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Forgetting to Re-member: Politics of Amnesia and the  
Reconstruction of Memory in *Eternal Sunshine of the  
Spotless Mind*, *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Memento*

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**Abstract**

This essay aims to discuss the ideological aspects of memory loss as a reconstruction of personal and collective memory with reference to several Hollywood movies, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Memento* and *Everything Is Illuminated*. The essay explores the construction of memory within a network of power relations and the profound influence that the reproduction of memory has on the embodiment of personal identities. The unreliability of human memory has been a major issue in philosophical debates and works of art from early Greek philosophy to cyberpunk novels. Memory studies draw on a wide range of academic fields varying from neuroscience to political science, with an emphasis on prosthetic memories, identity and body politics, displaced cultural identities, and consumer culture. Often intermingled with collective narratives, memory is an ideological artifact or rather a form of language that can be institutionally manipulated or manufactured. The mass production of personal and collective memories further deprives human beings of control over their personal histories and identity constructions. In this regard, this article elaborates the formation, reinforcement, and reconstruction of memory in contemporary culture with particular references to the inclusion of hegemony, cultural politics, and identity politics in selected movies.

**Keywords:** memory, ideology, amnesia, prosthetic memory, *Memento*, *Everything Is Illuminated*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, god Theuth shows his inventions, the numbers and the letters, to King Thamus and praises the capacity of his inventions to make Egyptians wiser and improve their memory. King Thamus bitterly responds that, on the contrary, the inventions will cause forgetfulness

since people will rather rely on writing than on practicing their memory. Writing, for Thamus, is not an elixir of memory but of forgetting. The unreliability of human memory has become a growing concern in philosophy, arts, and politics. Furthermore, in neuroscience and sociology, for instance, there has been a constant emphasis on the formation and reproduction of human memory with particular references to identity and body politics, displaced cultural identities, and consumer culture. Recording human memory in different forms such as writing, painting, sculpture, photography or films, has often raised the question of originality and factuality since documenting reality is, among many other things, a matter of agency, agency of the author/ artist or agency of the instrument of recording. Taking this into consideration, postmodern critical theory has widely expanded on the agency of the author with regard to the dissolution and fragmentation of agency as well as the politics of subjectivity. Hence, current discussions associated with human memory, personal or collective, are not only focused on the natural or scientific aspects of memory but they also address the dissolution or reconfiguration of memory and historical narratives through technological mediation and accelerated media overflow. Obviously, an overwhelming interest in the past is in stark contrast with the futuristic utopias of the twentieth-century modernity. From reviving historical archives and museums to remaking history in Hollywood movies and documenting personal histories on social media, memory fails to materialize an imaginary relationship to the past. Considering the impact of fast-paced technology and global mobility through mass migrations, people today experience an inexorable displacement and cultural deterritorialization, which, eventually, results in a reification of human memory in the form of mass-marketed and manufactured items of consumption. Therefore, human memory is inflicted with a malaise, facing a crucial dilemma as to whether the authenticity of memory is personal, or collective, thus placing (post-)memory within a network of power relations. In light of the discussion of memory as a site of ideological narration, this article explores the temporality and dislocations of memory in postmodernity with reference to several Hollywood movies such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Memento* and *Everything Is Illuminated* to investigate a

culture of the decline of strong referentials which resulted in a loss of contact with the sense of reality.

### Discussion

From the perspective of social sciences, memory is commonly viewed as a personal and experimental relation to the past. It is often argued to be basically an impersonal, institutional and ideological manufacture, a “social construction, a site of potential resistance but also vulnerable to containment and reprogramming” (Grainge 2). Memory is mainly a form of language and therefore it is almost a conscious act that can be manipulated or manufactured. It is rather a cultural artifact fabricated within a network of hegemonic power struggles, a latent field of class conflicts that can be mass produced and marketed in exchange for the consent of the masses. It is constructed in the unconscious that alienates us from the mechanisms of memory and deprives us of the control over our personal histories and identity constructions. Personal memories often intermingle with collective narratives, and “historical events are transformed into spectatorial experiences that shape and inform the subjectivity of the individual” (Burgoyne 225). Therefore, any critical analysis of memory should focus on the production and manipulation of the personal memories in order to deconstruct the discursive practices of the dominant ideology.

The production of images and their conservation either in museums or in history books used to serve the interests of the ruling class. The ability to record events and transform them into memorable forms to transmit to future generations has been a matter of power struggle and ideological conflicts. A variety of visual archives ranging from public or private museums to collections and civic libraries were promoted as institutions of national memory by the ruling class. They attempted to define the national character of the ruling ideology while suppressing and eradicating the “infernal depository” of the Other (Bate 246). The public sphere of the industrial urban areas has been recreated to serve as an accumulation of fabricated memories and as a cultural achievement of the ruling ideology. In this sense, the visual memory of the masses created by

photographs and films, as well as monuments and buildings, functioned as an ideological apparatus to consolidate the sense of reality and universality of the collective memory. They also revolutionized and democratized history-making through visual images, enabling individuals to create their own personal archives and act as historiographers by making their own histories through personal archives on social media.

Visual memory, therefore, confines our perception of reality within a cognitive frame and eventually reiterates the taken-for-granted duplicate realities, but, at the same time, it preserves authenticity of the private sphere and unifies individuals around shared experiences. An explanation of one's intimate relation with visual images can be found in the personal meta-archives of truth, which are manipulated and manufactured by a wider context of mechanical reproduction of collective memories. However, visual images do not merely constitute an imaginary past, but rather pose questions about the possibility of building up a future free from the burdens of the past. Considering the arguments about the centrally-controlled curriculum of history teaching or monopolization of the mass-mediated images, memory and forgetfulness are inseparably linked to each other. Memory appears to be just another form of amnesia, and amnesia a form of hidden "consented" memory. Thomas Austin argues that the past does not have an intrinsic value and meaning, but that it is rather a function of the text and therefore constructed over time, making it possible to establish alternative histories and realities (257). History writing as memory building is not telling but always a retelling of the truth. It implies that history as collective memory inevitably has a discursive ground on which multiple narrations replace facts and factuality. Therefore, the objectivity of the historical narration translates into a slippery nomadism between collective memory and personal memory. It thus entails a substantial denial of what actually might have happened and embraces the falsity of the manufactured memories (Mandel 240). If the past can be made over and memory does not necessarily mean preserving a personal history, but remaking it with a pastiche of selected media images, the production of memory will only be possible by creating simulated illusions of the past while being immersed in an ever shrinking present.

To put it in more concrete terms, in *Memento*, for instance, Leonard has suffered from amnesia since he and his wife were attacked by burglars and he lost his wife. As he is unable to “locate his defining experience of traumatic loss” (Barnaby 93), he has to rely on the notes and photographs he keeps taking in order to construct his own reality. His pathological amnesic seizures stem from his desire to suppress the sense of guilt of losing his wife, as well as of his ignorance of Sammy Jankis, a customer with a similar problem of temporary memory. As a yuppie insurance inspector, with blind devotion to his job, Leonard does not believe Jankis, who claims that he cannot remember anything since he lost his wife. Leonard bluntly accuses him of faking his amnesic state. Tragically enough, unlike Sammy Jankis who is deprived of his capacity to remember, Leonard consciously distorts his memories and prefers not to remember who he really is. As Teddy, his companion on his journey to his real self, tells him once “So you lie yourself to be happy. Nothing wrong with that, we all do. Who cares if there’s a few little things you’d rather not remember” (*Memento*). Leonard appears to be locked up in the prison-house of a visual language composed of tattoos, little notes and Polaroid pictures, none of them reliable, or long-lasting, turning his own body to a *mystic writing pad* whose ability to retain and erase reverberates the mind’s mechanisms of perception, remembrance, and forgetting with a potential to induce its own fluidity and temporality (Radstone 327).

Leonard’s schizophrenic condition undoubtedly echoes a more complex cultural legacy of expunging painful memories and recreating the remnants of the past, where fresh-starts are particularly encouraged to debunk the burden of incapacity to change the present, the past, or the future. Amnesia, hence, is offered as an ultimate remedy to one’s political inaction and inability to remember since the trauma of remembering produces silences and anxiety about the adequacy of representation (Owen 235). In an age of dissolution and reconfiguration of memory via visual mediation and overflow of depthless significations, Fredric Jameson equates memory with such a schizophrenic dead end by stating that “our entire social situation has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, and has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change” (“Postmodernism” 125).

Mass-mediated images, and photography in particular, enable individuals to re-present their traumas in an acceptable formula, and at some point, as a fetishistic illusion of reality, which allows forgetting in disguise of remembering. These images eventually generate a prosthetic memory “to implant memories of events unexperienced by audiences” (Landsberg 143) while suppressing traumatic memories and redefining them as a simulation of bodily and emotional engagement with the “representation” of personal experiences and identification with the collective memory. In other words, mass-mediated images function as an apparatus to conceal, rather than reveal, the repressed memories, juxtaposing personal memories with images from scenes from films and photographs as icons of collective memory (Radstone 334). These desirable ‘memories,’ or post-memory, constitute incompetent and bastardised substitutes for historical consciousness. Post-memory, therefore, envisages a vibrant yet more reflective historical subject embedded in the mechanical reproduction of the truth, technologies and commodification of memory. It further offers a potential (and liberating) political alternative for the historical consciousness of the masses. Walter Benjamin described modernity’s erosion of involuntary memory - particularly relying on one’s own capacity and desire to retain memories through very personal modes of experience and storytelling - and its replacement with *mémoire volontaire* - as based on the mediated information and technological procedures. These procedures produce and store information in order to enable remembering that is carefully tailored to exclude unwanted memories (168-170).

The complexity of post-memory shatters signifying practices of individuals resulting in cognitive traumas and producing memories that can neither be forgotten nor remembered. The process of remembering becomes so traumatic that “the notion of authentic and territorialized memory tied to personal and collective experience has been challenged in a world where the past may be no longer felt or understood in any culturally specific or referential sense” (Grainge 7). Thus, Leonard’s amnesia does not result from a physical pathology, but rather from a cultural and social one in which people cannot rely on experiences or the power of reminiscence as much as they rely on mediated memories

composed of photographs, writings and narratives of the other people about their own experiences. With regard to this matter, Kravitz suggests that

the film seems to argue that Leonard's condition is our cultural condition as well, as if all postmodern subjects are somewhat schizophrenic, unable to remember anything new and create contemporarily vibrant traditions. This also explains why the plot could develop in a number of other directions. The unreliability of plot allows the audience to experience Leonard's detached reality, which is life without new memories. (38)

Similarly, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* introduces the story of a young couple at the end of their relationship and who decide to have their memories erased hoping that "blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders." Ironically, when they undergo the procedure, at the deep roots of their amnesia, they start to remember things that they want to remember while they forget their undesirable past. Confused by the wiped-out boundaries between the past and the present, the truth and the oedipal fantasies, and the self and the other, Joel and Clementine take a dark ride to their own selves among the torn-up pieces of broken hearts, unfulfilled promises and childhood embarrassments. Memory building with the help of the machines in the movie reiterates the definition of memory as fantasy building. Joel and Clementine's patched-up memories at the end of the erasure process create a fantasy-construction which serves to establish their own version of reality. This version of reality is inevitably a kind of illusion that structures an imaginary relationship to the Real, and thus conceals the fragmented and manufactured nature of ideology. As the machine reconstructs their memories and proceeds through their subconscious, Joel and Clementine are reborn out of their ashes with pristine memories, excluding failures and downfalls in a culture defined by success and personal progress. Following Deleuze and Guattari's definition of capitalism as inevitably causing schizophrenia (24), their memory is generated by a body without/out of organs that only produces (unfulfillable) desires, and that, therefore, ends up with amnesia.

Furthermore, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jewish American Jonathan Safran Foer investigates his grandfather's remains and the

memories of the Holocaust in the far lands of rural Ukraine. Rooted in a sterile land of simulated memories, Jonathan's perception of the past is based on highly commercialized and sterilized memorial days deprived of their historical and political connotations. Therefore, Jonathan's trip to Ukraine enables him to figure out who he would have been if his grandfather had stayed in Ukraine. It initially starts as an ordinary "back-to-the-roots" trip during which he can hire a guide and a car, take some photos and collect souvenirs to bring back to show the others. However, at the end of the movie, Jonathan unveils the memoir of his grandfather, which conceals a history of bloodshed and massacre, a history of forgetfulness. Jonathan has been cut off from the past aside from the objects he has carefully packed and catalogued, whereas his Ukrainian guide Alex has consciously chosen to forget his past and focused almost entirely on the future. He firmly expresses that "I was of the opinion that the past is past, and like all that is not now it should remain buried along the side of our memories" (*Everything Is Illuminated*). His grandfather, on the other hand, pretends to be blind, and his fake blindness stands for his refusal to take responsibility for what he witnessed during the war. As his grandfather removes his blindfold while he gets closer to his own past, Alex and Jonathan encounter a different past during their journey to their selves, a memory of their own experiences and of the others, which they have been able to preserve up to that moment only by forgetting. Elaine Safer emphasizes a "need" to create post-memories to deal with a traumatic past, especially in the case of Jewish communities and their "imaginative investment and creation" of the Holocaust (112). Indeed, such a need is not only suggestive of the collective trauma of Jews, but it is pervasively common to all postwar communities that seek ways to replace and repair their detachment from a painful past. The need for a better past only reincarnates a fantasy to re-member the dismembered parts of history as post-memory they created to situate themselves within a historical context. Post-memory, therefore, is necessarily trans-individual, transgressing the boundaries of the authenticity of personal memories and infiltrating into the mediated forms of collective memory.

If memory is a site of struggle and amnesia is false consciousness, then, one may rightly ask how people consent to participate in the

negotiation of remembering and forgetting and how they achieve to “personalize” mass-manufactured memories. One possible way is to use objects as a proof (and a witness) of personal existence. A wide range of evidence from cave paintings to monuments of dictators indicates that people retain their past in materialized forms; people remember objects and people need objects to remember. With a constant emphasis on a pain-free past and an apocalyptic and fragmented present, memory is always reified and converted into consumable materialized artifacts. The collapse of individual memory and its substitution with a ready-made commodified collective memory already coincides with a “historical shift from collective constructions of identity towards market-oriented individualism” (Austin 259). In a world of rapidly changing facts and collapsing official histories, people maybe find comfort in tailored collective memories. In this sense, Jean Baudrillard argues that

we no longer have the time to seek out an identity in the historical record, in memory, in a past, nor indeed in a project, or in a future. We have to have an instant memory which we can plug into immediately, a kind of promotional identity which can be verified at every moment. (11)

Photography, for instance, is commonly regarded as a great invention for keeping visual records of (personal or collective) history and photography functions as personal artifacts or official archives of national memory. However, it is equally criticized for generating a false perception of reality since the reality framed in a photographic image is, first and foremost, the reality that a photographer chooses to show us within the limits of the technical capacity of the camera. Therefore, debates on the authenticity of photography have often referred to the story of King Thamus, the king of Egypt. If people rely on devices to remember the past, then all they remember is a fragmented version of a manufactured reality. Accordingly, photographs represent the “documents of existence to be transformed into memories as the monuments of the past” (Bruno 72). Photography blurs and destabilizes the sense of reality, but also reproduces reality in a new form offering a consumable but equally durable repertoire of personal and collective memory. Similarly, Bate suggests that

with photographs, memory is both fixed and fluid: social and personal. As sites of memory, photographic images (whether digital or analogue) offer not a view on history but, as mnemonic devices, are perceptual phenomena upon which a historical representation may be constructed. Social memory is interfered with by photography precisely because of its affective and subjective status. (255)

Linda Hutcheon asserts that due to its inherently paradoxical nature of being both personal and impersonal, both temporary and permanent as well as both authentic and reified, photographs represent a better medium for an ideological reading of discursive practices in postmodernity. This is because photography records and justifies, yet also imprisons, arrests and falsifies time; it is a means of appropriating reality. Hutcheon further argues that postmodern photographic memory often mixes the verbal with the visual and nearly always impersonal in disguise of its personality (121). On the other hand, the more people rely on pictures and visual evidences of memory, the more they are confronted with a danger of forgetting and an urge to forget because photography produces a visual culture, a medium which is almost totally based on myths ready to be commodified and marketed. What people may expect to see in pictures is a better past with nostalgic premises constantly

depending on precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. Nostalgia requires the availability of evidence of the past and it is precisely the electronic and mechanical reproduction of images of the past that plays such an important role in the structuring of the nostalgic imagination today. (Hutcheon and Valdés 20)

Photographic nostalgia in postmodern culture, then, equals replacing real memories with simulated and mystified ones, which are seemingly stranded in a culture of temporality, reproducibility and fragmentation. Leonard, Joel or Jonathan cut and paste a fictitious and mythicised memory out of the pictures they collect, a visual pastiche, which provides a false access to the symbolic. They need pictures to replace memories. The schizophrenic pastiche they make up with their own pictures is disconnected from “the experience of temporal continuity” and “is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of

their past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 119).

If memory and amnesia are often visually constructed, to what extent does mass media affect the mechanisms of remembering? The question arising here is whether people remember with the help of mass media or use it to sink into the oblivion of flowing images so as to forget themselves. Leonard and Samy Jenkins, for instance, both like watching television, especially commercials because “they are short” and people do not bother with remembering and making any sense out of the images. Mass media is often blamed for causing the loss of historical and personal consciousness but it is the same media that makes every memory available to people every day. Not only historical images, documentaries or media archives, but also personal histories and memories have been investigated by mass media and media technologies. The overflow of images on mass media destroys the authenticity and originality of images and impairs the perception of reality and creates a wider vacuum of amnesia (Barnaby 91). Therefore, it does not only produce lost images and lost time, but it also induces that wider vacuum within cultural memory resulting in historical amnesia; television produces “forgetfulness not memory, flow not history” (Holdsworth 130). There is a tendency for people to indulge in the mediated flow of images since the mass media remembers for us, retells, remakes and reorganizes the stories of authentic memories creating an obsession, fantasy and trauma of the past (Huysen 17).

Mediated forms of memory increasingly serve to confirm our personal histories through which historical events become memorialized in their media representation – remembered by their mediation and remediation. In *Everything is Illuminated*, Alex, for instance, discards and constructs his past and future upon a mediated American dream available through films, television and magazines. In his Run DMC tracking suit and with his Saturday Night Fever disco performances, Alex conforms to the world where he lives and seemingly accomplishes to adapt his historically momentous past to a new privately satisfying future (Landsberg 145). Therefore, Alex’s

understanding of the past is manufactured rather than remembered. At the same time, [his] sense of collective memory or personal history is also

much more of an electronically mediated one or rather constructed from the ever more manipulable global image banks of television and films. (Hoskins 336)

The characters in these movies are deeply obsessed with different forms of remembering. Joel, for example, takes notes in his little notebooks and draws sketches of important people and events to pile his own personal memorial data. Similarly, Jonathan Foer writes every detail of what he has seen “in order not to forget.” However, when Alex asks him if he is a writer, he replies that he is a “collector” not a “writer,” suggesting that his daily notes are the collection of his sterile and intact collection of little memories, just like all the items he has sealed in plastic bags (*Everything Is Illuminated*).

In *Memento*, Leonard literally relies on his little notes and notices that he writes on the back of Polaroid pictures. He even goes a step further and turns his own body into an epitaph of his amnesia. He is so engrossed in writing and remembering that his entire existence has become his writing in blood and flesh. Leonard’s efforts to record his own past, the documentation of past in writing become a replica of one’s present values and understandings. Documentation no longer serves as a useful means of recording facts and events. On the contrary, it becomes an end in itself, a goal of self-fashioning for ongoing retrospection.

Nevertheless, the significance of personal records and documents in creating personal memory cannot be underestimated since

the past is only accessible through private and publicly articulated memories, narrated through the perspective of the present. The textual documentation of our past is made up of a mixture of personal memory and public memories that over time become fused and indistinguishable. (Drake 184)

Like other narrative forms, written documents of the imaginary past are discursive records narrated by and through language and in a similar way to language, the act of writing down memories is fragmented, unconsciously constructed and oriented towards the other. Therefore, the written form makes it more difficult to discern primary memories of personal experiences from the secondary and narrated impersonal

histories. The memories of others, however, may help affirm the validity of the personal ones. From a Lacanian perspective, the ego finds itself only through the reflection of another person, which means that individuals recognize themselves only in comparison with others and through other individuals' identification with them. Therefore, recording memories, or documenting personal experiences, always yields a sense of alienation, and one's authentic identity or memorial entity is an alienated subject defined by the Other with capital O.

According to Jameson, "history is only accessible to us in narrative form," but it is an "absent narration" inexpressible and unattainable through language ("The Political" 20). In other words, people can only formulate their cognitive maps through creating a history of their own based on narrations chosen from a vast array of other narrations. However, since all narrations are discursive practices, one can never be sure about the authenticity and uniqueness of their personal memory (history). If the autobiographical text is recognition of one's identity, it is often misrecognized. Accordingly, Joel, in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, writes down his memories always in relation with his oedipal affairs with women, which represent failed attempts to replace his mother. Joel's interpretations of personal experiences are undoubtedly accounts of his frustrations about women as objects of desire. Similarly, in *Memento*, Leonard takes little notes about the people he meets, but these notes prove to be unreliable each time, as he is obviously manipulated by these people. Leonard's *little memoir* about other people, himself and his fictitious past, inevitably leads him to a misrecognition of the reality and places him in an ever-changing flux of different realities manipulated by the Polaroid pictures and little notes. Moreover, Jonathan stops taking notes of his journey when he realizes with the aid of his thick glasses that writing only alienates him from the outside world, which certainly appears different than what it is. As a result of their frustrating inner explorations through writing, the three characters concede that "the constitutive gap between reality and its representation in language" and build up their own realities out of "many different possibilities of representing the real and their memories" (Huyssen 19). If there is nothing outside the text, and if the text is misrecognition of one's existential constitution, then, the

construction and reconstruction of memory and history are processes which are strictly related to the production and reproduction of ideology based on the alienation and reification of identity.

### Conclusions

In postmodern culture, in an age when people cannot trust their memories, the reliability of the human mind is still in question. Furthermore, people seem to voluntarily stop remembering and produce false memories in their quest for happiness. It is equally true that the “postmodern version of nostalgia and memory may have been developed at the time when the rise of information technology made us question not only what would count as knowledge but what would count as the past in relation to the present” (Hutcheon and Valdés 20). The twentieth century was a time of mass sufferings, mass poverty, unjust wars and global ignorance. Consequently, the discontents of civilization have led people back to where they felt safe, to a happier and innocent past, by making them erase unwanted memories, disturbing stories of their lives or other people. When Jonathan and his Ukrainian guides find the mystery village, Trachimbrod, what they find is an old woman and boxes of memory, full of small, seemingly unimportant objects. She identifies with the entire village when she says “I am Trachimbrod” and “these boxes are Trachimbrod,” which are symbols of misery, suffering and oblivion. In contrast to the reality of the boxed memories of Trachimbrod, people create a graveyard of the dead objects of dead memories bought from a discount sale in a supermarket that could be disposed of in a garbage bag (*Everything Is Illuminated*). People desperately seek sterile memories, and, consequently, memory and amnesia inevitably become misrecognitions and ahistorical mass delusions (Pence 243). The modern-day information and perception overload of mass media and the fetishism of memorial souvenirs turn ignorance into bliss, especially in a global future with no certainty of confidence and people’s growing need for slowing down and turning to virtual memories for inner peace and comfort.

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