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[home](#) » [arts & entertainment](#) » [film review](#)

Dreamworldliness

By Josef Woodard, October 4, 2006

***The Science of Sleep*. Gael García Bernal and Charlotte Gainsbourg star in a film written and directed by Michel Gondry.**

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Among all media, cinema is best suited to aspire to dream states, and Michel Gondry is among the current filmmakers most likely to go there. That much we knew from his wild, non-linear but sweet collaboration with screenwriter Charlie Kaufman in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. In *The Science of Sleep*, Gondry goes into an even deeper sleep, or at least a different flavor of dream state, which shares many qualities of *Eternal Sunshine*, and something new to boot.

We meet our confused protagonist Stéphane (the ever game and charismatic Gael García Bernal) on the cardboard set of a talk show — in his dreams. A Mexican who heads to Paris after his father's death, Stéphane lands a lame job in the calendar trade, but mostly fends off friendly-ish demons and the unpredictable blend of dreams and reality.

For all its craziness, shifts of consciousness, stylistic twists, and charmingly disorienting insertions of pixilation and cardboard fantasies, what keeps the film grounded is that ol' love thing. Stéphane has fallen for Stéphanie, his enigmatic and commitment-shy neighbor across the hall, played by Charlotte Gainsbourg (daughter of the late French iconoclast Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin). "Why me?" she asks at one of her points of frustration. "Because everybody else is boring," Stéphane replies. Now that's true love.

It seems that Gondry's love is to play with language, both the language of film and the world of words, and he helps coat his film in pleasant confusion by freely mixing three languages. If the film catches on in any cult way, which it might, two new mutant words may enter the vernacular — "disasterology" and "schizometric" — both of which somehow help explain the state of things in the film and in Stéphane's experience.

"In dreams, emotions are overwhelming," Stéphane says at one point. Actually, the opposite is often true, as we find ourselves accepting irrationality and leaving judgment at home. The same can be said of *Science*. As this film's dizzying points of reference seduce us into acceptance, we surrender and enjoy the wild ride.