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# Temporal narrative procedures: an ethics of consciousness and agency in science fiction

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**Mémoire de recherche présenté par**

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sous la direction de

**Hélène GUILLAUME, MCF**

**TEMPORAL NARRATIVE PROCEDURES :  
AN ETHICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND AGENCY IN SCIENCE  
FICTION**

Soutenu le 3/06/2019 devant un jury composé de

Claire BARDELMANN, PR, présidente

Hélène GUILLAUME, MCF

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## Statement on Academic Integrity

I, Sonja Böttger, hereby certify that this dissertation, which is 29 291 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. All sentences or passages quoted in this dissertation from other people's work (with or without trivial changes) have been placed within quotation marks, and specifically acknowledged by reference to author, work and page. I understand that plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of such passages – will be considered grounds for failure in this dissertation and, if serious, in the degree programme as a whole. I also affirm that, with the exception of the specific acknowledgements, these answers are entirely my own work.

## Acknowledgements

*Acknowledgements have become a feature of the genre of academic writing. Be it in a book, in a dissertation or a conference presentation, we all expect to read or hear “a list of names of people we don’t know” (as Ellen Degeneres aptly put it) before getting to the part we came for. For that reason and because if there is one thing that stayed on between my first thesis and this one, it is my non-conventionalism, I hesitated to write this. Yet, this year more than any other, I feel like I may not have finished writing this thesis without the presence and support of a certain number of people, people whom I wish to thank here – not just for the form or the convention, but for myself.*

The direct and indirect mentors who have guided my growing up, those who have inspired me not only because of their knowledge, but also because of their kindness and humanity. My friends, Salma, Eloïse, and Abeline, whose continuous support has no price.

Scott Slovic’s book *Going Away to Think*, a regular source of inspiration. Pascale Amiot for teaching me to actually go away and think. Margot Lauwers, for her priceless advice, her inspiring personality and generosity. Bénédicte Meillon, for giving the lecture that lead to my choice to study English at university, and for teaching me so much ever since.

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## Abstract

This master's thesis sets out to study time, consciousness and agency in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This transmedial comparative analysis uses narrative theory to raise ethical questions, notably concerning the fragility of agency in the genre of science fiction. It focusses on the impact of time-travel and consciousness on agency and shows that these works have used conventions of the genre to question deeply humane aspects of memory and identity.

# Introduction

Time is an important part of daily human experience and an essential part of how we perceive reality. More than an object to contemplate in itself, it is a lens that colours every moment we experience. Like agency and consciousness, the other themes placed in the centre of this thesis, time is a particularly interdisciplinary topic of research. Indeed, time is studied by physics as one of the laws that reign over the physical world. Neurosciences, biology, and philosophy also look at time, each in their own way. Despite working independently, these studies are nevertheless complementary as part of the attempt to understand the mystery which time remains to us. Time is also studied in the humanities, since literature and the arts cast different lights on the way time is perceived as it is represented in many different ways. As a consequence of its importance in everyday life and human perception, time is crucial as a theme and in the narrative structure when studying how fictional universes are built. Regardless of the mode of reality they use and the story they tell, narratives need time to exist. Indeed, narrative requires at least two actions to be told<sup>1</sup>. As literary narratives usually relate more than two actions, narration also requires a choice about the order in which they are told, and how much the text dwells on each event. To study this, narratologists have developed tools which allow to describe the use of time in literary texts. The study of time in narrative fiction is based upon a distinction born from the Russian formalist critics, the distinction between *plot* and *story*<sup>2</sup>. Gérard Genette's work furthered this distinction by conceptualising them into *diegesis* and *narrative* respectively. He explored the way in which this distinction allowed to study time in narrative by the comparison between time of the diegesis and time of the narrative and creating a typology of the way time can be analysed. He defined chronological order as a basis to define all deviations in relation to it when doing literary

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1 Mieke Bal starts her book with a series of related definitions: "A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is *a series* of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors." These definitions imply that, for narrative to exist, there must be more than one actions to be related. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, p. 5.

2 Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p. 4.

analysis, as chronological order requires the least changes from the diegesis. As David Lodge writes, “The simplest way to tell a story, equally favoured by tribal bards and parents at bedtime, is to begin at the beginning, and go on until you reach the end, or your audience falls asleep. But even in antiquity, storytellers perceived the interesting effects that could be obtained by deviating from chronological order”<sup>3</sup>. In fact, few narratives are entirely chronological; even if the only anachronies are no more than a character thinking about their future or a short mention of a past event, because fiction mimics the way we perceive the world. However, depending on period and genre, anachronies can be much more important than that. The effects of major deviations from chronology are many; they can allow the reader to understand a character’s motivations through flashbacks, thus giving depth to characters, or they can create suspense with the revelation of a few well-chosen elements of the future before they are narrated entirely. While linearity is the most intuitive way of telling a story, complete linearity is a rarity in literature, for anachronies open the floor for a large variety of interesting effects.

While, as David Lodge mentioned above, divergences from chronological order are not recent, they are used differently depending on genres and period. Some genres are based on mostly-chronological narration. This has been the case, for instance, of the Bildungsroman, up to recently. The Bildungsroman is an interesting genre to discuss shortly at this point. Indeed, its relation with time has changed in contemporary works, a shift which brings to light relevant aspects of the relationship between the time of the narrative and the time of the diegesis. In the genre of the novel of formation, the story follows a character through their childhood, adolescent and young adult years. It is typical in this genre for the narration to follow the main character as they grow up. Examples of this can be found in Thomas Hardy’s novels *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, in which the narratives follow the characters meticulously through their ordinary life as well as the ordeals that prompt them to grow up. As the theme at the centre of the Bildungsroman is the evolution of the main protagonist, their physical, mental and emotional development, chronology is important to allow the reader to follow the protagonist as they grow up. Thus, this genre’s themes often coincide with the way the story is told. Indeed, traditionally, as Marianne Hirsch points out, one of the features which characterises the genre of the Bildungsroman is the linearity of the

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3 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, pp. 74-5.

timelines<sup>4</sup>. The story thus evolves with the character's physical and psychological development. And yet, it is interesting to observe that this tradition of following the character's evolution chronologically was changed in contemporary coming-of-age novels. Some recent novels belonging to the genre of the Bildungsroman indeed subvert this tradition, instead exploring ways of recounting the life of a character with emphasis on their memory, thus giving importance to subjectivity. This is, for instance, the case of John Banville's *The Sea* (2005) or Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988), two novels of formation in which adult characters think back on their past as children, teenagers and their adult life. In these texts, the characters' pasts are presented through non-linear narratives whose construction mirror the mechanics of the character's reminiscing. The Bildungsroman is thus one example of a genre whose relationship with time has changed drastically, from meticulously linear timelines to anachronic narratives which point out the difficulty the characters have to remember their past and other mechanics of memory. While neither *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* nor *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be said to belong to the novel (or film) of formation, I consider them comparable with the genre insofar as the characters' identities change with major experiences – changes whose effects are felt directly in the narrative, and research about the Bildungsroman can be broadened to reveal truths about narrative in general.

Although non-linear narration has always been used to tell stories, it seems to be increasingly common, particularly in postmodernist literature. Indeed, postmodernist literature has a leaning towards metafiction and playfully uses time as an object of self-conscious narration. The genre of science fiction has a particularly complex relationship with time. Already on the level of the diegesis, time has a major role in the genre as a thematic feature, notably through time-travel. *The Time Machine* (1895) by English author H. G. Wells is one of the works at the source of time travel in science fiction<sup>5</sup>. More generally, stories which belong to the genre of science fiction are usually set in the future, but the setting does not make them any less realistic; indeed, the futuristic setting seems to be a way to express worries about the future of humanity which are based on present situations. For instance, the development of technology and science is in constant acceleration, which causes concerns about the limits of this evolution. This comes out in the genre with technology advanced

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4 Hirsch, Marianne. "The Novel of Formation as Genre: Between Great Expectations and Lost Illusions", *Genre*, p. 297.

5 Ace G Pilkington, *Science Fiction and Futurism: Their Terms and Ideas*, p. 137. As qtd in "The Time Machine", *Wikipedia*.

beyond what exists at the time of writing, hybrid species, genetically modified human beings or even robots which replace them. Writing about the future thus seems to be first and foremost a way to express anxiety about the present. The genre also lends a voice to fears concerning the future of humanity, the impact of technology on society and on humanity and the future of society. But the two works under study go further than that, and as a result it will be important throughout this thesis to consider them as part of the genre, borrowing some features but also stretching – and sometimes tearing – its limits. For instance, memories have an important role in both stories, which is paradoxical if considering that science fiction deals with the future.

## **1. Defining Concepts: Time, Consciousness and Agency**

This thesis is primarily written as a piece of research within the field of literary analysis, and I cannot pretend to an in-depth understanding of these complex scientific debates. However, when working within the genre of science fiction, it seems to be sensible to compare certain elements with scientific knowledge. Indeed, the genre itself is built around scientific advancements and futuristic technology which is, very often, explained by science. The two works studied here are subtle and play with the limits of the genre, a point which will be discussed in the first chapter. Despite the two works' distance from some features of the genre, science matters nonetheless. This section of the introduction offers some basic elements to define and open the discussion on the concepts which will be relevant in the analysis of the two works.

The fact that the three domains of human existence this thesis looks at are being studied from many different fields of study makes them into multifaceted and mysterious concepts when considered from afar. Time can potentially be considered to be one of the least understood phenomena to this day, as scientists still disagree, for instance, on whether time really “passes” or if its flowing is only the way human beings experience it<sup>6</sup>. One of the most important scientific advancements in the study of time was made in 1905 by Albert Einstein. Indeed, as Mathieu Grousseau explains, Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity changed the way science looks at time. Whereas before, time was considered to be absolute, Einstein proved that it was, in fact, relative. This means that time is not, contrary to previous beliefs,

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6 Christoph Hoerl, “Time and the Domain of Consciousness,” p. 90-91.

the same for everybody, and may even vary for one person depending on their activity for instance<sup>7</sup>. Another finding that came from his work is that time and space are intricately related. “Physicists do not study the temporal evolution of phenomena which take place in space anymore, but simply phenomena which take place in the spacetime conceived as an irreducible frame”<sup>8</sup>. These are concepts and theories which, as I will argue throughout the thesis, are strongly relevant to the two works under study. An important aspect of scientific theories such as the Theory of Relativity and quantum theories is that they are counter-intuitive. As Bonneau and Poirier write, the spacetime frame introduced above “radically overturns our geometrical intuition”<sup>9</sup>, and Ikonicoff and Bonneau add, concerning quantum physics: “entirely logical on paper when expressed as equations, it becomes inconceivable when thinking about what it implies concretely”<sup>10</sup>. This will be relevant in the discussion about the mode of reality in I, 3. As Hoerl writes in “Time and the Domain of Consciousness”, what is problematic with theories which argue that time is not linear is that we do experience it as linear. He solves this dilemma by saying that it is possible to argue that “there is no such thing as passage [...] but that perceptual experience nevertheless presents us with an illusion of passage, the hypothesis that such experience is metaphysically illusory about the very existence of passage”<sup>11</sup>. As such, passage would not be a feature of time, but of our consciousness and the way we experience time, and of “the occurrences that constitute our own perceptual experiences”<sup>12</sup>. This is an important aspect when considering time alongside of consciousness and subjectivity, and, as I will explain later, it also coincides with what the Tralfamadorians believe in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The question of whether the passing of time is an objective reality or the result of conscious experience is the main reason for the choice of discussing both time and consciousness as interrelated concepts in this thesis. Indeed, even separately from this

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7 Mathieu Grousson, “Le sens du temps est un casse-tête,” Science & vie hors série *Temps, matière & espace: Les 150 choses à savoir*, p. 73.

8 Translation mine. Original: “les physiciens n’étudient plus l’évolution temporelle de phénomènes survenant dans l’espace, mais simplement des phénomènes prenant place dans l’espace-temps conçu comme un cadre irréductible.” Ibid., p. 73.

9 Translation mine. Original: “bouscule radicalement notre intuition géométrique.” Cécile Bonneau and Hervé Poirier, “La relativité restreinte fait toujours loi,” Science & vie hors série *Temps, matière & espace: Les 150 choses à savoir*, p. 82.

10 Translation mine. Original: “Tel est le propre de la physique quantique: parfaitement logique sur le papier lorsqu’elle s’exprime sous formes d’équations, elle devient inconcevable quand on réfléchit à ce qu’elle implique concrètement.” Roman Ikonicoff and Cécile Bonneau. “La physique quantique reste un défi à la raison.” In *Temps, matière & espace: Les 150 choses à savoir*, p. 94.

11 Christoph Hoerl, “Time and the Domain of Consciousness,” p. 91.

12 Ibid., p. 92.

argument, it must be admitted that consciousness influences how time is perceived. Think, for instance, of the way one can lose track of time when daydreaming, or even more strikingly, how dreams can last days when, in real time, they are dreamt over seconds only. This is why consciousness will be relevant in most of the sections of this thesis and needs to be defined here.

Consciousness is a question debated by both philosophy and neuroscience<sup>13</sup>. According to Northoff “consciousness describes the ability to subjectively experience”<sup>14</sup>. Consciousness is thus intricately linked to subjectivity. The complexity of discussing time in relation with consciousness was in fact already surmised before Einstein’s theory. Christoph Hoerl writes: “Henri Poincaré’s 1898 article ‘The measure of time’ [...] begins with the sentence: ‘So long as we do not go outside the domain of consciousness, the notion of time is relatively clear.’ The first three words warn of trouble ahead, for Poincaré thinks that how time seems to us in experience is, in fact, deeply at odds with what physics tells us”<sup>15</sup>. For this reason, the two texts under study in this thesis raise many paradoxes when studied with emphasis on time. Indeed, they play not only with disruptions in chronology but also with degrees of consciousness. Furthermore, as Edelman and Tononi write, “our private consciousness is all we have. The flattened dome of the sky and a hundred other visible things under it, including the brain itself – in short, the entire world –, exist for each of us only as parts of our consciousness, and all that perishes with it”<sup>16</sup>. Plays on consciousness thus allows to play with every aspect of the environment, time as well as space, which I will prove to be the case in the chosen corpus.

On its own, agency is probably easiest to understand among the three concepts in the centre of this work. In “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency,” Albert Bandura writes: “To be an agent is to influence intentionally one’s functioning and life circumstances. In this view, personal influence is part of the causal structure”<sup>17</sup>. This definition allows a clear idea of the concept: for there to be agency, there needs to be intentionality and effect. In other words, neither accidental actions nor passive ones will count as agency, for the subject must both

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13 Georg Northoff, “Slow cortical potentials and ‘inner time consciousness’ — A neuro-phenomenal hypothesis about the ‘width of present’”, *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, p. 174.

14 Ibid., p. 174.

15 Christoph Hoerl, “Time and the Domain of Consciousness,” p. 90.

16 Translation mine. Original: “notre conscience privée est tout ce que nous avons. Le dôme aplati du ciel et cent autres choses visibles dessous, y compris le cerveau lui-même – bref, le monde tout entier –, n’existent pour chacun de nous que comme des parties de notre conscience, et tout cela périt avec elle.” Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *Comment la matière devient conscience*, p. 16.

17 Albert Bandura, “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency”, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, p. 164.

want to do something and succeed in doing it. Yet, in this definition, Bandura also implies that there are other elements in the causal structure, and these elements may threaten the power of agency if they are too strong and if agency is too weak. Thus, as this thesis highlights certain degrees of agency in two texts, it will also discuss what takes its place in the causal structure that explains the unfolding of events. The concept of *free will* is strongly related to that of agency. Merriam-Webster defines it as a “voluntary choice or decision”<sup>18</sup>. The Cambridge Dictionary’s definition is more precise: “the ability to decide what to do independently of any outside influence”<sup>19</sup>. The important distinction between agency and free will is that free will refers first and foremost to the “decision” or “choice” without concerning itself with its physical actualisation. Agency focusses on this second part, the possibility to actualise one’s choice. These two concepts are thus interdependent, and both will here be relevant.

## 2. Corpus

This thesis will analyse and compare two narratives from different media, a novel and a film. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (henceforth referred to as *S5*), which was written in 1969, is one of Kurt Vonnegut’s best-known novels and is partly autobiographical. Indeed, the first and last chapter are told in the first person by a fictional author – an entity created as a reflection of Vonnegut – who wants to write a book about the bombing of Dresden during the second world war. The novel recounts the story of Billy Pilgrim, an American World War Two veteran who witnessed the bombing of Dresden while he was a prisoner of war. Billy came to be “unstuck in time” (*S5* 2) and to travel through time and space. He was kidnapped by aliens who brought him to the planet Tralfamadore and told him the truth about time and free will, among other concepts which they see differently from human beings. Meanwhile, Billy is thought to have become senile when he tells those tales back on Earth, because of the war trauma, a plane crash he was the sole survivor of, and the influence of the science fiction novels he reads. The story is told with numerous anachronies, following Billy’s travel through time and thus narrating the events of his life.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (henceforth *Eternal Sunshine* or *ES*), written by Charlie Kaufmann and directed by Michel Gondry tells the extraordinary yet very ordinary

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18 “Free Will,” Merriam-Webster.

19 “Free Will,” Cambridge Dictionary.

love story between an eccentric woman named Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) and a shy, reserved man called Joel Barish (Jim Carrey). The two characters are very different, and their differences leads to numerous arguments, and ultimately, to a dull life as a couple that they find boring, and sometimes downright pathetic. Clementine, whom Kate Winslet described in an interview as an “extraordinary eccentric bonkers barmy glorious person who absolutely [has] her own rulebook”<sup>20</sup>, is very impulsive and decides to get her memory of Joel erased at Lacuna, a business specialised in erasing procedures. When Joel discovers this, he also contacts Lacuna with the aim of undergoing the same procedure. It is during his erasing that the good moments they had as a couple come to light both to the characters and to the audience, and they attempt to stop the procedure and save their memories. This fails, as the technicians, with the help of the doctor Howard Mierzwiak, succeed in finding them even in the most remote of memories. However, as Joel wakes up the next morning, he meets Clementine again, apparently through sheer luck, and they start a relationship again.

Despite using different media, these two works are not so different generically. Indeed, they both use a semi-realistic mode of reality and both borrow from the genre of science fiction. While *Eternal Sunshine* takes place in the present of production (Joel’s journal entries are dated in 2003), *Slaughterhouse-Five* takes place in the past, neither settings corresponding to what is expected of science fiction: a futurist setting. Their relationship with the genre will be discussed in chapter one at length. The two works also seem at first to be at odds with each other in terms of their main themes; where *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a war novel, concerning itself with destruction and death, *Eternal Sunshine* is a film about love. Despite this, the way they portray two characters travelling in time through their memories is strikingly comparable, which is the reason I decided at first to try to put them together in a corpus. They are both as far from a linear narrative as conceptually possible, as the narratives follow not the action, but rather the consciousness of each character in their travel through their memories. As I found that the dynamic they engendered when studied together brought out aspects of each work that I had not expected, I decided to pursue this work as a comparative piece of literary analysis. The difference of media was another interesting element for the research, as different tools were used to produce the same effect, which is fascinating to study. Indeed, a novel relies mostly on narrative, and it also requires more attention and more time from the reader than a film does. There is therefore a privileged attention to text which is not the same

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20 Kate Winslet, Interview “A Life in Pictures”, YouTube, 12:20.

in a film. A film, however, has a multitude of ways to convey a story which are not related to words. Arguably, image is the most important way to convey information, as sight is the sense human beings tend to rely most on, but sound and music are also important means of communication which should not be neglected.

### 3. State of the Art

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is one of Vonnegut's most studied works. Many academics have tried to make sense of Billy's travelling in time in terms of real-world possibilities. This is the case of Lawrence R Broer, who dedicates one of the chapters of *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia In the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Broer links some of the features of the novel to symptoms of schizophrenia such as disorientation<sup>21</sup>, which she studies along with concepts of psychoanalysis such as the Oedipian complex and the conflict between Eros and Thanatos. "Billy," she writes, "uses fantasy not to reconstruct his own robotic personality, but to escape the present"<sup>22</sup>. More in line with the context of the war and Vonnegut's personal experiences, several researchers have studied the question of post-traumatic stress disorder in the novel. In "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," Bakhtiar Sadjadi and Nishtman Bahrami analyse the novel to understand Billy's symptoms, arguing that the character suffers from PTSD. Armanda Wicks took this argument one step further. Indeed, in "'All This Happened, More or Less': The Science Fiction of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*," she suggests the possibility of "reading the time travelling episodes as literal experiences of traumatic memory"<sup>23</sup>, and concludes that the genre of science fiction allowed Vonnegut to narrate the bombing of Dresden framed "through his trademark dark humor"<sup>24</sup>.

In contrast, *Eternal Sunshine* has rarely been studied by academics; however, a few articles and reviews can be found. In an article entitled "Music Video, Songs, Sound: Experience, Technique and Emotion in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*", Carol Vernallis analyses the way the soundtrack (both musical and otherwise) interacts with visual elements and motifs, especially in comparison with Gondry's work in the genre of music

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21 Lawrence R. Broer, *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia In the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 89.

22 Ibid., p. 87.

23 Armanda Wicks, "'All This Happened, More or Less': The Science Fiction of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, p. 337.

24 Ibid., p. 338.

video. The memory erasure and the question of whether such a procedure is ethical seems to be what has attracted the most attention from scholars, mostly specialists in neurology, psychology and/or ethics. In the article “Changing one’s Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*”, Neil Levy, a researcher in neuroethics, draws upon concepts developed by philosophers such as Locke and Hegel to discuss whether or not we should want to erase our painful memories. The article first discusses the importance of memory, as “memory constitutes personal identity”<sup>25</sup>. It then brings up scientific approaches to the procedure, cautioning that neuroscientists do not know to this day whether such a thing would be possible in real life. The article then goes on to argue that even if such a thing were possible, it would constitute serious harm to oneself because our memories of our experiences “are important guides to our abilities and limitations”<sup>26</sup>. It would also impede our social relationships, particularly recognition, which he argues to be important to our identity. The question of ethics is also discussed with a philosophical approach by Christopher Grau in “*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the Mortality of Memory”. Grau discusses the morality of memory erasure first through the prism of utilitarianism, then through Kant’s concept of *duty to oneself*. Both articles consider the memory erasure as a form of harm to the self that hampers one’s future.

This thesis will thus study the theme of time in the corpus, using narratology to relate time as a theme to time as a literary device. The first chapter will discuss the interrelations between time and genre, confronting the metaphorical looking back of historiography with the now conventional time-travel of the genre of science fiction, and from there, analyse the mode of reality of each work. Then, chapter two will study the relationship between consciousness and agency and analyse to what extent the characters are still agents despite outside restrictions such as the nature of time and the memory-erasing procedure. Finally, chapter three will reflect upon the influence of the previous questions on the characters’ identities in the corpus, arguing that the partial loss of identity created by diegetic events creates a fragmentation in their sense of self, but that despite appearances, the two works have a strong sense of continuity under the superficial fragmentation.

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25 Neil Levy, “Changing one’s Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*”, p. 30.

26 Ibid., p. 38.

## Chapter One: Time and Genre

Although the importance of time is common to all literary texts, its characteristics vary from genre to genre. To give a few classical examples, the stereotypical beginning of all fairy tales, “once upon a time,” sets the stories of this genre into the far past, often in the Middle Ages, which is complemented by a setting in a medieval castle and stereotypical characters such as knights and royal families. In contrast, texts from the naturalist and realist movement often take place in the time in which they were written, and, regardless of the period, memoirs and autobiographies focus on a recent past. Historiography, a genre to which *Slaughterhouse-Five* doubtlessly belongs, sets its stories within any period of history, thus in the past. Vonnegut’s novel takes place during the second world war, only twenty-five years before the novel was written. The demands of the genre of historiography clash with the genre of science fiction to which *Slaughterhouse-Five* is also said to belong, which requires a futurist setting. This tension will be explored in this chapter along with generic discussions of how the dealing with time of each work interferes with its generic categories. It will also analyse the mode of reality of each work, particularly in relation to time-travel, thus also discuss the status of time-travel.

### 1. A Return to the Past

The two works studied in this thesis deal with the characters’ pasts as main object of focus. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrator attempts to remember the bombing of Dresden to write a book, which, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, requires working on his memory. Similarly, Joel Barish’s memories of his relationship with Clementine are shown once they have already broken up, and Joel is led to look back on them. The relationship with one’s past is a complicated one for several reasons. Firstly, the past is not tangible: composed of blurry, fragmented memories, subjective impressions and feelings, the past can be difficult to reconstitute. Not being under our eyes like a text or a sketch on paper, it is too abstract to think back on objectively. Memory can be faulty, either inexact or with blank gaps.

Furthermore, even when remembered accurately, the past can be difficult to deal with. While the importance of memories is a strong common point between the two texts, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s Second World War setting adds a strong historical element that sets it apart from the film's more personal – though universal – story. In Vonnegut's novel, the war is not reduced to the status of a historical backdrop, it is the very subject of the text. Indeed, the narrator, which also presents itself as a fictional author and a projection of Vonnegut inside the diegesis, sets out to write a book about the bombing of Dresden, outwardly because he thought that it would "be easy" and "make [...] a lot of money", but truly because of how "tempting" it was and because he had failed to deal with the memories in other ways. The story of Billy Pilgrim seems to be more of a means than a goal in itself, a means to deal with the topic in a less personal way – this will be analysed in chapter III, section 1. As such, *Slaughterhouse-Five* belongs to the genre of historiographic metafiction as defined by Linda Hutcheon as "those well known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages"<sup>27</sup>. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is in fact one of the novels which Hutcheon quotes as examples of the genre, along with, for instance, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Vonnegut's novel's focus on the events of the Second World War and its metafictional tone give the novel a well earned place among the other works in the genre – it is, in Hutcheon's words, is an "ironic mixture [...] of war documentary and science fiction"<sup>28</sup>. The bombing of Dresden, a very well-known historical event, is the fictional author's final focus in his novel, which sets the story in a historical setting. The attention to detail and efforts towards truthfulness makes the wartime context into more than a simple setting, close to the "war documentary" Hutcheon mentions.

In terms of quantity of text, most of the focus is not on history. In fact, Billy's story is mentioned much more than historical events, with most paragraphs starting or containing the words "Billy Pilgrim", thus centring the novel around Billy's life. The novel even presents us with a chronological summary of Billy's life, starting with his birth (S5, 19). And yet, that does not in any way mean that history is neglected, for Billy's past is so intricately linked with history that, when his story is told, it also makes a claim about history, living up to being an "anti-war book" (S5 3). I would like to demonstrate that *Slaughterhouse-Five* masterfully

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27 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, p. 5.

28 Ibid., p.44.

weaves together official history with one character's personal past. History and the past are separate concepts. Eavan Boland, referring to history and the past respectively, wrote that "one was official and articulate and the other silent and fugitive"<sup>29</sup>, and it seems to me that this is what emerges from Vonnegut's novel: the elusive voice of the past. Indeed, by choosing a character who personally witnessed the destruction of Dresden, history and the past are already linked together. Most of the events in Billy's personal life are dated precisely, to the point where a timeline could be drawn: "Early in 1968, a group of optometrists, with Billy among them, chartered an airplane" (S5 20). In addition to making the text less confusing chronologically despite the many anachronies, the regular dates also allow to think of Billy's story in parallel to history. In a few cases, they are kept separate despite Billy's involvement in a historical event of the scale of the Second World War, for instance when the narrator comments on historical events which only indirectly relate to Billy:

The war was nearly over. The locomotives began to move east in late December. The war would end in May. German prisons everywhere were absolutely full, and there was no longer any food for the prisoners to eat, and no longer any fuel to keep them warm. And yet – here came more prisoners (57).

Billy is a prisoner of war at that moment, but these are not elements which concern only his experience; they are historical events which are seen from a different point of view, with more spatial and temporal distance and at a smaller scale. But for the reader, Billy is what links everything together, the conducting line of the novel. Billy's life is even sometimes dated in terms of historical events and not just dates, as for instance in the following sentence: "Billy closed his eyes, traveled in time to a May afternoon, two days after the end of the Second World War in Europe" (S5, 159). Although most of the time, time-markers are either dates, or other personal events (such as his daughter's wedding or his own age), such sentences relate the story strongly to history and make sure that the reader cannot forget the reason this story came to be. Furthermore, the novel often mentions directly real historical figures or events, and even sometimes quotes long passages of books or speeches. This is done nearly in the way an academic paper would, thus referencing real history. For instance, it refers to Truman and quotes him at length (S5 153) and Billy reads various historical texts throughout the novel (for example S5 13-4). Both the real novel and the fictional novel are named after a real

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29 Qtd in Pascale Amiot, "« That the Science of Cartography is Limited » : les fantômes d'Eavan Boland", in Gaïd Girard, *Territoires de l'étrange dans la littérature irlandaise au XXe siècle*, p.7.

historical event, the Children's Crusade, an event which took place centuries before. It becomes recurrent in the novel, mentioned as an analogy for the war but also as the original event: "Mackay told us that the Children's Crusade started in 1213" (S5 13) and this historical event is mentioned by various characters (for example S5 87).

Billy's story thus seems to be a pretext to narrate history, a pretext which takes up most of the narrative as the fictional author finds it impossible to share his personal experience. When the fictional author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* decides to write a book about Dresden, he is unaware that what really lies ahead of him is a long and painful process of remembering. The fictional author's choice of writing Billy's story seemed to have been taken as a result of his inability to write about his own experience. Indeed, a few years after the war, he cannot remember much, at least not to his own satisfaction. The decision to write a novel about Dresden is followed by many failed drafts. As he finds himself unable to remember the past in a way which satisfies him, he takes several steps which he think will help him trace his steps back and ultimately tell the story he wants, or perhaps needs, to tell. For instance, he goes back to the places he had been at: "I really did go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967" (S5 1). Time travel properly speaking will be the focal point later on, but it seems that the work on remembering done by the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* requires a metaphorical return to the past, and the process of writing is a journey back in time, since he is forced to project himself into his past in order to remember. In his effort to remember the war precisely enough to write about it, he contacts Bernard V. O'Hare, a man who was captured alongside him during the war so that they can "drink and talk and remember" (S5 4), but even this meeting seems rather disappointing for the character in terms of remembering.

Narration, the act of telling about the past, is, figuratively, a way to return to the past, revisit it, and the novel presents it in the same line as time travelling, and not only in the first chapter. Indeed, the fictional author is not the only character in the novel who narrates the past. When Roland Weary, an American prisoner who is in the train alongside Billy, narrates his story in the chronological order, it is said that he "went back" (35) in time to tell his story, which is also said in the following way: "In real life, Weary was retracing his steps" (34). In this way, other characters also travel back into their past through the use of speech. This metaphorical time travel (through thought or narration for instance) is one of the leitmotifs of the novel, since the characters regularly go back in time while staying in the present. One

example is when when the narrator admits that he uses the Bell Telephone Company to go reconnect with his past: “speaking gravely and elegantly into the telephone, I ask the telephone operators to connect me with this friend or that one, from whom I have not heard in years” (4). As time made him drift away from his friends, he tries to undo the marks of time by getting back in touch with them. Time travelling can thus be said to be the historian’s work; making the past available in the present. As such, Billy is the perfect character to use as a pretext to tell history, as his time travel makes it possible to narrate with a different perspective.

It is in fact unclear what type of focalisation is used, since Billy does not have the limitations of a usual character. Whether zero or internal focalisation on Billy is used, the focaliser knows the past, present and future, as does Billy. The text thus uses a unique perspective, both subjective in terms of subject yet also very neutral in terms of opinion (Billy’s political neutrality will be gone back to in chapter two) and omniscient in terms of time, with the complete knowledge of the past and future of an omniscient narrator. It is interesting to note that, in the passage relating Billy’s experience in Dresden, there is no time travel (S5 118). But time travel is still important because Billy knows the future: “Billy, with his memories of the future, knew that the city would be smashed to smithereens and then burned – in about thirty more days. He knew, too, that most of the people watching him would be dead.” (124). This makes of him a rather peculiar focaliser, if focaliser he is considered to be, since he has a knowledge of events which goes beyond what human beings normally perceive.

Thus, as a historical novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is particularly fragmented because of the back and forth movement between different moments in history as well as between the characters’ personal past and history. The narration of history requires the narrator and fictional author to revisit his memories of the past. Time-travel properly speaking is an actualisation of the return to the past required by any act of narration, it is also non-negligible as an event in and of itself, which will be explored in the second section.

## **2. Time Travel and Mode of Reality**

While, as discussed above, people go back in time metaphorically with every narration of an everyday anecdote as with the narration of history, the act of travelling through time is

not possible in real life. As such, when it appears in fiction, it is *unnatural*, with respect to the following definition, given by Jan Alber in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*: “An unnatural narrative violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world”<sup>30</sup>. This definition seems to give a clear basis to categorise stories into natural, and unnatural narratives. However, as this section will show, several problems arise with the attempt of such a categorisation. A discussion of time travel within science fiction and an analysis of the two works under study will bring to light some interesting paradoxes.

As noted previously, *Slaughterhouse-Five* deals with real events from the first-hand experience of Billy Pilgrim, a fictional war veteran. Despite this anchor in the real world, the novel can also be argued to be an unnatural narrative. This type of narrative, defined by Jan Alber as quoted above, is interesting to analyse the corpus because of the paradoxes that emerge from such an analysis. In another article, Alber defines what *unnatural* means to him:

the represented scenarios have to be impossible according to the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic (such as the principle of non-contradiction), or standard human limitations of knowledge. In other words, the unnatural deviates from “natural” cognitive parameters, i.e., real-world frames and scripts that are derived from our being in the world<sup>31</sup>.

Despite this definition, which in appearance is very simple to understand and to apply, there are elements in both works which allows to nuance the question. The phrases “*known* laws governing the physical world” and “*accepted* principles of logic” (italics mine) are particularly interesting, as they leave a space of uncertainty for what is not yet known. As what is natural is not fully understood and limited, the limit of what is unnatural is just as unclear. The genre of science-fiction in general plays with this limit, for by setting works in the future, it has the power to present impossible events (such as time-travel or memory erasure) as natural by calling on the science of the future. The genre often uses technology which is far more advanced than that of the time, another point which is at the limit between natural and unnatural, since scientifically-explained but not yet possible events are not completely *unnatural*. While this is not the case of either *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *Eternal*

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30 Jan Alber, “Unnatural Narrative”, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, p.1.

31 Jan Alber, “Unnatural Narratology: The Systematic Study of Anti-Mimeticism,” in *Literature Compass* 10/5, p. 449.

*Sunshine*, with the former taking place in the past and the latter in the present, they do still play with this liminality, each in their own way.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* does this through the Tralfamadorians' vision of time, which will be discussed at length in relation to agency in II, 1. In relation to the concept of unnatural narrative, Alber writes: "we assume that time in the actual world moves forward, that real-world spaces do not suddenly transform themselves, and that human beings are either alive or dead"<sup>32</sup>. Yet, as I shortly mentioned in the introduction, science does not know whether time moves forward or if continuity is brought on by our subjectivity and consciousness. Time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is indeed the result of trauma. Trauma per se will be important to come back to in the discussion about the fragmentation of identity in chapter III. However, this fragmentation is at the origin of such a fragmented narrative. According to Wicks, "memory [...] functions in the manner of a narrativizing tool by organizing and structuring events and experiences in order to provide the individual with a coherent sense of temporality"<sup>33</sup>. Since Billy has lost this ability to organise and structure events and experiences, he does not have a sense of chronology, which in turn marks the narrative. By following his consciousness instead of his physical presence in the fictional world, the narrative thus represents the effects of trauma, but making the narrative no less natural. In fact, if subjectivity is taken into account, such a narration of events is more accurate in terms of what the character experiences. Even the last part of Alber's definition (human beings are either alive or dead), which seems to be the most obvious, is unsettled in the novel and explained away by the Tralfamadorians' vision of time. Indeed, since all moments are simultaneously real, every being is both dead and alive at different points in time:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies, he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist (*S5 22*).

By basing the explanations of impossible events on real scientific interrogations such as the linearity of time, the novel completely blurs the limit between what is impossible and what is not.

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32 Ibid., p. 449.

33 Armanda Wicks, "'All This Happened, More or Less': The Science Fiction of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, p. 332.

The question of the mode of reality may not be directly relevant to the focus of this thesis; yet, it interferes with several concepts used, particularly genre, as well as with many thematic elements, and, as a consequence, it should be discussed. Traditionally, science fiction novels include impossible events, but these are not considered to be magic; instead, they are the result of the scientific advancements and futurist technology which are part of the genre. Time-travel is thus also accepted as part of the genre, often scientifically unexplained, yet considered explainable in the futurist setting. As such, time travel has become a familiar feature of science fiction, one that does not strike the reader as strange. In “Unnatural Narratology: The Systematic Study of Anti-Mimeticism”, Jan Alber explains this phenomenon, which is one of the ways in which unnatural events can be familiarised. He names this process *generification*, that is to say the technique of “evoking generic conventions from literary history”<sup>34</sup>. In the following passage, he explains it using concepts from cognitive science:

In some cases, the represented unnatural scenario or event has already been conventionalized and turned into a perceptual frame. In other words, the process of blending<sup>35</sup> has already taken place, and we have converted the unnatural into a basic cognitive category that is now part of certain generic conventions<sup>36</sup>.

Science fiction has integrated time travel into the genre, it is thus conventionalised. It has also integrated the use of technology that is not (yet) possible at the time of writing, and the writing of impossible events which are explained away by science. The conventionalisation of time-travel as a generic feature has as a consequence the loss of an effect of surprise on the part of the reader; being aware that they are reading a text which belongs to the genre of science fiction, they expect futurist technology and other generic features. Alber explains the effect of generification on the reader:

In such cases, the unnatural no longer strikes us as being strange or unusual: we can simply account for the impossible element by identifying it as belonging to a particular

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34 Italics original. Jan Alber, “Unnatural Narratology: The Systematic Study of Anti-Mimeticism,” in *Literature Compass* 10/5, p. 452.

35 “Blends” are a concept developed by cognitive scientists. Blending takes place in context, when two of these mental spaces form a structure, called “blend”. The blend has some characteristics from each mental space involved, as well as some properties of its own. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities*, p.17-9.

36 Jan Alber, “Unnatural Narratology: The Systematic Study of Anti-Mimeticism,” p. 452.

literary genre; we can evoke a suitable discourse context within which the anomaly can be embedded<sup>37</sup>.

What is interesting to discuss here is that both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Eternal Sunshine* still strike the reader and audience with a feeling of the unusual, and that is precisely because they are at the boundaries of the genre of science fiction. *Slaughterhouse-Five* in particular makes great efforts to stop the reader from adapting to the genre by creating a tension between generic codes. Indeed, the novel offers the reader the possibility of a logical explanation while inviting them to suspend disbelief and accept time-travel as magic. The use of magical realism within a work that is considered science fiction contributes to the feeling of strangeness in the reader, blurring the boundaries between modes of reality and genres. Many of the articles analysing *Slaughterhouse-Five* which were briefly mentioned in the state of the art discuss at length the possible logical explanations for both the time-travel and Billy's abduction to the planet Tralfamadore. They explain these unnatural events away as a result of the mental instability of the character: be it because he survived a plane crash with a fractured skull or because of the trauma of the war, Billy's perception of time, according to them, would be the cause of the unnatural events in the story. The attempt to rationalise an unnatural event comes naturally to many readers as a response to the discomfort of not knowing how to understand a story. It should be pointed out that the reader is indeed given many elements to justify denying Billy's time-travel beyond his own mind. For instance, the narrator relates the plane accident Billy was in to his talking of time-travel: "This," the novel reads, referring to the death of Billy's mother, "was before Billy had his head broken in an airplane crash, by the way – before he became so vocal about flying saucers and traveling in time" (36). By constructing the two clauses starting with the word "before", a parallel is created, implicitly leading the reader to link those two events together. Furthermore, Billy is mentioned to read only science fiction novels written by Kilgore Trout, and the stories recounted are uncannily similar to Billy's own adventures with time-travel and aliens. With the general mental instability that seems to be a feature of Billy's, it seems possible that he lost the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality. Finally, the argument of trauma is also a very likely source of Billy's time travel. Indeed, as a World War Two veteran, he is likely to suffer from traumatic flashbacks (which will be discussed in III, 1), which would provide an entirely rational explanation to most of the novel. This corresponds to what Alber

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37 Ibid., p. 452.

calls “subjectification”. He explains that “some physically, logically, or humanly impossible elements can simply be explained as parts of internal states (of characters or narrators) such as dreams, fantasies, visions or hallucinations”<sup>38</sup>. It is interesting to note that “[t]his reading strategy is the only one that actually “neutralizes” the unnatural insofar as it reveals the ostensibly impossible to be something entirely natural, namely an element of somebody’s interiority”<sup>39</sup>.

However, while indeed neutralising the strange events, the superposition of partly evidence-supported diagnoses used as reading strategies do not make the reading more comfortable – quite in the contrary, since they leave the reader the responsibility of deciding what to believe. Furthermore, the narrator also nudges the reader in the direction of the acceptance of magical events as such: “he dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time travel” (129). In addition to stating explicitly that Billy really did travel in time, the narrator uses the indicative mode when discussing it: “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time”. Sometimes, the facts are related through direct discourse, presented as the character’s thoughts, but as this is the case as much with magical elements as with rational ones, even this does not allow to prove one or the other explanation. The novel thus uses magical realism to create a tension which is unusual in the genre of science fiction. As a result, *Slaughterhouse-Five* requires a mixture of generification and subjectification as reading strategies, and the reader has the responsibility to choose how much of which to employ. This tension is present between the characters: “Barbara [...] thought her father was senile, even though he was only forty-six – senile because of damage to his brain in the airplane crash” (S5 23). Many characters think of Billy as crazy or senile. This represents the side of subjectification – time travel is only in the character’s mind, which was damaged by the war or the plane incident. The side of generification is represented by Billy himself, and, interestingly, by fictional science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, who believes in time-travel before Billy himself does. The novel plays with generic conventions, between the war story with a traumatised veteran and the science fiction novel with time travel and aliens. Through the use of magical realism, the novel allows for both sets of conventions to be at work, and often playing with exactly the point where they are at odds with each other. As a result, the reader cannot settle in one genre with its conventions of what is possible or not within the

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38 Ibid., p. 452.

39 Ibid., p. 452.

storyworld, and generification cannot happen. Generification and subjectification work together in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, not as the two sides of one coin, but as the two ways in which the story is told, since the reader is sometimes led to believe one, sometimes the other. In regards to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this thesis will keep an open-minded approach and embrace the paradoxes as part of the novel, refuting neither the magical explanations that require the suspension of disbelief and which will be productive study material for the question of agency in chapter two, nor the logical explanations, which will be interesting to discuss in chapter three when studying identity. Indeed, as H. Porter Abbott writes, “unreadable minds [...] work best when we allow ourselves to rest in that peculiar combination of anxiety and wonder that is aroused when an unreadable mind is accepted as unreadable”<sup>40</sup>, and I will therefore try to embrace all generic aspects of the novel.

Generification works much more smoothly in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Indeed, as the audience accepts that they are watching a science fiction film, they are also ready to accept the possibility of a company capable of erasing memories. This procedure is one which is not possible in reality at this time. Neil Levi explains the difficulties linked with such a procedure:

Memory erasure of the kind imagined in *Eternal Sunshine* is unlikely to be feasible anytime soon. Indeed, some neuroscientists wonder whether it will ever be possible. Part of the problem is that memories are not stored in one place, where they can easily be accessed and altered. Instead, at least once the memories have been consolidated (moved from short-term to long-term memory) they are stored in widespread cortical networks. Worse, so far as the prospect of targeting individual memories is concerned, the neurons involved in storing one memory (say, Joel’s memory of meeting Clementine) may also be involved in different memories, or perhaps different functions altogether, as well<sup>41</sup>.

Despite these scientific concerns, the audience does not linger on the fact that it is not possible, and this is a result of generification. Indeed, the scientific explanation provided by the doctor is clear and believable:

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40 H. Porter Abbott, “Unreadable” 448, as quoted in Jan Alber, “Unnatural Narratology: The Systematic Study of Anti-Mimeticism.” p. 454.

41 Neil Levi, “Changing one’s Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*”, p. 32.

Now, the first thing we need you to do, Mr Barish, is to go home and collect everything you own that has some association with Clementine. Anything. We'll use these items to create a map of Clementine in your brain. [...] And after the mapping is done, our technicians will do the erasing in your home tonight (*ES* 0:28:24).

The memory erasure is thus scientifically explained, and although the procedure is not possible in reality, the audience accepts this explanation. This is simply because, when reading or watching a work of science-fiction, the reader expects technology to be more advanced than reality, regardless of it is considered to become possible, and so generification occurs. Generification thus allows to accept the memory erasure as part of the genre. Concerning time travel, it is subjectification which is at work. Joel is unconscious during the erasing procedure, and that is when he is made to travel in time from memory to memory. The unnatural elements which are shown to happen take place exclusively inside the character's mind. More than a journey through time, it is a journey through the character's consciousness. *ES* thus uses both generification and subjectification, but independently, for separate aspects of the work, whereas in *S5*, they are completely at odds with each other.

## Chapter Two: Agency in the Imagined Future

Trickling down from the generic discussion and particularly the question of the mode of reality, this chapter will discuss the role of consciousness in the two works, especially in relation to agency – or the lack thereof. Indeed, unconsciousness seems to imply that there is no will and therefore no agency, and both works give complementary points of views on this question. *Eternal Sunshine* takes place mostly while Joel Barish is unconscious, and while *Slaughterhouse-Five* deals with consciousness and unconsciousness more subtly, there is no less to say. Both works studied also make strong claims on the possibility for the characters to be agents in relation to their level of consciousness. These questions touch upon ethical claims, in which both works will be shown to have very different standpoints. Billy Pilgrim is a prisoner of war when he witnesses the bombing of Dresden. Both as a soldier who is required to obey orders and as a prisoner, he has lost his free will almost completely. He arrives at a point where he does not believe in free will any longer, believing it is no more than an illusion. This will be discussed in the first section of this chapter. The second section will focus on *Eternal Sunshine* and argue that the character is quite literally a prisoner of his own mind as a result of relaying his agency to Lacuna. The third section will nuance these arguments and show that the two works do give importance to agency, each in its own way.

### 1. Disempowered by Time-Travel

*Slaughterhouse-Five* develops a rather comprehensive theory about the passing of time through the inhabitants of the planet Tralfamadore. Thanks to their ability to see the fourth dimension, the Tralfamadoreans know certain truths about the physical world that human beings are unable to understand. Their perception of time is very different from ours; to they do not experience the passing of time, in the contrary, they have equal access to any point in time: “The Tralfamadoreans can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance” (S5 22). This comparison with space is telling. Indeed, science often compares time and space, even putting them together in the

compound “spacetime” since Einstein’s 1905 Special Theory of Relativity, but scientists are careful to always point out their differences, particularly unidirectionality, as Mathieu Grousson explains: “Whereas it’s possible to travel space in all directions, time goes only in one direction”<sup>42</sup>. But Tralfamadorians are able to travel through time the way we do through space; for them, time and space are truly comparable.

As a result of the possibility to travel through time as one does through space, the Tralfamadorians know the future as they do the past and the present. In fact they do not experience time as linear at all, they experience it as the time-space that physics explains the world to be:

Billy Pilgrim says that the Universe does not look like a lot of bright little dots to the creatures from Tralfamadore. The creatures can see where each star has been and where it is going, so that the heavens are filled with rarefied, luminous spaghetti. And Tralfamadorians don’t see human beings as two-legged creatures, either. They see them as great millipedes – ‘with babies’ legs at one end and old people’s legs at the other’, says Billy Pilgrim (*S571*).

It is not possible to imagine exactly what Billy describes, since, if they see people with all the legs they will have in their lives, they would also see them with an infinite number of arms, of eyes etc. However, the point is that, for Tralfamadorians, all points in time are simultaneously real, and time does not pass. The Tralfamadorians consider their vision of the world as the correct one: “They had many wonderful things to teach Earthlings, especially about time” (*S521*). Considering that their truth is objective and unique, which is implied by the fact that they consider that they have things to teach Earthlings about time – not just about their vision of time – also means that the beliefs of human beings are wrong. In fact, to them, the passing of time and succession of events is no more than a subjective impression that human beings have because of the limitations of the species (which, incidentally, also corresponds to the way human beings tend to consider non-human animals). But in fact, the discourse of the Tralfamadorians is far from being absurd, since it coincides with some of the findings of science. Indeed, as Hoerl writes, “nothing in the physical picture of the world seems to correspond to the idea of such an objective passage of time”<sup>43</sup>. He explains that theorists

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42 Translation mine. Original: “S’il est possible de parcourir l’espace en tous sens, le temps s’écoule dans une seule direction.” Mathieu Grousson, “Le sens du temps est un casse-tête,” *Science & vie hors série Temps, matière & espace*, p. 73.

43 Christoph Hoerl, “Time and the Domain of Consciousness,” p. 90.

working on time disagree on whether or not there is passage. Some theorists thus argue that “there is no such thing as passage [...] but that perceptual experience nevertheless presents us with an illusion of passage”<sup>44</sup>. The similarity between the discourse of the Tralfamadorians and that of some scientists is interesting to consider in the context of the genre of science fiction. It seems that the novel uses scientific research and plays with its limits, thus also balancing on a thin line between what is realist and what is not, between science and magical realism. In a way, despite the historical setting and absence of extraordinary technology, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is thus a perfect realisation of the genre – at the boundary between science and fiction.

The way in which the Tralfamadorians experience time has a strong influence on agency. Indeed, logically, if there is no temporal succession, there is no past that is set nor a future that is to be decided of. To them, everything already is. As a result, since future events have already happened, there are no choices and no decision to take, there is no free will and no agency. They speak of “The orchestration of the moment” (S5 23), as something that was planned in advance, that could only be in the way it is. The theories of time presented in this book allow time travel to be logical – one travels through time like one does through space –, but it also brings on a sense of fate, inevitability. The Tralfamadorians explain this to Billy as he asks them why he is the one being kidnapped by the flying saucer: “Why anything? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? [...] Well here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*” (S5 63). With everything already existing, there are no cause-consequence relationships. In the Tralfamadorians’ view of time, there is no agency because there is no causation. This is reflected in their novels: “There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depth of many marvellous moments seen all at one time” (S5 71-2). This explanation of Tralfamadorian novels suggests that they found a different way to appreciate the world, valuing harmony between moments and not the action or characters as a result of the lack of cause-effect relationships in their world-view.

This sense of fate that comes as a result leads to a loss of agency because action is considered to be unnecessary; there is a path to follow and there is no possibility to diverge from it. “Only on Earth is there any talk of free will” (S5 70), the Tralfamadorians tell Billy. To them, free will is a human illusion, just like the passing of time. This is reflected in Billy’s

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44 Ibid., p. 91.

character. Indeed, despite being an “Earthling” and thus unable to appreciate fully what Tralfamadorians consider to be the real nature of time, Billy was chosen by the Tralfamadorians and although he still experiences time in the way a human being does – with succession between events – he feels the side-effects of the Tralfamadorian science through time-travel. Like them, he travels in time and is as fully aware of his future as he is of his past. This has an effect on the narration, for instance when he knows he is going to be kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians on the night of his daughter’s wedding: he knows that “he was about to be kidnapped by a flying saucer” (S5 59) in advance, even precisely in time: “Billy looked at the clock on the gas stove. He had an hour to kill before the saucer came” (S5 60). What seems at first strange is that he does not try to stop it, or consider whether or not he would like it to happen; for him, it is the way it should be, the way it will be. The Tralfamadorians’ fatalistic view is thus closely linked with Billy’s passivity as a character. Albert Bandura writes: “People conceive of ends and work purposefully to achieve them. They are agents of experiences, not just undergoers of experiences”<sup>45</sup>. But Billy is such an undergoer of experiences, precisely because of his knowledge of the future, and he embodies the exact opposite of agency. Several times throughout the novel, this becomes extreme: “Billy’s will was paralyzed [...] it became imperative [...] Billy’s hands locked [...] Only then did Billy’s brain start working again” (S5 62). These expressions suggest a physical inability to think and act, a paralysis of the brain. Billy is shown to be very passive throughout the novel; he does not speak, rarely even answers when he is spoken to: “Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (S5 19). The use of the verb *act* reveals the paradox of agency in the novel. Indeed, it suggests both agency and lack thereof. Lexically, acting is the result of being an agent, the verb “act” is defined by the Oxford dictionary as to “Take action; do something”<sup>46</sup>. Yet, an actor plays the part they are given, they have no choice beyond the freedom of interpretation and have to play the character as it was written.

Beyond his physical passivity, he is also mentally passive, showing no reaction and seemingly not having an opinion about most of what he sees: “Billy Pilgrim tried hard to care” (S5 47). He is shown to be apolitical, and even not to have a conscience: “Billy was not

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45 Albert Bandura, “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency”, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, p. 168.

46 “Act,” Oxford Dictionaries.

moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do.” (S5 49). It seems that, as a result of knowing that events could not happen in any different way, that agency is an illusion of humanity, that Billy has also lost all sense of morality. He is more machine than human, in conformity to what he has learned on his trip to Tralfamadore: “Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine. It amuses them that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines” (S5 127). Similarly, fictional science fiction writer Kilgore Trout is mentioned to have written a book about robots which dropped “burning jellied gasoline on human beings”. These robots had “no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground” (S5 138). The reference to the Vietnam war turns Trout’s shallow-sounding novel into a metaphor about what humanity has become. The loss of agency is exaggerated through the metaphor of robots, mindlessly obeying orders regardless of moral consequences in a way which is ultimately typical of the genre of science fiction.

## 2. Trapped in One’s Mind



*Eternal Sunshine* (0:54:28). Just after the disappearance of Clementine from his memory of being at the lake, Joel understands what the procedure implies, and that he is effectively trapped in his own mind.

One image is particularly striking in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*; that of Joel, on his knees on the ice of the Charles screaming “I don’t want this anymore, I want to call it off.” (0:54:18) and the next image cutting to the technician dancing with the secretary to loud music, both dressed in nothing but their underwear. The anxiety felt by the character as a consequence of his powerlessness at that moment is agonisingly frightening, and the first thought that comes to mind is that Joel is a prisoner in his own mind. This thought stays with us during the entire film, as he tries to escape the procedure and regain his power of action. The realisation of what the procedure really is like brings with it a strong feeling of regret, for Joel knows that, by relaying his agency to Lacuna, he lost the power to shape his life as he wished to. Regret comes as a result of not being able to change the past. This section will study agency during the memory erasure in *Eternal Sunshine*.

In a way, it could be said that Joel chose the procedure and thus that he chose to give up his agency; yet it is clear that he did not know what to expect from the erasure. He may be an agent, but the decision he takes is driven by his emotions and not by thoughtful reflection. As Hateren writes, “agency and free will are under intense investigation by the neurosciences, with several results casting doubt on whether free will exists at all”<sup>47</sup>. It can indeed be considered that Joel’s choice was not taken of his own free will insofar as his decision was not informed. The definition of “free will” from the Cambridge Dictionary, quoted in the introduction, specified the importance of a choice being made “independently of any outside influence”<sup>48</sup>. While ignorance is not technically speaking outside influence, it is outside influence (Clementine’s decision to have the procedure and the doctor’s willingness to take him in priority) which leads him to take the decision so harshly. Still, he is seen swallowing what seems to be sleeping medication willingly, trusting Lacuna’s supposed medical knowledge, thus effectively giving away his agency. This brings on a more fundamental question: did Joel really choose to go through the erasing? Indeed, the memories of agreeing to do the procedure and visits to Lacuna are erased along with Clementine, since the company does not want people to remember that there is something to remember. Sometimes, it is unclear whether we see the action taking place in the present, or the memory while Joel is going back, but once the images start to use unnatural associations (such as Joel being twice in the same room), the audience is aware that something strange is going on, and we are aware

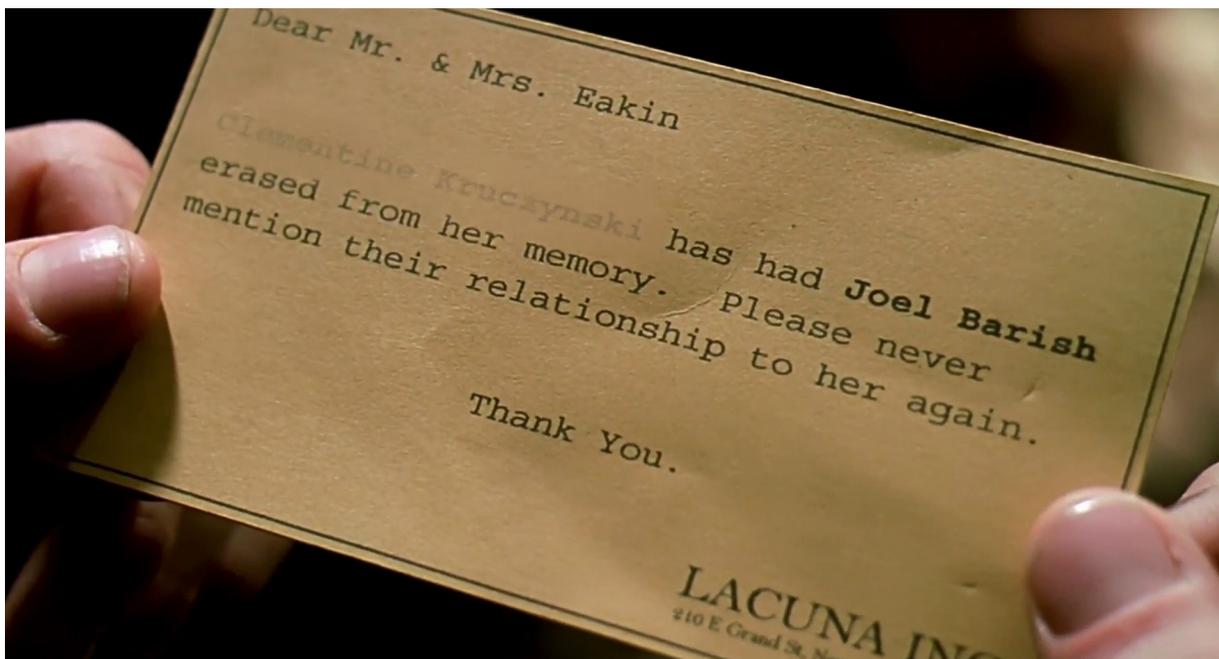
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47 Hateren, “The Origin of Agency, Consciousness, and Free Will”, p. 980.

48 “Free Will,” Cambridge Dictionary.

that this is not the real event which is seen, but the process of erasing the memory of this event. Thus, in reality, we are never shown the moment Joel agrees to have the procedure. When he starts inquiring about the services offered by Lacuna, the film suggests that the procedure is already ongoing, and we understand that when we watch him agreeing to the procedure it is already because that memory is being erased (0:30:07).

This is ultimately the question that comes with any instance of time-travel: if there is no succession, if we can travel between the past and the future, then the cause-effect relationship is unsettled. The effect of time travel on causation will be analysed in depth in relation to *Slaughterhouse-Five* later on. However, going back to *Eternal Sunshine*, eighteen minutes into the film and before we are aware of the procedure, Joel is shown driving home in tears, opening mail from Lacuna and taking the pills sent to him by the memory-erasing company to make him sleep throughout the procedure. Although this could also be during the erasure, since Lacuna would also erase that memory, nothing indicates that this is not the genuine moment. The most likely interpretation seems to be that this is the only scene truly happening in the past. If it is, then this is possibly the beginning of the procedure, with everything shown afterwards being already during the erasure. It is clear that the procedure does indeed start much earlier than the audience who watches the film for the first time is lead to think. Indeed, when memory erasure is first mentioned, that is when Joel's friend Rob shows him the confidential card with the words "Clementine Kruczynski has had Joel Barish erased from her memory. Please never mention their relationship to her again."



*Eternal Sunshine* (0:25:01). Joel's memory of looking at the card Lacuna sent to Carrie and Rob.

memory. Please never mention their relationship to her again.” (0:24:55), the procedure is already under way, since Clementine’s name disappears from the card. At that point, the audience does not know anything about the procedure or the fact that Joel is getting his memory erased. Yet, Clementine’s name becomes blurry and finally disappears, then the image becomes blurry and an electronic beep is heard (0:25:08), signalling the erasure of that particular memory.

While Joel has a rather passive personality – at least in comparison with the buzzing character of Clementine – it cannot be said that he is a passive bystander of the procedure. Quite in the contrary, he fights it with all he has even though the all-mighty technology makes it a losing battle. Indeed, once he has fallen asleep, he is trapped in “a dreamlike, drugged slumber”<sup>49</sup> that is in truth difficult to define but seems rather close to that of a person who is asleep and experiencing a lucid dream. He is physically unable to move – apart from succeeding in opening his eyes twice – and is forced to relive his memories. By taking the drugs sent by Lacuna, he relayed his agency over to them, a decision to trust with too little knowledge made in the spur of the moment while he was angry at Clementine. However, what the technicians seem to ignore is that while their subject is apparently asleep in his bed, he relives his memories in a realistic way. They take place at a life-like pace, and Joel, like Billy earlier, “acts out” the part he is given, the part of his past self. Every attempt to stop the procedure fails as the technicians have a direct power at the source of the dream: his brain. Stan is lost when faced with a subject who seems to resist the procedure, and it seems to be the first time that someone has resisted the procedure. However the doctor’s expertise quickly makes up for it. For Joel, the fight against that power is lost in advance, comparable to trying to keep a computer going through software manipulations when someone else can unplug it. Joel is unable to even communicate, and the technicians think that he has unconsciously developed a resistance to the procedure. The characters with whom Joel speaks have the same limitations. Once Joel decides that he wants to stop the procedure, he goes to speak to Dr Mierzwiak and asks him to wake him up. However, what he does not realise is that he is inside of his own mind, and that the doctor is just as helpless as he is: “I’m part of your imagination too, Joel, how can I help you from there?” (0:56:40). The characters are thus all part of Joel’s mind, made from memories but also his own imagination.

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49 Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*, p. 169.

The question I would like to ask here is to what extent the character is really unconscious, and how conscious this resistance is. As an audience member, as we see Joel fight to keep the memories, we are led to believe that he is conscious in his past memories and consciously exerts his agency. The technicians' belief that he developed an unconscious resistance to the procedure – almost like an immune response with the brain defending itself – seems almost outrageous when we witness the strength of his will to keep his memories. And yet, Joel is asleep, and very much unconscious and as a result he is powerless. At first, before trying to escape the procedure itself, Joel tries to re-write his own past, and interestingly, it is the environment which protests. For example, after the argument that triggered their breakup, Clementine leaves Joel's apartment. He catches up with his car, then tries to run after her. However, no matter in which direction he is running, he always runs in the direction of his car and away from her (0:38:35). As a result, he is physically unable to follow her. This could be said to be because when this breakup really happened, he did not follow her, and the procedure works with memories as they were before the procedure. As he relives his memories, he supposedly relives them the way they were at first; like Billy, he can only act out the part he is given. However, this changes as the procedure is under way. If he cannot follow her at first, it is hypothetically because he does not yet have a strong enough desire to keep his memories to resist the procedure, but as he is reminded of the positive aspects of his relationship with Clementine, his will strengthens and he claims back his power to act.

### **3. Reclaiming Agency**

Although, as stated above, the characters are very limited in their ability to act from inside the memories, they spend a large portion of the film trying to escape the procedure. Despite the fact that it ultimately fails and Joel wakes without any memory of his relationship with Clementine the next morning, the struggle is not pointless. If the characters cannot escape the ultimate all-powerful technology, they are still agents in their present. In fact, while he is indeed a prisoner of his mind, Joel is also freed by the power of imagination. Indeed, the procedure allows to relive through his memories and change the past, something that is not possible in reality: time “is different [from space] insofar as it has only one direction. And

that, at a large scale, it brings to the surface irreversibility”<sup>50</sup>. The unidirectionality of time has as a consequence that the past cannot be changed, a law which is known as the irreversibility of time in physics. When Joel visits his memories of the past, the simple fact that he is in the past implies that he has no power of action. And yet, because he is in his mind, he can in fact change the events, and as he goes through his memories, he is still an agent to a certain extent. For instance, Joel attempts to run after Clementine or change the way things happened.

I mentioned earlier that where Joel is subdued and passive, Clementine is energetic and active. She – or rather, Joel’s projection of her in his mind – is a driving force of action even during the procedure:

CLEMENTINE: Just cancel it then.

JOEL: What are you talking about, I can’t just cancel it, I’m asleep.

CLEMENTINE: Wake yourself up! (*ES* 0:58:07)

Despite wanting the procedure to stop, Joel is not the one who has the idea.

She is also the one who comes up with the idea of hiding in a memory in which she does not belong, which was therefore not mapped in Joel’s brain. This very smart idea is the closest to success they achieve, since Stan needs to call the doctor for help to find him again. The Clementine projected in his mind is the agent in him, she dares to suggest change even when change seems impossible:

CLEMENTINE: I wish you’d stayed.

JOEL: I wish I’d stayed too. Now I wish I’d stayed. I wish I’d done a lot of things. I wish I – I wish I’d stayed. [...]

CLEMENTINE: Joely? What if you stayed this time? (*ES* 1:29:12)

Finally, I would like to mention Mary Svevo, the receptionist at Lacuna. During most of the film, Mary is strongly in favour of the procedure, not worried about ethical aspects. She seems to admire the doctor in particular, and we, like her, find out in the end of the film that this is the result of having been in a relationship with him. When she finds out about this affair and the fact that she had her memory erased, she takes action immediately, listening to the tape and returning all the tapes to their respective owners, including Clementine and Joel. This last move does not nullify the procedure for them, for all they know is that they had a relationship together, as well as what they do not like about each other. However, it stops

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50 “Translation mine. Original : “Intimement lié à l’espace, le temps s’en distingue en ce qu’il n’a qu’une direction. Et qu’il fait émerger, à grande échelle, l’irréversibilité.” Mathieu Grousson. “Le sens du temps est un casse-tête,” *Science & vie hors série Temps, matière & espace*, p.73.

them from making again the one mistake they regret the most: getting their memory of each other erased. Regardless of whether or not their relationship lasts, agency has not lost. The knowledge of having had their memory erased allows Joel and Clementine to decide to imagine the future differently, and, I believe, this hope could give them the agency they need to change. The question of agency in *Eternal Sunshine* is thus complex. Indeed, the film offers more questions than it provides answers and the open ending leaves the audience to choose how to interpret it, as a playful but grim work on the inevitability of repeating one's mistakes or as a hopeful outlook on the possibility of starting over. The film does not give one answer to these questions, it merely invites the audience to think about them.

Billy is introduced as a character in chapter two, which is where the novel begins properly speaking. This chapter starts in the following way: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (S5 19). This announces a large part of the story, the reader is warned that time will have a major impact, and announces time-travel. Beyond the thematic introduction of time travel, the word choice is particularly interesting, for it implies that human beings are as a rule stuck in time. Are we prisoners of our timelines? This is what the Tralfamadorians seem to think, since they see their own freedom in time as a vantage point. In this regard, while Billy has lost all belief in free will and agency, he has also won a different kind of freedom, that of travelling through time freely and learning more about the past and the future than other earthlings. From the point of view according to which all people are machines, Billy's knowledge of not being an agent only removes an illusion, for he believes he knows the ultimate truth. But although this uncontrolled time travel seems to be a prison in itself – in the same way human beings are stuck in a chronological timeline, Billy is stuck in his own timeline – it is in truth more than that. David Lodge writes: "Billy is "time-tripping". With other traumatized veterans he seeks to escape the intolerable facts of modern history by means of the science fiction myth of effortless travel through time and intergalactic space"<sup>51</sup>. I will discuss the question of trauma in Chapter III, but it is important at this point to highlight the word *escape* in the above quote. This "time-tripping" is indeed an escape for Billy, an escape which the genre of science fiction allowed him, both in the narrative and in the diegesis. Billy is indeed a great reader of science fiction. Reading novels by Kilgore Trout lead him to believe in the existence of Tralfamadorians and time-travel. These stories changed his way of looking at the world, his way of perceiving it. By believing in fiction, he escapes the horror of

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51 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 78.

reality. Fiction allows him to survive the traumatic memories through a life which is half-fictional, half-real. It gives him a different way of looking at the world, a lens which allows him to experience life beyond what human beings see.

When the fictional author in *Slaughterhouse-Five* decides to write about the past, he goes against the pull of wanting to bury the trauma deep within oneself. The process of remembering is a way to free himself of the trauma which haunts him. As Maria Holmgren Troy observes, trauma “resists narrative integration”<sup>52</sup>, which appears in the novel through the narrator’s difficulties with writing. He believed it to be an easy task at first: “all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (S5 2), but he soon realises that it will be an arduous and stressful task: “I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time” (S5 2). The novel calls upon the motif of looking back as a taboo:

Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes.

People are not supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore (S5 18). Looking back as a taboo is also the theme of the story of Orpheus, who lost his partner to the underworld because he looked back although Hades had forbidden him to do so. *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to break the curse; he looked back, and by doing so, he claimed his past as his and became an agent again.

Freedom from chronology also becomes a power in itself, if only symbolically. A passage of the novel which has attracted much attention is that in which Billy, on the night of his daughter’s wedding, knowing that he has some time before the flying saucer comes, watches a war film, first backwards to reach the beginning of the film, then forwards again. This scene is striking because the images shown on the screen are the very opposite of destruction. Lawrence Broer analyses it the following way:

“In one telling image, a war movie run in reverse, Vonnegut demonstrates the power of art to subvert the destructive process of war. Fires go out; dead or wounded soldiers are made whole; bombs fly back into planes which fly backwards to friendly cities; the bombers are dismantled and minerals used for bombs are returned to the earth (73-75).

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52 Maria Holmgren Troy, “Narrative and Trauma: Kate Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster* and Margaret Atwood’s ‘Death by Landscape’”, *Berätta för att förstå? Sju essäer*, p. 126.

Unfortunately, Billy uses fantasy not to reconstruct his own robotic personality, but to escape the present. His vision transports him to an Edenic world of ‘two perfect people named Adam and Eve.’ He seeks a condition of ‘pre-birth’ (43)<sup>53</sup>.

In fact, by moving in space to the planet Tralfamadore, he encounters this Edenic world in the zoo. Through the power of imagination, he freed himself from the real world in which he was too powerless. Yet, it is clear that this is only a relative freedom, for Billy is no less passive, simply accepting his condition, whether good or bad. I would like to argue that *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s relationship with agency is thus paradoxical: by showing an extremely passive character who is more of a witness than an agent, it shows the necessity of action. As Broer writes, “A striking paradox of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that it presents us with Vonnegut's most completely demoralized protagonist while making what is to this point the most affirmative statement of Vonnegut's career”<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, the novel has a “predominantly affirmative thrust”<sup>55</sup>. The characters’ exaggerated passivity is not glorified, it is presented as the result of war and despair. Fiction and imagination are an escape for the characters: “They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. [...] They were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (S5 82). Fiction is here a sense-making tool for the characters, for the narrator, and perhaps as well for the author and the reader.

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53 Lawrence R. Broer, *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia In the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 87.

54 Ibid., p. 86.

55 Ibid., p. 87.

## Chapter Three: The Past, Memory and Identity

The importance of memory in the two works under study is, as mentioned in the introduction, somewhat paradoxical in regards to the genre, since memories concern one's past and science fiction usually concerns itself with the future. The previous chapters, however, have shown that the involvement of time-travel blurs even the conception of past and future. In fact, my hypothesis in this chapter is that time travel allows to push these considerations to the background to prioritise characterisation and the development of identity. Identity and time are interrelated concepts. Identity changes with the passing of time: people grow up and age, their personality changes with experiences. Age and experience also change the way time is perceived to pass. This chapter will study how travelling through time and memories influences the characters' identities, and vice versa. It will also show that the two works use time-travel to build characters which are, in an abstract and theoretical way, outside of time. My aim in this chapter is to study the formal tools used by each text – each using a different medium – to represent fragmentation, loss, or continuity.

The two texts under study are very fragmented works of art. Time shifts are numerous, and the characters visit their past and futures until each narrative is a labyrinth of anachronies. Fragmentation is commonly cited as a feature of postmodernism<sup>56</sup>, among others brought on by the increasing horrors of the twentieth century. If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is commonly listed as a postmodernist work, *Eternal Sunshine* does not seem to be part of the same movement. Yet, it undeniably inherited postmodernism's fragmentation and playfulness. Beyond leading to a fragmentation in the narrative, time-travel also leads to a fragmentation in the characters' identities. Each work also offers a reconciliation of sorts in its own way. Reconciliation with oneself and with one's time, even a potential continuity, will be the subject of the last section of this chapter.

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56 e.g. Ihab Hassan, who cites "fragmentation" among 11 other criteria which are, according to him, defining of pluralism in postmodernist literature. "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," in *Exploring Postmodernism*, p.19.

## 1. Loss of Identity

Apart from their passive and subdued attitude, Joel Barish and Billy Pilgrim have little in common in their lives and personalities. The one experience they have in common is that of loss, both within their mind and in tangible reality. On the one hand, Joel is mourning a relationship, but the procedure he agrees to in order to make the breakup easier is an even greater loss, the threat of the loss of part of his memories, and, with them, the loss of a part of himself, a loss which is irreversible. Billy's loss is of the kind which comes with large-scale destruction. As he witnessed the bombing of Dresden, the event became a traumatic memory in his mind that destroyed the balance in his psyche. Beyond that, Billy suffers smaller-scale losses, such as the deaths of first his mother, then his wife Valencia, the loss of his home on Earth when he is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians, and, ultimately, the loss of his life. As discussed in Chapter II, both characters also lose their free will, which comes down to the loss of a part of what makes up their identity.

Regardless of whether or not brain damage is considered to be the explanation for time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is undeniable that Billy had indeed suffered from damages to his brain at several points in his life. First, this happens as a consequence of PTSD, which is referred to as "a mild nervous collapse" and for which Billy "was given shock treatments". Both the "mild nervous collapse" and its treatment are forms of brain damage<sup>57</sup>, damage which was then furthered by the airplane accident Billy was in in 1968, a crash he was the sole survivor of and that caused "a fractured skull" and confusion which accompanies concussions of any severity: "He didn't know where he was" (129). The case of the narrator of the novel is more difficult to discuss. As a narrator, he is always present, his words are our only link to the story. Yet, while, as a first-person narrator, he is homodiegetic, his character-self is elusive. In the first and last chapters, he reveals a lot about himself as a writer, a figure built as a mirror image to the real author. This figure is autobiographical to such an extent that many scholars choose to identify him to Vonnegut, considering that "the author speaks to us directly in the important first chapter about the impact of the war on him, and [...] with references such as 'I was there,' and 'that was me,' he personally turns up in the narrative four

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57 According to Friedberg, electroshock treatments "produces amnesia by selectively damaging the temporal lobes and the structures within them". This makes the brain damage suffered by Billy quite similar to that undergone by Joel Barish. John Friedberg, "Shock treatment, brain damage, and memory loss: a neurological perspective," p. 1014.

times”<sup>58</sup>. While I believe it important to make a difference between a preface and postface, in which the author addresses the reader directly, and the first and last chapters of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is true that the similarities between the narrator and the author result in an uncanny narrative structure and an instability of the narrator’s identity. His struggles with his memories are the focus of the first chapter, where he discusses the writing process, and his inability to remember, which rather than make explicit through words, he shows by starting the topic several times and changing the topic. The narrator’s absence throughout the novel apart from the first and last chapter is interesting to mention. As noted by Broer above, he does appear four times in the novel, but only fleetingly, as a presence more than as a character. Indeed, he only mentions his presence in passing and does not elaborate on his actions. In the last chapter, he notes:

“There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters”<sup>59</sup>.

There is thus a strong ethical claim linked with the absence of the narrator as a character from most of the novel. Instead of showing himself, he lets his absence speak for itself, a silent, invisible testimony of his loss of identity. Focussing on Billy is thus like a compromise, the only way he can tell about the war without telling about his experiences, a therapy for the trauma he suffered.

The importance of brain damage and identity loss in both works is striking by its similarities. I wrote above that while Vonnegut’s novel concerns itself with destruction and death, *Eternal Sunshine* is an optimistic film about the power of love. While this is certainly true in terms of general themes, both feature a violent destruction of a psyche. A large part of the story of *Eternal Sunshine* takes place during the erasure of the memories. While we witness this procedure, we see Joel re-live his memories of his relationship with Clementine before they disappear, one after the other. This procedure, which Dr Mierzwiak explains to be a form of “brain damage” (0:31:30) is thematised in many ways throughout the film. While the brain damage caused by the procedure is considered to be minor – “on a par with a night of heavy drinking” (0:31:36) and the procedure to be nearly completely risk-free, it becomes

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58 Lawrence R. Broer, *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia In the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 86.

59 Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 134.

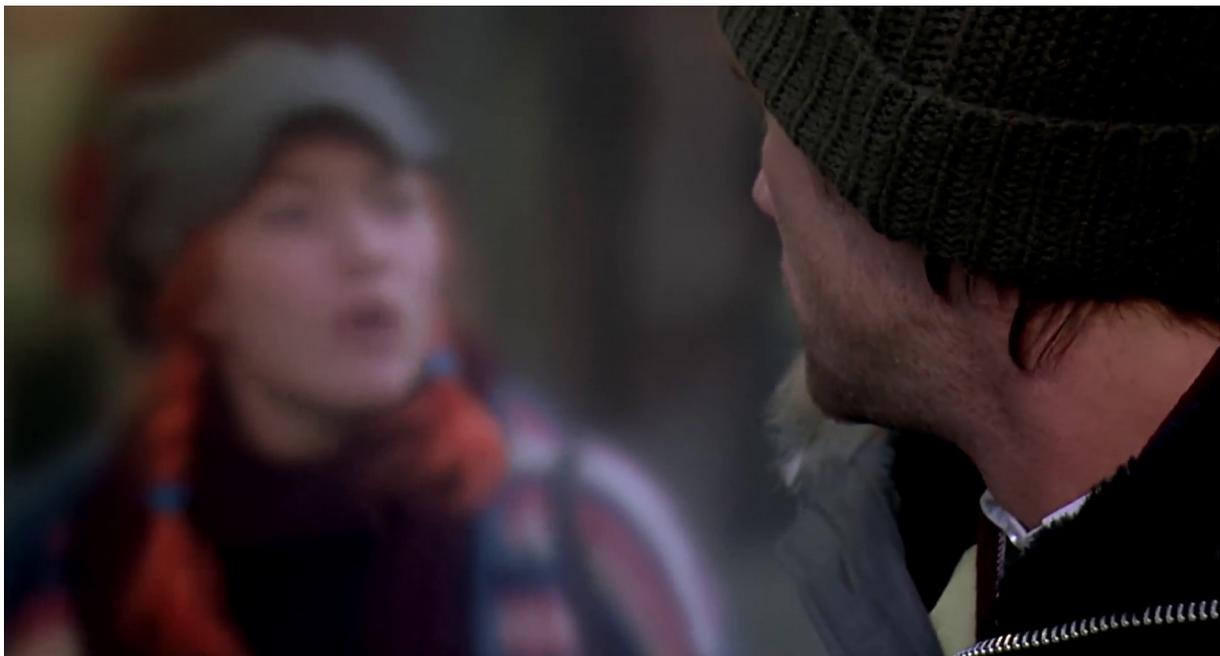
clear as the film unfolds that it causes irreversible damage to the patient's sense of identity. The film uses several techniques to thematise this loss, starting with the opening credits, during which the letters slowly disintegrate before disappearing. Like the memories in Joel's brain, like the dots on the map on the technicians' computer, the letters disappear progressively and piece by piece.



*Eternal Sunshine (0:18:08).*

The letters from the opening credits slowly disintegrate.

Laurence Moinereau, who studied the effects which can be produced by opening and ending credits, notes that sometimes, “words become motifs”<sup>60</sup>. Here they become an analogy for the entire procedure undergone by the characters. Beyond this, blurring is often used in the film to convey the interference of the procedure with the memories which are shown. This happens for instance as Joel and Clementine argue on the last night they see each other, which is thus the first memory of their relationship to be erased since the procedure works backwards. The images are clear throughout their argument, but as the memory draws to its end and the



*Eternal Sunshine (0:42:54).* The images represent the procedure by blurring Clementine, who is being erased from Joel's mind, while Joel himself, the subject from whose consciousness the memories are seen, stays clear. The camera, angled like Joel, pulls the reader into his subjective gaze and consciousness by making the audience have the same field of vision as he does.

60 Translation mine. Original: “la transformation du mot en motif”. Laurence Moinereau, *Le générique de film : De la lettre à la figure*, p. 34.

procedure starts to interfere, the images become blurry in order to represent the memory half-erased and becoming less clear (0:36:38). Blurring can also be selective; the memory erasure targets Clementine first, and as she is being erased from his mind, her face becomes blurry although he stays clear on the image (for example at 0:42:54). Along with the blurring of the images, other filmic tools are used to represent the increasing distance between the character and his memories. Examples are the extinction of lights (for instance at 0:23:25), the disappearance of the character (e.g. Joel loses Clementine in a crowd at 1:17:30) the crumbling of the structures around the characters (0:38:25 and 1:28:00), disappearance of their environment (the titles and images disappear from the books in the library until they are completely white, 1:22:30) a lack of synchronisation between sound and image, echoing sounds, a lack of coherence in space, and various combinations and variations of the above.

The lack of coherence of space and plays on image/sound synchronisation are two points which are interesting to explore a little further. Time and space are intricately related in the film, as they are in physics. With the theory of relativity came the concept of spacetime, as discussed in the introduction. While space and time are very different parts of the physical world, they are often put in relation, for instance when speed is in question, or when the chronology is represented as an arrow which points to the right. As ubiquity is physically impossible, space and time are related, since moving through space is impossible without the passing of time. In the film, the moment of his past Joel is sent back to determines the place he revisits as well. It is interesting to note that *Slaughterhouse-Five* also touches upon this question, since Billy's time travelling is represented in terms of time as well as of space: "And Billy traveled in time to the zoo on Tralfamadore" (S5 91). Going back to *Eternal Sunshine*, the question of the relation between time and space is what allows Joel to resist the procedure. Indeed, the procedure targets specific space-time associations which Joel and Clementine try to escape by physically running away from the erasing in the memories (e.g. at 0:54:52). Furthermore, the aforementioned lack of coherence reflects the progressive loss of the memories as the associations between spaces are broken by time-travel. By breaking up the way time is experienced, that is to say by fragmenting the timeline, the coherence of space is also broken. There are many representations of this idea in the film as, while travelling in time, Joel also travels in space. For instance, before the audience member is aware of the procedure, they watch Joel as he tells his friends Carrie and Rob that Clementine pretended not to recognise him when he went to visit her at her job. During his narration, the voice of

the character becomes a voice-over as the image shifts to the scene at the library. We are thus shown memory-Joel as he tries to interact with Clementine, while hearing present-Joel's narration of the event. But when he walks away from the help-desk at the library and through a door, he is back to standing in his friends' living room. This sudden teleportation is the result of time-travel. Similarly, when he tries to follow Clementine when she leaves his apartment after their argument, directions are confused as she seems to enter the bathroom only to be in the kitchen when he looks for her.

Because Michel Gondry is well-known for his work in the genre of music video, it seems natural that the film also uses music and sound to support the image, perhaps more so than usual. First of all, several parts of the soundtrack are slightly out of tune, which creates an effect of strangeness and loss of bearings. In parallel with the character's loss of identity, the music loses what holds it together, rhythm and harmony. This is the case of "Collecting Things" (*ES* 0:28:25) and "Peer Pressure" (1:12:21) for example. The main theme, composed by Jon Brion, is played twice in the film, both times on the same images of Joel waking up in the morning after the procedure and going to the train station, calling in sick at work and spontaneously going to Montauk instead. This scene is the first of the film, when the audience does not yet know that his memory was erased, and then again towards the ending after the entire procedure has been shown. It is interesting to note that in this first instance, the audience is on equal grounds with the character, since he does not know about the procedure. The synchronisation between image and music is different: the music starts about thirty seconds later in the second occurrence, letting the silence stretch for longer. The melody of this theme is poised and harmonious, in line perhaps with the very romantic nature of the film. But the jazzy twist only half a minute after its beginning (created both by the dissonance of a major seventh and a syncopated rhythm) warns the audience of the fact that all is not as it seems. The repeated syncopes (a rhythm which starts with a note which lasts for only half of a pulse and thus sets the following notes off-pulse) give an out-of-balance feeling to the incipit. The theme thus already introduces us to the double aspect of the film: both a very romantic film and an almost surrealist piece which plays with our conceptions of space and time. The rhythm and harmony contribute to the strangeness of the film by evading stability. This is furthered by a very low bass and a high-pitched melody which leave up to three octaves in the middle empty. The piece thus lacks the stability of full harmony, and simultaneously adds a nostalgic tinge to the beginning. There is also a digital background noise in the music of the

theme, a soft and continuous sound with subtle interruptions not dissimilar to hiccups (this sound effect also appears in other parts of the film, as for instance in the song “Bookstore” [1:22:21]), which creates an effect both of mystery and of suspense.

7

14 Major 7<sup>th</sup> and syncopate-like rhythm

21 Large gaps between the bass and melody

28

Extract from the score of the piano arrangement of the main theme by Jon Brion (measures 7 to 33).

All these musical elements have a different effect on the audience on the first and second time this music appears, even though both the sound and the images are the same. What differs is that they have a different knowledge of the situation. The first time, it appears like a rather traditional film beginning: the simple, delicate melody which accompanies the morning routine of the character makes for an incipit without surprise. The nostalgia seems to be a result of the character’s bitterness on Valentine’s Day. The second time the same passage is shown, however, the audience has just watched the entire procedure and seen the character fight to keep his memories and with them his identity. Although the character himself ignores this history, the audience’s knowledge changes the way this scene is experienced. The nostalgia is much stronger; it is now a whole relationship which is being mourned, and with it

his own identity, and the music accompanies the audience in their larger understanding of the situation.

There are also several passages in which sound is not synchronised with the image. As the various moments of the past are confounded and the memories progressively disappear, as the few temporal anchors are destroyed, the elements become more confused. One instance is when Clementine is irritated at Joel's tactlessness (0:45:45) and tries to argue with him, and she gets angrier as he shows no resistance but also no will to discuss the issue. After a few sentences, the movements of her lips stops corresponding to the words we hear, signalling perhaps that Joel has stopped listening to her, or, at a smaller scale, that her words have already started being erased. The loss of memories is thus supported by various filmic tools which rely both on sound and image. In *Eternal Sunshine*, the procedure of memory erasing "impoverishes [...] self-knowledge"<sup>61</sup>. Identity is threatened at its deepest as Joel's memories of Clementine are erased, and he is sent back to being the person he was before anything happened. In both works of the corpus, the loss is partial, and creates a gap in the characters' identities. This loss is thus at the origin of fragmentation, an unbridgeable gap between a before and an after. The next section will focus on this fragmentation.

## 2. Fragmentation of the Self

Identity evolves with experiences and the passing of time. Linear and nonlinear narratives alike show very well how a character can be changed by an event, and at the large scale every event changes them. The presence of time travel makes this more complex. Indeed, as the characters travel to their past or their future, they are forced to confront their past and future selves. As the characters are led to visit their past and, in Billy's case, his future, the narrative bears traces of the changes in them. Indeed, in real life, change in identity usually happens progressively, but time travel leads to the confrontation of the different identities of the characters. Throughout his life, Billy takes on different roles. This is emphasised by the fact that he is often referred to with one tag only, not describing his character but his main role in society at that moment. The following quote presents an instance of time travel. Billy falls asleep as a prisoner of war, in 1944 or 1945, and travels in

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61 Neil Levy, "Changing one's Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*", S&F p. 41.

time to 1968 in his sleep: “Billy Pilgrim went to sleep, woke up *as a widower* in his empty home in Ilium” (italics mine, 107). The shift of over twenty years marks a major change for him: when he falls asleep, he is not yet married, and he wakes after the death of his wife. Throughout the novel, Billy is referred to with many labels as time affects his identity: from soldier to veteran, from husband to widower, father, optometrist. Each of these labels shows that, while the passing of time is a regular process, life is marked by major turning points which bring on sudden changes of identity. When he travels in time, he is detached from his previous role to take on the next quite suddenly and without the transition which usually accompanies a change of state (e.g. the death of his wife makes a widower of him). This fragmented self is the result of Billy’s “confusing, scattered sense of temporality”<sup>62</sup> thus also impedes on his sense of identity.

Although the story of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* takes place over a shorter period of time – the length of Joel and Clementine’s relationship, which can be assumed to last a little under two years – than *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the film works even more directly on the comparison of the different periods of life. In contrast to Billy Pilgrim, Joel and Clementine have not had time to evolve as much between professions, life events and functions. Despite this, it is interesting to study the relationship each character has with their past self, particularly because the film blurs the boundaries between past and present and the characters are directly confronted with their past selves without being this past self. As a result, the audience witnesses a major discrepancy between between the past and the present version of the characters. The main trigger of this discrepancy takes place as Joel relives a memory in which he was talking with Clementine while lying in bed under the blanket (*ES* 00:52:10). She confides her insecurities to him, tells him of her loneliness as a child and he tells her that she is beautiful, he is reminded of the beautiful moments they had together. “Let me keep this one please,” (*ES* 0:53:18) whispers Joel’s present self, which, as Jane Stadler remarks, is represented as a voice over<sup>63</sup> throughout the film. I would, however, like to point out that while he is indeed often present as a voice over, his present self’s comments on the past are more often voiced by the Joel of the past, making the two identities blur. A third source of discourse from present Joel is when he appears twice on the screen, as on the image below.

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62 Armanda Wicks, “‘All This Happened, More or Less’: The Science Fiction of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, p. 337.

63 Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*, p. 181.



Joel appears twice on the image. On the right, he is the Joel of the memory, that of the past, on the left, his present self is observing the scene.

It is here interesting to note the difference of colours between the Joel of the past, who is tinged in the orange light created by the colourful blanket, and the present-Joel who is paler and in more natural colours. The film thus invites us to accept that this Joel is not under the blanket at all, he is an onlooker, in a different dimension of his own consciousness. The present-Joel, presented as an onlooker, is important here because it is while watching this scene from a different perspective that he understands that he does not want to go through this procedure after all. This memory may be the first moment when he realises that he cherishes his memories of Clementine, but with every memory he revisits, this will to keep the memories strengthen. As argued in the previous chapter, Joel is trapped inside of his own mind and cannot escape the procedure. But as the procedure goes on and he relives through his memories of Clementine, he changes his opinion on whether or not erasing memories was a good decision. His past self took the decision on a whim, as a result of his anger at Clementine and a wish to show that he, too, can forget, as well as a desire to get over his relationship with her. But while they decided to erase each other because they weren't happy, once the procedure is taking place, they realise that not all memories of their relationship are dark, they are also a part of themselves that they want to keep. This creates a major discrepancy between Joel's past self and his decision to erase his memories, and his present –

but unfortunately unconscious – self who regrets this decision dearly. This discrepancy is shown in several ways.

Several passages use irony to highlight this gap. This is for instance the case of a very interesting passage situated approximately halfway through the film, as Joel and Clementine are running to escape the erasure. Between two shots of them running, we are shown fleeting images of happy moments of their relationship, such as Joel jumping on their bed while Clementine plays the piano and Clementine laughing in bed and being carried by Joel. These are typical moments of a happy relationship, they provoke a smile in the audience, for these two characters look like they are glowing together. The sound in that passage is a blend of the piano, Clementine's laughter from this memory and her voice from another memory, and over all of this, Dr Mierzwiak's voice resonates: "Our files are confidential, Mr Barish, so I can't show you evidence. Suffice it to say that Miss Kruczynski was not happy and she wanted to move on" (*ES* 0:55:21). These words are the same which the doctor says when Joel first learns of the procedure. But the images which now accompany them show the complete opposite, a carefree couple. The superposition of these elements points out how much Joel changed his mind since; how much he regrets hiring Lacuna, which in turns shows that the Joel who is going through the erasure (who is not the same as the Joel who has gone through it and is not aware of it) has the larger perspective and is able to see his mistake.

The procedure of memory erasure is planned to take place at night. The organisation Lacuna prepares it the day before, and then their technicians Stan and Patrick come when the person is asleep to erase their memory. Thus, the procedure takes place when the subject is unconscious. However, during the procedure, while Joel relives his memories, he is aware of the fact that they are being erased. As mentioned earlier, while Joel's memories of Clementine are erased, Joel relives the memories. However, the film departs from logic as, contrary to what could be expected, he doesn't stand by as a simple onlooker watching his past self, but he becomes this past Joel in some – but not all – instances. To further the confusion, Clementine and Joel are both aware that his memory is being erased as they are in the past memories, but she is not aware of events which took place after her memory was erased, such as her relationship with Patrick. Joel and Clementine are aware of it in the memories but their past selves are disappearing, and their future selves will have no idea that an erasure has even taken place.

It is interesting to observe that, although Joel is unconscious in his bed, his senses still pick up on sound. The film alternates between showing the audience scenes from Joel's memories, which he himself sees and acts in although he is unconscious, and scenes from the procedure, with the two technicians, then the secretary and finally the doctor. This omniscient perspective becomes more complex when the film shows scenes from inside Joel's mind, memories from his past he is living through again, and the audience still hears the voices of those who erase his mind. This is an interesting phenomenon; while the character is unconscious in his apartment, he also seems to be very conscious in various different points in time. The paradox appears already in the word choice; as two points in time cannot be related by the conjunction *while*. Yet, that is how it is presented in the film. Indeed, while Joel is unconscious, he is also in the past, not only remembering but also re-enacting his part. A striking example is when memory-Joel is in his apartment, eating take-out Asian food with an orange-haired Clementine (0:39:57). They are in the same room as where the procedure takes place, at different points in time, yet it happens *at the same moment*. This apparent absurdity is masterfully conveyed by sound effects. Indeed, beyond the effect of the music itself which was discussed in the previous section, sound and music are thus also relevant in the way scenes are articulated. Indeed, while Joel is sitting on the sofa, eating with Clementine, Joel is able to hear Patrick's and Stan's voices as they talk during the procedure. Their conversation echoes into the memory Joel is visiting, thus implying that while those moments are separated by what are probably months, they are simultaneous. The images underscore the sound, as images from the memory with Clementine alternate with those of Stan and Patrick in the present, in the same apartment. At that point, Joel has a double presence, that of his past, and that of his present – since he hears both Clementine and the technicians. As Joel looks through his apartment to find the source of the voice, and of course finds no one, he still says “There is someone here” (0:40:55). Despite seeming absurd as he stands alone in his kitchen, his comment is in fact true, since Stan and Patrick are indeed in this same spot but at a different moment, one which is taking place at the same time in his consciousness. This very confounding fragmentation of his consciousness is a result of the dream-like state he is in during the procedure. I'd like to note that the Clementine in the memory cannot hear the voices, and she is only a projection of his imagination. Indeed, since time-travel only takes place inside Joel's mind, everything is nothing but the product of his memory complemented

by his imagination. This is where logic departs, since the film represents the character's mind and the laws of physics and logic do not always apply in it.

The difference between the real scenes (the procedure, as well as the scenes between Patrick and Clementine) and those taking place in the character's mind is furthered by the way cuts are made. Indeed, traditionally, films keep a certain continuity through the discontinuity of the cut thanks to elements of sound. Vincent Amiel explains the notion of continuity shots as a way to link shots so that "the cut is not felt like a definitive and radical rupture, but as a seam which joins separate pieces with the highest discretion. The goal is to hide the caesura, to erase its impression while still keeping the quality of articulation which is the principle of cuts"<sup>64</sup>. In *Eternal Sunshine*, there is no such effort of discretion. On the opposite, an effort is made to emphasise it. When there is a change of plans between Joel's memories and the present process of erasure, the image changes at the same time as the sound (apart from when the words of the technicians pervade through his consciousness, since these instances are unrelated to cuts). At 0:48:45 for instance, two shots succeed one another without any continuity. There is no music and no background sound, and as the image shifts to a conversation between Joel and Clementine to a conversation between Stan and Mary, the change in sound is instantaneous, interrupting the former conversation and entering the latter mid-sentence. When "each visual cut corresponds to an identical cut in the sound, it is the effect of rupture which is clearly desired"<sup>65</sup>, and the choice to introduce no extradiegetic sound draws attention to the cut as a rupture.

Time-travel gives the characters a new perspective on themselves. Probably the most striking instance of the encounter between the past and the present in the film is the two passages during which Clementine and Joel hide in Joel's childhood. Beyond the humorous effect created by seeing an adult Joel playing under the kitchen table and them both being bathed in a sink, the contrast created is not a result of a fragmentation in the character's identity; it's the result of going back to a different period of one's life. Clementine and Joel are sometimes played by two children, sometimes by themselves but with tricks in scale and

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64 Translation mine. Original: "Raccorder", c'est faire en sorte, comme le terme l'indique, que le cut ne soit pas ressenti comme une rupture définitive et radicale, mais comme une couture, qui permet d'assembler des morceaux différents avec la plus grande discrétion. Il s'agit de camoufler la césure, d'en effacer l'impression, tout en conservant la qualité d'articulation qui est au principe des changements de plan." Vincent Amiel, *Esthétique du montage*, p. 18.

65 Translation mine. Original: Lorsque "chaque coupure visuelle correspondrait à une identique coupure sonore [...] c'est l'effet de rupture qui est manifestement recherché". Vincent Amiel, *Esthétique du montage*, p. 21-2.

perspective which give the impression that they are smaller. Thus, “although the film can be understood to take place largely inside one character’s head, its multiple points of view are not governed by a single, overarching perspective; often its separate strands do not even meet one another”<sup>66</sup>. This multitude of perspectives, I would like to argue, are in a large part different moments of Joel’s character. In addition to both characters’ pre- and post- erasing identities discussed above, the characters which appear within Joel’s mind sometimes have unclear identities. The scenes in which Joel appears twice on the screen – as for instance during the memory of the mapping of his brain (0:33:10), show a fragmentation between the Joel who really went through this moment (the one whose brain is being scanned), the one who is re-watching the memory, and the one who is lying unconscious in his bed.

These examples have shown how much the character before the procedure is different from the one who is struggling to escape it. Another fragmentation in Joel’s identity appears between the Joel of before the erasure and that of after who is not aware of having undergone a procedure to erase his memory, nor of having had a relationship with Clementine. This version of Joel can be studied through the passage which is shown twice, once at the beginning and once at the end and which I discussed in III, 1. In addition to not remembering his relationship with Clementine, he forgot the song that was erased by mistake when he took Clementine in the memory of his childhood. Indeed, the film shows his mother bathing them both in the sink, his mother was singing this song, which is very well-known. When they meet for the first time, a scene which is shown at the end of the film, he sings the song when she tells him her name and jokes about Huckleberry Hound. He also says that the Huckleberry Hound doll he had was his favourite toy when he was a child. However, after the erasing when they meet again, he claims never to have heard of this song. The song has thus been erased from his memory when they erased this entire memory, a memory which in truth should not have been erased. The procedure thus erases not only one person, but whole parts of one’s life. The procedure has also changed him. Indeed, as he impulsively takes a train to Montauk instead of following his daily routine to work, he notes: “I’m not an impulsive person. I guess I just woke up in a funk this morning” (*ES* 00:02:05). This is a strong common point between Joel and Clementine – the erasure shakes them to their core. Clementine has the procedure done one week before Joel does, and by the time that week has flown, she is

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66 Carol Vernallis, “Music Video, Songs, Sound: Experience, Technique and Emotion in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*”, p. 279.

(still) deeply shaken. Her new boyfriend, Patrick, who is busy erasing Joel's memory, calls her and finds her in an anxious state. She's in the middle of an identity crisis and is starting to panic: "I'm lost, I'm scared, I feel like I'm disappearing, my skin's coming off, I'm getting old, nothing makes any sense" (0:49:42). This anxiety marks of the loss of identity. It seems that her identity is shattered because a part of her memories is missing. Even though she does not know that her memories were erased she knows that something is missing, and her identity is off-balance. The fact that she ignores everything concerning the procedure makes her feel even more unhinged. Indeed, her self changed with Joel's relationship, but the memories that created this change are not there, and she seems to viscerally feel this discrepancy between her conscious projection of who she should be (according to her memories) and who she really is (according to the past, which she does not remember). Joel underwent some changes during his time with Clementine. He seems to have become more relaxed, his personality is different. Indeed, the Joel we watch in the memories which are being erased is nothing like the shy and withdrawn man who meets Clementine at the very beginning of the film. Clementine's hatred of the word "nice" in the post-erasing timeline is particularly noticeable because of Joel's poor vocabulary. But before the procedure, he was much deeper, using the word "magical". Both characters are thus deeply unhinged by the procedure.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the characters chose to undergo this memory erasure, and to give up their agency to Lacuna. This is a result of their struggle to deal with the memories of their relationship. They choose to erase the memories of the other person from their their minds in order to move on. By deciding to erase their partner from their memories, Clementine, and then Joel, cut off their link to their past in order to turn towards the future. Once the procedure is completed, going back is impossible for them. Since, as Neil Levy remarks, "some of our memories [...] are important guides to our abilities and limitations,"<sup>67</sup> and we learn from our past, the two characters are at a considerable disadvantage, since they are unable to learn from the past and are possibly doomed to make the same mistakes again, as suggested by the last scene, where the two characters are running together on the beach: "The shot repeats itself three times, each time jumping back to exactly where it began, just as the film itself did, suggesting perhaps that the happy couple is destined to repeat the mistakes

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67 Neil Levi, "Changing one's Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," *S&F*, p. 38.

of their relationship, over and over again”<sup>68</sup>. The impossibility to remember their relationship limits their self-knowledge, and all the mistakes have been made again.

In *S5*, Trauma is a relevant aspect of the narrator’s and Billy’s identities. The fact that they were traumatised by the war has been discussed throughout this thesis. In the context of the fragmentation of identity, Trauma is particularly important to go back to. “Narrative techniques that are used to express traumatic memories and experiences are, for instance, repetition, fragmentation, gaps or ellipses, lack of chronology, and shift of verb tenses”<sup>69</sup>. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the past is painful, traumatic. Non-linear narratives are typical ways of narrating stories which resist narration, as it is the case of trauma stories: “[I]n order to meet the challenge of giving a narrative voice to trauma, literature itself must depart from traditional sequential patterns and develop new forms, just as it must revise received notions of time, memory and history. (Susana Onega, “Ethics, Trauma and the Contemporary British Novel”). The constant time-shifts in the narrative have this exact role. As the writer himself says in the first chapter, which has somewhat of an introductory role, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre”<sup>70</sup>. The narration has been mentioned above to be linear if one considers that reality is not linear. This is also the case at the level of the character’s consciousness. Indeed, “research in neurosciences reveal how [a traumatic event] immediately impacts cognitive functioning [...] traumatic memory becomes conflated with reality so that it seems to occur in the present”<sup>71</sup>. Billy can thus be considered to experience time in such a disjointed manner that narrating his past in a chronological way would betray the way he perceives the world around him. Thus, the novel copies the way the character experiences time. “*In Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead argues, ‘Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection’”<sup>72</sup>. This is precisely the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the fragmentation caused by trauma is accepted as part of the character’s identity. If Billy’s self is so fragmented, if he cannot experience his identity as a unit or as a network of units, it is also the result of the loss of memory which came with the

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68 Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*, p. 1.

69 Maria Holmgren Troy, “Narrative and Trauma: Kate Gibbons’s Ellen Foster and Margaret Atwood’s ‘Death by Landscape’”, *Berätta för att förstå? Sju essäer*, p. 125-6.

70 Kurt Vonngut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 16.

71 Armanda Wicks, “‘All This Happened, More or Less’: The Science Fiction of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, p. 330-2.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 333.

trauma. The following passage invites the reader to embrace the fact that memory is not perfect: Billy “found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it, shimmeringly – as follows” (145). The memory which follows is that of the bombing of Dresden (146). What is focused on is the way he remembered it, and not the way it really was, which requires to accept the inexactitude of memory.

### 3. Continuity

Up to now, this chapter has discussed the manifold fragmentation of the two works under study, a fragmentation which reflects the loss of unity in the way the characters experience their identity. However, despite – and, in a way, thanks to – this fragmentation, there are also marks of continuity in the identities of the characters and in each work as a whole. What I will argue in this section is that the way the two works are narrated requires the reader to create the continuity from the elements of a collage. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* may be fragmented in images, sound and identity, and yet, there is one strong source of continuity, and that is the character’s consciousness. Indeed, the narrative follows Joel’s consciousness as his memories are being erased, and in this regard, the narrative can be considered to be linear, since the events are shown in the order in which Joel experiences them during the procedure. The narration of Joel and Clementine’s relationship is told while it is being erased from his mind, following the technicians as they go through the map of his brain backwards to erase every trace of Clementine from his mind. The erasure is both anachronous and linear, however paradoxical that may sound; as it takes place chronologically but backwards. It starts with the most recent memories and goes back in time methodically, from the memory of the procedure itself, to then the last time he saw her and the argument that followed, and working its way through their relationship to the first time they met at the beach in Montauk. Joel lives through his memories of Clementine backwards in his sleep, and the narration follows this process meticulously. Thus, fragmentation and discontinuity are the result of the linear narration of a fragmented experience.

This is also true for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which the narration of the events does not follow historical chronology precisely because it follows the consciousness of the character. In a strange, twisted way which requires to accept time-travel as part of chronology, the novel

is indeed told in a chronological order. Two types of chronology can thus be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the objective chronology, that recorded by clocks, calendars and history textbooks. This concept stays abstract and theoretical, an idea of the passing of time that we cannot experience for every being can only describe the world from the point of view of their consciousness. On the other hand, there is the way time is experienced. Like every experience, the passing of time is subjective, different for every individual, more or less similar to the abstract conception of an objective chronology depending on the person.

If Billy's experience of the passing of time is particularly unusual, marked by trauma and by the beliefs of a species from another planet, the narrative nevertheless follows it in a linear manner. The two types of chronology are at odds with each other in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and their problematic relationship (discussed in I, 3) is visible in the text through the use of time markers which are at odds with the experience of time-travel: "Billy slept without dreaming for a while, *and then* he traveled in time" (italics mine, S5 81). The time marker "and then" announces the succession of events, thus a certain continuity. Yet, the event is time-travel, a jump forward of three or four years which is completely at odds with the succession suggested by the words "and then". Another example is the very first sentence of the second chapter of the novel, already discussed in the second chapter of this thesis: "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (19). The words which interest me now are "has come", which refers to a certain development, a progressive change which implies a chronology. Those two examples show the limits of our Earthling language in terms of the Tralfamadorian view of time. They suggest that we cannot escape a certain succession of events when telling stories, even the most fragmented stories. We cannot read the novel the way Tralfamadorians would, "all at once, not one after the other" (S5 71). Thus, we have to accept that a certain continuity is unavoidable, because it is part of what constitutes consciousness. According to Georg Northoff, "consciousness describes the ability to subjectively experience. One central component to such subjective experience is the continuity of time"<sup>73</sup>. The continuity created by the narrative is the only supporting line through the temporal fragmentation, and the narrative is what allows Billy's identity to emerge. The fact that Billy has integrated time travel into his identity is supported by his name; indeed, a pilgrimage is a journey in which the process of travelling is the goal. Billy's travel through time is like a pilgrimage, he

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73 Georg Northoff. "Slow cortical potentials and 'inner time consciousness' — A neuro-phenomenal hypothesis about the 'width of present'", *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, p. 174.

discovers the world from a different angle, with the eye of an outsider. Billy is not lost, he is “a dazed wanderer” (S5 26), a pilgrim, a traveller through space and time.

Despite its construction as a collage, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* functions similarly. Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman explains: “The way this movie is structured and what Michel [Gondry] and I were trying to do is have the audience be exactly where the character of Joel is, at every point”<sup>74</sup>. However, despite this similarity, its nature as a film means that the techniques used are different, as other tools than discourse are available. Indeed, a film provides more information than a novel, since more senses are on alert, and *Eternal Sunshine* uses this to its advantage, for instance by planting objects in the background which the audience member recognises and creates a continuity. Carol Vernallis points out several motifs used in the film which come up at several points, as for instance that of the aeroplane (the one Rob and Carrie take out of the car at the beach, the pattern on child-Joel’s pyjama, the window decoration in Joel’s bedroom), twenty-three “images of alcohol”, frequent recording devices, the galaxy, panties, skeletons (including Clementine’s costume and the pair of eyeballs worn by Patrick to greet Mary)<sup>75</sup>. While I would argue that some of them may represent themes in the film more than create continuity (particularly the recording devices, which have an importance of their own as part of the memory erasure), it is true that the repetitive appearance of certain motifs creates a coherence through the editing style which imitates a collage.

In addition to these visual elements which are often in the background, a coherence emerges between Clementine and Joel’s relationship in the past and that in the present. For instance, some sentences are part of Clementine’s identity which she repeats to him after the procedure, such as “no jokes about my name”, which she says when she introduces herself both times, and “I’m just a fucked up girl who’s looking for my own peace of mind”, which she says in the library (1:22:17) and at the end of the film in the corridor just outside of Joel’s apartment (1:42:47). This is also the case of Joel who for example repeats the sentence: “My life isn’t that interesting” when they meet again after the procedure (0:11:17) but also before the procedure (0:45:41). The way they describe their respective lives is the same, because in both cases they are meeting for the first time and he had the same uninteresting routine before, she her own history. These phrases are crucial in the construction of the characters’ identities

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74 Charlie Kaufman interview 8:42

75 Carol Vernallis, “Music Video, Songs, Sound: Experience, Technique and Emotion in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*”, p. 281.

through the procedure, they are items which help the audience detach the character from the story and see them as a whole. Furthermore, while the timeline of *Eternal Sunshine* may seem confusing at first, there is in fact only one true flashback. Indeed, the film starts on the morning after the erasure, and the first quarter of an hour shows Joel and Clementine apparently meeting for the first time. He drives her home, and as he waits for her in the car, the flashback takes place (*ES* 00:17:38) and the audience is sent back to just before the procedure at the same time as the opening credits start. What I would like to point out here is that there is a visual link through the cut; he is at the wheel of his car waiting for Clementine, and then there is a fadeout to black and the next image is him crying in the same place, from nearly the same angle. The differences are subtle: he is seen slightly less from the side, he is wearing a winter hat, and the link of the car is strong, to the point where a person who watches the film for the first time and is thus not aware of the procedure may think that there is continuity.

It is interesting to note that, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well, despite the apparent fragmentation, a certain continuity can be observed even through time travel. This is the case, for instance, when, despite having travelled in time, Billy's actions continue: "He closed his eyes, and opened them again. He was still weeping, but he was back in Luxembourg again" (*S5* 52). Billy is nearly always unconscious when he travels through time, or at least has his eyes closed, so the shift is not narrated as a fragmentation, and his crying creates a continuity through the time-shift. Even more striking is when it is not only his mental and emotional state which persists through time travel, but also his physical state: "Now, somebody was shaking Billy awake. Billy still felt drunk, was still angered by the stolen steering wheel. He was back in World War Two again, behind the German lines" (*S5* 38). Here, Billy has gone back in time from a party in 1961 to World War Two while he was asleep. He fell into a drunken sleep, and, despite time travel to the past, he is *still* drunk and *still* angry, despite it being years earlier. As we follow his consciousness, the past to which he travels is actually in the future from his point of view. The use of such logical connectors create the continuity of consciousness in the narrative. Like all other instances of time travel, these are not anachronies on the level of the narration, they are a linear narration of an anachronic consciousness. Continuity is also created through logical connections when Billy travels through time. For instance, on several occasions, Billy falls asleep in a ward and travels in time to another ward, particularly on pages 81 to 87. The same phenomenon takes place later

in the novel, when Billy travels from the hospital after the crash to him as a doctor examining a patient to his childhood, where himself as a sixteen year old patient “in the waiting room of a doctor” (S5 155) then to “the hospital in Vermont”. The connection is based on logic rather than time, and it creates a thread that the reader can follow, not unlike the repetitions of several motifs in *Eternal Sunshine*.

In both works, the elements which creates continuity are part of what makes the works coherent despite their fragmentation, but they are more than that. Indeed, I would here like to argue that *Eternal Sunshine* in particular carries a strong ethical message. As said in the literature review in the introduction, the memory-erasing procedure has received some attention in terms of ethics. Without repeating these articles’ very relevant points, I would like to contribute to the question by arguing that the continuity in the characters’ identities shows that beyond being potentially unethical, erasing a person from one’s memories is virtually impossible. The regions of the brain holding the memories might be erased in the science-fictional universe, but I strongly believe that all memories and experiences are related, which explains the deep confusion of the character when he wakes up with what seems to be nearly two years of his life missing. Furthermore, one’s memories are not only in one’s brain, and Clementine marked Joel’s (and vice-versa) life beyond any specific memory. As a result, everything that marked their relationship comes back. The most evident loophole of the procedure is that of each person’s acquaintances – Carrie and Rob were informed of the procedure but did not keep the secret, and Joel’s neighbour greets Clementine by her name although she has no memory of meeting him. More subtle traces are the ripped-off pages in his diary the morning after the erasing as well as his off-hand remark that he has not written in it for two years – which is assumedly the length of their relationship. He also find his car damaged and wrongly believes it to be the doing of the owner of the car parked next to him whereas we later on learn that Clementine wrecked Joel’s car while under the influence of alcohol. While these elements contribute to the confusion on the first watch, they ultimately show the depth of each experience, and the fact that one night’s technical work cannot undo years of experiences, relationships and feelings. The fact that Joel and Clementine are both confused after the procedure, as discussed in the previous section, also contributes to transmitting this message.

A few elements remain unexplained in *Eternal Sunshine*. This is the case of the two characters’ unlikely meeting and their immediate attraction towards each other, two elements

which point towards the fact that the memory erasure missed some subtle traces of the relationship in their brains. The fact that Clementine and Joel meet in Montauk the morning after his memory was erased is too big of a chance to be only that. Indeed, they both live in town and both have their daily routine, but Joel (and possibly Clementine too) impulsively skips work and goes to Montauk for no specific reason that they remember. On the beach, Joel sits at the same place he did on the day he first met her (0:02:52), and looks around and inside the house they had broken in on the night they first met. The logical explanation for them going to Montauk is Clementine's last words to him during the procedure: "Meet me in Montauk" (1:30:44). These words are whispered in his ear just as the last memory is being erased, so it may have been left over in his unconscious. It would seem that they both unconsciously remember, since they are both there. But if, as discussed in III, 2, the Clementine in the memories during the procedure really is only the product of his imagination, then the real Clementine cannot have any memory of it. Here, the film offers no explanation, perhaps encouraging the audience to imagine the very romantic possibility of shared dreams. Another element which points towards an uncanny recognition is Clementine's behaviour. The first time they meet, she was already a forward person, sitting next to him and inviting herself to his food. However, it was based on a common point: their inability to socialise with the rest of the group. When they meet again after the procedure, they are the only two people on the beach. She seems to follow him as they have a cup of coffee at the same café, wait at the train station together and take the same train back. Her behaviour is very familiar – beyond her extravagant character, she acts as though she felt that she knew him. She invites him for a drink and declares that she'll marry him, taking him to the frozen lake as a honeymoon the next day and inviting herself to his place. She also looks at Patrick in mistrust (0:52:04) and downright runs away with no explanation when he repeats the lines Joel had said to her on the Charles as though she had an uncanny sense of recognition.

Thus, beyond scientific and philosophical explanations, the film leaves a few connections unexplained. These can be read as conveying the inevitability of making the same mistakes over and over: the characters may have wanted to move on and start a new life, but such a thing is not possible. The open ending allows the audience to choose whether the film has an optimistic or a pessimistic ending; whether they are able to learn from their mistakes to make the right choices for them, or whether they are doomed to always repeating the same mistakes. The film can be read as an ode to agency and humanity over technology in the film,

the proof that acting is not in vain and that mistakes can be learned from if they are accepted. Stadler writes:

we have good reason to suspect that they've learned a lot about themselves and each other during the memory-wipe adventure with Lacuna. The lyrics tell us this much, since the song that they sang when they met on that same beach, "You were lost and gone forever, Oh my darling Clementine," has been replaced with a song about "changing your heart" by Beck. The song implies change and growth, progress and love<sup>76</sup>.

I believe that it is because they are aware of their history together that they have a chance at a real new start. The illusion of a new start through forgetting was no more than that, an illusion, for if they forget their mistakes, they are doomed to repeat them. In addition to showing that the erasure of memory has severe consequences on identity, the film also shows that it is not possible to erase part of one's life. The fact is that both of the couples that were broken up by memory erasure fall in love again. Mary's memory may have been erased, but even before finding about the erasure, she felt attraction towards Mierzwiak again: "I've loved you for a very long time" (1:18:10). Continuity in *Eternal Sunshine* is a mark of the victory of agency and free will.

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76 Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*, pp. 1-2.

## Conclusion

Marya Schechtman writes: “[P]ersons are essentially narrative beings: they are constituted by the stories they tell themselves and one another about their lives”<sup>77</sup>. We are also constituted by the stories we tell or read about fictional characters, who reflect aspects of ourselves. Stories tell us what is possible and allow us to imagine the impossible. They allow us to project ourselves in different situations, to enter another’s consciousness for the time it lasts, and then to come back to our own lives with a new perspective. As such, they are part of the construction of our identities. While the two works I chose to study stand out as fragmented experimental fiction, their in-depth analysis pointed out that they ultimately tell universal and very humane stories. By guiding us through the consciousness of one main character, they make for existential journeys.

*Eternal Sunshine* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are very different works, both in terms of medium and themes, yet this thesis has shown them to be complementary in terms of the ethical message they deliver to their audience. Time-travel in both works has been shown to be more of a travel through consciousness and memories. Diegetic time-travel allows a linear narration to capture the humanity of the characters in all its depth. The difficult relationship the characters have with their past causes a return to it in several ways. As in the examples of non-linear Bildungsroman given in the introduction, those works focus on memory. The point of view is close to internal in both cases, and we go through memories of the past. However, it goes one step further; remembering becomes actual time travel. Going back to the past becomes literal. The actualisation of reminiscing into time travel changes mode of reality and as a consequence genre, and the two works are undoubtedly generically hybrid. This is where the comparison between the two texts can be considered to have been the most fruitful; as the two texts have a very different ethical standpoint in terms of agency. Where Billy, be it in the past or in the present, is told that he is powerless and as a result becomes a passive observer, Joel and Clementine fight tooth and nail to recover their free will and power to act. In this

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<sup>77</sup> Marya Schechtman, as quoted in Neil Levy, “Changing one’s Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,” p. 35.

respect, Joel and Clementine are the exact opposite of the characters of Vonnegut's novel. They resist the procedure in a way that the technicians do not imagine to be possible, they fight their past selves' decisions, they defy the procedure by reconstructing the past in the present. Where *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a testimony of post-war desolation, *Eternal Sunshine* is an ode to life. In *S5*, The narrator and the character are complete opposites in terms of agency. Where Billy is passive, the narrator rebels against his own consciousness and claims back agency by revisiting his past and narrating it in order to move on. In this regard, *Eternal Sunshine* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are particularly interesting to compare. Although getting over war trauma and a relationship cannot be compared on all levels, the two works merge insofar as they question the necessity to remember the past to move on with one's life. The memory-erasing procedure in *ES* seems to be an easy way out of the difficulty of moving on. Forgetting requires less effort and less anguish than dealing with the memories, but the characters ultimately understand that this facility is an illusion. The narrator of *S5* has understood that moving on requires assimilating one's past first, and although the traumatic memories want to be forgotten, he forces them back to the surface one last time in order to move forward again. The expressions "getting over" and "moving on" "contain an apt temporal metaphor: 'getting over' is moving from a point of view that sees the person in the present to a vantage point from which she is viewed only by looking back"<sup>78</sup>. Memories are thus an integral part of one's identity, as Joel realises when he understands how the procedure really works. Neil Levi writes: "We do not live moment-by-moment; instead, we live by connecting our past to our future, and our memories are the essential thread by which we make these connections"<sup>79</sup>. Memories are thus crucial for the creation of a sense of identity.

Both texts suggest that the relationship a character has with time influences their ability to act in the reality they are in. Charlie Kaufman, who wrote the screenplay for *Eternal Sunshine*, claims the exploration of what real life romance is really like as his first aim<sup>80</sup>. One message of the film is that there is no right way to live, no perfect solution or answer, and one has to make mistakes to move on. For this reason, it is important to keep the ambiguity of the ending of the film and of its general message in regards to agency. *Slaughterhouse-Five* portrays a character who has lost all desire to be an agent. He lacks the passion of Clementine

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78 Havi Carel, "The Return of the Erased: Memory and Forgetfulness in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*", p. 1072.

79 Neil Levi. "Changing one's Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*." p. 31-2.

80 Charlie Kaufman, Interview, 6:08.

and Joel, he, contrary to them, does not try to fight to regain his agency. This is explainable by the period in which it was written, where *ES* is a twenty-first century experimental romance film, *S5* reflects trauma and post-war desolation. As Wicks explains, “[w]riting about trauma through the lens of science fiction provides Vonnegut with a sense-making tool, and offers fresh insight into the task of narrativizing trauma”<sup>81</sup>. Furthermore, she writes, “within science fiction, the bizarre takes on properties associated with trauma”<sup>82</sup>, which is why genre and mode of reality were two important aspects of this thesis.

## 1. Generic Remarks

The corpus I chose to work on is, as said in the introduction, is only partly considered to belong to the genre of science fiction. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a historiographical text, a testimony which is only partly fictional<sup>83</sup>. *Eternal Sunshine* is first and foremost a romance, with a rather ordinary setting (Boston in 2003). If Lacuna uses technology that does not exist to this day, the material they use is unimpressive, and they can be said to be “a futuristic but low-tech organization”<sup>84</sup>. It does not take place in the future, and there is none of the extraordinary futuristic technology of traditional science fiction. Yet, regardless of the material used, memory erasure is indeed an idea which sets the film as science fiction. Dr Mirswiak’s explanations seem plausible, but, as Neil Levy explains, “some neuroscientists wonder whether it will ever be possible”<sup>85</sup>. As a result, it can be said that *Eternal Sunshine* borrows from the genre of science fiction while not using all of its features and knowingly breaking some expectations of the genre.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*’s affiliation with the genre is more problematic. Indeed, the author had a low opinion of the genre<sup>86</sup>, and the science-fiction novels Billy reads are presented as

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81 Armanda Wicks, “‘All This Happened, More or Less’: The Science Fiction of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, p. 330.

82 Ibid., p. 331.

83 I chose not to discuss this delicate aspect of the novel beyond what was necessary for the topic at hand as many have engaged with this question before. Vonnegut’s text is considered to be partly autobiographical, for many elements of his biography correspond to events which take place in the novel (as discussed for example by Amanda Wicks), among which the witnessing of the bombing of Dresden, and the narrator, particularly present in the first and last chapters, seems to be a mirror image of the author. However, it is still presented as a piece of fiction, and it is as such that I chose to study it.

84 Stadler, Jane. *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*. p. 169.

85 Neil Levy, “Changing one’s Mind: The Ethics of Memory Erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,” p. 32.

86 Amanda Wicks quotes the author on his lack of esteem for the genre of science fiction: “[I]f you write stories that are weak on dialogue and motivation and characterization and common sense,” Vonnegut writes,

low quality pieces, with near-identical themes and low-quality writing<sup>87</sup>. Furthermore, the genre of science fiction seems to be at odds with that of historiography, with a novel about the Second World War. However, one feature of the novel which undeniably relates to the genre of science fiction is the importance given to science. But while the text regularly centres its attention around scientific questions, none of the veneration towards scientific progress and technology usually seen in traditional science fiction is present, and the tone is more than a little ironic:

Billy coughed when the door was opened, and when he coughed he shit thin gruel. This was in accordance with the Third Law of Motion according to Sir Isaac Newton. This law tells us that for every action there is a reaction which is equal and opposite in direction. This can be useful in rocketry (*S5* 65-66).

This is underscored by various other references to science with an ironic tinge, for instance when he compares of Trout's novels with Darwin (*S5* 173). Generically, it can thus be remarked that the novel really gives justice to the genre of science fiction, making fiction out of science. I would here like to suggest that *Slaughterhouse-Five* works as a satire of science fiction, using features of the genre with ironical purposes. The Tralfamadorians' theories about the real nature of time, which I analysed at length in II, 1, is an extreme version of the least intuitive physical laws and theories. By casting aliens as the voice of science and writing their discourse as an exaggerated (but clearly similar) version of what scientists says, the novel casts a mocking light on scientific progress. However, that does not mean that the novel must not be taken seriously. Indeed, in David Lodge's words, the novel is "both amusingly parody of science fiction and philosophically serious"<sup>88</sup>. The genre of historiographic metafiction, to which *Slaughterhouse-Five* was argued to belong in I, 1, includes irony in its very existence, it is a way of casting a new light on history and on fiction simultaneously, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* certainly does this. Parodying science, parodying science-fiction, and parodying historical discourse is a way to deconstruct supposedly omniscient discourse and replacing it with a self-assumedly imperfect polyphonic discourse. Thus, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, time travel is more than the conventional technological advancement of science fiction;

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'you could do worse than throw in a little chemistry or physics, or even witchcraft, and mail them off to the science fiction magazines,'" p. 334-5.

87 Their writer, Kilgore Trout is brought up on p.82 and regularly throughout the novel. Nobody else likes Trout's novels, he is not a popular writer although he published a large number of books.

88 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 78.

it is the meeting point between science fiction and historiography, whose generic conventions meet in the novel despite how opposed they may seem to be.

The two works are incredibly similar in many aspects which were analysed in this work, but Vonnegut's novel does not have the light playful tone which accompanies the film. In terms of reader-response, Alber writes: "It is worth noting that while some unnatural constellations evoke feelings such as discomfort, fear, worry, panic, terror, or horror, others stir up feelings of amusement, delight, and comic joy. It goes without saying that these strong emotional responses feed back into the appeal of the unnatural"<sup>89</sup>. *ES* does indeed evoke some stress, for the possibility of losing one's memories can be horrifying. However, the entire film is a delight – partly because the erasing is watched more as a metaphor. *S5* is taken more seriously, but if some distress comes from reading the novel, it is not from the unnatural elements such as time-travel, but from the very real historical passages as well as the casual violence mentioned.

## 2. Universality and Intertextuality

It is my belief that the comparative angle chosen for this thesis highlights each work in a way that studying them separately would not have allowed. Indeed, while separate individual studies highlight certain aspects, putting the two together gives light to similarities and differences which would otherwise have stayed hidden. As a consequence, now that I am concluding this dissertation, I feel the need to mention a few other works which allowed me to read *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* differently, and which add strongly to the considerations on time, agency and consciousness. Time attracts intense attention. It seems to be one of the main themes of literature, and perhaps this can be explained by the way it touches everything: we study history and look at our past, we plan our future, we grow up and age, see others go through the same process. In short, time seems to rule over our existence, even defining its beginning and end. It is no wonder that literature has given so much attention to time. Often personified in children's fiction – as a man in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and as a crocodile in *Peter Pan*, the relationship between human beings and the passing of time has become a leitmotiv. This thesis studied at length the two instances of time travel in two different fictional universes, two ways of approaching one's

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89 Jan Alber, "Unnatural Narratology: The Systematic Study of Anti-Mimeticism", p. 457.

relationship with one's past. It has shown that whether the choice is to revisit it or to erase it, it needs to be gone back to; for the past makes up the present.

Beyond time-travel as a thematic feature of science fiction, the idea of going back in time has intrigued many. The passage in which Billy Pilgrim watches a film backwards is very similar to many other passages in films and has become common – even cliché – in video games. I would here like to mention two instances of film scenes which are particularly similar to the scene in *S5*. In *The House with a Clock in its Walls*, a film for children, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, images from World War Two are shown in reverse, with planes swallowing bombs in. The images are strikingly similar to those imagined when reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and for this reason, it is interesting to mention them here. In *The House with a Clock in its Walls*, a warlock, shaken by his experiences in the war, made a clock turn backwards to undo the evils of humanity, and ultimately, humanity itself. Since this film belongs to the genre of fantasy and magic is accepted as part of the fictional universe, the status of this unhinging of time in terms of mode of reality is very different. But the film shows a scene in which we see a war taking place in reverse. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is yet again generically different, since the story is anchored in a realistic world, and the magical elements fall under the mode of magical realism. One of the first scenes in the film is that of a clock which has been built to turn backwards. The man who built it made it so as a result of losing his son in the war, and as he explains that he wishes the war to be undone, the film shows these images of a city rebuilding itself as planes fly backwards and take the bombs away. These two films are very different in many aspects, but it shows the universality of this wish of undoing the past – a major theme in the corpus.

This comes back to one of my first claims; time is a particularly interdisciplinary concept which can be studied within most fields and related to many other themes. Analysing *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* together was particularly productive to highlight narrative procedures which relate to time, as they use two different media. Their generic hybridity and the fact that they were written in different periods in time made the questions more complex but also more interesting, and the thesis allowed for a perhaps unexpected but fruitful dialogue between these two works.

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