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It is highly doubtful that enthusiasts of romantic cinema would consider Richard Linklater's trilogy, *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), *Before Midnight* (2013) to be their top choice. In fact, looking at the scholarship, one is hard pressed to find texts that consider the films to be part of the genre. Nevertheless, as I hope to make the case in this review, the three films that span over eighteen years in the relationship of a couple, Jesse (Ethan Hawk) and Celine (Julie Delphy), deserve not only the attention of romance lovers, but also serious consideration by students of romantic cinema. Two facets set Linklater's trilogy apart from other, independent art films that tackle the complex subject of love: these films have a relatively sizeable cult fan base among transnational cinephile audiences and, through setting, cinematography and an epic narrative construction, the two decades long artistic collaboration between Linklater, Delphy and Hawk results in one of the most comprehensive, philosophically charged, yet romantically charmed cinematic essays about love.

The *Before* trilogy presents the intricate story of a romantic relationship between Jesse and Celine that arches over nearly two decades. In *Before Sunrise*, the two protagonists meet accidentally on a train to Vienna and end up spending a profoundly transformative night together that leaves their future open as they agree to meet again in six months. The next part in the trilogy, *Before Sunset* picks up the narrative nine years later in Paris, where Jesse, now a successful author, is promoting his novel and where he encounters Celine once again at a book promoting event. The trilogy concludes with *Before Midnight* set against the backdrop of Greece, which shows Jesse and Celine in a long-term relationship grappling with challenges of commitment and changes in their romantic energy. Each time, the films unfold in real-time as the protagonists connect and spend time together exploring the landscape and conversing about deeply personal experiences such as love, death, the passage of time, and faith.

Critical readings of the trilogy tend to center on topics of aesthetic, political or philosophical nature. The collection, entitled *Before Sunrise, Before Sunset, Before Midnight: A Philosophical Exploration* aims, in the words of its editors—Hans Maes and Katrien Schaubroeck—to “extend the philosophical conversation” instigated by the trilogy (1) and to explore a wide range of philosophical dilemmas the films evoke. There are ten individual chapters and the collection ends with an extensive interview with July Delphy who shares her views on love, philosophy, the act of reading, and the making of the trilogy.

“The Poetry of Day-to-Day Life” is a central theme in the movies and it is also the title of the first chapter. The author, Michael Smith, contends that the trilogy brings to the foreground everyday life and mundane reality often overlooked. There are two different aspects of day-to-day life that the films explore, according to Smith: the first is the “genesis and growth of a romantic relationship” and the second is “the creation and consumption of art” (7), both of which, the author claims, we often take for granted. Marya Schechtman, in her essay “Time and Transcendence in the *Before* Trilogy,” makes the case that watching the films allows viewers to experience “real-life romances as story-like” (24). The films move beyond telling Jesse and Celine’s love story to reflect on the ways in which we experience *love as a story*. However, the author also cautions against expecting that an *existing* relationship will “unfold like a story” (29). Schechtman argues that the trilogy ultimately provides “a model for how profound real-life love can be” (39) by foregrounding multi-perspectivism and by exposing the joy and pain of integrating someone else’s story into our lives.

Hans Maes, in the next chapter, claims that melancholy is a fundamental underlying sentiment in the *Before* trilogy. He defines melancholy 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” (41). This particular definition certainly allows Maes to demonstrate how the characters themselves, their interactions, as well as cinematic elements such as the soundtrack, the *mise-en-scène* express a deep sense of melancholy. In his article, Christopher Cowley’s analysis focuses on the last film in the trilogy, specifically looking at “relational vertigo” (65). The majority of the chapter is dedicated to situating “relational vertigo” in philosophy, art, and literature as “the moment when one participant, perhaps both [in a relationship], suddenly becomes aware of the very real risk that the relationship is unraveling or will soon unravel irretrievably” (65). In the last section of the essay the author demonstrates how relational vertigo is present in *Before Midnight*.

Probably the most explicitly philosophical quest of Linklater’s trilogy is Murray Smith’s essay, “Epic Intimacy.” Despite the title’s somewhat misleading suggestion, Smith is interested neither in the epic nor in the intimate aspect of the films. Instead, he considers Linklater’s preoccupation with classic philosophical concepts such as “the nature and passage of time, the effect of that passage on people and places, and the special role of film in representing and exploring these preoccupations” (84). Ultimately, he identifies two aspects that make the trilogy “philosophical”: the dominance of dialogue and self-reflexivity. Probably the most explicit chapter in the collection to examine the trilogy from the perspective of romance is Diane Jeske’s “‘Romantic or Cynic’: Romantic Attraction as Justification.” The author’s main assertion is that the films “set up a familiar contrast between romantic love/attraction and reason or rationality, with a clear message that when romance is in opposition to rationality, rationality ought to be set aside in favor of romantic love”

(103). In other words, the trilogy, by taking on the subject of love in a serious and deliberate manner, throws out the dichotomy of romantic versus cynic “to recognize how romantic aspirations and attraction can complicate our lives and create serious [worthwhile] dilemmas for us” (117).

Similarly to chapter five, chapter seven also studies the films’ dialogue as an aesthetic experience. According to the author, Kalle Puolakka, the trilogy elucidates the philosophical and performative nature of conversations through key such aspects as their “background conditions, how new possibilities open up in the course of a conversation, the growth they can exhibit, or even the role of gestures and facial expressions” (120). Anna Christina Ribeiro’s contribution to the collection draws attention to the ways in which the films intricately link love and death through dialogue. The ultimate message, according to the essay, is that our awareness of death gives meaning to our experience of love and that love is our way to “conquer” (154) death that is eternally hovering over us. Chapter nine, the editors’ contribution to the volume, reveals the purpose of their overall quest—to examine the love they feel for Linklater’s trilogy. They find the key to their feelings in the act of *desire* for interaction—to watch, to re-watch, to discuss, and to write about the films. The last essay in the collection is James MacDowell’s “Romance, Narrative, and the Sense of a Happy Ending in the *Before* Series.” MacDowell presents the argument that the trilogy both plays on and defies the narrative tendency towards closure and coherent ending, thus resembling “endless” reality (175) more closely. The analysis focuses on the ending in each piece of the trilogy, “especially on how these relatively ‘open’—yet nonetheless ‘deliberate and concerted’—conclusions navigate the conventional ‘end’ of romance” (176) only to conceptualize romantic fiction in more realistic ways.

All in all, Maes and Schoebrock’s edited volume is a worthwhile read for those of us who, like the editors themselves, fell in love with this wonderful film saga about the simultaneous promise and outlandishness of true romantic love. However, what is even more important and what is, no doubt at the forefront of the editors’ purpose as well, is that film enthusiasts in general and romance lovers in particular watch *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset*, and *Before Midnight* as soon as possible and as often as they can. It is highly doubtful that anyone in the audience will not also find themselves quickly “falling in love” with Linklater’s brilliant film trilogy.