

Truly, Madly, Deeply.

Hans Maes asks what it is to love a work of art

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 judgments in the space of just a couple of hours. But you may grow to love only a handful of works over the course of your entire life. For me, these include Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Nescio's novella *Titaantjes* (somewhat imperfectly translated as "Young Titans"), The Pixies' album *Bossanova*, and Richard Linklater's film trilogy *Before Sunrise, Before Sunset, Before Midnight*. These are all works I love (or have loved) truly, madly, and deeply.

Let me say something about the 'madly' part first. Most of us know what it's like to fall crazily 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 I see the opening sequence of *Before Sunrise*, set perfectly to the music of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, the butterflies are there. And I catch myself thinking about certain conversations in the film for days and weeks afterwards. I confess that I have visited Vienna and Paris just to retrace the footsteps of the main characters (and film crew), just as I have visited most of the locations described in *Persuasion* as well as the house in which Jane Austen is said to have written it. And, yes, if I could get hold of a pen once used by Austen I would be as thrilled as Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* receiving a napkin signed by Spock/Leonard Nimoy.

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 my 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, I have no difficulty in conceding that the *Before* films are not as accomplished as, say, *Citizen Kane* or *Vertigo* – films I admire but do not love.

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, I love *Titaantjes*, but I also love a cold beer on a hot summer's day. There's a difference between these two, obviously. In the latter, what I mean is simply that I *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 I profess my love for *Titaantjes*, however, I refer to something much more exclusive and much more profound, something that goes beyond a mere liking.

Loving a particular work of art is also different from loving art in general. 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 her 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 will often be art lovers, but they need not be. Loving a work of art 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 – assuming that this really qualifies as love – 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. I love the *Before* trilogy, but I don't love Richard Linklater.

So why has the phenomenon that we're interested in been overlooked in the relevant literature? I think 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. For what would it mean for me to adopt *Bossanova's* ends? The album 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 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, that people can love their country, or that one can love a pet, should be inclined to reject them.

The fact that views like this cannot account for the love of particular art works I 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 I won't attempt to formulate a full-blown theory here, I 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 (making it more plausible from a phenomenological point of view). It also acknowledges love's forward-looking, open-ended character and 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 I 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. I 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 judgment 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. Does this 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 a rationalist about love in general – here I take my cue from Katrien Schaubroeck's essay 'Loving the Lovable' – I also think that the love for a work of art will typically be based on (and hence justified by) reasons. 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 gives rise to all sorts of unreasonable behavior. But that doesn't mean that the love itself is not grounded in reasons.

But, the anti-rationalist might object, if you are justified in loving The Pixies' *Bossanova*, if your reasons for loving the album 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 *Bossanova*, then isn't everyone rationally obliged to love the album? 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'. 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. 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. When I read *Titaantjes* for the first time I was about the same age as the main characters and struggling with the same issues as they are. The novella really spoke to me and gave me the feeling of being understood. It made me see, for instance, how the abandonment of youthful ambitions is part and parcel of growing up and it did this in a way that filled me (and still fills me) with a benign and comforting sense of melancholy. These, I think, are good reasons for me to love *Titaantjes*, but obviously, someone else is not required to love the novella simply because it makes *me* feel this way. These reasons are also non-deontic in that they help to justify my love for the book without making it a requirement. If I come across another story that fills me with a benign and comforting melancholy but I do not grow to love it in the same way as I love *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.