



THE LANDSCAPE in the sci-fi fantasy *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is inside the brain of Joel Barish (Jim Carrey), an introverted graphic artist. It consists of all his memories of an extrovert girlfriend called Clementine (Kate Winslet). When he discovers that she has had all her memories of him erased by a company called Lacuna which specialises in blowing away the parts of your mind you want to forget, he decides to retaliate in kind.

The inventor of the medical process and head of the firm, Dr Howard Mierzwaik (Tom Wilkinson), tells him to go home and go to sleep. The company's technicians will erase Joel's bad memories while he sleeps, starting with the most recent and working backwards. But during the process Joel rediscovers his passion and attempts to escape the procedure. He just can't wash that girl right out of his head. He persuades the mental Clem to help him evade the memory-killing procedure, hiding in ever-deeper layers of the mind where the software cannot penetrate. There are shades of Orwell's *1984* here, even if the Lacuna procedure is voluntary.

The title of the film comes from a line in Alexander Pope's poem *Eloisa to Abelard*, written in 1717. The poem is based on the love story of Heloise and Peter Abelard, the famous medieval French philosopher and theo-

logian, whose gadfly opposition to authority and emphasis on the importance of reason rendered him an early Humanist. He was asked by one of the canons at Notre Dame, Fulbert, to tutor his niece Heloise. She was about seventeen (though some sources say she was actually in her twenties), Abelard in his late thirties. To facilitate the task of educating Heloise, Abelard lived in Fulbert's house. Abelard and Heloise soon found themselves passionately in love. She became pregnant and the two were secretly married in Paris.



In an effort to protect Abelard from any further embarrassment, Heloise denied to Fulbert that they were married. Further, to escape Fulbert's anger, Abelard arranged for Heloise to move to a Benedictine convent where she lived as a lay woman and where he visited her as her husband. Fulbert wrongly assumed that Abelard had sent Heloise to the convent in order to get rid of her. To take revenge, he hired two men to enter Abelard's quarters and castrate him.

Afterwards, to resolve their marital crisis, Abelard requested that Heloise become a Benedictine nun and he a Benedictine monk. They lived the rest of their lives apart in various religious institutions, but wrote letters to each other, a few of which survive, and Pope based his poem on them.

In Pope's work *Eloisa* is torn between her continuing love of Abelard and her dedication to God. Try as she may, she can-

not forget her lover, and she envies the virgin nuns who have no memories of forbidden love to torment them:

*How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!*

Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd
'Spotless' thus means 'without ethical blemish', and the poem can be seen as a moral struggle between the flesh and the spirit. Yet in the film 'spotless' means 'cleansed of memories', and at first glance it is difficult to see what the moral dilemma is here since other people are not involved except in our head. But ultimately our memories are all we really have, and perhaps we may argue that we have a kind of responsibility to others that we retain memories of them, especially after they're dead and gone, for then they are nothing but the memories we have of them. To wish to erase them from our minds is a kind of spiritual murder.

Eternal Sunshine is brimming with such ideas. There is more than a hint of the suggestion that our very being is ultimately grounded in our relationships. Take them away, and people are empty shells, 'poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves', in the words of Francis Bacon. Or at least, they are incomplete persons. It is no coincidence that Joel is an introvert and Clem is a free-spirited extrovert for we are meant to see these parts are complementary and contributory to the whole.

The problem with the film, however, is not about its ideas but about the execution. A movie about the power of love should make us feel the passion, but there is no great screen romance on view here. The content of their life together is left pretty blank, apart from the arguments. There are no major love scenes and the pair do appear to be doomed by their incompatibility, rather than saved by their complementarity.

Also, they are portrayed as rather banal and even clichéd characters who seem to live in a social vacuum. Consequently, when Joel wants to save his memories of the affair, we do not care a great deal whether he defeats the machine's attempts to erase them or not.

It seems strange that a film which takes its title from a reference to a famous love affair between two extraordinary people should be so lacking in either romance or character. It is these deficiencies that prevent *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* from being a great movie, but there is enough talent in writer Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*) and director Michel Gondry to guarantee that even better things are yet to come.