Falling in Love with a Film (Series)

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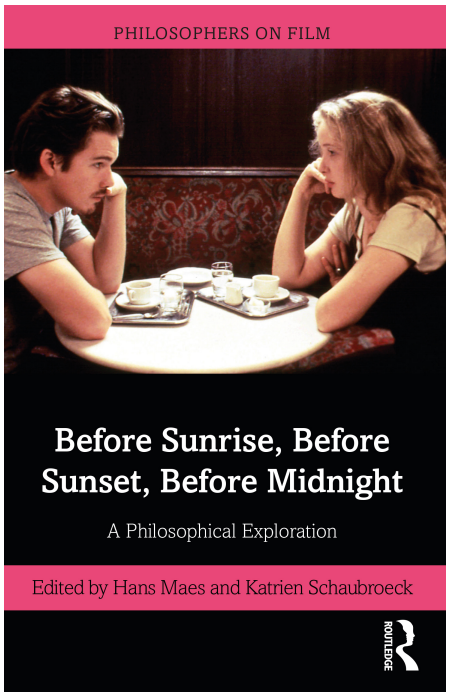

Judging works of art is one thing. Loving a work of art is something else. When you visit a museum like the Louvre you make hundreds of judgements in the space of just a couple of hours. But you may grow to love only one or a handful of works over the course of your entire life. Depending on the art form you are most aligned with, this can be a painting, a novel, a poem, a song, a work of architecture, or some other art object or performance. As it happens, however, both of us have fallen in love with a series of films: *Before Sunrise, Before Sunset,* and *Before Midnight*. But what does it mean to love a film? What's the difference between liking a film, loving a film, and being a film lover? How rational or irrational is it to fall in love with a film? What are the constitutive elements of such a love? These are the questions we'll aim to address in this paper.

Truly, Madly, Deeply

Most people will know what it's like to fall madly in love with someone. You feel the proverbial butterflies when you catch a glimpse of your beloved in the

street; you think about them constantly; you become interested in everything about them (where they live, what they do for work, where they were born, etc.) and the most banal items, say, a napkin or a pen they used, suddenly acquire a special significance. Something very similar happens when you fall in love with a work of art. Each time we see the opening sequence of *Before Sunrise*, set perfectly to the music of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, the butterflies are there. We've caught ourselves thinking and talking about certain conversations in *Before Sunset* for days and weeks after we've seen the film. We confess that we have visited Vienna and Paris just to retrace the footsteps of the main characters (and film crew), and plans are underway to visit the Kardamyli residence where *Before Midnight* was shot. And, sure enough, if we could get hold of a prop that was used in either of these films, no matter how banal the item, it would become one of our most prized possessions.

Naturally, a state of infatuation can be short-lived and superficial. But it need not be. You can grow to love a person, truly and deeply, and this often is a life-changing experience with a lasting impact on how you think and what you value. The same with art: falling in love with a painting or a novel may be the start of a relation that lasts for decades and that changes the very fabric of your mental and emotional life. It should be clear that this is very different from merely judging a painting or novel to be successful. You can judge a novel or a painting to be great and yet have no love for it (Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is our own go-to example here). Equally, you can fall in love with a work and at the same time acknowledge that some other work you don't happen to love is more successful as a work of art. For instance, we have no difficulty in conceding that the *Before* films are not as accomplished as, say, *Mulholland Drive* or *Vertigo*. But we love the former, while we only admire the latter.

Falling in love with the *Before* films, in our case, has been the start of a long-term relationship with real-life impact. The very fact that we are writing this essay and editing this book, so many years after we first saw the films, is testament to this. (Likewise, Jesse spending years of his life writing a novel about his one night with Céline indicates that it was much more than just a cheap fling.) But we are certainly not alone in loving these films. Over the years the films have acquired a score of devoted fans for whom the trilogy is extremely close to their heart. There is *Before Sunrise* fan fiction, there are multiple fan websites, there is a fan-made fourth instalment, entitled *Before the End*, there are artists like Rozette Rago whose work has been influenced and inspired by the movies (Rago 2019). Film critics have picked up on this as well.

> Twenty-five years ago this month, a modest film was released in theaters across the United States, to little fanfare. Late January is traditionally a dumping ground for misbegotten movies and, though the film debuted to respectful reviews, it ended up grossing an unspectacular $5.5 million. Yet those few who saw *Before Sunrise* fell in love with it, and it eventually developed a passionate cult following (Luckard, 2020).

Indeed, scholar and critic Robin Wood once admitted that *Before Sunrise* 'was a film for which I felt not only interest or admiration but love' (1998: 318). And as a critic for *The Guardian* wrote more recently:

> When *Before Sunset* was released in 2004, its co-writer and co-star Julie Delpy mused on the popularity of the two sublimely romantic movies she and Ethan Hawke had made with director Richard Linklater: "It's not like Star Wars, but in that small group of people, it really means something to them." Which is to say that, for that small group of people, among whom I loudly and proudly count myself, awaiting a new instalment of the *Before* trilogy (as it stands, for now) is in fact exactly like Star Wars, just without the lightsabers (Patterson, 2013).

So, to many people it seems only natural to describe their attitude toward a particular film as an attitude of love.

Liking, loving, judging

Curiously, in both the philosophy of art and the philosophy of love, the phenomenon of loving an art work has been largely ignored. There are a few exceptions (the topic is touched upon in recent essays by Jerrold Levinson, Sam Shpall, and in Alexander Nehamas's *Only a Promise of Happiness*). But the phenomenon remains severely underexplored. Before we investigate why that is, it's important to draw a few distinctions – because the word 'love' gets thrown around a lot. For instance, we love *Before Sunrise*, but we also love a cold beer on a hot summer's day. There's a difference between these two, obviously. In the latter case, what we mean is simply that we *like* drinking chilled beer when it's hot outside. A *Stella* would be good, but a *Jupiler*, *Vedett*, *Duvel* or *Seefbier* would do the trick just as well. When we profess our love for *Before Sunrise* however, we refer to something much more exclusive and much more profound and lasting, something that goes beyond a mere liking. As Céline herself formulates it in that first instalment: "if you have a meaningful experience with someone else, a true communication, they are with you forever in a way." This can be true of an encounter with a human being just as it can happen in an encounter with

an art work such as a film.

Loving a particular film is also different from loving film in general. A film lover, or cinephile, is someone who enjoys watching films and has a passionate interest in cinema, just as an art lover, one could say, is someone who enjoys engaging with art. They value art in general and make art appreciation an integral part of their life. There may be a few works that the art lover cherishes especially, but then again there may not be. Similarly, people who love particular works of art (or films) will often be art lovers (or cinephiles), but they need not be.

Loving a work of art or a film should furthermore be distinguished from loving a fictional character. Not only because one can come to love artworks that are not fictional and don't have characters (just think of music), but also because one can love a fictional character, or at least be infatuated with it, without loving the work that brought the character into being. (The immense popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* in the 1990s was in large part due to the mass-infatuation with Mr Darcy as played by Colin Firth in the BBC series, rather than to a genuine appreciation of the book as a work of literature.) Finally, to love a particular work of art is not the same thing as loving an artist. Of course, love for a painting or a film might lead to a fascination for the artist who created the work. But one should not be confused with the other. We love the *Before* trilogy, but we don't love Richard Linklater.

So why has the phenomenon that we're interested in been overlooked in the relevant literature? We suspect that this is in large part because of certain prevalent (pre)conceptions about love. For instance, if you believe that love must be mutual in order to *really* qualify as love, then paintings or novels are immediately disqualified as love-objects. A painting or a novel will not love you back. Similarly, there can be no love for a work of art if you hold Kyla Ebels-Duggan's 'shared-ends view' according to which love directs us to share in each other's ends (Ebels-Duggan 2008). For what would it mean for us to adopt *Before Midnight's* ends? The movie doesn't have ends or goals like we have. Alternatively, if one thinks of love as a response to the particularly human capacity for valuation, as David Velleman (1999) does, then only a person can be the proper object of love, not a work of art (or any other object for that matter).

Unsurprisingly, each of these conceptions has met with sustained criticism and anyone who thinks there can be unrequited love or that people can love their

country or their pet, should be inclined to reject them. The fact that views like this cannot account for the love of particular art works we consider to be just one more nail in their coffin.

But if this isn't the right way to think about love, what is? While we won't attempt to formulate a full-blown theory here, we do want to put forward the following substantial claim: love always involves a complex of emotions and dispositions held together by a deep concern for the beloved and an intrinsic desire for interaction with the beloved. Not only does this conception of love allow for unrequited love as well as a wide range of love-objects, such as countries, animals, football teams, and works of art (hence making it more plausible from a phenomenological point of view). It also acknowledges love's forward-looking, open-ended character – a feature that is illustrated so well by the characters of the *Before* trilogy whose love manifests itself in a resilient and persistent desire for interaction with each other.

The conception of love that we propose helps to highlight some of the most important differences between loving a work of art and making aesthetic judgements about works of art. To begin with, the judgement that a painting is skillfully executed does not necessarily presume an emotional involvement with the object – something that *is* characteristic of love. Secondly, such a judgement does not necessarily entail any deep concern for the work. There are probably tonnes of works that we have judged favourably in our lifetime and that we have now forgotten all about. Thirdly, even a very positive aesthetic judgement does not necessarily come with a desire to further interact with the object. You can acknowledge that a vase is beautiful and yet have no inclination to buy it or spend any more time looking at it. (Here we take issue with Alexander Nehamas, one of the few contemporary philosophers who has tried to connect love and art, but who does not seem to make a distinction between judging a work of art beautiful and loving it. For him, judging a vase or a painting to be beautiful is identical with the spark of desire, the wish to engage more with the object. We believe this is much more typical of love and that, in fact, most judgements are not forward looking, but – like verdicts – backward looking.)

Moreover, when we make an aesthetic judgement about a work of art there is, at least according to many philosophers, a rational expectation that others will (on the whole) agree with us. Famously, Immanuel Kant held that a judgement of beauty demands agreement – a claim which has been interpreted by some as an ideal prediction: someone who judges an object to be beautiful is claiming that

under ideal circumstances everyone will share her pleasure. When we *love* a work of art, by contrast, there is no rational expectation that others will share our love, just like there is no such expectation when we love a person.

For people who love the trilogy it usually comes as a pleasant surprise when they do stumble upon someone who is equally enamoured with those films – the surprise indicating that there was no real expectation that this would happen. Contrariwise, devoted fans might not entirely welcome it if, through some strange twist of fate, the film series were to suddenly become the most popular franchise in the world and everyone were to fall in love with it. It might not be welcomed because their own special relationship with the films will threaten to become less special as a result. (Likewise, it would perhaps not be ideal if everyone were to fall in love with the person you happen to love.) Again, this points to a fundamental difference between loving and judging works of art: the desired outcome of one's aesthetic judgement – universal agreement – will likely be perceived as detrimental for one's love.

Rationality, Irrationality, Contingency

If, when we love a work of art, there is no rational expectation that others will share our love, does that mean that love is a-rational? Does it follow that our love for a work of art is not based on any reasons? Well, no. As rationalists about love in general, we also think that the love for a work of art will typically be based on (and hence justified by) reasons (Schaubroeck, 2014). After all, when given the opportunity, people can talk endlessly about the works they love and will often try to make their deep involvement intelligible by citing reasons. Conversely, if someone could not mention a single positive reason for why she loves a film, but just shrugs her shoulders when asked, we might rightly doubt whether she truly loves it. That is not to say, of course, that when people are in love they always act reasonably. Love may lead to all sorts of behaviour, going from reasonable to stupid to downright immoral. But that doesn't mean that the love itself (defined as a complex of dispositions and emotions) is not responsive to reasons.

But, the anti-rationalist might object, if you are justified in loving the *Before* films, if your reasons for loving the trilogy really are good reasons, then aren't these reasons also going to hold for everyone else? So, if it is indeed reasonable for you to love *Before Sunrise*, then isn't everyone rationally obliged to love the

film? This objection only makes sense if you assume that reasons must be *deontic* (that is, demanding a particular action unless there is a countervailing justification) and *agent-neutral* (what is a reason for X will automatically also be a reason for Y). But why assume that? Some reasons clearly are *non-deontic*. These are reasons that invite rather than require, that justify without 'unjustifying' doing something else. Such reasons, as Jonathan Dancy argues, are not 'in the wrong-making business' (Dancy, 2004). For example, Anne may have good reasons to get angry at Elizabeth but if her good nature prevents her from becoming angry, then surely she's not in the wrong. Furthermore, there can be *agent-relative reasons*, when the reason-giving fact, or the formulation of the reason-giving consideration, include a reference to the particular agent the reason applies to (Nagel, 1986). For example, Paul may love Phil because Phil helped him through a difficult time and seems to understand him like no one else, and because Phil's voice and demeanor has a calming effect on Paul. These are legitimate reasons for Paul to love Phil, but they are clearly agent-relative. The fact that Phil has this effect on Paul is not a reason for Jonathan or Michael to love Phil.

Reasons for loving a particular work of art are very often agent-relative and almost always non-deontic. For example, one of the authors of this article has a longstanding love for the novella *Titaantjes*, written by the Dutch author Nescio. When he read *Titaantjes* for the first time he was about the same age as the main characters and struggling with the same issues as they are. The novella really spoke to him at the time and gave him the feeling of being understood. As he recalls it, the novella made him see how the abandonment of youthful ambitions is part and parcel of growing up and it did this in a way that filled him (and still fills him) with a benign and comforting sense of melancholy.

These, we want to argue, are good reasons for Hans to love *Titaantjes*. Obviously these are agent-relative and non-deontic reasons. Someone else is not required to love the novella simply because it manages to make Hans feel this way. They may recognize the features Hans cites but not appreciate them in the same way. These reasons are also non-deontic in that they help to justify Hans's love for the book without making it a requirement. If he comes across another story that fills him with a similar sense of melancholy but he does not grow to love it in the same way as he loves *Titaantjes*, that's absolutely fine. There is nothing irrational about that (just as there is nothing irrational about not getting angry even if you have reason to).

It's precisely such agent-relative and non-deontic reasons – 'because the poem helped me through a difficult time', 'because I feel inspired every time I hear this song', 'because I am encouraged and reassured when I see this film' – that help to explain and make intelligible the deep concern, the emotional attachment, the desire for interaction – in short: the love that we feel for those works of art that come to occupy a special place in one's life. And it is precisely such reasons that people tend to give when they try to describe their love for the *Before* films.

It is true that a profound connection of this sort may depend on a number of contingent factors – being in an emotionally vulnerable position when you first come across these films, sharing a predisposition for philosophical reflection with its makers, or having exactly the right age to be able to relate to the depicted events. The latter is commented on by this critic:

> The films have had an especially huge impact on those of us who were roughly the same age as Hawke and Delpy as each film came out. We've watched romantic, idealistic twentysomethings grow into achingly lonely but passionately hopeful thirtysomethings, then into comfortably married fortysomethings struggling to reconnect with who they used to be, amidst the baggage of adult life (Luckard, 2020).

And he continues:

> Every fan of the films feels a personal connection to them. I was on a high school class trip to Vienna during the summer of 1994 when *Before Sunrise* was filming, though I had no idea a masterpiece was being created somewhere just blocks away. I was one of the fortunate few to see the film in theaters in 1995, simply because I happened to recognize Vienna in the television commercials. Hawke and Delpy were a few years older than me, but I could relate to everything they went through. I could see moments I had felt and lived. There were flashes of people I knew in Céline and Jesse, as well as flashes of myself, at both my best and worst (Luckard, 2020).

But that such contingent factors can play a decisive role in whether or not you will fall in love is just a fact about love in general and one that is, for that matter, beautifully illustrated in the *Before* trilogy itself.

The Tripartite View

While we have not offered a fully developed theory of love, the substantive conception that we propose bears strong affinities with the full-fledged account

developed by Sam Shpall. For Shpall, love has a fundamental role in making our existence meaningful (2017: 70). Love generates meaning in our lives, as Shpall illustrates with various examples: a mother taking care of her disabled child, a pious person committing herself to God, an artist devoting his entire life to writing a book. As the last example shows, and as we've indicated earlier, Shpall is one of the very few philosophers who makes room for love of art (2017; 2018). Looking more closely at his account may help to shed light on our love for the *Before* trilogy. But, as will become clear, looking carefully at the *Before* trilogy may also help us to point out a potential weakness of Shpall's theory.

Adopting a functionalist approach, Shpall takes it as a requirement for a definition of love that it can explain the role that love plays in our lives. The central argument for his preferred view of love is that it can explain love's role as a generator of meaning. As the examples of the mother, the pious person and the artist are designed to illustrate, experiences of meaning in life have three features in common: the source of meaning gives structure to the lover's life, it makes them susceptible to rich emotions, and susceptible to pleasing states of affection. This is captured by Shpall's so-called tripartite view: [l]ove is *devotion* that renders *vulnerable* and expresses *liking* (2018: 91). In structuring our lives, connecting us to a source of enjoyment, and making us vulnerable, love generates meaning. This view appears well equipped to explain certain features of love as they are represented in the *Before*-movies and manifested in our particular attachment to the films.

Before considering the vulnerability and devotion that comes with love, let us say something about the 'liking' that is entailed by love, according to Shpall. As he points out, there is something unsettling and incongruous about someone who claims to love a person, but does not in any way enjoy their company and is only negatively affected when thinking of them. Loving and liking go together, as is also evident in the *Before* trilogy. Céline and Jesse clearly enjoy each other's company. They instantly take to one another in *Before Sunrise*, they cannot tear themselves away from each other in *Before Sunset*, and even in *Before Midnight*, where their love is put to the test, they are drawn to each other in moments of flirtatious intimacy and sparkling conversation.

As Shpall goes on to explain, it is this aspect of liking that gives love the reputation of being not under our control. For our likes and dislikes are deeply contingent. They are not the outcomes of decisions or other volitional acts. Céline and Jesse cannot help liking each other, and there doesn't seem to be an

act of will involved in this element of their love. Likewise, we've taken to the *Before* movies without this being the result of a careful deliberation on our part. They struck a chord with us and the enjoyment we take in watching these films has not left us since. At the same time, we acknowledge that other people may not like – or may even actively dislike - the films and that there may not be much that can be done about that. For those people the possibility of coming to love the trilogy will be very remote indeed.

Loving and liking, while clearly linked, are also distinct. As we have argued in a previous section, love is more than a mere liking. There are people we like but do not love. Similarly, there are films that we enjoy watching, but are not deeply attached to. And if Céline had not followed Jesse off the train in Vienna, their mutual liking would not have been able to develop into something more. According to Shpall, the something more that is required for love is devotion. He defines devotion as being concerned about something and being disposed to act on this concern. There are three forms that devotion can take: concern for the well-being of the beloved, concern for being with the beloved, and concern for the satisfaction of the other's ends. Sometimes one form of concern is predominant in love. Other times love incorporates all three concerns. We see this on display, for instance, in *Before Sunset*. Céline and Jesse do not just make polite enquiries about each other's wellbeing, but when they sense distress and unhappiness they try to console the other person. As the minutes tick away, they make it clear – both explicitly and implicitly – that they want to continue to spend time together. And they show a concern for the satisfaction of the other's ends: Céline is happy with the success of Jesse's book and writing career, while Jesse is thrilled to hear about Céline's job and the way that she is helping to make the world a better place.

Two brief asides here. First, when the object of love is inanimate, like a work of art, it is still apt to speak of devotion, Shpall thinks, but this evidently cannot show in a concern for the satisfaction of the beloved's ends (as a work of art has no ends). In such a case, devotion will manifest itself, for example, in the desire to be with the work of art and to devote time to it. Second, devotion by itself is not sufficient for love. This is illustrated quite aptly by Jesse's story of marriage. As he recounts, he saw marriage as the moral or adult thing to do. "In the moment, I remember thinking it didn't much matter, the who of it all. I mean, that nobody is gonna be everything to you and that it's just the action of committing yourself, you know, meeting your responsibilities, that matters." But simply committing oneself is not enough for love, as he was bound to find out.

“There is no joy or laughter in my home,” he complains. Husband and wife don’t seem to like each other very much anymore. Instead, Jesse says he feels like he’s running a nursery with somebody he used to date.

A third aspect of love, as conceived by Shpall, is vulnerability. Unlike devoting oneself to someone, there is a strong element of passivity here. In the case of love to be vulnerable means to be affected by what happens to the beloved and by what the beloved does. Consequently, a lover’s vulnerability will manifest itself as a disposition to feel very strong emotions, like joy, pride, shame, anger, or sadness. There is in fact a broad consensus among philosophers of emotion that all emotions are concern-based. For example, it is only because I care about my garden that I fear its fate in the coming storm. And, conversely, all concerns imply investment and identification such that one becomes vulnerable to events that are not under one’s control. So the aspects of devotion and vulnerability in love are essentially linked. When Hank says, at the airport in the opening scene of *Before Midnight*, that he does not want his father to attend his recital, Jesse feels hurt. Or to take another obvious example of a lover’s vulnerability: when Jesse arrives in Vienna on December 16 to find out that Céline is not there, his disappointment is immense (so he eventually reveals to Céline in *Before Sunset*). When one comes to truly love a film, that, too, can engender a sense of vulnerability and leave one open to feeling strong emotions. If, for instance, your beloved film is ridiculed in conversation, that will likely be experienced as hurtful. Or when a further instalment in the series is announced, that can be a source of joy and happiness. But equally, it can be a source of genuine anxiety (will this next instalment do justice to the characters? Will it not destroy the magic of the previous films? Etc.).

Devotion, Mourning, Interaction

According to Shpall, love is devotion that renders vulnerable and expresses liking. One advantage of his account is that it may help to dissolve conflicting intuitions about the amount of control that people have over their loves. Some see it as “not a decision but a destiny” (Scruton cited in Shpall, 2018: 118), others see it as “an emotion of choice” (Solomon cited in Shpall, 2018: 118). Some hold us responsible for love, others think it befalls us. Here is the solution that the tripartite view offers: “Our intuitions are muddled because love is a composite psychological condition, whose component parts are very differently susceptible to control, and very differently amenable to normative assessment”

(Shpall, 2018: 119). Our likings are hard to control or manipulate. The same might be said about our vulnerabilities (at least once we have them). But what we devote ourselves to is a matter of choice. Thus offering a tripartite account of love allows Shpall to "grant that there is some sense of love that is not active" (2018: 108) while holding on to the idea that love is partly shaped by active choices we make concerning whom we want to spend time with, etc. The romance at the heart of the *Before* films beautifully illustrates this mixture of active commitment, irrepressible attraction and inevitable vulnerability.

Emotions run quite high in the second half of *Before Sunset* but we are not witnessing two human beings who are merely left at the mercy of their emotions. They also make important decisions as they go along. They gradually come to endorse some of their feelings (as they perhaps come to reject other feelings such as guilt and anger). And they decide to act in a certain way that unequivocally expresses their concern for the other person. It's worth noting that there were also significant decisions and actions preceding their reencounter: Jesse writing his book, Céline deciding to come to the book presentation. And as the day progresses, they shift more and more towards a mutual commitment that is bound to have a great impact on both their lives. In *Before Midnight*, by contrast, we may observe a shift in the opposite direction. Devotion seems to crumble and doubts emerge about their commitment to each other. They can still take pleasure in conversation and there is no shortage of vulnerability, as the hurt, anger but also occasional tenderness show. But the question is whether they are still devoted to one another. Aligning their goals in life, it becomes apparent, will require more than a time machine game and a hot night in a hotel room. (Precisely because their sense of commitment, i.e. the 'controllable' part of love, is under threat, the hope remains that their love will survive and we are left with an open ending. They are still able to enjoy each other's company, so if they don't give up, if they persevere and make an effort, we are led to believe that their love may perhaps be healed and renewed.)

As you may recall, in the formulation of our own view of love, we emphasized the desire for interaction, rather than the notion of devotion. The latter, according to Shpall, can manifest itself as a concern to be with someone, but it doesn't need to manifest itself that way. There can be devotion that takes the form of a concern for the wellbeing of the other person or a concern for the satisfaction of their ends. Now, for all its explanatory power, it is here that a weakness in Shpall's theory may become evident. Shpall seems to inherit the criticism that has been addressed to Frankfurt's robust-concern view (to which

the tripartite view is indebted). Frankfurt defines love as robust concern, requiring no interaction whatsoever. Though the inclusivity of this conception of love is an appealing feature, the equation of love with a private state of concern might actually make it over-inclusive. The robust concern of a stalker who (falsely or rightly) believes he knows what is good for his object of devotion would count as love on this conception. Or, to make the same point with a less extreme example, Frankfurt does not see anything defective in a paternalistic concern that projects needs and interests on a beloved that the beloved does not have or that the beloved does not want the lover to interfere with (several people have formulated this criticism, amongst others Ebels-Duggan, 2008).

Shpall's understanding of 'devotion' is more flexible and versatile than Frankfurt's robust concern, but still, it does not seem to require an active soliciting of input by the beloved and it does not seem at odds with a stalker's troubling concern-at-a-distance. Adding interaction to the equation can help to circumvent some of these problems. Moreover, it can help to account for an aspect of love that the tripartite view cannot explain. On Shpall's view it is puzzling why someone would mourn after an unsolicited break-up with a romantic partner. After all, this person can still devote his or her life to the ex-partner, be concerned about his or her wellbeing, continue to be vulnerable and to like this person. Nevertheless, a response of mourning would be entirely understandable. Our view that places emphasis on interaction can account for this: although devotion, vulnerability and liking from a distance in such a situation are possible, the interaction will be gone, and that both explains and warrants the reaction of mourning, and the sense that something meaningful in one's life has gone. What Céline and Jesse missed out on, after their failed reunion on December 16, is ongoing interaction with each other. And with this a source of meaning in their lives went missing. They both go through a very tough time after *Before Sunrise* and it seems fitting to say that they experienced some form of mourning.

The notion of 'mourning' is at the centre of Tony Milligan's view of love that is closely aligned with both Shpall's and our own view. All three connect love's value with its being a source of meaning. Hence when that source dries up or disappears, it is natural to feel sad. Milligan delineates the objects of love as those objects whose loss can be cause for mourning and grief. "We can love anything that we can grieve over," Milligan suggests (2011: 7). This approach allows for a wide scope. We can grieve over the loss of a person. But not just persons. Forests, familiar places, animals etc… clearly can be objects of love

(Milligan, 2011:123; 128). To the list of natural environments and non-human animals we could (and should) add works of art. If a painting or a sculpture or a work of architecture that one truly loves is subsequently destroyed, the natural response will be to mourn the loss. Just think of the outpouring of grief after the 2019 fire in the Notre Dame (which is curiously foreshadowed in *Before Sunset)*. With the advent of digital times, it is perhaps harder to imagine the loss of a film. But if, say, all copies of the *Before* trilogy were to be destroyed or made inaccessible by some sort of superbug, this would no doubt cause distress to those who love the trilogy and leave a hole in their hearts. The film critic Derek Malcolm once defined a great movie as any movie he could not bear the thought of never seeing again. We agree with Malcolm, be it with a small amendment: it may not be true of all movies one acknowledges to be great, but it is true of all movies that one comes to love deeply.

We have described our love for the *Before* films in terms of a desire for interaction with them. Shpall may prefer to speak of a concern 'to be with' the work of art that one loves. But while he might mean the same as we do, 'being with' really seems to underdescribe the relation that one seeks in regards to a work one loves. In loving the *Before* films, for instance, we want to watch and re-watch them, discuss them, read and write about them. And, importantly, we wish to learn from them. We have let the films inform our thinking and doing. A self-serving, sentimental interpretation of the movie would be the equivalent of the paternalistic one-sided concern that we criticized above. By contrast, the activity of engaging with a movie in order to understand it better and let it generate meaning is more typical of a truly loving relationship.

Conclusion

Robin Wood, who shared our love for *Before Sunrise*, described the film and the dynamic between its protagonists as follows:

> It is characterized by a complete openness within a closed and perfect classical form (…). The relationship shifts and fluctuates, every viewing revealing new aspects, further nuances, like turning a kaleidoscope, so the meaning shifts and fluctuates also. (…) [It] involves each individual spectator in a complex dialogue: Do *you* feel this, do *you* agree with that, how exactly does this affect *you*, your attitude to life, your ideas about relationships, the relationship you are in, the relationship you want? (1998: 324)

For a film to reveal new meanings, new layers and new aspects, it is necessary that a viewer engages with the movie and let themselves be guided by what the movie offers. Relationships of love are like kaleidoscopes indeed, in that they keep generating new perspectives on the world. This is true both of the love between Céline and Jesse and our love for these films. That is why we find it apt to characterize love in general as a practice of interaction and engagement. And when this practice results in a meaningful experience, a 'true communication', it is as Céline says: "it stays with you forever."

Shpall's view and ours are in many respects closely aligned and they both leave room for a love that extends beyond the interpersonal realm and that can include the love of a film (series). The difference lies in the characterization of the relation between the lover and the love object. This relation, we hold, is marked by a desire for interaction. When this desire is frustrated and made impossible, grief will be a natural response. When the desire is fulfilled, the relation can take on certain qualities that make the love intelligible – in other words: it will produce non-deontic, agent-relative reasons. In this way characterizing love as an interaction helps to explain how the attitude of love is grounded in reasons that are themselves generated by qualities of the relationship. Like people, art works have the power to comfort, inspire, explain, offer hope and consolation. In this capacity they are capable of providing deep and meaningful experiences. It is these experiences, these relational features of a work of art, that we value and that do not only make us love it but also give us reasons for loving it.

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