors:** Julia Driver, Christopher Grau, Troy Jollimore, C. D. C. Reeve, Valerie Tiberius, George Toles, and Stephen L. White.

**Christopher Grau** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Clemson University. He is the author of several essays that explore ethical issues through film, including 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Morality of Memory', which appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. He is also the editor of *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (2005).

## Philosophers on Film

The true significance of film for philosophy, and of philosophy for film, cannot be established in abstract or general terms. It can only be measured in and through individual philosophers' attempts to account for their experience of specific films. This series promises to provide a productive context for that indispensable enterprise.

Stephen Mulhall, Fellow and Reader in Philosophy,  
New College, Oxford

In recent years, the use of film in teaching and doing philosophy has moved to center stage. Film is increasingly used to introduce key topics and problems in philosophy, from ethics and aesthetics to epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. It is also acknowledged that some films raise important philosophical questions of their own. Yet until now, dependable resources for teachers and students of philosophy using film have remained very limited. The *Philosophers on Film* series answers this growing need and is the first series of its kind.

Each volume assembles a team of international contributors to explore a single film in depth, making the series ideal for classroom use. Beginning with an introduction by the editor, each specially commissioned chapter discusses a key aspect of the film in question. Additional features include a biography of the director and suggestions for further reading.

The series is ideal for students studying philosophy and film, aesthetics, and ethics, and anyone interested in the philosophical dimensions of cinema.

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# **Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind**

Edited by

**Christopher Grau**

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# Illustrations

All illustrations in this volume are reproduced from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Dir. Michel Gondry (2004).



## Contributor biographies

**Julia Driver** is Professor of Philosophy at Washington University in St Louis. She has written articles in normative ethics, moral psychology, and aesthetics that have appeared in journals such as the *Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Social Theory & Practice*, *Philosophy*, and *Ethics*. She has written two books, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Ethics: the Fundamentals* (Blackwell, 2006). She is writing another book, *Consequentialism* (Routledge, forthcoming).

**Christopher Grau** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Clemson University. He is the author of several essays that explore ethical issues through film, including “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Morality of Memory,” which appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. He is also the editor of *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (Oxford, 2005).

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**C. D. C. Reeve** is Delta Kappa Epsilon Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His books include *Philosopher-Kings* (1988, reissued 2006), *Socrates in the Apology* (1989),

Practices of Reason (1995), Aristotle: Politics (1998), Plato: Cratylus (1998), The Trials of Socrates (2002), Substantial Knowledge (2003), Plato: Republic (2005), Love's Confusions (2005), and Plato on Love (2006). His paper "A Celémín of Shit: Comedy and Deception in Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*" appeared in the volume on *Talk to Her* in the present series.

**Valerie Tiberius** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota. Her research is in the areas of moral psychology, prudential virtues, and well-being. She is interested in the relationship between empirical psychology and philosophical questions about well-being and the good life. Her new book, *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely With Our Limits* (Oxford, 2008), explores how we ought to think about practical wisdom and living a good life given what we now know about ourselves from empirical psychology.

**George Toles** is Distinguished Professor of English and Chair of Film Studies at the University of Manitoba. He is the author of *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film*. George has been the screenwriting collaborator of director Guy Maddin for more than twenty years. Recent credits include *My Winnipeg*, *Brand Upon the Brain!* and *The Saddest Music in the World*. He has also written the original story and co-authored the screenplay of Canada's first stop-motion animated feature film, *Edison and Leo* (2008).

**Stephen L. White** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. He has published papers in philosophy of mind, epistemology, moral psychology, and aesthetics, and a book on mind, moral psychology, and personal identity titled *The Unity of the Self*. He is currently writing a book involving themes from the phenomenology of perception, which he develops within an analytical philosophical framework.

## Note on the director

**Michel Gondry** was born in Versailles, France. Raised in an artistic family, Gondry began experimenting with animation and motion pictures at the age of twelve. When Gondry attended the art school Ecole Olivier de Serres in Paris, he played drums for the rock group Oui Oui, and directed their music videos. These videos caught the eye of the musician Björk, who invited him to direct the video for her song “Human Behavior.” This launched Gondry into directing and he has since worked with artists such as The White Stripes, The Rolling Stones, Beck, Daft Punk, Foo Fighters, Sheryl Crow, Gary Jules, and Paul McCartney. Gondry’s innovative videos have used groundbreaking techniques that have become pervasive in the film industry, such as the morphing of images, and the bullet time effect later made famous by *The Matrix*. Gondry is also an accomplished commercial director, having worked with Levis, Motorola, American Airlines, and Nike. DVD collections of Gondry’s exemplary music videos and commercials were released in 2003 and 2009.

In 2001, Gondry made his feature-film directorial debut *Human Nature* from a screenplay from Charlie Kaufman. After working with Kaufman again on the Academy Award-winning *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Gondry went on to write and direct the films *The Science of Sleep* and *Be Kind Rewind*, and direct the documentary concert film *Block Party*. He has recently authored a guide for DIY filmmaking entitled *You’ll Like This Film Because You’re In It: The Be Kind Rewind Protocol* and a comic book: *We Lost the War but not the Battle*; both published by Picturebox. He is currently in production on *The Green Hornet*, a feature film about the iconic superhero that will star Seth Rogen, to be released in the summer of 2010 by Columbia Pictures.

## Note on the screenwriter

**Charlie Kaufman** was born in 1958 in New York City and grew up on the East Coast of the United States. Kaufman attended Boston University for a short while, though later transferred to New York University (NYU) to study film. He began his writing career working with his friend Paul Proch on pieces for *National Lampoon* magazine, but in the early 1990s moved to Los Angeles to pursue writing for television. While Kaufman found success writing for such programs as *Get a Life*, *Ned and Stacey*, and *The Dana Carvey Show*, his rise to national prominence came with the release of the film *Being John Malkovich* in 1999. That collaboration with the influential music video director Spike Jonze resulted in a uniquely skewed cinematic vision that was also a surprise hit among both critics and audiences. Kaufman went on to win prizes from the British Film Academy and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association for his script, and a flurry of activity followed. Three of Kaufman's screenplays saw release as films in 2002: *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, *Adaptation* (also with Spike Jonze), and his first film with Michel Gondry, *Human Nature*. Though *Human Nature* did not achieve the degree of success that Kaufman and Gondry hoped for, they came together again to make *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, released in 2004. Kaufman, Gondry, and Pierre Bismuth shared an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Eternal Sunshine*, and the film went on to win over thirty other awards in several countries. Kaufman has recently expanded his role to both writer and director with his 2008 film *Synecdoche, New York*. He lives in Pasadena, California with his two children.

# Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Michel Gondry for generously providing a remarkably heartfelt and personal foreword that, consonant with the themes of his film and this collection, looks *backward*: both to his memories of making *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and to his own experiences of romantic loss. Thanks also to Josh Oreck; Lauri Faggioni; Raffi Adlan and Miguel Ian Raya at Partizan; Tony Bruce, Adam Johnson and Stacey Carter at Routledge; and Amanda Crook and Andrew Craddock at Florence Production. Finally, I'd like to thank all of the contributors for their faith in the project, their hard work, and the far-from-painful memories that have resulted from working together on this volume.

# Foreword by Michel Gondry

## MY MEMORY HURTS

After my father passed, I moved to New York to shoot *Eternal Sunshine*. My girlfriend came with me. She had just finished arranging and decorating my apartment with her insane obsession for colorful and quirky patterns. She had spent a month working on it and we never shared the place. Not a single night. We went to New York and spent a year there. While I was finding various ways to see Joel Barrish's memories of Clementine evaporate, fade, decay, I was building my own with BK.

My production office was stern and quite boring. One day my BK, who was working with us, came to work with two paint pots—a green one and a blue one—and an old book on cats. She asked me to take the afternoon off. When I returned the next day, my office looked so cool. Colorful fabric and cats were sprayed artistically over surfaces of green and blue and the rest of the staff turned green in envy. One of the producers, Steve Golin insisted his office to be subjected to a similar transformation.

Charlie had written the most beautiful screenplay with various poetic ways to feel the memories fading away. I kept racking my brain to find in-camera trickery and visual ideas to match the level of his writing. Also, Charlie had written snow in many scenes that we couldn't afford to create, so we wiped out most of those. Eventually, the coldest winter in 20 years squeezed New York and solidified the Hudson. We actually ended up wiping the snow away for continuity on many occasions.

Meanwhile more fun memories were built with BK. The biting cold engraves the happy moments deeper in the brain than the average

weather; it's like a chemical process. Like this time we went to visit Ellen, the Director of Photography, in the snowy upstate, or when we had this dinner in this sushi place and BK overheard this customer commenting on my accoutrement "this guy sure is ready for a storm". She couldn't stop laughing for a while after that. Although not as hard as she did the evening I paraded naked in our flat after a shower making fun of dangling and unnecessary amounts of flesh—only to find myself right in front of our housecleaner, a German activist, in an overly narrow corridor. What on earth was she doing here at 9PM? And why did BK fail to mention her presence? BK experienced a near death laughter moment. She saw the bright light.

Meanwhile, we were shooting Jim on stage rummaging through his apartment to collect all of Clementine's mementos. I don't know why, but I was not convinced by the realism of this scene. For some reason, it felt a bit like a "film moment". Eventually, the crew defeated the cold; we shot the frozen Charles on a nearby frozen lake. It all played out for the best and the movie was slowly taking shape through the chaotic process of editing. Everything was great, until this evening when BK was lying on our bed, so relaxed that she hadn't bothered wearing panties. I remember that was the last time I saw her *arbusto*. She asked me to stop the shower I had started to run, to talk—decided to put on some panties and stabbed me quietly. She had enough and wanted to be back in LA.

I am ashamed to say that the pain was greater than the one I had felt for my father. Sometimes I was crying so hard in the street I had to stop walking because I couldn't see the pavement anymore. Did I neglect her? I don't know. I think I grew older. I mean physically. BK became more pretty while I grew uglier, or something really pathetic. I was pathetic. I am pathetic. She had left abruptly, saying she had to think and would make her decision in the weeks to come. I knew too well the outcome and the anxiety was eating me from inside, so I went to Office Depot, bought the biggest cardboard box, and packed all BK's clothes and mementos. The next time I watched the film, this scene where Jim is packing up Clementine's stuff was not a "film moment" anymore. Now, I cannot watch *Eternal Sunshine*.

I erased BK's number from my cell phone (to prevent the infamous drunk dial syndrome) and in the past years, I've done the same for the numbers of two other women whose stories ended bitterly. Those three numbers are the only ones I know by heart—because I erased them.

I've read some news in scientific magazines that targeted memories can be wiped out . . . on mice. I wonder if mice experience painful break-ups? So far, technology has only succeeded in making us forget everything . . . except the things we don't want to remember.

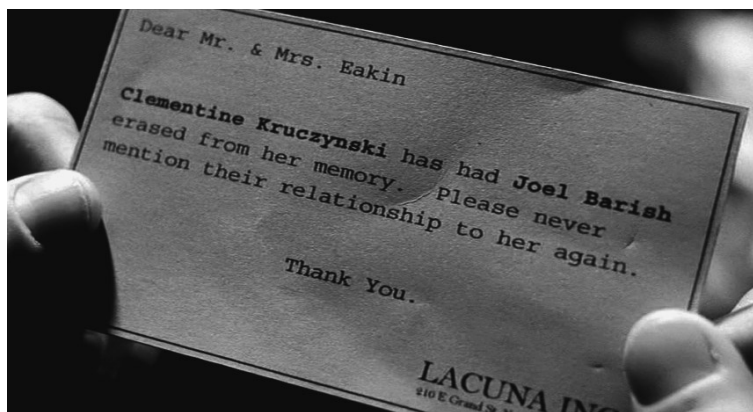
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# Christopher Grau

## INTRODUCTION



**I**N KEEPING WITH THE SPIRIT of the Routledge Philosophers on Film series, this volume brings together both distinguished and emerging philosophers to explore the many philosophical issues that are raised in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (hereafter *Eternal Sunshine*). Arguably one of the best films of the past decade, *Eternal Sunshine* combines the highly original visual creativity of director Michel Gondry and the

sharp intelligence of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, both united and inspired by a simple but compelling idea about memory erasure first put forward by Gondry's friend, the French conceptual artist Pierre Bismuth. Utilizing Bismuth's conceit, the film manages to tread familiar territory in a novel way: the classic trope of a couple "divorcing" only to eventually, after some adventure, come together again is given a new twist thanks to a peculiar and powerful memory-removal technology.

The film begins with the viewer residing in the same confused epistemic position as the protagonist Joel (Jim Carrey), and only gradually unfolds to reveal that both Joel and his ex-girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) have chosen to undergo a memory erasure process offered by a dodgy outfit called Lacuna, Inc. The procedure allows those mourning the death of a romance the chance to wipe out all trace of the prior relationship, including all memories of a former lover. Despite having purchased the "spotless mind" offered by Lacuna, both Joel and Clem fail to find much sunshine as a result. What they do find, surprisingly, is a way to nonetheless reunite, and upon eventually learning the true nature of their troubled past together, the film ends with them affirming the idea of giving their relationship another chance.

That brief synopsis does not begin to do justice to the richness, both philosophic and aesthetic, of this remarkable film. Indeed, the diversity of the essays in this collection is testament to the complexity, nuance, and depth of *Eternal Sunshine*. Beginning with a psychoanalytically informed interpretive essay from David Reeve in which he explores the therapeutic aspects of Joel's journey into his own mind, we move to Troy Jollimore's discussion of Nietzschean themes in the film, in particular the lessons the film offers regarding love, memory, and repetition. We then have Valerie Tiberius's careful examination of the relevance of Joel's memory loss for philosophizing about the nature of the self and the role of emotion in decision-making. Following this is Julia Driver's philosophical analysis of how *Eternal Sunshine* can help us understand why being erased from another's memory can be seen as a genuine loss to the one forgotten. Coming from a quite distinct set of concerns, Stephen White's essay connects up *Eternal Sunshine's* themes and style with other works from Michel Gondry and argues that Gondry's cinematic innovations do much more than entertain: they challenge a number of misguided philosophical approaches to film and to perception, and they suggest the virtues of a neglected phenomenological alternative. Finally,

George Toles offers a moving and personal essay that considers the ways in which *Eternal Sunshine* can remind us of the capacity of memory and imagination to truly engage with those closest to us.

In Noël Carroll's introduction to the *Philosophers on Film* volume on *Talk to Her*, he helpfully distinguishes between a number of different ways in which philosophers can interact with film: while some philosophers tackle the specific philosophical questions that arise when considering film as an art form, others utilize the content of particular films as jumping off points in order to explore more general philosophical ideas, ideas that may be merely suggested (perhaps unintentionally) on the screen.<sup>1</sup> Others still make the case that the films themselves can philosophize: the claim here is that, while obviously not in the business of providing proofs or giving explicit theoretical arguments, some films nonetheless not only raise philosophical questions but suggest answers to those questions. Though philosophers sometimes talk loosely about such categories as though they are exclusive in nature, Carroll is clearly right to avoid this, and attempting to apply these categories to the contributions in this collection helps highlight why. Consider White's essay: it explores some classic issues in film theory, and so in that respect it falls pretty neatly into the first category (what Carroll calls "philosophy of motion pictures"), but White also provides grounds for thinking of Gondry's work as engaged in philosophy in its own right, and thus his essay fits Carroll's third category (what some have called "film as philosophy"). Reeve's, Jollimore's, and Toles's essays seem to me to criss-cross the boundaries of "film as philosophy," "philosophy of motion pictures," and Carroll's second category (which he calls "philosophy in film"), all the while offering and defending interpretive claims that would be at home in the longstanding tradition of theoretically informed film criticism written by non-philosophers. Both Driver's and Tiberius's essays fit fairly well into the "philosophy in film" camp, but that label could be misleading by suggesting that they aren't offering up original philosophical work in addition to demonstrating connections between the film and standard philosophical issues.

In the end what matters most to me about all of the essays here is not which of these categories they best fit, but that they each help to show, often in quite different ways, why *Eternal Sunshine* is a film that is not just worth seeing but worth dwelling on, puzzling over, and living with through repeated examination. Of course, one need not be a philosopher