Event, Contingency, Repetition: Donnie Darko vs Eternal Sunshine

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I: Event/Fidelity

The centrality of the concept of fidelity to Alain Badiou’s theory of the event suggests that – of the four domains of politics, science, art and love – the domain of love, and the event of falling-in-love, has a special place within the theorisation of the event, in terms both of its contingency and the strength and singularity of its world-transforming commitment.

This paper seeks to use the concept of fidelity to the event as the starting point for a reading of two films of the early twenty-first century – Donnie Darko (2001) and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004) – that raise complex questions about the nature of falling-in-love, not simply as an event, but as the paradigmatic case for thinking the event. In particular, following the narrative structure of these two films, I want to explore the relation between contingency and repetition in thinking the event and the event’s demand for fidelity to an as-yet unforeseeable transformative potential.

For Badiou, the event is radically contingent and unforeseeable, and because it is in excess of a situation, it is indiscernible within it. It is a radical newness that contains the potential to transform the situation entirely; but at the same time, due to its unprecedentedness, its potential and even its nature as an event are not immediately apparent. The event requires what Badiou calls an intervention, a recognition of the event and a commitment of fidelity to the event on the part of a subject who instantiates a truth procedure that will be the working out of the transformative potential of the event.

The word ‘fidelity’ refers directly to the amorous relationship, but I would rather say that it is the amorous relationship which refers, at the most sensitive point of individual experience, to the dialectic of being and event, the dialectic whose temporal ordination is proposed by fidelity. Indeed, it is evident that love – what is called love – founds itself upon an intervention, and thus on a nomination, near a void summoned by an encounter. (Badiou, 2007: 232; see also Feltham, 2007: xxxii.)

For Badiou, political militants, research scientists, artists and creators might all be thought of as lovers who embrace, with fidelity, the contingency of their chance encounter with – their falling-in-love with – an event:

A subject is nothing other than an active fidelity to the event of truth. This means that a subject is a militant of truth. … The militant of a truth is not only the political militant working for the emancipation of humanity in its entirety. He or she is also the artist-creator, the scientist who opens up a new theoretical field, or the lover whose world is enchanted. (Badiou, 2007: xiii)

Both Donnie Darko and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (which takes its title from a line in Alexander Pope’s Eloisa to Abelard, a love story that Badiou cites as exemplary of love as event) raise this question of fidelity to the event by imagining paradoxical situations in which, in different ways, the main characters are faced with a repetition of the radical contingency of the event. At first sight it would seem that it is precisely from the unrepeatability of the event that the demand for fidelity issues; the impact of this uncanny repetition in these two films therefore underscores in particularly striking terms the complex relations between contingency,
repetition and fidelity in the thinking of the event.

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To begin with, I want to sketch out the relation, in the event of falling-in-love, between contingency on the one hand – the ‘chance encounter’ that is the event of falling-in-love – and agency on the other, as a decision to act in fidelity to the event and its rupture of a situation. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens write:

For Badiou, the question of agency is not so much a question of how a subject can initiate an action in an autonomous manner but rather how a subject emerges through an autonomous chain of actions within a changing situation. That is, it is not everyday actions or decisions that provide evidence of agency for Badiou. It is rather those extraordinary decisions and actions which isolate an actor from their context, those actions which show that a human can actually be a free agent that supports new chains of actions and reactions. For this reason, not every human being is always a subject, yet some human beings become subjects; those who act in fidelity to a chance encounter with an event which disrupts the situation they find themselves in. (Feltham and Clemens, 2005: 5)

When two people fall in love, the chance encounter of their meeting is an event in relation to which they change their lives. Their fidelity, it is important to stress, is not a fidelity to each other as persons (since, in an important sense, they hardly know each other); rather, it is fidelity to the event of falling-in-love itself and the fact that this event will necessarily change – unpredictably and irrevocably – their relation to their world – to their friends and families, their work and career, their living arrangements, tastes and habits – whether or not these changes will turn out to be for better or for worse. The duration of the relationship is a measure of their fidelity to that chance encounter, and may continue long after they have ceased to be of the slightest interest to each other as persons. Falling-in-love is thus an intervention: a decision, a commitment of fidelity to the radical contingency of the event and its transformative potential.

Both Donnie Darko and Eternal Sunshine work through complexly recursive narratives that raise interesting questions about the nature of the event of falling-in-love. Due to the complexity of the narratives it’s worth briefly summarising the films before moving on to an analysis.

Donnie Darko’s protagonist is an emotionally-troubled high-school student who starts having what seem to be psychotic hallucinations of a gigantic menacing rabbit called ‘Frank’. During the night of 2 October 1988, Frank leads Donnie out of his house to tell him the world will end in 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes and 12 seconds; at the same moment, on the stroke of midnight, a jet engine inexplicably falls from the sky and crashes through Donnie’s bedroom. The remainder of the film follows the next 28 days in Donnie’s life. Acting under Frank’s instructions, Donnie carries out a series of increasingly destructive acts. Also at Frank’s prompting he starts to investigate time travel, and is given a book The Philosophy of Time Travel by Roberta Sparrow, a local elderly eccentric known as ‘Grandma Death’. During this time he also falls in love with a new student at his school, Gretchen. On the night of Halloween, with only hours remaining before the prophesied end of the world, Donnie takes Gretchen and two friends to seek Roberta Sparrow but they are attacked by two school bullies, the fight spills into the street, and an oncoming car runs over and kills Gretchen. The driver is Donnie’s sister's boyfriend Frank, wearing the grotesque rabbit costume of Donnie's hallucinations. Donnie shoots him with his father's gun. As a vortex of dark clouds forms above his house, Donnie returns Gretchen’s body to her home and watches as an airplane carrying his mother and sister is wrenched violently and one of its engines falls into the vortex. The events of the previous 28 days then replay rapidly in reverse, as Donnie steps into the vortex and travels backwards through time to return to his bed just before midnight on the night of 2 October. Knowing what is to come, Donnie laughs strangely to himself just before the jet engine crashes through his room, killing him, but preventing the chain of events that would have led to the deaths of Gretchen, Frank, his mother and his sister. The next morning Gretchen rides by Donnie's house and sees the grieving family. A neighbourhood boy tells her that a boy named Donnie Darko has been killed and asks if she knew him, but she says no. The film ends with a prolonged silent exchange of looks between Gretchen and Donnie’s grieving mother.

In Eternal Sunshine, emotionally withdrawn Joel and unhinged free spirit Clementine strike up a relationship on a train journey back from Montauk, New York. In a 17-minute opening sequence they meet, fall in love, and spend a night together. The sequence ends the next morning as Joel waits in his car for Clementine to get her things to come and stay at his apartment. A stranger approaches the car and asks Joel, anxiously, ‘What are you doing here?’ The opening credits begin to roll and the scene changes, disconcertingly, to an overwrought Joel sitting behind the wheel of his car at night and weeping uncontrollably. This begins a long flashback sequence in which we learn that, although they do not realize it, Joel and Clementine are in fact former lovers. The scene picks up the story of their ‘first’ relationship just after their final, irreparable argument. A few days later Joel discovers that Clementine has had her memories of him surgically erased by a company called Lacuna Inc., so Joel resentfully decides
to undergo the procedure himself. Much of the rest of the film takes place in Joel’s mind, while he sleeps and the Lacuna technicians progressively erase his memories of Clementine. Upon seeing happenings times of love, he struggles but fails to prevent all his memories of her being erased, the last one being of Clementine telling him: ‘Meet me in Montauk’. In a separate story arc, Mary, a receptionist at Lacuna, discovers she has had an affair with Dr. Mierzwiak, the head of the company, and then allowed him to erase it from her memory. Outraged, Mary quits her job, steals the company's records and sends them back to the company’s clients. The film resumes at the point where Clementine returns to Joel’s car after having unknowingly met and fallen in love with him a second time. As they drive along, Clementine reads Mary’s letter and discovers, for the first time, that she has had a previous relationship with Joel. She plays an enclosed cassette and both listen in bewilderment and growing horror to Clementine’s interview at Lacuna Inc., where she outlines in intimate detail all the things she hates about Joel. Joel stops the car and Clementine storms off. When Joel returns to his apartment he too finds a letter from Mary and begins to listen to his cassette. Clementine arrives, and it is her turn to listen to his reasons for hating her. She makes to leave, but Joel asks her to wait; Clementine initially resists, pointing out to him that their relationship will probably go the same way again. ‘OK’ says Joel. ‘OK’ says Clementine, and the film ends with them laughing awkwardly.

At first sight, it would seem the pivotal event in Donnie Darko is the freakish crash of the jet engine, but this is an event only in the sense of a narrative plot device; it poses no problems of recognition, and issues no demand for fidelity. Instead, we should see the falling-in-love of Donnie and Gretchen as the true event of the film, since it is his desire to save Gretchen that motivates Donnie’s self-sacrifice at the end of the film: it initiates a process of subjectivation whereby a deeply disturbed individual comes to act with purposeful, albeit self-destructive agency.

It is worth stressing that this reading of the film refers to its original cinema release version from October 2001. The film’s website, DVD commentary and Director’s Cut version, released in May 2004 with an extra twenty minutes of footage, provide a considerable amount of extra information, particularly concerning Roberta Sparrow’s Philosophy of Time Travel, that not only removes many of the ambiguities of the original but also enforces a radically different interpretation of the narrative (see King, 2007: 28-35). In the Director’s Cut, the jet engine crash opens up an unstable ‘Tangent Universe’; the actions of Frank, Gretchen, and other characters set an ‘Ensurance Trap’ which manipulates Donnie into the position of the ‘Living Receiver’ who ‘must ensure the fate of all mankind’ (King, 2007: 32) by his self-sacrifice. According to this version, Donnie’s actions are thoroughly determined by powerful external forces.

The original version, however, as Geoff King points out, fits quite well Tzvetan Todorov’s ‘much cited definition of the “fantastic” in fiction as involving a hesitation on the part of the reader/viewer (and, in some cases, on the part of the central character) between natural and supernatural explanations of diegetic events’ (King, 2007: 49-50). That is, the original film leaves the possibility entirely open that Donnie’s visions of Frank are hallucinations, symptoms of what his therapist tells his parents is paranoid schizophrenia, but it also underscores his act of self-sacrifice as not that of a hero saving ‘all mankind’, but that of a desperate lover saving those he loves. The end prophesied by Frank is not the end of the world as such, but the end of Donnie’s world. The more modest human context of the original Donnie Darko also preserves the event of Donnie and Gretchen’s falling-in-love as contingent, rather than necessary; it is only through its contingency than an event can issue a demand for fidelity, and thus it is only with reference to the original version of the film that a Badiouan reading can be sustained.

Eternal Sunshine offers a different variation on the theme of fidelity to the event. The film would seem to present two versions of event of falling-in-love; the second version, that we are provided with by the ‘uncanny repetition’ on the snow-covered beaches of Montauk that constitutes the film’s opening sequence, and the first, ‘original’, event, also on the beach at Montauk, that we are shown at the end of Joel’s memory erasure procedure. But, as C.D.C. Reeve points out, Joel’s inexplicable desire to go to Montauk at the beginning of the film is an awkward wrinkle in the film’s narrative logic; it may be a coincidence, ‘but the feeling the film creative is of inevitability, not happenstance. Joel and Clementine, it tells us, had to meet in Montauk’, a feeling it produces by ‘flirting with the paranormal – with fate, or kismet, or some muddled version of Nietzschean eternal return’ (Reeve, 2010: 29). That is, if the first falling-in-love is contingent, the second falling-in-love appears necessary, not an event itself but part of the unfolding of the original event.

From this perspective, Clementine’s and Joel’s decisions to erase all memories of each other would seem to constitute the most profound betrayal of the event of their falling-in-love, far deeper than simply realising in bitter estrangement. The film certainly invites us to consider the services of Lacuna Inc., as a moral cop-out, an unwillingness to accept the risk of loss and grief enfolded within the transformative potential of falling-in-love. By contrast, their commitment at the end of the film seems to acknowledge this risk, suggesting that even if this second relationship ends in disaster, Joel and Clementine will at least not seek to have it erased from their memories. It is really only this second commitment that involves a fidelity to the event (the event of their first falling-in-love), but it is a commitment to an event that neither of
II: Contingency/Estrangement

The strange pressure that each of these film narratives brings to bear on the narrative logic of the love story throws into relief a number of issues concerning the contingency of the event of falling-in-love, and the way in which the event demands a fidelity, not to the event as something in the past – as what was, its contingency annulled by actuality – but to the event as not-yet, as the unfolding of a radically contingent potential transformation, as what may or may not be.

In ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’, Giorgio Agamben defines the contingent as ‘a being that can both be and not be’ (Agamben, 1999: 261), and with reference to Leibniz’s summary of the figures of modality – the possible (that which can be), the impossible (that which cannot be), the necessary (that which cannot not-be) and the contingent (that which can not-be) – notes that the contingent, ‘which coincides with the domain of human freedom in its opposition to necessity’ also ‘has given rise to the greatest number of difficulties’ (Agamben, 1999: 261). There are three major aporias of contingency: that the contingency of being cannot refer to events in the past, since the power of changing the past is denied even to God; that contingency must be limited with respect to actuality, in that something that does happen effectively annuls its potentiality not to happen, even though its ‘opposite could have happened in the very moment in which it happened’ (Agamben, 1999: 262); and that contingency must not be threatened by future events such that, for instance, if something that is contingent on Tuesday actually happens on Wednesday, then on Tuesday it must have already been true that it would happen on Wednesday, necessarily, therefore, not contingently (Agamben, 1999: 263).

In these terms, fidelity to the event involves an awkward relationship to contingency: what can it mean to affirm fidelity to something that might have not happened? Does a fidelity to the event of falling-in-love also paradoxically commit the lovers to affirm that they might also have not fallen-in-love, or might have fallen-in-love with someone else? Clearly this is unsustainable as a model of commitment, of agency on the part of an individual who becomes a subject through their fidelity to an event; it would simply be a model for prevarication and indecisiveness. Instead, as Agamben goes on to argue, the relation of contingency and necessity is best expressed through tautological truths of the form: ‘tomorrow it will rain or it will not rain’.

What I wish to argue here is that this relation to the contingency of falling-in-love, in both Donnie Darko and Eternal Sunshine, also involves a kind of radical estrangement: fidelity to the event is not the same as fidelity to a person, not a til-death-us-do-part togetherness, but paradoxically one of the most isolating and solitary of commitments. Fidelity can even take the form – indeed sometimes must necessarily take the form – of a certain kind of betrayal. Indeed, Adam Phillips argues for a positive moral understanding of betrayal, as an inevitable aspect of growth and change, by reference to the story of Judas:

The Gospel of Judas could be taken to be saying that only someone who truly recognises someone can betray them, and so-called betrayal may be the best thing they can do. … We are encouraged by the gospel narratives not simply not to identify with Judas, but to disidentify from him. As if no one would want to be Jesus’ betrayer, no one could possibly aspire or desire to betray their master, someone they really believed in and loved. But why not? It is, after all, one of our modern myths about development and independence that the adolescent betrays his parents, the student betrays his teacher; that without betrayal the disciple remains always and only a disciple. … What has been entrusted to secrecy in Judas’ story is that betrayal is one of the forms revelation takes. (Phillips, 2012: 14)

In Donnie Darko this estrangement can be seen through the nature of Donnie’s sacrifice and its relation to the notion of the ‘pure gift’, understood as a gift that does not constrain its receiver to any form of reciprocity. Many early reviewers of the film drew parallels between Donnie and Christ, parallels that the film intermittently encourages (see King, 2007: 89-91). But Donnie’s act transcends in its purity Christ’s sacrifice, which remains caught within the logic of the ‘reciprocal gift’ insofar as God’s gift of his son forms the basis of the relation between God and Christians, and insofar as the symbolic repetition of that event forms a cornerstone of its rituals, a conversion of its contingency into necessity. Donnie’s act, on the other hand, his fidelity to the event of falling-in-love with Gretchen, requires, ironically, not just the sacrifice of his own life, but also of his and Gretchen’s falling-in-love. In order to save her, Donnie must assert his freedom from necessity by restoring to their falling-in-love its radical contingency; their love, rather than something that can not-be – necessity; love as destiny – is restored by Donnie’s decision to its radical contingency, as something that can not-be. Immediately, of course, this contingency is annulled, according to the aporia governing the contingency of the past: what can not-be collapses into what was not.

Donnie’s gift, his act of love, therefore requires its own erasure; though the poignant ending of the film suggests that, in some kind of mystical, paranormal way, Gretchen and Donnie’s mother are vaguely conscious of some kind of bond between them, according to the nature of the pure gift, Gretchen cannot know what has been given to her or by whom. Slavoj Žižek,
discussing Jean-Luc Marion’s ‘Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift’, notes that the notion of sacrifice as ‘a pure act of giving with no return’ involves a paradox:

The paradox is that if the gift is truly given, outside of any economy of exchange, then it cancels itself as a gift, since the givenness of the gift and thus its giver both disappear in it: ‘The givee cannot take the gift given for its own, so long as he still sees in it the face and the power of its previous owner. This owner (the giver) must disappear, so that the gift can start to take as given; finally the giver must disappear completely for the gift to appear as given definitively, that is to say given up’ (Žižek, 2012: 52-3).

To illustrate the relation between sacrifice and the gift, Marion discusses the example of Abraham and Isaac: ‘Abraham does not really lose his son – all he has to do is to manifest his readiness to sacrifice him, based on the recognition that his son is not his in the first place, but given to him by God’ (Žižek, 2012: 53). Žižek goes on to quote Marion:

[By] restraining him from killing Isaac, God precisely does not refuse the sacrifice of Abraham, but annuls only his being put to death, because that does not belong to the essence of sacrifice: the actual death of Isaac would only have satisfied sacrifice in its common concept (destruction, dispossession, exchange and contract). … By sparing Isaac from now on recognised (by Abraham) as a gift (of God), God re-gives him to him, gives him a second time, and by presenting a gift by redundancy, which consecrates it definitively as a gift. … The sacrifice redoubles the gift and confirms it as such for the first time. (Marion, n.d.; qtd in Žižek, 2012: 53-4)

In a similar way, Donnie’s act of self-sacrifice confirms the nature of the gift, of the true gift as that which is given freely, and therefore contingently: the true gift may or may not be given. Through his decision not to be in order to save Gretchen, Donnie affirms the radical contingency, the freely given nature, both of his own life and of the event of falling-in-love with Gretchen. (From another perspective, of course, Donnie’s decision to accept his own death and prevent the chain of events that would lead to his falling-in-love with Gretchen might be seen as a betrayal of the event, but it would be an unusual lover who would condemn his beloved to death as the consequence of their meeting. Indeed, this would be to capitulate to the logic of love as destiny, thereby annulling the contingency of the event and the freedom of the subject who assumes agency through their fidelity to it.)

Part of the great poignancy of Donnie Darko arises from Donnie’s increasingly desperate psychological state as the end of his world approaches. He repeats with great agitation to his psychotherapist the words that Grandma Death whispers to him earlier in the film, that ‘every living creature on earth dies alone’. Donnie’s final act, though it is an act of the most profoundly selfless love, because it is a ‘pure gift’ also entails no relation, no reciprocity. As Badiou stresses, acting in fidelity to the event involves a radical isolation from the situation. Donnie does indeed die alone, but in the end it is not in fear but with confidence and commitment. His death is a gift freely given, an act carried out with a strange joy, a joy reflected in Donnie’s queer, dark, self-affirming smile – his amor fati – as he waits for the sky to crash over his head.

Eternal Sunshine offers this isolation, this intimate estrangement between the lovers, in an even starker form. In the traditional love story, the lover forms an idealised picture of the beloved (especially while the beloved remains unattainable or unattained) that sustains the fantasy element of desire; during the period of mutual infatuation this fantasy is ‘realised’ but is also gradually undermined by its contact with reality, the inevitable character flaws and bad habits, insecurities and resentments of the beloved. For a relationship to survive its in-love phase, the lovers must each commit, in effect, to generating new fantasies (fantasies that may, for instance, involve other people) in order to sustain their desire for each other. In this sense, a commitment to fidelity is a commitment to estrangement, even a kind of infidelity. Eternal Sunshine offers a variation in which the original ‘innocent’ event of falling-in-love has been erased. Joel and Clementine’s decision to continue their second relationship, while it involves a deep affirmation of fidelity to this now-forgotten event, also involves a certain betrayal, since the Joel and Clementine who make this commitment are not the Joel and Clementine who fell in love. They are, in an important sense, different people now, and so their getting together is something like having an affair; ‘a bit on the side’ of that first relationship. Perhaps it is this frisson of infidelity that will sustain their desire?

We should think of Lacuna Inc.’s memory erasure procedures as precisely a fictional example of the ‘destructive plasticity’ of Catherine Malalbou’s study, in Ontology of the Accident, of the radical consequences of brain injury for notions of selfhood and transformation. Whereas we tend to think of lives running their course like rivers, Malalbou suggests, where gradual transformations shape the person in ways that nevertheless preserve an underlying essence, the radical change of destructive plasticity – brain injury; serious trauma; degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease; or sudden, unforeseeable jolts into old age or depression – renders people unknowable, without relation to their former selves, coldly indifferent, irremediably alien:

As a result of serious trauma, or sometimes for no reason at all, the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person, and eventually
takes up all the room. An unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbours nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. A form born of the accident, born by accident, a kind of accident. … A new being comes into the world for a second time, out of a deep cut that opens in a biography. (Malabou, 2012: 1-2)

In reality, of course, no one voluntary chooses to undergo these kinds of destruction of the self and its continuity and coherence. Malabou is at pains to emphasise how such brain injury radically compromises the temporal unity of the self: ‘In principle a brain injury … cannot be re-integrated retrospectively into experience. These types of events are pure hits, tearing and piercing subjective continuity and allowing no justification or recall in the psyche’ (Malabou, 2012: 29). But for Malabou, what we think of as ‘normal’ identity is always threatened by the possibility of such destructive accidents; the possibility of undergoing a radical annihilation of one’s identity while still remaining alive is part of the structure of life itself: a ‘contingency … which remains absolutely unpredictable in all instances’ (Malabou, 2012: 30).

These sobering considerations might help us consider Joel and Clementine’s story more rigorously. Eternal Sunshine is, of course, a fable, a fairy-tale. Dr Mierzwiak, the founder of Lacuna Inc., describes the erasure of the memory of a one-night stand as no more destructive of the brain than a ‘night of heavy drinking’. But of course Joel’s and Clementine’s procedures, to erase all memories of a two-year relationship, are immeasurably more far-reaching. The film is understandably tentative about imagining rigorously the effects of such massive brain damage on the personality. As Malabou stresses, such effects would transcend the traumatic, since the ‘self’ that survived would have no emotional connection to its former self or indeed its significant others, since that self was of course nothing more than the aggregate of its interactions with others; there would be no grief, no sadness, nothing but a cold, inhuman indifference, to oneself and everyone else.

The film glances briefly into this abyss, such as when Joel curiously wonders why so many pages have been ripped from his journal, but the post-Lacuna Joel is still able to function in a way that seems relatively normal, almost entirely continuous with his former self. There are gaps, of course, but they are presented as trivial matters of detail rather than unbridgeable existential rifts. To take one instance that the film follows through: when they first meet, Joel of course associates Clementine with the song of the same name, familiar as the theme of the Huckleberry Hound cartoon series; during the erasure process, he remembers his mother crooning this tune as she bathed him in the kitchen sink. He also tells Clementine that his favourite childhood possession was his Huckleberry Hound doll. Finally, when Joel hears Clementine’s recording of why she wants to erase him from her memory, we hear how she loathes his ‘pathetic, wimpy, apologetic smile … that sort of wounded puppy shit he does’ (see Reeve, 2010: 16-18).

Under the regime of Lacuna Inc.’s destructive plasticity, Huckleberry Hound and everything associated with him has become no more than a lesion, a burnt out patch of dead brain tissue. When they meet at Montauk the second time, Clementine says ‘No jokes about my name’.

JOEL: I don’t know any jokes about your name. CLEMENTINE: Huckleberry Hound? JOEL: I don’t know what that means. CLEMENTINE: Huckleberry Hound? What are you, nuts? (qtd in Reeve 2010: 16-17)

The dialogue makes light of it, but only a mentally damaged person would not know who Huckleberry Hound is. As we have seen, the development of Joel’s personality was shaped by Huckleberry Hound; Huckleberry Hound is part of who he is, and not knowing Huckleberry Hound means he now no longer knows himself. Nevertheless, at the very end of the film, it is Joel’s plaintive look of appeal, his ‘wounded puppy shit’, that persuades Clementine (somewhat inexplicably) to agree to try having a relationship with him again.

This gesture, like Joel’s urge to go to Montauk at the beginning of the film, is an inexplicable survival of a brain injury that in reality would have rendered Joel a complete stranger to himself and everyone who knew him. Though Eternal Sunshine shies away from probing the depths of this estrangement, I think it is important that the decision of Joel and Clementine at the end of the film, the act of fidelity to an event of falling-in-love that neither of them remembers, does involve a radical estrangement and isolation. Neither of them is sustained by the false hopes that generally sustain romances. Indeed if, as Albert Camus famously wrote in A Happy Death, ‘We always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love – first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage’, then Joel and Clementine find themselves in the awkward situation of experiencing both deceptions simultaneously.

III: Repetition/Affirmation

Both Donnie Darko and Eternal Sunshine are structured by uncanny repetition: scenes elaborated at the beginning of the film are repeated with a different outcome at the end. So too, in both cases the narrative events occurring during the middle of the film are effectively erased at the end: Donnie’s acceptance of his own death prevents the chain of events that transpires over the 28 days of Frank’s prophecy, including his falling-in-love with Gretchen and Gretchen’s death; Joel and Clementine’s first relationship, dealt with in flashback during the
middle of the film, has been erased from both their memories by the end, and thus they begin their second relationship with an awkwardly unclean slate. Though both films end with an erasure of the event of falling-in-love, they also both end on a note of affirmation.

This structure of repetition and affirmation inevitably suggests the Nietzschian eternal return. Donnie’s wry smile as accepts his death can be read, as I have suggested, as a gesture of *amor fati*, an affirmation of one’s fate. So too, many critics have read Joel and Clementine’s final ‘OK’ as a Nietzschean affirmation that, even should their relationship pursue exactly the same painful and destructive course as it did the first time round, they now accept this (see, for instance, Jollimore, 2010). Indeed, Mary quotes from Nietzsche in the film: ‘Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their mistakes’. Joel and Clementine embark on their second relationship older but not, of course, wiser.

The interesting conclusion of these two films, however, is that when these characters are presented with the privileged opportunity of making a ‘correction’ of a past event—a privilege entirely restricted to fiction, since as we have seen, not even God can change the past—what they freely choose is, in a sense, an even worse fate than formerly: Donnie chooses to die in order to save Gretchen, Frank, his mother and his sister; Joel and Clementine start a relationship with the awkward knowledge that, at some level of which they are presently unaware, they already hate each other.

In essence, however, these characters’ moments of repetition, in revisiting the moment of *intervention* of the recognition of and commitment of fidelity to the event of falling-in-love, enable them to affirm, not the inevitability of their love, but its contingency. This repetition is therefore quite different from a Nietzschean affirmation of the irreversibility of the past, a Zarathustran ‘willing backwards’ in which ‘thus it was’ is transformed into ‘thus I willed it’, because, as Agamben points out ‘the infinite repetition of what was abandons all its potential not to be’ (Agamben, 1999: 268). Instead, Donnie’s sacrifice of his love for Gretchen in order to save Gretchen, Joel and Clementine’s wager to start a relationship in the absence of all romantic illusions about each other, are commitments to the fundamental contingency of the event, its ability both to be and not to be.

So too, this contingency of the event is not something that belongs to the past, but to the future, to the event as the *not-yet*. To return to Badiou’s central concept of fidelity as structuring a subject’s relation to the event, in whatever domain it occurs, we might suggest that the demands of utopianism in our time—whether amorous, scientific, artistic or political—require precisely such a temporality, a sense of fidelity to the event not as belonging to the past but as the opening out of a potential future transformation.

The conceit of time travel exposes the falsity of the notion of a moral obligation to the given, to facticity, to the situation; fidelity to the event, on the other hand, involves a refusal of the given, of facticity, of the unalterability of the past, in the name of the still—*not-yet*-closed possibilities that facticity at first sight appears to have cancelled. In the name of fidelity to the event, then, everything—even the unalterable past—is opened to the possibility of transformation. If, despite its sombre mood, there is an optimism in *Donnie Darko*, it is in its celebration of the pure gift, of the freely chosen act that affirms the contingency of the event, its potential both to *be* and not to *be*. So too, if there is a darker side to *Eternal Sunshine*, it is in its recognition of the task of love, of fidelity to the event of falling-in-love, as a sober and sobering commitment to a truth procedure sustained by, but not sharing in, the blissful ignorance of being-in-love. And is not this precisely also the sobering challenge of art, of science, and of radical politics?

**References**


*Donnie Darko* (2001), Richard Kelly, Pandora Films, 113 mins.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Michel Gondry, Focus Features, 108 mins.


