

## **THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT: DECONSTRUCTING JOURNEY AND IDENTITY CRISIS FROM A POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVE**

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*Abstract: The present paper aims at proving that Eric Bress and Mackye Gruber's film, The Butterfly Effect (2004) can be analyzed from a postmodernist perspective, in this way discussing the theme of journey and the identity crisis that Evan, the main character, experiences. Through his chaotic storytelling, the protagonist puts very much emphasis on his own flashbacks and recollections in order to use time travelling as a means of improving not only his life, but his fiends'. The research paper will also demonstrate that every action one takes has inevitable effects in the present or near future, thus questioning how affected one can be when talking about life choices. Hence, the paper will hint at theoretical aspects related to postmodernism on the one hand, while on the other, it will analyze key scenes from the already mentioned movie.*

*Keywords: surreal /vs/ real, affect /vs/ effect, flashbacks, sub-plots, irony*

It is often believed that defining the postmodern is an exceedingly difficult task, if not an impossible one, and I concur with this judgment. For the purposes of this essay I shall not claim to offer a critique of postmodern thought and methodology in general, but will focus on ideas in the field of identity and journey that will be defined as 'postmodern' as they exhibit a number of key features that are generally accepted under this term. This study explores the ways in which one's self can be altered through the society impact on identity crisis from the chaotic perspective of postmodernism.

Interestingly enough, at the very beginning of the movie, an intriguing definition is provided: "It has been said that something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can

ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world – Chaos Theory”.<sup>1</sup> Even if in common usage ‘chaos’ was misinterpreted as being ‘a state of disorder’, in fact, ‘chaos theory’ is a field belonging to mathematics’ which studies the behavior of dynamical systems that are highly sensitive to initial conditions, an effect which is popularly referred to as the butterfly effect. To put it differently, one can state that it is the scientific theory that a single occurrence, no matter how small, can change the course of the universe forever. If one alters even the smallest of life’s details, its outcome is completely changed. In addition, I find it of great importance to mention Michael Bütz, who clarifies that “the philosophical concept of *chaos* has long been regarded as a useful mythological tool to describe the unsettling experience of change”.<sup>2</sup> To put it differently, chaos resorts more to the fear of change than to the actual outcome. We should agree that it is, in fact, related to the state of mind which directly influences one’s decisions and actions.

After carefully viewing the film, one could say that there are three kinds of postmodernism present in *The Butterfly Effect*. One of them is the deconstructive postmodernism, which rejects truth, reason, and the belief that one man and society can be perfect through continual progress. Moreover, the idea of knowledge is believed to be subjective and open to interpretation, and instead of knowing the truth, the human kind expresses opinions and indicates preferences. Narrative postmodernism talks about how knowledge, meaning and truth are sociologically constructed in communities and are reflected in people’s stories. And finally, constructive postmodernism talks about the societal structures as organic and have purpose instead of the modern view. In other words, it allows perception such as memories, dreams, and/or visions to become a form of knowledge.

Apart from having postmodernist elements, the film also tackles identity issues, in this way making the viewer question how sane the main character might be. When carefully deconstructing the term identity in *The Saturated Self*, Kenneth Gergen cited Thomas Reid who claimed that: “the conviction which every man has to his Identity, as far as his memory reaches, needs no way of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it, without first

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<sup>1</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Bütz, Michael R, *Chaos and Complexity: Implications for Psychological Theory and Practice*. Washington DC, Taylor & Francis, 1997, p. 4.

producing some degree of insanity”.<sup>3</sup> To put it differently, one’s identity is supposed to be constant and durable until there is something which can either empower or weaken it. When this happens, one instantly and unconsciously becomes insane without realizing it at first. This is what must have happened to the protagonist in the film: due to his deep desire of bettering his life he becomes obsessed with the thought of changing past events in order to alter his present. Evan’s identity is, in fact, chaotic because he is aware that he wants only good things to happen to the girl he loves, Kayleigh, but all his attempts (except his last one) are in one way or another, selfish.

Additionally, *The Butterfly Effect* brings to light not only the breakdown of the distinction between culture and society, but also an emphasis on style at the expense of substance and content. It also relates on confusions over time and space as well as the decline of the meta-narrative, which is the story beyond the story. The film itself begins with a short quote that describes chaos theory, followed by string instruments. Immediately after that one gets acquainted with time bending and fragmentation, as they are the main techniques used in the film, because it revolves around the central principle that one small act can have a ripple effect that can influence all kinds of events and people.

Actually, the film begins with the ending and then it suddenly changes to Evan’s chronological beginning; thing that might provide foresight to what it might happen. Other postmodernist features that are present throughout the entire movie are the unexpected flashbacks to different scenes, and obviously the non-linear plot line 5 different ‘sub plots’ every time Evan travels back in time to change his future. The viewer could be rather confused because of the new character personalities and because of a different series of events. Nevertheless, whenever Evan tries to make things better, they become worse – this is where irony, playfulness and black humor come to light. For example, in one scene, he tells his mother of his deteriorating mental state while doing tricks in his hospital wheelchair. Another scene which reveals irony and humor is towards the end of the movie when he has no arms, but still jokes that he can’t even kill himself.

As a child, the protagonist Evan experiences blackouts, which are supposed to be stress related and as a result of his condition, the main character struggles to figure out various aspects

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<sup>3</sup> Gergen, Kenneth, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, New York, Basic Books, 1991, p. 133.

of his life that are unclear. For instance, he only associates his identity with those memories he can remember, while very little details are given about Evan's life, his father's mental state, and Kayleigh's eventual death. All these techniques allow the audience to take on the role of the writer and decide what happens. Nevertheless, the audience is not informed of every detail concerning the flow of events. One could clearly state that the beginning is rather confusing, the middle and the ending are somehow unfinished, because of the conclusions that are left up to interpretation. Throughout the movie Evan suffers many severe sexual and psychological traumas such as being forced by Kayleigh's and Tommy's father – George Miller, to take part in child pornography, being strangled by his mentally-ill father (one will later find out that his father tried to kill Evan in order to stop history repeating itself all over again), causing a dynamite accident with his friends – fact that eventually led to different consequences from distinct story lines, and seeing his dog being burned by Tommy. Seven years later, he accidentally discovers that he can actually travel back in time, changing parts of his past and therefore causing the blackouts.

The film plays with the idea of cause and effect, meaning that each time Evan changes something in his past, it drastically affects his future. At one point, he starts to read one of his journals and a very powerful phrase comes out of his mouth: "It's like my mind refuses to believe what I'm seeing".<sup>4</sup> This is the first flashback he ever has; he finds himself once again at the junkyard looking at Tommy as he is prepared to kill his dog. Regaining his consciousness, Evan is still not capable of understanding what actually happened there, and decides to pay a visit to Lenny, one of his childhood friends. However, Lenny seems to be stuck in the past. Although he had already grown up, his room reflects that he is in an identity crisis and it seems that he is not able to move on. Interestingly enough, Lenny seems to talk as Tommy, he gets violent at one point, using Tommy's phrases to explain the mistakes Evan did in the past.

Another critical moment that influences Evan's identity deals with the explosion scene. During the adolescence years Evan, Kayleigh and her brother Tommy 'try' to integrate Lenny in their group by forcing him to put dynamite in one mailbox. Unfortunately, the owner and especially her baby end up being hurt. A memorable thing that should be noted here is the mistake he does while watching the explosion; his cigarette burns his blouse and when Evan

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<sup>4</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

wakes up, he checks his stomach, and sees that whatever happens during his blackouts has serious repercussions in the future. From this moment on, he tries to figure out a way to remember the past, in spite of his roommate warnings.

Once again, the movie embraces the theme of journey, as Evan tries to find Kayleigh. If Lenny was not able to clearly explain the traumatic episode from the junkyard, maybe Kayleigh will manage to enlighten a more distant memory – the ‘Robin Hood’ movie, in which Kayleigh and Evan were supposed to take off their clothes and kiss in front of a camera. Being forced to recall such a terrible event, Kayleigh’s eyes mist with tears: “Nothing’s all better, okay? Nothing ever gets better. You know, if I was so wonderful Evan, why didn’t you call me? Why did you just leave me here to rot?”.<sup>5</sup> Now, Evan clearly regrets for leaving her behind for a very simple reason – the next day he finds out that she committed suicide, probably because she was not able to bare any more grievances. Interestingly enough, the main character brings to the funeral the ‘I’ll come back for you’ note together with white roses, a symbol of innocence, forgiveness, and also probably death.

Immediately after that, he thinks about that scar that came out of nowhere. He wonders: “If I make scars, do I have the power to heal them?”.<sup>6</sup> Wanting to save Kayleigh from ever being oppressed by her father or brother, he turns back to the movie scene and ‘respectfully’ convinces her father not to lay a finger on her again. Kayleigh grows up to be a happy student, having a full life ahead of her. From this scene on, one could understand that the main character managed to alter the past for the first time. However, although his intention was to save Kayleigh’s life, Evan learns that Tommy is the one who dies this time. Being imprisoned for Tommy’s murder, Evan has another flashback from the junkyard, where he carefully instructs Lenny to take any necessary measures of precaution. However, things end up worse than before. After Tommy’s funeral, Kayleigh decides to leave home and Lenny ends up being hospitalized. Though his intentions are good every time, everything he changes causes more consequences for himself (he becomes an amputee at one point) and for those around him.

Another powerful recollection, this time about his father, explains why things should have been left the way they were before. Jason, his father, claims that: “You can’t change what

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<sup>5</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

<sup>6</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

people are without destroying who they were [...] You can't play God, son. It must end with me".<sup>7</sup> Now, one can finally understand why Jason tried to kill his son – in order to stop him from making the same mistakes he had once did.

Again, he is trying to find Kayleigh, only this time she seems to have lost her sense of identity immediately after Tommy's funeral – she is now doing drugs and makes a living from sleeping with men. What is interesting here, is her scar on her cheek (she had it from that day at the junkyard); together with it, it seems that all her innocence had washed away. When Evan tries to convince her that he is trying to help her, Kayleigh once again desperately cries: "If you have already done so much for me, why don't you go back and save Mrs. Halpern and her baby? And then maybe Lenny wouldn't freak out and ruin my family!".<sup>8</sup> Once again, Evan goes back to the block buster scene, this time sacrificing himself for the sake of the loved ones.

As a consequence, he is now handicapped – his arms were amputated after he had tried to save Mrs. Halpern and her baby. Oddly enough, due to his act of heroism his friends live a beautiful life – except for Evan, who was never praised for sacrificing himself and, Kayleigh and Lenny, who are now having a relationship. In an act of desperation, Evan tries to kill himself, by drowning in the bath tub, but Tommy saves him. One could say that raising God-related questions shows how much, or how little control, a human being has over his/her future. Despite Evan's efforts to save Kayleigh, the future never turns out the way he wants it to. Another aspect of irony could explain the scars that randomly show up on Evan's body – the stomach scar, the stigmata in prison – all these features clearly mock religion from a postmodernist perspective.

The main character finally decides to make things right once and for all, but even this time destiny seems to laugh in his face. Wanting to save his mother from a terrible death, he goes back to the camera scene and threatens Mr. Miller one more time. What is different here is that he lights a block buster that manages to eventually kill Kayleigh. Ending up in a hospital, Evan finds out that there were never any real journals – they were only part of the fantasy world that his mind created to cope with the guilt of killing Kayleigh. Evan now finds himself in the position of finally facing the truth. To put this differently, one can say that Evan eventually realized that it is his life that is the cause of his loved ones' problems, and he decides to go back

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<sup>7</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

<sup>8</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

in time and save Kayleigh's life. The last flashback presents the day in which Evan met Kayleigh, and this time he decides to let her and Tommy live with their mother, instead of their father. Evan states: "I hate you and if you ever come near me again I'll kill you!".<sup>9</sup> By doing this, he realizes that, in comparison with the alternate realities, this choice is his final; in order for her to live, he has to experience a life without her. Evan finally decides to burn all his journals, claiming that: "I know who I am. I don't need a bunch of stuff to remind me".<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, eight years later, Evan and Kayleigh seem to recognize themselves, but they still go on separate ways. Because every alternative reality he has experienced shows him nothing but misery for Kayleigh, Evan chooses to not allow himself to be part of her life, and protect her from suffering.

Being a postmodern movie, the director of *The Butterfly Effect* has also released another version, in which the ending is slightly different from the original one. Instead of going back to the day he met Kayleigh, Evan chooses to return to his mother's womb and with an ending similar to Donnie Darko he twists the umbilical cord round his neck, killing himself. Hence, the audience feels free to make its own choice by deciding which ending better fits this schizophrenic-like storyline.

As a result of the stress and anxiety that Evan has experienced, he develops the irrational belief that he can make everything perfect. In other words, Evan's simulation of his world after he changes the events is creating a surrealistic reality. Those surrounding him know life as it is in their own reality, but Evan has not lived it, so he does not know the same; this inconsistency in knowledge between characters is surreal for him, and almost not even real. Towards the end of the movie, Evan goes back in time and creates physical scars on himself, hoping that he could finally heal those on others. This film plays with the idea of what is meant to be, and the amount of control we have over our own futures. The constant time changes and alterations cause the audience countless 'what if' questions. One could only say that the movie cannot be explained in a scientific way because the world is a place where the subject (i.e. the human being) is only knowledgeable through his/her own experiences and others. More importantly, one cannot explain the time traveling and the 'past-changing' that Evan does in order to alter his life because

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<sup>9</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.

<sup>10</sup> *The Butterfly Effect*, Eric Bress, J. Mackye Gruber (dir), Ashton Kutcher, Amy Smart, Melora Walters (perf), New Line Cinema, 2004, DVD.



the actual knowledge-based human nature uses science to prove that time traveling does not exist.

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