Hans Maes and Katrien Schaubroeck (eds.) *Before Sunrise, Before Sunset, Before Midnight: A Philosophical Exploration*. London: Routledge, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-367-20438-9, £130 (hbk); 978-0-367-20439-6, £34.99 (pbk), £35.99 (ebk).

Over a timespan of eighteen years, Richard Linklater directed the films *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004) and *Before Midnight* (2013). They were not huge blockbusters, but they gathered a faithful and enthusiastic following—large enough to not be considered cult pieces either. To the unfamiliar, the plot of the *Before* trilogy may sound just like a stereotypical Hollywood romantic comedy or melodrama. Two white and handsome heterosexual people fall in love, experience some adversity, and end up married with children; only to then face a big hurdle in their relationship that (in theory) they overcome. Linklater’s opus is, however, not a cliché. The dialogue between Frenchwoman Céline and American Jesse—played by Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke—delves into aesthetics, meaningfulness, and love in a way that the average romantic pastiche could never aspire to. The trilogy set-up and the temporal spacing between the individual instalments allows audiences to follow the characters through the different stages in their relationship—and does so without uncanny make-up or editing, actually showing the passage of time in the actors’ faces.

For these and other reasons, Hans Maes and Katrien Schaubroeck—the editors of this volume—find the films “philosophical to the core” (p. 1); something they aim to show with a heterogeneous collection. The volume has ten chapters that either offer insights on the trilogy’s philosophical themes or build upon the films to advance (novel or existing) philosophical ideas—on occasionthey , do both things. Rather unusually, academia and show business collide in the epilogue, where Maes and Schaubroeck interview Delpy. There’s some platitudes, but mostly interesting and illuminating insights by Delpy as a co-creator of the scripts—not to forget her view that people “*have to* read philosophy” (p. 202).

According to the book blurb (p. iv), the themes explored in the volume include the nature of love, romanticism, and marriage; the passage and experience of time; the meaning of life; the art of conversation, the narrative self; gender; and death. All these topics are indeed touched upon to a greater or lesser extent. I find this book to be, in its essence, an investigation of love and romance. So, my main question here is: what can we learn about romantic life from this philosophical exploration of the *Before* trilogy?

The first lesson is that love researchers needs to consider interaction as one of the—if not the most important—constitutive element of love. This is commonly accepted, but there are valuable aspects of interaction worth exploring in the trilogy. Interaction is the main element in the chapters by Michael Smith (chapter 1) and Kalle Puolakka (chapter 7), as well as Maes and Schaubroeck’s co-authored contribution (chapter 9). Puolakka’s work is not about love; it is instead a treaty on the nature of conversation with the *Before* trilogy as guiding example. His contribution is as unexpected as it is interesting, working in the infrequent intersection between aesthetics and the philosophy of language (via Davidson and Dewey). Smith sees Céline and Jesse’s relationship as a paradigmatic example of mutual direction and interpretation, thus endorsing a widespread view of love that sees interaction is in fact the central definitory element of love—specifically, he follows Dirk Baltzly and Jeanette Kennett’s *Intimate Relations: Friends and Lovers* (2016, Routledge). For their part, Maes and Schaubroeck argue that the *Before* trilogy highlights the importance for interaction not only for love between people, but also love for other objects and ideals. Taking their own love for the films as a starting example, they offer an insightful response to Sam Shpall’s *A Tripartite Theory of Love* (2018, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*). Shpall’s view of love is a ground-breaking departure from the exclusive focus on love for persons, and defines love through vulnerability, liking and devotion. Maes and Schaubroeck’s standalone paper successfully puts forward an alternative view of love for multiple kinds of objects while establishing a clear difference between liking and loving something or someone, and without downgrading the relevance of interaction.

The second lesson that can be extracted is that love, and particularly the love that characterises romantic relationships, has to be looked at as an extended process. This idea has been occasionally explored but is not yet a mainstream position within philosophy of love; thus making this the most exciting aspect of the book from the perspective of philosophy of love. By displaying Céline and Jesse’s relationship over time, the *Before* trilogy itself shows that love cannot be captured in a single frame, or even a single film. The diachronic approach is picked up by Marya Schechtman (chapter 2), who draws a parallel between romantic relationships and narratives. Her view echoes the claim that an episode of being-in-love only counts as such if such episode is embedded in a wider love narrative. This has been argued before by Karen Jones (*How to Change the Past,* 2018, Routledge) and Troy Jollimore (*Love in the Past (And Present, and Future)*, 2022, Routledge); but Schechtman goes beyond identifying the narrative shape of love. In line with her long-standing work on narrative, Schechtman makes a normative claim according to which romantic narratives—as exemplified by the trilogy—are proof that some things *have to* be experienced as part of a narrative. This is normative in the sense that narrative structure is what defines these experiences as the kind of experiences they are. Whether the reader accepts this claim or not may hinge on their prior stance on the normative force of narrative, but it is undeniable that her use of the *Before* trilogy as a case study offers plausible backing to a diachronic approach to love—and in turn, to Schechtman’s wider project.

At first glance, Anna Christina Ribeiro (chapter 8) seems to reach the opposite conclusion. Love—Ribeiro argues—grounds us in the present. In the films, Cèline and Jesse discuss death explicitly and nod at it implicitly several times. Ribeiro explores these conversations in detail to conclude that romantic love is a *memento mori*, a constant reminder of a future certain death that consequently keeps us attached to the now. And then, in a sort of middle ground on the diachronic outlook we find Murray Smith (chapter 5). Smith explains that Linklater’s work is an example of the sort of artistic narratives that “can help us grasp, and reflect on, temporality in ways that elude our ordinary thinking” (p. 84). As such, the trilogy is a philosophical piece in itself, Smith concludes. He stops short of making a normative claim like Schechtman’s, but his view is certainly compatible with it.

What can we conclude, then? Because of its nature as a collection of essays, this book does not need to offer a unified view on love and diachronicity, but I think that, in fact, it does. We can accept both Ribeiro’s claim that love grounds us in the present and Schechtman’s and Smith’s views of love as providing us with a special kind of temporal understanding. We could say that it is precisely *because* love grounds us in the present that we can engage in what Schechtman calls “mental time travel” (p. 33, which in turn enables understanding of our experience that is inaccessible when thinking episodically. In fact, we could say that if love is a *memento mori*, love can only be a reminder of death by projecting our thoughts towards the future (where death is) and the past (where our time has already been used up)—Schechtman explicitly identifies the *memento mori* theme (p.28). In this way, these three chapters function as well as a response to anti-narrativists, by showing that narrative approaches (to love, but possibly to other temporally extended features of our lives) do not preclude the possibility of being grounded to the present—and how love, as shown in these films, is a good scenario to prove this claim.

The third lesson that can be extracted from this collection with respect to romantic life that the philosophical investigation of love needs to move on from the stereotypical romantic ideal. The contributors in this volume seem to be divided on whether the *Before* trilogy reinforces or challenges this ideal. Diane Jeske (chapter 6) is in the first camp. In her previous work, Jeske has rightly objected to the priority that is given to romantic love over rationality. In this trilogy, Jeske argues, there is an unwarranted triumph of love over all the (good) reasons Céline and Jesse have to break up at the end. Given the central place that the trilogy gives to romantic love in the protagonists’ lives, and how much they give up in the name of romantic love (more on this below) it is perfectly plausible to interpret the films as portraying love as *the* supreme good (like, in fact, Ribeiro does in this very volume). I agree with Jeske that this is something that should be criticized. Not necessarily because romantic love is not *a* good or even *one of* the supreme goods, if there are such; but because of the damaging prevalence of what Elizabeth Brake called *amatonormativity* in her *Minimizing Marriage* (2012, OUP): a damaging social script according to which life is not complete without romantic love. In that sense, it is fair to say that the *Before* trilogy falls short of questioning the romantic ideal with respect to the place that romantic love occupies in our lives (both actual and philosophical).

Jeske’s view on the film having a stereotypical happy ending is in opposition with arguments made in other chapters, which support exactly the opposite view—that is, that the trilogy disrupts the ‘happily ever after’ traditional romantic script. With the first film portraying Céline and Jesse’s first meeting in Vienna (full of romance and expectations) and the second film showing their reunion in Paris (where they finally fulfil their promise to meet again), the third film takes us on a family vacation in the Greek Peloponnese, once a lot of frustrations, reproaches and loose ends have accumulated off-camera throughout Céline and Jesse’s marriage. It is here where we get to their final fight, where Jesse accuses Céline of wanting to ‘live in a fairy tale’: “[I]f you want *true* love, then this is it: it’s not perfect, but it’s real”, he says (see MacDowell’s discussion of this scene in p. 188). It transpires from the films—particularly the third one—that love is *burdensome*. This departure from the romantic ideal is the central claim in Amélie Rorty’s *The Burdens of Love* (2016, *Ethics*), which is explicitly played out in the trilogy. For the protagonists, love comes at a high personal cost: Jesse has to abandon his child from the marriage he exits after reuniting with Céline in the second film, while Céline has to abandon her independence and her ideals. Although the burdensome character of love is not the explicit topic of any of the contributions, it is widely acknowledged throughout. For example, Schechtman points out that loving someone leads to opportunities missed and possibilities closed (p. 38); while Ribeiro states that by the end of the trilogy, “staying in the present has grown both harder and more pressing, love more of a willful act” (p.147).

Here lies what can be considered the main point of criticism to this volume: there is no in-depth exploration of how heavily the burdens of love fall mostly on Céline—the female partner in the heterosexual relationship. The third film distils Céline’s disappointment and doubts about where her marriage has led her: to a family life where she plays the role of ‘wife of a genius’, in Jesse’s shadow, and having to live up to him having told the world about their first encounter (in the films, Jesse becomes a best-selling author with a novelised version of the events in *Before Sunrise*). All this while having to abandon her idealistic career and enduring her husband’s “closet macho attitudes” (see p. 186). It is not the case that the authors in the volume are blind to the gender imbalance present in the trilogy: they do bring it up implicitly and explicitly. For example, Michael Smith points out that Jesse has crafted the marriage at the expense of Céline’s happiness (p. 14); Ribeiro and Schechtman elaborate on the fact that Céline cannot recognise herself anymore (p. 148; p. 35); and Maes and Schaubroeck discuss the gender imbalance with Delpy on several occasions (pp.197-198). Although it is impossible for one volume to capture everything about love (or even everything that the trilogy says about love), it would have been good to see a chapter specifically on these gender dynamics. There is a plausible reason for this omission, which is that one of the contributors, James MacDowell, has already written a comprehensive and rigorous account of gender in the *Before* trilogy (2013), published in the *Alternate Takes* online film criticism site. However, maybe it would have been a good idea to re-print it or re-visit here in more depth.

Christopher Cowley (chapter 4) does explicitly discuss the burdensome nature of love (pp. 67; 77), probably in more detail than any other author. But his chapter is focused on defining what he calls *relational vertigo*: the realisation that one’s romantic relationship is unravelling or will so soon (p. 65). Cowley has consistently written some of the most inspiring philosophical work on the end of love in the past few years, and his contribution here does not disappoint. His account of relational vertigo is rigorous, thought-provoking, and directly connects the case study with the philosophical canon on relational autonomy and moral luck in romantic relationships, as well as the view of love as mutual shaping of the lovers. It is hard to do justice to this chapter in one paragraph, so the recommendation for philosophers of love and relationships is simply that they should read it as soon as possible. With the line of thought I have presented earlier, Cowley’s contribution acts in favour of the notion of the *Before* trilogy as a subversion of the romantic ideal. Love is burdensome insofar it is difficult to understand, and whether love goes well or not is partly a matter of luck. If Cowley is right, and this is how the films portray love, the trilogy is indeed a subversion of the ‘happily ever after’ trope.

Part of the disagreement on whether the film portrays a happy ending stems from the lack of clarity on whether there an ending at all. The contributors are divided on whether the last scene, where Céline and Jesse stop fighting to revisit an old private joke, represents the end of the relationship or not. Here I am inclined to agree with Film Studies scholar James MacDowell (chapter 10), who is an expert on Linklater’s trilogy and is thus a great contributor to have on board. MacDowell believes that the third film has an open ending, in the same way the ending of the two previous films were transformed into ‘middles’ with the release of the successive instalments. In that sense, the trilogy embodies a “resistance to narrative closure” (p. 174). This is also acknowledged by Schechtman (p. 29). MacDowell compares the trilogy with other films with open endings such as *The Awful Truth* (1937) or *The 400 Blows* (1959). It could have been interesting to investigate how the *Before* trilogy differs from other popular, more commercial contemporary films that also disrupt the ‘happy ending’ trope while clearly giving narrative closure, such as *La La Land* (2016) or (arguably) (*500) Days of Summer* (2009). Murray notes how the ending of *Before Midnight* gestures at the diachronicity described by the other authors: at the end Céline and Jesse “agree to reimagine their story’s beginning” (p. 187) and it is this gesture that allows us to imagine the exchange as a sign of their relationship continuing. Again, there is an interesting comparison with similar time travelling at the ending, which in *La La Land* is imaginary, while in *(500) Days of Summer* the protagonist’s look to the past reveals that he had idealised the relationship. In any case, MacDowell’s analysis is valuable not only because of his vast knowledge of cinema in general and the *Before* trilogy in particular, but also from a wider philosophical stance: his view on open endings shows that highlighting the narrative or diachronic structure of a relationship does not necessitate a harmful desire for narrative closure, which has been another classical stance of anti-narrativists.

MacDowell’s piece could be considered one of the less love-centric chapters, with a focus on aesthetics that is also shared by Maes’s solo contribution (chapter 3) on her study of melancholy. The philosophical study of emotion has traditionally suffered from a hyperfocus on a handful of emotional experiences while completely neglecting others. Maes contributes to the current trend towards closing this gap by offering a description of melancholy—which he finds the protagonists prone to, as well as expressed by the films. For Maes, melancholy is existentially charged: he defines it as “the profound and bittersweet emotional experience that occurs when we vividly grasp a harsh truth about human existence in such a way that we come to appreciate certain aspects of life more deeply” (p. 61). The piece then belongs with novel work on phenomenology and emotion, specifically on the notion of existential feeling (see for example Matthew Ratcliffe’s *Feelings of Being*, 2008, OUP). Furthermore, Maes’s account echoes Ribeiro’s view in this volume, with *memento mori* as one of the examples of melancholy that he finds in the trilogy.

As a mode of conclusion, one thing is clear: with this collection, Maes and Schaubroeck more than prove their point about the philosophical character of the film. The main strength of their work as editors is that this volume is interesting for a wide range of professional academics (from Philosophy, Art and Film Theory, Media Studies, or Popular Romance Studies). As I have shown, it is particularly valuable for philosophers of love and/or narrative theory. By offering work from experts with heterogeneous backgrounds on the same case study, this volume becomes a unique treaty on romantic life and temporally extended experience, and thus is of obligatory reading for people working on these topics. And of course, it offers a new window of insight for anyone who has fallen in love with these films, possibly having walked the streets of Vienna or Paris, or sat at a terrace in the Peloponnese, to relive Céline and Jesse’s night, afternoon, and evening love story(ies).