



The Language of Memory in Cinema: The Use of Remembrance as a Narrative Tool in *Aftersun*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how memory functions as a narrative device in the film *Aftersun*, where memories are portrayed not merely as tools of recollection but as a means for characters to question their identity and connection to the past. Through visual and narrative strategies, the film presents memories as a narrative language that explores self-identity and relationships. Drawing from feminist theory and memory studies, this research analyzes the film's narrative structure, arguing that remembrance is employed as a method for reconstructing ties to the past and understanding one's self. *Aftersun* transforms memory into a non-linear, fragmented, and emotional narrative device, offering the audience a deeper insight into the characters' inner worlds. The purpose of this study is to uncover how memory serves as an effective tool in cinema for reproducing individual experiences and social identities.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Wells' debut feature *Aftersun* (2022) marks a significant entry into contemporary cinema through its intimate exploration of memory and familial relationships. The film centers on a young woman,

Sophie, as she reflects on a past holiday spent with her father, Calum, in Turkey, reconstructing fragmented recollections to understand her father's complex emotional world. Wells crafts an autobiographical narrative style, intertwining Sophie's recollections and emotional resonances with visual cues that blur the lines between past and

present. Through its nonlinear, layered storytelling, *Aftersun* aligns with cinematic approaches that prioritize memory as a central method, echoing recent developments in feminist autobiographical cinema (Cooke, 2020; Gilmore, 2017).

Charlotte Wells, a Scottish filmmaker, brings a background in both narrative and experimental film that informs *Aftersun*'s innovative structure. Wells' visual choices evoke the texture of memory—fragmented, hazy, and often resistant to clear interpretation—characterizing her approach as a blend of traditional narrative with the evocative power of “visual memory.” This aligns with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2001) theory of life writing, which they define as a narrative act that reclaims personal and cultural identity through autobiographical expression. By weaving Sophie's memories with fragmented narrative techniques, Wells not only reconstructs personal history but also invites viewers to encounter memory as a fluid and often unreliable narrator, echoing the complexities of feminist life writing as described by Leigh Gilmore (2017) and Jennifer Cooke (2020).

The concept of life writing, traditionally understood as self-referential storytelling that merges individual memory with broader socio-cultural narratives, provides a critical framework for understanding *Aftersun* (Smith & Watson, 2010). In autobiographical film, life writing is often linked to feminist practices that resist conventional storytelling by exploring how memory can act as both a method and a subject. Wells' use of fragmented visuals and reflective tone exemplifies life writing's potential in cinema, where memory functions as a methodological tool for narrating subjective experience. Feminist scholars like Lauren Fournier (2021) argue that memory in life writing serves as a site of resistance, challenging patriarchal narratives by affirming the validity of subjective, nonlinear recollections in constructing identity.

By positioning memory as a narrative method, *Aftersun* contributes to a feminist cinematic discourse that redefines narrative structure, aligning with Hélène Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing. *Écriture féminine*, which emphasizes fluidity, nonlinearity, and a rejection of rigid structures, parallels Wells' portrayal of memory as a dynamic, ever-shifting force. Through fragmented imagery and visual metaphors, Wells' film illustrates how memory functions as an active, reconstructive process, offering an alternative mode of storytelling that challenges fixed notions of identity and invites reflection on the intricate

dynamics between self, memory, and history (Cixous, 1975; Miller, 1991).

Annette Kuhn's (2002) concept of memory work posits that memory is not merely a tool for recollection but an active, reconstructive process that shapes identity and belonging. *Aftersun*'s fragmented, elusive, and emotionally charged depiction of memory aligns with Kuhn's theoretical framework, which emphasizes how individual and collective memory intersect, making remembrance both a personal and cultural act of re-production. Kuhn argues that memory is shaped through interpretation, subjectivity, and affect rather than being a fixed record of the past. In *Aftersun*, Sophie's recollections do not serve simply as an archive of past experiences but as a means of making sense of her father's emotional world and her own evolving identity. By framing memory as a fluid, ever-shifting narrative force, Wells' film resonates with Kuhn's notion that acts of memory are inherently tied to self-construction, reinforcing *Aftersun*'s place within feminist cinematic discourse.

The emotional resonance of memory in cinema has been a subject of extensive research, with scholars emphasizing the role of affect in shaping audience engagement. As noted by Rancière (2009), the emotional impact of a film can be significantly enhanced through the use of memory as a narrative device. In *Aftersun*, the characters' recollections are laden with emotional significance, inviting the audience to empathize with their struggles and triumphs. This emotional engagement is further amplified by the film's pacing, which allows for moments of reflection and contemplation. The concept of nostalgia also plays a pivotal role in understanding how memory functions in *Aftersun*. Nostalgia, as articulated by Boym (2001), can be both a longing for the past and a means of constructing identity in the present. The film's portrayal of nostalgia highlights the tension between idealized memories and the complexities of lived experiences. This duality invites viewers to reflect on their own memories and the ways in which they shape their identities and relationships.

This article analyzes how *Aftersun* employs memory as both a theme and a narrative device, situating the film within feminist life writing practices that transform personal narratives into broader socio-cultural commentaries. By embracing memory as a visual method, Wells' film aligns with a lineage of feminist cinematic approaches that redefine traditional narrative conventions, affirming the power of memory to narrate, shape, and ultimately reconcile

identity. Through this lens, *Aftersun* (2022) emerges as a profound exploration of memory's capacity to mediate between personal and collective experiences, illuminating the power of life writing in feminist film to transcend the boundaries between autobiography, fiction, and cultural memory.

In recent years, feminist narrative theory, particularly as framed by scholars like Susan S. Lanser (Lanser, 1992), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Smith & Watson, 2001), and Jennifer Cooke (Cooke, 2020), has reshaped the analysis of autobiographical films, where memory and self-narration become powerful tools for feminist critique and identity construction. Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun* (2022), for instance, illuminates these theoretical frameworks by exploring memory as a narrative device that dismantles patriarchal storytelling. Through a fragmented, visually driven recollection of a childhood vacation, *Aftersun* questions how individual memories shape identity and resists conventional linear storytelling by introducing a "feminine writing" (Cixous, 1975) style that emphasizes subjective and layered experiences.

Feminist narrative theory, as explored by Susan S. Lanser in *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992), critiques traditional narrative structures for their gendered limitations. Lanser's work examines how storytelling, voice, and authority are deeply influenced by gender, making her approach essential for understanding how autobiographical films by women directors use narrative authority to foreground female experiences. Feminist narrative theory seeks to elevate women's voices, using techniques that underscore the complexities of female subjectivity, such as fragmented storytelling and focalization, the latter emphasizing the viewpoint through which the story unfolds (Lanser, 1992). Lanser's critique of patriarchal narrative structures provides a crucial lens for examining autobiographical films, where women directors reclaim narrative authority to tell stories from a distinctly female perspective.

In autobiographical films like Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir* (2019) and Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), this feminist narrative framework plays out through focalization and subjective storytelling. Both films reject conventional linear structures, opting instead for fragmented timelines and shifting perspectives. Hogg's *The Souvenir*, a semi-autobiographical exploration of a young woman's romantic entanglement in 1980s London, uses a fragmented narrative style that mirrors memory's subjective nature. Sciamma's

Portrait of a Lady on Fire similarly utilizes focalization to convey the emotional intricacies of a relationship between two women, challenging the traditional male gaze and privileging the female experience. These films illustrate Lanser's concept of feminist narrative authority, inviting audiences to experience the world through the eyes of their female protagonists, thus highlighting the potential of autobiographical cinema to challenge patriarchal structures and offer alternative representations of female subjectivity.

The concept of life writing, as developed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), further supports this framework by positioning autobiographical narratives as acts of resistance against patriarchal identity constructions. Life writing allows women to assert their voices and reclaim their stories within a cultural landscape that often marginalizes or silences female perspectives. For Smith and Watson, autobiographical narratives are inherently political, as they enable women to resist patriarchal norms and redefine themselves on their own terms. In hybrid forms like autofiction, where the boundaries between truth and fiction blur, women writers and filmmakers find space to rewrite personal histories, creating narratives that offer a more nuanced view of female identity.

Jennifer Cooke's *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (2020) expands on this by examining how contemporary feminist life writing adopts a bold, "audacious" approach to previously taboo subjects, such as sexuality, mental health, and trauma. Cooke argues that modern feminist life writing disrupts literary norms, using fragmented, non-linear narratives to reflect the complexities of women's lives. Films like *Aftersun* exemplify this audacity by blending personal memory with fictional elements, creating a narrative that is at once deeply subjective and universally resonant. By emphasizing vulnerability, trauma, and fragmented storytelling, *Aftersun* (2022) aligns with Cooke's concept of "new audacity," presenting a feminist approach to life writing that resists conventional narrative expectations and embraces the messiness of personal experience.

Building on these theoretical foundations, this article explores how autobiographical films by women directors utilize memory, subjective narration, and fragmented storytelling to challenge patriarchal narrative conventions. It examines how feminist narrative strategies enable female directors to create complex representations of women's lives,

emphasizing memory and personal experience as narrative methods that resist linear storytelling and conventional character development.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach through close visual and textual analysis to examine the autobiographical and feminist narrative strategies employed in *Aftersun* (Smith & Watson, 2001). Through a lens informed by feminist narrative theory and life writing frameworks, the analysis will scrutinize how memory, subjective narration, and fragmented storytelling are utilized by female directors to subvert patriarchal narrative structures, allowing for complex representations of women's identities and experiences. The methodology involves situating memory as a methodological tool that constructs a subjective reality within the film, aligning with the work of scholars who address the intersection of memory, identity, and gender in autobiographical narratives (Cooke, 2020; Eakin, 2014).

In developing this methodological approach, Paul John Eakin's (2014) theory on self-narration is instrumental. Eakin argues that modern autobiographical writing diverges from traditional narrative expectations by adopting fragmented and hybrid forms to better reflect the complexities of identity in a postmodern world. This aligns with feminist life writing as articulated by Jennifer Cooke (2020), who describes the "new audacity" in feminist autobiographies—where conventional narrative forms are intentionally disrupted to produce more dynamic and authentic representations of life. In *Aftersun*, the narrative's nonlinear form, the intertwining of personal and collective memory, and the selective use of subjective perspective align with this approach, as they allow director Charlotte Wells to explore the fluidity and layered nature of female identity.

Building on Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact" (1975), this methodology also addresses the implicit contract between the viewer and the film's narrative. Lejeune's theory holds that in traditional autobiographical works, a trust is established between author and reader, predicated on the authenticity of the narrator's identity. However, in *Aftersun*, the blending of real and fictionalized memory creates an "autofictional interference," which disrupts this pact by casting doubt on the extent to which the narrative aligns with historical truth. This ambiguity invites the audience to question the boundaries between fact and fiction, a

technique that aligns with the approaches taken in films like *The Souvenir* and *Bergman Island*, where subjective reality becomes central to the storytelling. By challenging the expectations of an "autobiographical truth," *Aftersun* engages the viewer in a layered narrative that emphasizes memory as both selective and interpretative (Lejeune, 1975; Boyle, 2012).

The theoretical insights from *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction* (2015) further support the study's methodological framing, particularly in terms of examining the blurred boundaries between self-representation and authenticity. The contributions in this collection underscore how autobiographical and autofictional forms destabilize conventional ideas of selfhood by integrating elements of fiction, a strategy highly relevant in feminist autobiographical cinema. This approach allows *Aftersun* to explore personal narratives that resist fixed identities, offering instead a portrait of subjectivity shaped by memory and experience (Shands et al., 2015).

The methodology also incorporates insights from Alexandra Effe and Arnaud Schmitt's *Autofiction, Emotions, and Humour: A Playfully Serious Affective Mode* (2022), which examines how humor and irony serve as affective tools within autofiction. This perspective is critical in analyzing *Aftersun*'s tone, where moments of nostalgia, humor, and loss create a layered affective experience. This affective approach allows the film to subtly communicate the protagonist's inner emotional complexities, revealing the tension between remembered and lived experience. This methodology recognizes memory as an affective narrative tool that constructs meaning and engages viewers on an emotional level (Effe & Schmitt, 2022).

Claire Boyle's study, *Self-Fictions and Film: Varda's Transformative Technology of the Self in Les plages d'Agnès* (2012), provides an additional layer to the methodology by linking Vincent Colonna's concept of autofiction with Michel Foucault's "technology of the self." Boyle's analysis highlights how autobiographical cinema can serve as a transformative process, where self-narration and reflection create spaces for self-care and identity formation. This concept aligns with *Aftersun*'s portrayal of memory as a method through which personal identity is not only reflected but continually reconstructed. By employing fragmented and subjective narratives, Wells crafts a filmic language that allows memory to serve as both personal reflection and socio-cultural critique (Boyle, 2012).

Kanchanakesi Warnapala's research on memoir, gender, and "respectable femininity" (2023) informs the analysis of how *Aftersun* challenges traditional depictions of femininity and identity through its narrative structure. Warnapala's insights into the dual role of memoir—as both a reinforcement of and a resistance to gender norms—align with *Aftersun*'s approach to representing female subjectivity through memory. This methodology thus emphasizes the film's nuanced portrayal of gender and identity, highlighting memory as a vehicle through which gendered experiences are articulated, and societal expectations are both engaged with and subverted (Warnapala, 2023).

Research Questions

1. How does *Aftersun* by Charlotte Wells employ narrative techniques and focalization to convey feminist perspectives within autobiographical cinema?
2. How does memory function as a method in *Aftersun*, and what are its implications for representing fragmented or reconstructed identities within feminist autobiographical narratives?

Drawing on feminist narrative theory (Lanser, 1992) and life writing frameworks (Cooke, 2020), I aim to uncover the ways in which memory, as deployed in the film, disrupts traditional, linear narrative forms and creates a space for representing the layered and multifaceted experiences of womanhood. This approach allows for an analysis of memory's capacity to construct a fragmented, subjective reality that speaks to the complexities of gendered identity (Gilmore, 2017).

3. Analysis

Building on Lanser's (1992) critique of traditional narrative frameworks, *Aftersun* by Charlotte Wells effectively reclaims narrative authority by using focalization to foreground the inner lives and memories of its characters. In *Aftersun*, memory is not just a recollection but an active, subjective process that shapes the narrative structure, placing the female experience and memory at the story's core. This approach challenges dominant narrative structures by centering on an intimate, gendered perspective, which reshapes storytelling conventions in line with feminist narrative theory. In particular, the film's fragmented scenes and non-linear progression allow us to perceive young Sophie's memories and reflections on her relationship with her

father, capturing a complex, layered experience of identity and family.

Smith and Watson's (2024) life-writing framework further supports how *Aftersun* employs elements of autofiction to blur truth and fiction, representing female identity as fluid and multifaceted. The film intertwines personal history with fictionalized memory, resonating with their perspective on life writing as a mode for women to assert agency over their stories. In *Aftersun*, this technique creates a layered, feminist narrative, where memories serve as both introspective tools and acts of resistance. For example, Sophie's memories of her father at various moments—such as when he performs Tai Chi alone or when he shares playful moments by the pool—construct an emotional portrait that resists patriarchal notions of linear storytelling and stable identity. By using Sophie's fragmented and sometimes unreliable memories, Wells critiques the traditional authority of narrative "truth," instead inviting viewers into a more subjective, interpretive space.

Jennifer Cooke's (2020) concept of "audacity" in contemporary feminist life writing also finds resonance in *Aftersun*'s fragmented and experimental structure, where themes of trauma, vulnerability, and memory are explored visually and narratively. *Aftersun*'s non-linear storytelling and its layering of intimate, often painful recollections exemplify a feminist approach to autobiographical cinema that disrupts conventional coherence. One example is the final, emotionally charged dance scene between Sophie and her father, which encapsulates both the joy and pain of memory. This scene, interwoven with flashbacks, projections, and imagined interactions, becomes a powerful exploration of identity and trauma, allowing fragmented memories to reveal complex layers of self and familial connection.

Challenging Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," *Aftersun* invites viewers into a narrative that is both personal and intentionally ambiguous. By blending real memories with fictionalized scenes, Wells subtly defies the traditional expectation of narrative "truth" and encourages the audience to experience the fluidity of memory, mirroring the instability of identity and memory in the female experience. The film thus offers a self-aware commentary on the nature of autobiographical storytelling, where viewers must navigate the blurred boundaries of Sophie's recollections and interpretations. Through scenes such as Sophie watching old home videos and attempting to reconcile her memories with her current understanding of her father, *Aftersun* disrupts the

conventional pact of autobiographical authenticity, embracing the subjective nature of personal memory.

Lauren Fournier's (2021) analysis of autotheory as a feminist practice aligns closely with *Aftersun*'s approach to self-representation. In *Aftersun*, memory and self-representation become tools of feminist resistance, as the film integrates Sophie's personal memories with critical reflections on identity. The result is a narrative that critiques societal norms around gender, identity, and memory. This is particularly evident in Sophie's retrospective reflections as an adult, where the memories of her childhood and her father's struggles gain new meaning and depth. By using autotheory techniques—blending personal narrative with critical reflection—*Aftersun* invites viewers to question established norms and encourages a nuanced understanding of self and memory.

In this way, *Aftersun* exemplifies feminist theoretical principles, using memory, subjective focalization, and fragmented narrative structures to foreground female experience and challenge traditional narrative authority. Through these techniques, the film positions memory not just as a storytelling device but as an active method of feminist resistance, inviting viewers to engage with complex, multi-layered portrayals of identity and experience.

The intersection of memory studies and feminist theory offers a rich framework for analyzing *Aftersun*. Memory studies have increasingly acknowledged the importance of gender in shaping memory practices and narratives. As articulated by Radstone (2000), memory is not a neutral process; it is influenced by societal norms and power dynamics. In this context, *Aftersun* can be viewed as a site of resistance, where the characters' memories challenge traditional narratives and offer alternative perspectives on identity and relationships.

The film's portrayal of female characters, in particular, underscores the importance of memory in understanding gendered experiences. Feminist scholars have long argued that women's narratives are often marginalized or silenced in mainstream cinema (Mulvey, 1975). However, *Aftersun* subverts this trend by centering the emotional and psychological complexities of its female characters. This aligns with the feminist perspective that emphasizes the significance of personal narratives in shaping collective memory and identity (De Lauretis, 1984).

Aftersun embodies a deeply feminist approach to autobiographical cinema by transforming memory into a dynamic, interpretive method that emphasizes the subjective, nuanced nature of personal experience. The film's fragmented structure reflects the instability and selective reconstruction inherent in memory, underscoring how identity is an evolving narrative shaped by both presence and absence. By allowing Sophie's memories to blur the lines between reality and interpretation, *Aftersun* invites the viewer to confront the emotional layers of her connection with her father and the quiet complexities of her upbringing.

In doing so, *Aftersun* challenges conventional storytelling, sidestepping linear narrative forms in favor of a mosaic-like portrayal of memory that reflects the unpredictability of human recollection. Sophie's shifting understanding of her father is pieced together through both vivid memories and imagined scenarios, subtly illustrating how memory can be a means of making sense of loss and absence. As a narrative method, memory thus becomes a tool of agency and resistance, as Sophie retrospectively claims her own experience and voice in understanding her past. This interpretive flexibility is *Aftersun*'s distinct achievement, using the film's cinematic language to show that memory, far from a passive archive, is an active force in shaping one's ongoing relationship with identity, family, and self-understanding.

This image from *Aftersun* visually encapsulates the film's exploration of memory, intimacy, and the complexities embedded in Sophie and her father Calum's relationship, echoing Philippe Lejeune's (1975) concept of the "autobiographical pact." Here, the image plays on the tension between proximity and distance, illustrating how memory—particularly in autobiographical narratives—shapes personal relationships by selectively emphasizing certain details while leaving gaps in understanding.

The contrasting postures of Calum and Sophie—the father reclined, seemingly at ease, and Sophie more upright, appearing contemplative—suggest differing internal landscapes. This visual distinction aligns with Paul John Eakin's (2014) insights on fragmented self-narration, where individuals' inner worlds are portrayed not as cohesive but as layered and selectively recalled. The differing body language signifies emotional distance even within physical closeness, representing memory's tendency to blur, fragment, and reshape relational dynamics.



Figure 1:

The vibrant yet soft colors in the background, like the blooming flowers and clear sky, establish an idyllic, almost dreamlike setting. This color palette mirrors the tendency of memory to soften or idealize the past, reflecting Jennifer Cooke's (2020) notion of "new audacity" in feminist life writing, where even painful memories are often revisited with a certain gentleness. The visual warmth here does not erase the underlying tension and grief but instead frames it in a way that captures memory's dual role as both soothing and distancing. This approach aligns with feminist narrative theory, as described by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001), where memory becomes a tool for both reflecting on and reshaping personal history.

The presence of a shared yet individualized gaze—the two are together yet each absorbed in their own thoughts—underscores one of *Aftersun*'s central themes: memory's limitations in fully grasping another's internal life. Sophie, in her adult reflection, can recall these moments and reinterpret them, yet she remains just out of reach of truly understanding her father's struggles. This dynamic echoes Lauren Fournier's (2021) work on autotheory, where self-reflection merges with memory to form a critique of relational and personal identities. Here, Wells uses the visual language of film to convey this layered dynamic, where memory becomes both a connective thread and a barrier, capturing the selective,

interpretive nature of remembering relationships and lost time.

This dark, shadowed image from *Aftersun* serves as a powerful visual representation of Calum's inner struggles, reflecting themes of obscured memory and emotional opacity. The limited lighting casts focus on a partial view of Calum's torso and his arm in a cast, suggesting both physical and emotional wounds. The cast subtly symbolizes the concealed pain and vulnerability that Calum carries, hidden from others especially his daughter, Sophie. This image acts as a poignant reminder of the unspoken trauma and challenges he silently endures, underscoring the selective nature of memory in capturing only fragments of a person's experience.

The darkness around Calum accentuates his isolation, creating a boundary between him and the viewer, as if his own memories are clouded in secrecy. The narrow strip of light beside him signals a faint, yet ultimately insufficient, attempt at reaching clarity or connection, echoing the partial and elusive nature of memory. This visual composition resonates with the broader narrative in *Aftersun*, where Sophie's recollections of her father are fragmented and only partially illuminated, embodying the notion that memory selectively reveals and conceals.

In this context, Calum's half-formed figure becomes almost spectral, mirroring Sophie's later attempts to

reconstruct her understanding of him through incomplete memories. The interplay of shadow, partial light, and unseen elements in the image heightens the film's themes of mystery and melancholy, symbolizing the gaps and the inherent ambiguity memory leaves in our understanding of those we love. This approach draws upon narrative techniques in life writing, where selective recollection foregrounds the emotional limitations and fragmented nature of memory.

Calum and Sophie, despite their physical closeness. The frame divides the space into two distinct halves: on the left, Sophie sits in a warmly lit bedroom, reading calmly, bathed in soft, comforting light. This side of the image suggests safety, innocence, and peaceful introspection. Sophie's environment symbolizes her youthful naivety and limited understanding of her father's internal struggles. In stark contrast, Calum occupies the right side of the frame, seated in the dark, tiled bathroom, isolated and burdened. The harsh, cold lighting in the bathroom emphasizes a sense of solitude and emotional pain. His body language, with his head resting on his cast-covered arm, conveys exhaustion and possibly despair. The bathroom setting and his posture create a visual metaphor for his hidden struggles, visually capturing what feminist narrative theorists describe as the "subjective opacity" that memory preserves (Cooke, 2020). The door frame serves as a boundary, a visual barrier that separates their worlds, underscoring the silent gap in their relationship and embodying what Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact" complicates in memory: the distance between narrative self-construction and relational truth (Lejeune, 1975).

This composition, with its contrasting lighting and separation by the door, mirrors the thematic tension in *Aftersun*: Sophie's innocent perspective versus Calum's concealed pain. It reflects how memory often captures fragmented, incomplete images of loved ones, with Sophie's later recollections possibly framed by her limited understanding. The scene powerfully depicts how people can be in close proximity yet worlds apart emotionally, symbolizing the barriers of understanding and memory that define Sophie's retrospective exploration of her father.

In this still from *Aftersun*, Calum is seated among stacks of rugs in a carpet shop, surrounded by rich textures and intricate patterns. The setting evokes a sense of cultural depth and tradition, which contrasts with Calum's casual clothing and detached posture. The rugs, symbolizing history and memory, can be seen as a metaphor for the layers of Calum's life

experiences and the concealed complexities he carries. Each intricate pattern echoes the fragmented nature of memory, aligning with Paul John Eakin's notion of self-narration as a mosaic of remembered experiences, where each memory carries distinct emotional weight and meaning (Eakin, 2014).

Calum's posture—sitting alone, slightly slouched with his hands clasped—conveys a sense of vulnerability and introspection. His distant expression suggests he is lost in thought, highlighting his inner isolation. This setting not only emphasizes his disconnection from the vibrant cultural environment around him but also his emotional distance from those in his life, including his daughter Sophie. As the image captures Calum's introspective isolation, it resonates with Claire Boyle's concept of "self-fiction" in autobiographical cinema, where the setting becomes a "technology of the self," enabling characters to explore their fragmented identities in relational and cultural contexts (Boyle, 2012).

The empty rug laid out before him suggests an invitation or path, hinting at the reflective journey that Sophie undertakes in the film. This visual metaphor of a "path" invites viewers to imagine Sophie's attempt to reconstruct and connect with her memories of her father, much like arranging a patchwork of these patterned rugs. This path metaphor embodies the process of autobiographical exploration, where memory and identity intertwine, as Sophie pieces together fragments of her father's complex character and the elements she could never fully grasp.

In this scene from *Aftersun*, we see Sophie inside a phone booth, her back turned to the camera as she speaks on the phone, while Calum stands outside, looking on. The red-framed glass of the booth creates a sense of separation between them, underscoring the emotional and psychological distance that pervades their relationship. Sophie, positioned inside the booth, appears isolated, symbolizing her attempt to connect to an outside world or perhaps even to a deeper understanding of her father, whom she struggles to fully comprehend.

Calum's expression as he watches her is one of quiet concern or contemplation, suggesting his awareness of this distance but also his helplessness in bridging it. The red frame of the phone booth might also signify passion, urgency, or warning—a subtle nod to the intensity and fragility of their bond. Additionally, the red frame creates a fragmented view, mirroring the theme of fractured memories and partial understanding that Sophie later experiences as she tries to piece together who her father truly was.

The phone booth itself is a powerful metaphor for communication and disconnection; while Sophie is attempting to reach out, Calum remains outside, reinforcing the boundaries between them. This setup encapsulates the film's central motif of strained connections and the barriers, both visible and invisible, that separate people, even within close relationships. This image poignantly captures the essence of memory and loss, as Sophie's adult self attempts to reconstruct these moments to grasp her father's elusive inner world.



Figure 2:



Figure 3:

This photograph-like frame of Sophie and Calum at the beach evokes a sense of nostalgia and fragmented memory, resonating with the subjective and sensory qualities often associated with memory. The bright colors, casual framing, and slight blur of the image resemble a candid vacation photo, emphasizing the emotional tone over precise detail. Such a visual style highlights the idea that memory captures an essence—a blend of vivid impressions and emotional undertones—rather than an objective reality (Eakin, 2014). Here, the cinematic language transforms memory into a layered narrative experience, as if the viewer is looking back with Sophie, where warmth and nostalgia blend with the complexities of her relationship with her father.

The intimate yet detached framing aligns with feminist theories of autobiographical cinema, suggesting a personal but fragmented perspective that mirrors the process of memory recall (Smith & Watson, 2001). The image acts as a metaphor for memory as a selectively constructed archive, where sensory details and emotional resonance blend to shape an understanding of the past. Through this composition, the film reimagines memories as subjective and multifaceted, mirroring how individual recollections capture both the immediacy of past moments and the emotional interpretation added over time.

Moreover, this photograph-like quality underscores the film's approach to memory as a nonlinear and interpretive narrative tool. By presenting memories in a patchwork style, *Aftersun* reflects how recollections often layer fleeting gestures and emotions to create an inner emotional landscape rather than an exact portrayal of events (Gilmore, 2017). This visual approach invites the audience to experience the subtle gaps and emotional hues that define memory's hold on our relationships, emphasizing the imperfection and emotional depth that shape how we remember those we love.

In this shot, the old TV screen captures a faint, blurred reflection of Calum, merging his presence with the everyday objects of their shared environment. Acting as an imperfect mirror, the TV's reflection symbolizes the way memory often presents a distorted or partial image of reality, aligning with theories of autobiographical memory as fragmented and interpretive (Smith & Watson, 2001). This blurred reflection suggests that Sophie's recollection of her father is built upon fragments and shadows, capturing him only incompletely as an enigmatic figure marked by absence as much as presence.

The use of reflection here reinforces the concept of fragmented memory, where Sophie, in her adult retrospection, attempts to reconstruct her father's character from fleeting, unclear recollections. This imagery aligns with narrative theories that highlight memory's role in creating a subjective rather than objective account of past relationships (Eakin, 2014). The TV's imperfect reflection not only emphasizes the gaps in Sophie's memories but also serves as a metaphor for the complexities of reconstructing a loved one's inner life, where remembered moments are shaped more by emotional resonance than by factual clarity. Through this visual metaphor, the film invites viewers to experience the selective and interpretive nature of memory, revealing how relationships are often pieced together from incomplete reflections.

This scene depicts Calum walking through a brightly lit, empty hallway, a stark departure from the warmth of the vacation scenes shared with Sophie. The artificial, almost sterile lighting of the hallway underscores a sense of isolation and introspection, highlighting Calum's inner solitude. In this moment, the hallway serves as a symbolic passage, a liminal space reflecting Calum's emotional state—a confined, unadorned corridor that seems to lead nowhere, emphasizing a lack of direction or escape. This framing aligns with theories on memory and introspection, suggesting that Sophie, in her recollection, perceives her father as moving through isolated spaces, even within the context of their shared experiences.

The contrasting imagery—the hallway's brightness against its emptiness reinforces the idea that despite moments of shared closeness, Calum carried a sense of disconnection and entrapment. This visual portrayal reflects how memory can amplify certain emotional truths, capturing Calum as a figure set apart, navigating confined spaces alone. By positioning him in a corridor that limits movement and freedom, the scene symbolically mirrors his internal struggles, suggesting that Calum, though present, often felt inaccessible. This imagery evokes the layered complexities of memory, where emotional distance is often etched as vividly as physical proximity, highlighting the interpretive nature of how loved ones are remembered in the spaces they inhabited.



Figure 4:



Figure 5:



Figure 6:

In this image, memory acts as a narrative tool that gently blurs the lines between past and present, self and other, reflecting Sophie's impressionistic recollections of her father, Calum. Both characters are shown in silhouette, their forms softened against the vast blue backdrop of sea and sky, creating an ethereal, almost dreamlike quality. This visual obscurity symbolizes the intangible nature of memory—where over time, exact details may fade, leaving behind only the emotional essence, the moods and fleeting impressions, rather than precise visuals.

Memory here is less about exact recall and more about evoking the atmosphere of shared moments, an approach that aligns with feminist life writing, emphasizing subjective and interpretive expressions of the past. The expansive space and softened focus capture the layered and interpretive quality of memory, hinting at both closeness and separation. Sophie's memories, like this image, are poetic and open, shaped by her adult perspective looking back on these moments, allowing space for introspection and contemplation. This visual style in *Aftersun* shows memory not as a fixed account but as an evolving, living presence—an entity shaped by both the past's impact and the present's emotions. Through this approach, the film uses memory to construct a layered and nuanced narrative, inviting viewers to feel the depth and distance within the father-daughter bond without a clear, linear recounting of events.

In *Aftersun*, memory operates as a narrative motor, propelling the story forward through fragmented, non-linear recollections rather than traditional chronological events. Unlike a conventional plot driven by action or dialogue, the narrative unfolds through flashes of memory, filtered through the daughter's perspective. This structure shapes the audience's engagement, as they are invited to piece together the narrative much like the protagonist herself—through images, emotions, and unspoken gaps.

Memory as a motor prioritizes emotional truth over linear progression. The fragmented recollections echo the daughter's attempt to reconcile with her father's presence and eventual absence. Each scene operates not as a sequential step in a timeline, but as a meaningful moment that captures a feeling or impression, which collectively builds the emotional depth of the characters. This approach transforms the film into a puzzle, where each fragment contributes to a larger emotional narrative rather than a straightforward plot.

Sophie's camera signifies her attempt to preserve moments, capturing her fragmented understanding of her father and their shared experiences. This aligns with the film's theme of memory, where snapshots represent attempts to hold onto fleeting moments. However, the underwater setting suggests a distortion, hinting at the ways memories can become murky or distorted over time.

Water often symbolizes the subconscious, memory, and emotions. Being underwater visually reflects Sophie's immersion in her memories—she is, quite literally, submerged in her experience. The water blurs and distorts, representing how memories are not always clear or reliable. This aligns with the film's fragmented narrative structure, where memories are incomplete or shaped by emotional undertones rather than factual precision.

The shot is taken from the point of view of someone looking at Sophie, suggesting an external perspective on her introspective act. This external view reflects the film's theme of exploring one's identity through another's gaze. In *Aftersun*, Sophie is trying to understand her father, piecing together her memories of him as an adult, and the camera's gaze serves as a metaphor for this reflective process.

The underwater shot emphasizes Sophie's isolation. She is alone in the pool, separated from others by the water, echoing the emotional distance and introspective journey she undertakes in the film. The depth and silence of the water around her mirror the depth and complexity of the memories she is trying to access, as well as the solitude she feels in revisiting them.

The water naturally distorts the camera's view, a powerful metaphor for how memory operates in *Aftersun*. Just as water distorts what the camera captures, time and emotion distort Sophie's memories. Her view of her father is clouded by her present understanding and past emotions, creating a layered, nuanced recollection that is neither wholly accurate nor entirely fictional.

Memory's inherent subjectivity drives the ambiguity and complexity in *Aftersun*. This motor of narrative allows the audience to experience the father's and daughter's perspectives in an intentionally blurred way. Rather than providing clear answers, memory blurs lines between real and imagined, past and present, fostering an unreliable perspective that leaves room for personal interpretation. This encourages viewers to question what they see,

mirroring the protagonist's own uncertainties about her father and her relationship with him.

The fragmented nature of memory-based storytelling leaves gaps, which serve as points for the viewer's engagement. These narrative absences function as spaces for the audience to project their own experiences or emotions, deepening their connection to the film. By using memory as a motor, the film resists closure, instead keeping the emotional journey open-ended and evocative. This approach underlines the theme of loss, where memory both preserves and obscures the father's image, making him simultaneously present and absent.

From a feminist perspective, memory as a motor allows for a reclamation of subjective experience that challenges patriarchal storytelling conventions. This method aligns with feminist narrative theories by

centering personal and emotional realities over objective or male-dominated perspectives. By focusing on memory, *Aftersun* emphasizes individual experience and resists the need for a definitive "truth," highlighting the complexities of female identity, family, and loss in a way that resonates with feminist themes of self-representation and narrative authority.

Memory's motor effect blurs the boundaries between past and present, as scenes often shift seamlessly between different times or perspectives. This fluidity reflects how memories influence the protagonist's current identity and emotional state, showing how the past is not a fixed chapter but an active presence in her life. By anchoring the story in this interplay between past and present, memory as a motor connects each moment, even as it resists forming a clear, linear plot.



Figure 7:

The image on the screen within the image—a literal reflection of a reflection—symbolizes how memories are often second-hand representations, filtered through perception and time. By capturing herself in this way, Sophie is not only recording her external self but also engaging in an act of self-observation. The layered image suggests that memories are not direct records of reality but filtered, incomplete, and fragmented. This approach mirrors how *Aftersun* constructs its narrative through Sophie's layered recollections of her father.

Here, the act of self-filming implies Sophie's early attempts to make sense of herself and her surroundings. Her youthful gaze into the camera

indicates a moment of innocence, yet it is tinged with the deeper longing to understand her father's complex identity as she remembers him in adulthood. This image becomes a visual metaphor for the idea that memory is a way of capturing and holding onto one's evolving sense of self, a concept that aligns with the film's exploration of identity and the ways we reinterpret past experiences over time.

The use of a camcorder, an object that evokes a sense of the past, emphasizes the nostalgia embedded in the memory. In revisiting these "recorded" moments, adult Sophie is reflecting on her younger self's interactions with her father. The camcorder creates a sense of temporal distance, as the video footage

Sophie took as a child now serves as an imperfect archive, a point of access to emotions and memories that have changed in significance over time. The shot also blurs the lines between self and other, as the camcorder's screen shows Sophie but distances her from her direct self-perception. This visual separation reflects how her memories of her father are simultaneously intimate and distant. The presence of the screen between Sophie and her actual self suggests that memory is not only an internal process but also a mediated one, impacted by the tools (like cameras) that we use to capture and re-experience moments. The shot speaks to the film's broader use of visual language to address the act of remembering. Sophie's gaze into the camera while simultaneously seeing her own image mirrors the dual perspective the film takes—present-day Sophie looking back on her younger self and her father, trying to reconstruct and interpret their relationship. This duality is visually represented, reminding the audience of the subjectivity and selectivity inherent in memory.

With memory as the driving force, *Aftersun* invites viewers to actively interpret the visual and emotional cues rather than passively receive information. The fragmented scenes create a reflective experience, encouraging viewers to empathize with the characters' internal lives while making their own sense of the narrative gaps. Memory becomes a participatory element in the film, making the audience co-creators of the story as they reconstruct it piece by piece.



Figure 8:



Figure 9:



Figure 10:



Figure 11:

4. Conclusion

Aftersun employs memory not merely as a theme but as an active, layered narrative device that profoundly shapes the audience's experience of the story. By relying on fragmented, non-linear recollections and deeply subjective impressions, the film departs from conventional, chronologically structured storytelling, instead weaving a complex tapestry of sensory and emotional memories. In this framework, memory itself becomes the "narrative motor," propelling the story forward through moments that are vivid yet incomplete, capturing the essence of Sophie's internalized view of her father, Calum, rather than a straightforward recounting of events.

This approach invites viewers into a reflective and interpretative role, where each memory fragment provides insight into Sophie's evolving understanding of her father. Through selectively recalled scenes—moments that feel both deeply

intimate and slightly obscured—the film prioritizes the emotional weight of these memories over their objective reality. This dynamic allows the audience to experience the ambiguities and emotional complexities of Sophie's relationship with her father, mirroring the way memories in real life often operate: as impressions colored by time, feeling, and personal interpretation.

By resisting a linear plot and focusing on the way Sophie remembers her father, *Aftersun* situates personal experience and intimate truths at the heart of its storytelling. The film becomes a space where memories are not passive recollections but actively constructed narratives, blending the past with Sophie's present emotions and emerging self-awareness. Each recollection holds an emotional resonance that accumulates, ultimately forming a nuanced portrait of Sophie's relationship with her father—a portrait that, like memory itself, is shaped by both what is remembered and what is forgotten.

This approach reinforces the sense that understanding others, particularly loved ones, is an ongoing, interpretative process, continually influenced by the shifts in one's own identity and perspective over time.

By structuring the film as a series of memories rather than a linear account, *Aftersun* allows Sophie's memories to capture fleeting, emotionally charged moments, and in doing so, positions memory as a dynamic narrative force that reconstructs rather than simply retrieves the past. Through this layered, subjective narrative, *Aftersun* draws viewers into the protagonist's emotional reality, inviting them to empathize with her attempts to piece together an image of her father through both cherished memories and the inevitable gaps that remain.

The film's cinematic techniques—such as blurred visuals, reflective surfaces, and the recurring motif of water—serve as powerful symbols for memory's inherent subjectivity, illustrating how emotions, time, and perspective shape, distort, and preserve moments in ways that are uniquely personal. Blurred visuals often suggest the elusive nature of memory, where specific details become softened or even lost over time, leaving only impressions that are felt more than seen. Reflective surfaces, such as mirrors and screens, add layers of complexity by creating doubled or fragmented images, echoing the ways in which memories can feel both intimate and distant, real and imagined. The motif of water, in particular, reinforces this sense of fluidity, as its shifting, sometimes murky quality embodies the selective and interpretative nature of memory itself.

By intertwining these visual elements with a fragmented storytelling structure, *Aftersun* transforms memory into a cinematic language that portrays it as a complex, selective process—one that both obscures and reveals. Through these techniques, the film enables a deeper engagement with the characters' internal worlds, drawing viewers into the emotional landscapes that lie beneath the surface of specific memories. Each fragment of memory becomes a part of a larger, immersive narrative, building an emotional depth that resonates with Sophie's evolving understanding of her father, Calum.

In this structure, the gaps and ambiguities in Sophie's recollections are not merely omissions but intentional spaces for interpretation. The film encourages the audience to read between the lines, to sense the emotional currents that Sophie herself may only

partly understand, suggesting that memory is as much about what we feel and infer as it is about what we can directly recall. As each memory fragment forms part of a larger, textured emotional landscape, viewers are invited to experience the ways in which memory is influenced by love, loss, and personal growth, shaping not only how Sophie remembers her father but also how she navigates her own journey of self-discovery. This approach transforms memory from a passive act of looking back into an active process of connection, reflection, and emotional revelation.

In alignment with feminist narrative theory, *Aftersun* reclaims subjective experience by challenging patriarchal conventions that traditionally prioritize objective, linear storytelling. By structuring the film around memory as a primary method of storytelling, *Aftersun* underscores the validity and depth of personal narratives as valuable sources of emotional and relational insight. Sophie's perspective is central to this approach, grounding the narrative in the nuances of individual experience and inviting a more fluid, introspective engagement with themes of memory, identity, and connection. In doing so, *Aftersun* not only embraces but expands the boundaries of autobiographical cinema, suggesting that personal experience—particularly when filtered through memory's selective and interpretive lens—can reveal as much about the nature of human relationships as any straightforward recounting of events.

Through its memory-driven approach, *Aftersun* ultimately illustrates that understanding others is a continual, interpretive process. By prioritizing emotional resonance over factual precision, the film allows viewers to connect with Sophie's evolving understanding of her father, Calum, and to appreciate the complexities and fragilities inherent in familial bonds. In portraying memory as both content and structure, *Aftersun* captures the bittersweet elusiveness of relationships, the moments that slip away, and the lasting impact of those we love. This narrative technique reveals memory as not just a record of the past but as an active, living force that shapes our present selves, suggesting that the process of remembering can be as transformative as it is nostalgic. In the end, *Aftersun* leaves viewers with a profound sense of the poignancy of lost time, its impact lingering like a cherished yet elusive memory, resonant with both beauty and the ache of incompleteness.

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