Philosophers have long questioned the nature of reality. From the days of mythology to today, there are two fundamental questions which have occupied great thinkers: how do we come to be here (obviously divided into creationists and evolutionists) and what is the nature of the world (although equally divided by spirituality versus ‘actuality’)?

At the heart of understanding the world we perceive (what most call the real), for those who believe in the idea of an omnipotent creator, is the juxtaposition of the corporeal and the spiritual. Most people of faith believe in some form of ‘afterlife’ which consequently means that there is a level of existence, or reality, which we cannot experience in our corporeal state. For most religions, as philosophies, the bodily life is purely a preparation for the afterlife and we are measured by our activities on Earth (‘sins’, good deeds and so on), which infers that whilst Life is important, it is the Afterlife that is more important. The Afterlife, then, is perceived as, in a sense, the true reality and Life is construed as an alternative which is less real.

For those who are non-believers, the counter position is more accurate: Life is the only experience and therefore the only comprehensible reality. The very concept of any alternate reality makes atheist humanists uncomfortable because it questions their belief in the solidity of the singularity of the tangible real and, instead, implies possibilities more easily resolved through spiritual modes of understanding.

Challenged thus, philosophical approaches to reality often divide into an optimistic comprehension of utopias and dystopias: benevolent modes of control versus realities controlled by mysterious enemies of humanity.

If a belief in reality and alternative realities is fundamentally about an individual’s perception of the world then, further, the representation of that reality is inextricably linked to the perception of the world and the way in which the individual processes experience: thus helping us to understand how different individuals actually experience different realities and how, in mental processes, the individual can divorce him/herself from the unbearable reality and become absorbed in a reality which they can construct – becoming their own god.

Yet there is also a third position, that of the doubter, the questioner, the person who does not necessarily have a concrete belief but who also does not feel they can exist in a world without a creator. This third position oscillates between reality and its alternatives more freely and more enquiringly observes their own responses: but this freedom makes the processing of realities more difficult and not less and, if anything, encourages a more fully confused interaction with events. It is this third position that many contemporary art forms express: a confused articulation of self, fragmenting, of the real, questioned, of the past, present and future, uncertain, that may be identified as fundamentally post-modernist.
In this paper, I shall examine two films in particular where reality and perception have become divorced and thus alter the nature of the protagonists’ interaction with experience, *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). For today’s purposes, I shall focus on issues of the identity within these films and those aspects which draw attention to the American post-modern being represented, especially the concept of home as explored in each film and how these begin to connect to ideas of perception and reality. This is all part of my wider research on the representation of the mind in cinema of which this can only be described as a fragment but I hope you find it interesting.

The American qualities of each film are richly embedded in the visuals, the dialogue and the engagement with a pastiche of American culture. Since the early 1980s, American cinema has experimented with numerous representations of the American mind that question the imagery of the past and contemporary cultures through the use of memory and imagination. In *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), where the protagonist doubts whether he is human or Replicant and the mise-en-scène is filled with bright neon lights which advertise in Japanese the latest gadgets and gimmicks, the unification of Japanese and American influences, just as in *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995, where Keanu Reeves is an information courier, his brain hotwired to smuggle mega-bites of corporate data, engendering a kind of mental breakdown) and *The Matrix* trilogy (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999 and 2003 twice, where the characters fight for a human reality rather than a robot engineered retro-experience), emphasises not multiculturalism but globalisation on multiple levels in a way which expresses American concerns about their own cultural fragmentation (ironically, considering that most of Europe is more concerned about the Americanisation of European cultures and has been since the 1920s). This expression of doubt (What is American culture, is the melting pot simply a pastiche of other influences piled on top of each other and has their ever been real integration?) is at the core of beginning an identification of these texts as being post-modern. If the authenticity of the environment of existence is itself being questioned, then it is hardly surprising that the subjects within that environment are questioned, questioning and represented as having a fractured relationship with experiences.

Within both *Fight Club* and *Eternal Sunshine* specific visual images are used to create a pastiche of the American past and present, as well as references in the dialogue which play upon ideas of nostalgia for an idea of America rather than America itself. To illustrate these and provide us with textual reference we shall watch two clips, one from each film, in which the American pastiche is represented powerfully. In watching each clip, I want you to focus on the mise-en-scène, references to past and present culture and how the fracturing and fragmented mind is represented. Firstly, to consider *Fight Club*.

The initial premise of *Fight Club* is that Ed Norton’s character, critically known as ‘Jack’ because of his later references to his emotions through a third person (for example “I am Jack’s broken heart”), is an insomniac who starts going to self-help groups for the seriously, if not terminally, ill in order to cry and therefore to sleep. After a year, Helena Bonham-Carter’s femme fatale “tourist”, Marla Singer, interrupts these groups and once again he cannot sleep. In a state somewhere between waking and sleeping, ‘Jack’ criss-crosses the country on aeroplanes with his job as recall co-ordinator for a care company, and eventually meets Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) on a
flight. Having landed, he then discovers that his IKEA laden apartment has exploded and ends up drinking with Durden, enjoying a male bonding fight with him in the street and then staying with him in a ramshackle house on Paper Street which is pure American Gothic. Life with Durden is good, ‘Jack’ is freed up again and drops the self-help groups but the fights start to attract other men and so develops the fight club. Over time this becomes more and more significant as a cultural phenomenon and more men join, eventually forming a paramilitary group commanded by Durden, who directs them in Project Mayhem. At the same time as the club is expanding, Marla re-enters his life after Durden interrupts her suicide attempt and she and Durden become lovers, then haters quite rapidly with Durden telling ‘Jack’ to “Get rid of her”. As Project Mayhem takes over Durden’s life, ‘Jack’ feels increasingly disenfranchised and jealous of the attention Durden gives to other men (beating one to a pulp: “I felt like destroying something beautiful”, he says) and becomes marginalized. At the seeming climax of Project Mayhem, when Meatloaf’s character Bob is shot, ‘Jack’ feels so distanced that he abandons Durden, who then leaves.

It is at this point that ‘Jack’ starts to realise that Tyler Durden was not all that he seemed: Durden was, in fact, an imaginary friend, an illusion. As Durden says when ‘Jack’ links all the pieces of the puzzle together: “All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me”. The club, Project Mayhem, Durden’s volatile relationship with Marla: all these things were created by ‘Jack’ and his schizophrenia – “Was Tyler my bad dream or was I Tyler’s?” asks ‘Jack’.

Like The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), like Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and like Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2003), the film replays the scenes, reframes the perspectives and then completes the ellipses so that the protagonist can finally witness his own fragmenting and, in recognising the fractures, begin to reassemble the complete self. Durden says to ‘Jack’ “You created me. I didn’t create some loser to make me feel better. Take some responsibility”: and so he does. In reframing the past events the present comes into more accurate focus, the mirror is recalibrated and ‘Jack’ takes Durden’s existence into his own hands by destroying the brain which has created him: he shoots himself.

Firstly, Fight Club.
Chapter 4.

The “IKEA nesting instinct” of Fight Club is related to Patrick Bateman’s materialism in that other great American post-Reagan novel, American Psycho (1990, Bret Easton Ellis, filmed by Mary Harron in 2000 with a similar visualisation to this scene and starring Christian Bale as the sociopathic fashion victim fetishising business cards). It is a metaphor for the commercialism of American culture whereby objects become the signatures of success in a historical progression from the early Sears catalogues that made houses of the ‘wild west’ as pseudo chic as those of Boston or Washington: a metaphor which is made all the more powerful by ‘Jack’s’ assertion that his apartment made him “nearly complete, nearly perfect” to which Durden responds:  
  Fuck Martha Stewart: I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. 
  I say let’s evolve. Let the chips fall where they may”.
All of which is like a clarion call to the sleep starved ‘Jack’ left only with a suit and a suitcase.
IKEA, of course, is not an American phenomenon, as anyone here who has ever visited one will know: neither is it simply a shop or a catalogue, it is a way of turning shoppers into factory bred beast, coerced through the produce, the food, like sheep to the slaughterhouse, the warehouse where you collect your goods. You are prevented from deviated by labyrinthine routes and shelving blocking the line of sight and the pathways are narrow enough that if you get stuck behind the ubiquitous chav family out on a Sunday afternoon you cannot circumnavigate around the various unruly family members. So much for the “IKEA nesting instinct”, what IKEA is concerned about is the herding instinct of humans: alongside the fact that what IKEA actually produces tends to be rather ‘tasteful’. The IKEA instinct then, what ‘Jack’ and Patrick Bateman are trying to demonstrate, is a concept of modern ‘taste’ which makes them appear to be part of society. What makes the IKEA reference in *Fight Club* specifically American is the visual connection of these images to magazine and lifestyle culture, which began in the US through Sears and into the *New Yorker* and the obsession with the lifestyles of the rich and famous, aka Hollywood. IKEA becomes contextually situated as the epitome of modern American commercial taste and as powerful an icon for success as Frasier Crane’s designer apartment in the *Cheers* spin-off.

There is a definite confrontation of the concept of ‘home’ also being explored through the mise-en-scène not just of these scene but elsewhere in the film: an explicitly American concept which is satirised through its absence and which is alluded to by the earlier reference to Martha Stewart and the dilapidated Munster/Psycho home lived in by Durden: the ‘twee’, over-decorated home filled with ‘Home Sweet Home’ embroideries and fathers who say “Honey, I’m home”; but then this is also a film in which fathers are being debated and have abandoned their sons. “Our fathers were models for God”, argues Durden to his apostles, “If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God?” This whole area of masculinity in the film is one which I do not have time to go into in this paper but this ideology that the men of *Fight Club* are without fathers and therefore without role-models, or gods, inflects the entire film because it affects not just the characters interactions with themselves but those interactions with the environment which lead to the soulless “nesting instinct” of barren personalities.

The ‘Martha Stewart’, rather too perfect, model of the American home is also noticeably alluded to in Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a film in which the interplay of the alternate realities is much more akin to an Orwellian version of the world in which the thought police are fully armed. In Gondry’s film, written by Charlie Kaufman (the mind behind *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*), what begins simply as a love affair gone wrong becomes a case of memories being erased. The premise concerns the concept of being able to forget unpleasant events and what would happen to your mind if you eradicated things that are a cause of sadness: hence the title of the film. The narrative explores however, the way in which the mind struggles against this and, in dong so, enters the surreality of memory in an attempt to articulate how in the mind, memory can become “another country”. In the scene you are about to see, you will see both the articulation of home through the mise-en-scène and how the regression into the self is manifested through a position of innocence (‘Jack’s’ position in relationship to Durden is also ‘innocent” in that it is one of an absence of responsibility for his actions but, here, you will see how Joel
(Jim Carrey) regresses to a place in childhood which, ironically, makes the very reason for bringing Kate Winslet’s Clementine to his past redundant.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
Chapter 13.

Here the home is commended, is very late 1960s, is bright, clean and somehow unreal (unlike the working 1960s kitchen of a film like *That Thing You Do*, which also draws on a nostalgic relation to the past). It is, like ‘Jack’s’ IKEA filled home, artificial, signalling absence of life rather than its presence. This links, as in *Fight Club* to the perception of the home as connected to parenting.

In *Fight Club*, however, mothers are criticised as emasculating their sons but, in this scene from *Eternal Sunshine*, what is seen is how the lack of mothering rather than of fathering is a problem. Yet, unlike *Fight Club* where the lack informs the protagonist’s anger, here what is seen is only loss: and a sense of loss being confused by the juxta-positioning of a) Joel as a 4 year old b) Joel as the adult c) the mother as already absent d) Clementine trying to avoid being ‘lost’ e) Clementine as Joel’s mother’s friend and f) the fact that this is a memory entering another memory in the brain of someone whose mind is slowly deconstructing experience as he has previously comprehended it. In entering the memory, would Clementine’s ‘hidden’ presence ultimately mean Joel loses the memory of his mother from his 4 year old perspective? Would Clementine become trapped in this memory and so Joel the adult would never be able to retain the memory of looking at her crotch? The enigmas posed by this scene are substantial, as are those offered by the film as a whole: the weakness of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, unlike *Being John Malkovich* is that it tries to hard to answer unanswerable questions instead of just leaving them for philosophical debate.

The mise-en-scène of the memories in *Eternal Sunshine* varies according to the cycle of repetition upon which Joel is caught but each cycle contains imagery which, like Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, echoes a specific kind of American landscape: one in which the somebody is always on the wrong side of the tracks, where there’s always a wooden clad beach-house aching with flotsam and jetsam and where bookshops are filled with uncut edges (in memory, why should the unread book have words within it – like *Pleasantville* [Gary Ross, 1998] the words are waiting to be remembered). However, again as in *Fight Club*, the American mise-en-scène is not perfect, not Hollywood, not complete and when it is, such as the kitchen, it signifies false memories and imperfection. The homes of Durden, Marla, Clementine and of Joel in the ‘real’, by contrast, are human spaces, spaces infected by the past which present the new American Gothic – grunge as a counter to the “IKEA nesting instinct”: and so too are the characters fascinating in their visual contribution to the post-modern American mise-en-scènes represented in each film; especially Marla and Clementine, whose images are particularly striking.

Hand around pictures.

Marla is cast as the femme fatale, dressed in black and chain smoking in slow motion when the spectator first sees her but, rather like Bonham-Carter in real life, what is evident is that Marla has a grungy, second-hand quality which sees her at one point
dressed in a little girl’s bridesmaid dress that she’s bought from a thrift shop – thus revealing the fragility of the character in a way her attempted suicide failed to. Clementine by contrast is not quite so grubby but is clearly influenced by the gothic too, although more evidently expressed through her ever-changing hair she could be identified as belonging at the intersection of gothic and punk. Yet, Clementine too also has her little girl moment as she and Joel are seen as children within his memories. The strength of the images of both women in each film emphasises their centrality to the plots not in terms of time on film but, like most good female characters in male centred films, because they enable the protagonist to question his environment and his surroundings. When ‘Jack’ calls Marla and she calls him “Tyler Durden, Tyler Durden, Tyler Durden” three times (echoing, as in other places, Peter’s denial of Christ building up to the crucifixion), it is no coincidence that ‘Jack’s’ voice-over narration acknowledges this with “We have just lost cabin pressure”.

So, to wind up because I need to: both Fight Club and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind articulate a version of post-modern America that is centred upon a critique of the past and a questioning of the present which implies an uncertain future. In both films, because the mind is fractured, the future identity is what is being questioned and the only answer ‘Jack’ can find is to destroy the mind capable of creating Durden whilst, for Joel, it is only in hiding Clementine as an adult from his mind, by placing her in his child’s mind eye as a child, that his future identity, containing her influence, can be saved; which it is. Both characters, ultimately need to find a ‘home’ for their minds, a safe place, in ‘Jack’s’ case, a cave, where his power animal is Marla: “slide”.