

## Caution: Allegory Ahead

Allegory is a tricky undertaking. Its practitioners must conceal at first what they mean to reveal at last. If their story is too obvious, their audience is deprived of the pleasure of discovery. If too cryptic, its design may disappear beneath the surface of its plot. Striking the balance is everything, as demonstrated by the two films under review this month.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* was scripted by Charlie Kaufman, who is currently America's allegorist extraordinaire, a status he earned with *Being John Malkovich* in 1999. Conceived by Kaufman and directed by Spike Jonze, *Malkovich* is an exceedingly clever, if finally lightweight, meditation on the withering of personal identity in the age of celebrity worship. Teaming with Jonze once more in 2001, Kaufman wrote *Adaptation*, consolidating his fame among the cognoscenti with a skillfully deployed postmodern conceit. He inserted himself as a character into the film, which was supposed to be an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, Susan Orlean's study of the floral species' adaptive capabilities. Kaufman wittily fused horticultural with cinematic adaptation, producing a hybrid of adaptive self-indulgence.

There is a problem with these and Kaufman's other films, however: They are amusing intellectual performances that leave you feeling conned. As you depart the theater, you cannot help suspecting Kaufman has been fooling with your sympathies for no better purpose than to plume his own sense of superiority. *Eternal Sunshine*, however, takes a new tack. Kaufman has checked his wise-guy gamesmanship in order to take on a theme of genuine consequence. Forced to guess, I would say that he has dropped his ironic postmodernism to develop some autobiographical concerns. The results are at once humorous and bracing.

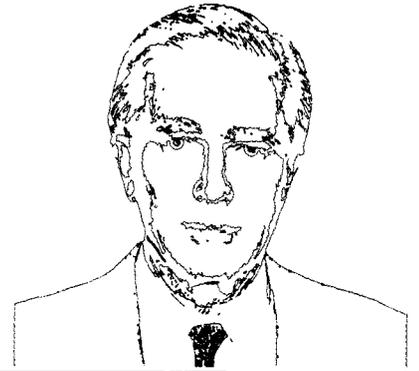
Directed by erstwhile commercial-maker Michel Gondry, the film flashily probes the central problem of all human relationships: our inability to break out of the prison of our self-infatuation, a circumstance dear to Kaufman's self-regarding heart. Each of us is locked inside his own mind, the story suggests, a penal state

that causes us to misread other people, often disastrously, especially when our romantic longings are engaged. Under the sway of Venus, the loved one too often becomes the slate on which we inscribe our short-winded fantasies, only to be disillusioned when they run out of breath.

Kaufman has taken his title from Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," a poem that recounts the tale of the famous 12th-century lovers who allowed their feckless passion to swamp their judgment. This allusion aptly fits Kaufman's story of a would-be remedy for love gone wrong. Pope's Eloisa is a tormented woman. At once remorseful and rebellious, she can neither escape her guilt nor forget the joy that caused it. This leads her to long for a state of perfect innocence:

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

This is the warrant for Kaufman's central conceit, an artful bit of science-fiction gimmickry. A small company, aptly named Lacuna and run by a Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), can erase the spots of unwanted memories from the suffering mind. Given our culture's inane determination to make so mercurial a state as romance life's *summum bonum*, Lacuna's trade is never so brisk as at the approach of Saint Valentine's Day. The more intensely romance is celebrated, the greater the need to forget it when the flowers wilt and the chocolate melts. This is a proposition with which Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) brokenheartedly agrees. She is so fed up with her dear but drippy boyfriend, Joel Barish (Jim Carrey), that she has Lacuna rinse him from her mind. Unlike Pope's Eloisa, however, she is not exactly hankering for innocence; she just wants to forget the lackluster Barish, the sorry cause of her regrets, so she can move on to her next swain unencumbered. What better allegory for the modern insistence that relationships should be no-fault and hassle-free?



### *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

Directed by Michel Gondry  
Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman  
Distributed by Focus Features

### *The Return (Vozvrashcheniye)*

Produced by Ren Film  
Directed by Andrei Zvyagintsev  
Screenplay by Vladimir Moiseyenko  
and Aleksandr Novototsky  
Distributed by Kino International

When Joel discovers Clementine's high-tech perfidy, he angrily elects to undergo the same procedure. Trouble arises, however, when the erasure of his memory is compromised by the curious forgetfulness of Dr. Mierzwiak's staff. The results of this malpractice give Kaufman an allegorical pass to explore how we routinely fail to understand one another, to our emotional and spiritual detriment.

All this is told in a fractured narrative that skittles back and forth across time and space as we enter into Joel's mind, prepared for erasure by Lacuna's patented medications. As Dr. Mierzwiak explores his memories, looking for traces of Clementine to eliminate, Joel begins to resist. He does not want to forget her after all. To fight the procedure, he hides himself in the most private precincts of his memory: an impulsive trip to Montauk Point on a frigid February morning; the time, as a four-year-old, he tried to hide under the kitchen table; the night his mother caught him in his adolescent bed with a naughty magazine. As he flees to these secret memories, he takes his imagined Clementine with him on an inner journey of discovery that may or may not change his life and his feelings for the real Clementine. The film is at its

most intriguing in these passages. While never as profound or original as Kaufman seems to think it, his narrative manages to live up to Pope's observation concerning the creative imagination in "An Essay on Criticism":

True Wit is Nature to advantaged  
dressed,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so  
well expressed.

The one blemish on this otherwise highly inventive film is that Kaufman and Gondry never cease to call attention to their allegory. They seem afraid we might miss their thematic ambitions. They might learn something in the way of subtlety from *The Return*, a Russian film by first-time feature director Andrei Zvyagintsev, who knows how to keep quiet about his allegorical intentions and thereby makes them all the more provocative. Like his American peers, he raises questions concerning our inveterate self-immurement, but he could hardly be further from Gondry in his visual style and Kaufman in his narrative conceits.

Zvyagintsev draws on the Bible to comment on the bewildered Russian national soul trying to make sense of its tattered patrimony at the opening of the 21st century—at least, I think this is his purpose. His enigmatic film hugs its secrets so tightly that, for critical honesty, only a Russian should be allowed to hazard a guess as to what they are. Zvyagintsev has said his movie is a "mythological look on human life." Maybe so; other than the Sphinx, however, few mythical beasts have been quite so silent.

The film begins with two brothers, Andrey (Vladimir Garin) and Ivan (Ivan Dobronravov), who seem to be about 14 and 12 respectively. They live with their mother and grandmother in a nearly desolate lakeside village somewhere outside of Moscow. Returning from their roughhouse play one evening, they discover their father, played gloomily by Konstantin Lavronenko, has unexpectedly returned after a 12-year absence. Their mother points to the bedroom, and they peep through the half-opened door to catch a glimpse of a sleeping man inside. Wrapped in a white sheet and foreshortened by the camera's foot-of-the-bed perspective, the man looks too much like Andrea Mantegna's *The Dead Christ* for the shot to be merely a coincidence, as later events will support. The boys ask their mother, "Where did he come

from?" She says mysteriously, "He just came." The boys rush to the attic, where Ivan digs into a trunk and pulls out a large book illustrated with William-Blake-like drawings. Is it a Bible? From between its pages, the boy pulls a photograph of a man. There is certainly a resemblance to the stranger sleeping downstairs, but Ivan nevertheless has doubts. After all, if this is a second coming, it has gone strangely unheralded. When their father—if he is their father—awakes shortly afterward, he emerges from his bed grim-faced, gaunt, and perversely laconic. He offers no explanations as to where he has been, what he has been doing, or why he has returned. At dinner, he takes his unchallenged place at the head of the table, where he opens a bottle of red wine and pours it into glasses for each member of the family. He ritualistically breaks a loaf of bread and hands its pieces around the table, asserting himself as the household lord once more. The religious symbolism is so obvious that it borders on the comic, especially since this redeemer seems extraordinarily short of compassion. He never once smiles at his family. When Andrey holds out his glass for a refill, he ignores him. This is a man determined to ration his meager supply of mercy.

Then, without preamble, the father announces that he will take the boys on a fishing trip the following morning, and his wife instantly accedes to his plan, although she, too, knows nothing about who he has become during his absence. When they retire to bed, he lies down and, within seconds, turns away from her and falls asleep.

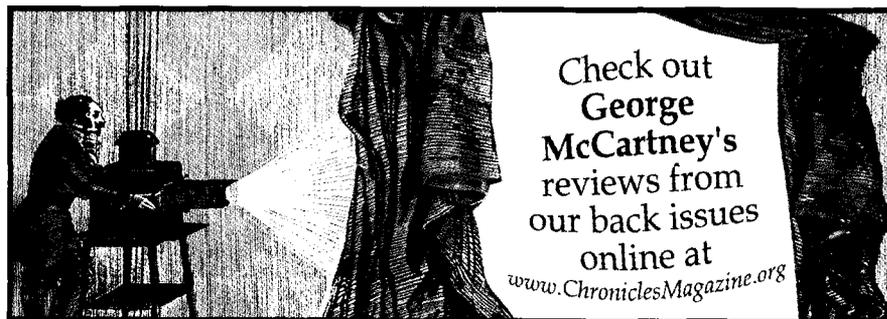
The rest of the narrative is taken up with one of the oddest journeys in film history. As the father drives the boys to an unspecified destination, he continues to keep his own counsel. He stops at times to telephone someone about something, but neither the boys nor we ever find out who or why. Meanwhile, he practices some tough love on his sons—or is it cruelty? Ivan is harshly punished for being hungry. Andrey is told that he is

contemptibly soft for not standing up to some older toughs who clearly outmuscle him. Twelve years away, and this is how you treat your kids? What gives?

The last leg of the journey is even more bizarre. They take a small boat to an island, where the boys fish while the father goes off by himself to dig up a small metal box buried in the foundation of a partially demolished house. How did he know where to find this box? What is inside of it? Again, no answers.

While Zvyagintsev has been nearly as tight-lipped in interviews as his film's father, it does not take a Ph.D. in allegory to discern that he is offering a parable about Mother Russia. His characters represent a people who were deprived of their patrimony by the Bolshevik revolution and are now confused by its sudden, if partial, return. What are they to make of it? Does the restoration promise a return to a culture interrupted? The Abraham-and-Isaac imagery at the film's ending is not reassuring. If only we could find out what is in that tin box!

Zvyagintsev gets away with his mysterious act largely because his cinematography and compositions are so uncannily compelling. From his first shot of a silvery lake under a gray dawn, you know that you are in the hands of a master. The lake's waters fill the screen, shimmering preternaturally. Are they warm or cold, inviting or ominous? The visual ambiguity puts you immediately on notice: Something is amiss. Zvyagintsev follows this with a series of desolate scenes that recur throughout the film. They are a visual motif of unnerving absence. Once the father and his boys reach the mysterious island, this nothingness becomes more insistent. The camera is slow to follow the characters when they move out of range. Instead, it lingers longingly on empty space. It is a strategy that conveys an almost unbearable sense of loss. The poignant bleakness of this quietly astonishing film will trouble you long after the final credits.



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## The Warming of the West

We know that nothing in this world stays the same. What we do not know is how or why it doesn't. Probably, this is because we do not need to know.

After five or six years in western Wyoming, in the late 1970's and early 80's, I recognized what seemed a stable weather pattern. Summers were warm and dry, except for the afternoon thunderstorms. By the end of June, the prairie had browned and stayed that way until after the monsoon that commenced like clockwork in mid-August and lasted until the start of September. Around the end of the first week of the month, an overnight storm dropped six inches of snow that melted off by ten in the morning. From then on, a perfect Indian Summer prevailed, dry and warm and windless under a shiny, cloudless sky—until the first of the snowstorms that rolled in without warning from the Pacific in the last week of October and kept on coming until Christmas. January and the first part of February were dry and very cold, with temperatures as low as -50 degrees, before the chinook thaw in mid-February arrived. March was wet again, and the biggest winter storms came in April. From mid-May, the prairie was green and fresh until the heat and drought of early summer seared it in late June. The pattern seemed fixed as the constellations in their seasonal course—before, in the mid-80's, it came apart in the drought years that culminated in the Yellowstone conflagration in the summer of '88.

Though there were wet years again after that, the familiar cycle had not succeeded in reestablishing itself in 1997, when I moved to New Mexico for two years. The spring of '99 (the year I returned north), Wyoming looked as if it had been airbrushed green to make an Irish travel brochure; since then, the region has suffered from almost unrelieved drought, said by climatologists to rival a dry period in the mid-18th century lasting 30 or 40 years. Two years ago, most of Colorado seemed on fire. This year, following a winter that got off to a start like an old-timer's nightmare before losing all interest in life and collapsing in neurotic exhaustion into an early grave, the fire warnings began in the middle of March

as the snows receded from the foothills of the Front Range. On approach into Denver International Airport on the second day of spring, I watched the High Plains lifting rapidly toward the belly of the big jet, brown and patchy like the hide of a sick lion, showing green only in the turned sections where the winter wheat struggled to take hold in rows of desiccated parallel scratches.

If the American West really is suffering from global warming, and if global warming is actually caused by an industrial system powered by fossil fuels, then this is no more than poetic justice, the economy of the West being heavily dependent on mineral extraction. Strangely, this goes ignored by the agricultural interest, despite the fact that agriculture sees itself as the major, if not the sole, victim of the warming trend, and that its hostility toward the extractive industry is legendary. Of course, modern agriculture is itself an industry, as dependent on oil and petrochemicals as any other. Still, it is not in the nature of ranchers to exercise sweet reason for the purpose of putting other people's trials and tribulations on a level with their own. Where the issue of global warming is concerned, it is possible that they recognize that they and the international corporations who own the rights to the minerals underlying their sugar-beet fields and cattle herds are in the same boat. As indeed we all are.

If global warming produced by industrial development is not a reality, then it ought to be, in the sense that it is unrealistic to suppose that human civilization can vent millions of tons of particulate matter into the atmosphere, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, without producing climatic change, good, bad—or simply neutral. There is always that third possibility to excuse us from having to ask, "Good for what?" and "Bad for what?" to which the obvious answer seems to be, "Bad for whatever exists in the contemporary epoch." From this, the hypothetical visitor from Mars might be pardoned for concluding that Dick Cheney would be in favor of regulations designed to halt the warming process and Ralph Nader, opposed to them. What *is* is for destruction: What *is not* is to



be realized in the future. Of course, human beings are not as consistent as that. Modern "conservatives" want stability in order to perpetuate the destabilizing forces of turbocapitalism, while "liberals" desire change that will produce stasis, which appears to them as the End of History. *If we really are free to determine our own destiny, then we shouldn't be.*

It is a certain fact that the earth's atmosphere is warming and has been for at least a hundred years. Whether the change is a natural phenomenon of the sort that brought the Ice Age to a close 11,500 years ago, or whether it is man-made—or a combination of both—is the question on the table. So far, the debate has set politicians on the one side, activists on the other, and scientists somewhere in between. But as the evidence in favor of the human factor mounts, the politicians have tended to disengage themselves from the argument by assuming an aloof demeanor that signals a determined uninterest and neglect strikingly at odds with their policy of opinionated interference in every other situation under the sun. When a group of "concerned" scientists recently accused the Bush administration of failing to acknowledge scientific research that contradicts its preconceived conclusions, the administration's spokesmen hardly bothered to defend it against the charge. More significantly, the administration ignored entirely a worst-case scenario commissioned within its own Defense Department warning that, within as little as 20 years, global warming could inundate European as well as Third World cities, decimate crop production worldwide, make fresh water a scarce commodity, and lead to mass migrations and endemic nuclear warfare as countries contend with one another for the basic necessities of existence. This time around, the White House did not risk detailing