



Keeping Love Visible

A Review of

Before Midnight (2013)

by Richard Linklater (Director)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035399>

Reviewed by

David G. Wall , Jacqueline Remondet Wall 

Before Midnight is the third episode in the film trilogy examining the romance of Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Céline (Julie Delpy). Each installment reenacts a critical day in their relationship. The first film, *Before Sunrise* (Walker-McBay & Linklater, 1995), dramatizes their meeting and brief initial encounter, and the second, *Before Sunset* (Walker-McBay & Linklater, 2004), explores the day nine years later when they connect again. *Before Midnight* shows their relationship's evolution; since reuniting, they've established an ongoing commitment to each other.

The intrinsic drama of watching a couple develop their relationship at different times is presented with minimal plotlines. Almost all of the scenes in these three films are conversations exclusively between the two characters. Many are 15 to 20 minutes of uninterrupted dialogue between Jesse and Céline as they walk and talk about love, art, life, and each other. In addition, the three films are said to be an intense collaborative effort of the two actors and the director (Richard Linklater) and are sequenced in real time—the first film was made 19 years ago, the second, 10 years ago, and *Before Midnight* in 2012. Thus, the films provide an idealized equivalent of a longitudinal case study of a couple meeting, falling in love, committing to each other, and living their lives together over nearly two decades.

The Visibility Principle

Starting with the first film (*Before Sunrise*), Jesse and Céline's conversations are characterized by honesty and openness. On an impulse, Jesse talked Céline into leaving the comfort of a train for the uncertain streets of Vienna to spend the day together. However, once they deboarded, their romantic excitement was replaced by the harsh realization of a potentially disastrous faux pas—what if they discovered that they really didn't like each other? "This is kind of weird," says Céline. Jesse replies, "Yeah, this is kind of weird, isn't it? I mean, I feel a little awkward. Um . . . But it's all right, right? It's okay." Their honesty in admitting their mutual discomfort allowed them to quickly recapture the cheerful spontaneity of their first conversations. Starting with this honesty, a mutual affection grew as each became ever more visible to the other.

Locke and Kenner (2011) conceptualized the *visibility principle*, a romantic couple's psychological visibility to each other. The ability to share deeply held emotions, beliefs, and values and see a positive reflection of one's consciousness becomes the basis of the most intimate of human bonds. According to these authors, the visibility principle is based on Aristotle's conception of friendship:

And so, as when we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at the one we love. For the one we love, as we say, is another self. (Locke & Kenner, 2011, p. 5)

This conception of love is egocentric, but not hedonistic. Quite the contrary, the friendship Aristotle described is a mutual admiration earned by two virtuous people. Although sharing sexual pleasure adds another bond, romantic love ideally has the same qualities: mutual admiration, love, and respect. Romantic love, where two people reflect their deepest held values and beliefs, has the potential of giving the greatest joy in life. Jesse says, "People always talk about how love is totally unselfish . . . but if you think about it, you know, there's nothing more selfish." "Yeah, I know," replies Céline.

Memorable Memories

In *Before Midnight*, Jesse and Céline's life together includes realistic complications resulting from their decision to become a couple. The prologue scene shows Jesse leaving Hank, his 12-year-old son from a past marriage, at a small Grecian airport. After visiting his father, Hank is returning to his mother's home in Chicago. We then meet Jesse and Céline's 6-year-old twin daughters. Much has changed in Jesse and Céline's lives since their first encounter.

But one thing has not changed. As in the previous films, Jesse and Céline reveal their love and visibility to each other as they take extended walks together. Their walks through the Peloponnesian countryside reveal much about the visible nature of their relationship. Jesse starts the conversation by describing a scene in a novel he is writing (he's an author). "The boy catches a reflection of his face in a window and realizes he is no longer a boy but an old man."

Not liking the sadness of the story, Céline changes the conversation to a letter Jesse wrote when he was 20 years old to himself when he would be 40 (Jesse is 41 at the time of the film). She thinks the letter shows that Jesse really hasn't changed very much and that he is very much the same man now that he was when he penned the letter.

Jesse acquiesces to some degree but reflects on one area where he has changed: When he was young he wanted time to speed up so he would be quickly grown and on his own. Now that he is grown, though, he wants time to slow down. In response, Céline retells a thought she expressed in a previous movie, that "no matter where I am in my life, I always seem to wonder, 'Is this a memory or a dream?'" Jesse acknowledges her by saying that she has always thought that about herself. Then, he good humoredly connects with Céline's flight of fancy by teasing, "Is this walk really happening, right now?" Coming back down to earth, Céline stops and states with knowing mischief in her eyes, "It is." Then they look into each other's eyes and laugh.

They continue to tease each other about not knowing everything and admitting that neither of them knows as much as they thought they did earlier in their lives. "The point is to keep looking, searching, staying hungry . . . right?" asks Céline. "It's true," says Jesse, seriously. Their conversation continues, covering everything from the differences in male and female attitudes toward career success to joking about whether they will be able to put up with each other in their old age.

Listening and watching Jesse and Céline talk about seemingly random ideas as they walk, the viewer witnesses the comfort and joy that a loving couple gives each other as they reveal the parallels of their innermost thoughts and feelings. Seeing the reflection of understanding within each other, we found ourselves thoroughly enjoying these two people and the loving nature of their relationship.

The importance of visibility and memories is an ongoing theme in all three films in the trilogy. In the second movie, *Before Sunset*, the couple meets after being apart for nine years, but they continue their conversations as if interrupted for only a moment. Their initial interaction is characterized by honesty and hope. Céline asks, "Now that we've met again, we can change our memory of December 16th [their first meeting]. It no longer has that sad ending of us never seeing each other again. Right?" Jesse answers, "Yeah, you're right. I guess a memory is never finished. As long as you're alive."

In *Before Midnight*, Jesse and Céline are having dinner with friends, during which the subject of romantic love and relationships becomes the topic of conversation. Natalia (Xenia Kalogeropoulou), an elderly acquaintance of the couple, touchingly describes her efforts to remember her deceased husband.

He is sort of fading and I'm starting to forget him. And it's like losing him again. So sometimes, I make myself remember every detail of his face: the exact color of his eyes, his lips, his teeth, the texture of his skin, his hair. Sometimes, not always, I can actually see him . . . almost touch him. He appears and he disappears like a sunrise and sunset, anything so ephemeral. Just like our life, we live it and we disappear. And though we are so important to some, we are all just passing through.

Not Knowing Oneself and Loss of Visibility

Another theme in *Before Midnight* is the critical importance of self-knowledge to romantic love. Locke and Kenner emphasized self-knowledge in their conceptualization of visibility. They quoted the philosopher Ayn Rand, "To say, 'I love you' one must first know how to say the 'I'" (Locke & Kenner, 2011, p. 27). To share one's innermost self requires knowing that innermost self. At one point during their walk, Jesse states, "If we are ever going to truly know one another, I think we'd have to get to know ourselves better first." This line is surprising because their conversations seem to reflect so much self-knowledge, but Jesse is acknowledging a lack of self-knowledge he perceives in himself and Céline as well. The admission hints at problems to come.

While walking, Jesse and Céline go inside an ancient, tiny Byzantine chapel. The chapel is a shrine to St. Odilia, the patron saint of eyesight. Jesse explains that people come from all over Greece to leave donations to the blind and pray for the restoration of eyesight to loved ones. On one of the walls of the chapel is a fresco of St. Odilia. Céline is saddened to see

that the eyes of the painting are scratched out. The malicious defacement foretells a change in the positive tone of the movie and a sad loss of visibility between the loving heroes.

Jesse and Céline finally make it to their hotel room after their walk. As expected, they soon start making passionate love. However, in the midst of their intimacies, Céline's cell phone rings. With her breast exposed, Céline leaps out of bed to answer the call. It's Hank, who has called to let her know he made his connecting flight in London. As Céline completes her conversation with Hank, Jesse motions to Céline from the bedroom that he would like to talk to Hank, too. But in a classic "turning against" behavior (Gottman & Driver, 2005), Céline inexplicably hangs up the phone without handing it to Jesse.

Céline's ignoring gesture initiates an extended, heartbreaking quarrel. The remarkable 30-minute scene that follows offers excruciating examples of Gottman's "four horsemen of the apocalypse" in romantic relationships: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman, Ryan, Carrère, & Erley, 2002). Many issues that arise are not likely to threaten their relationship. For instance, they argue about the division of labor in completing household chores.

However, other issues confronted seriously undermine the proud self-assurance previously reflected in their intimate conversations. Jesse feels guilty about living away from Hank and wants to move to Chicago to be closer to him. Céline is unsure about her career and seems guilty and resentful about her obligations as a mother. Guilt and self-doubt replace the admiration and respect they previously shared as their visibility of each other fades away. Céline asks at one point, "If we didn't have the girls, all our crap, would we even still be together?" "What?" replies Jesse, "I mean you are the . . . mayor of Crazytown, you know that?" The arguments are kept balanced, so neither Jesse nor Céline is seen as mainly at fault. However, for viewers, it is like watching one's two best friends argue. It's uncomfortable, and one just wants them to stop.

And sometimes they do almost stop and "turn toward" each other psychologically, a characteristic that Gottman observed in relationships that successfully resolve differences (Gottman & Driver, 2005). During one of these "turning toward" moments, for instance, Céline helps Jesse resolve some of the guilt he feels about not living closer to his son. But just as one thinks the couple might start seeing each other and creating a positive environment in which to talk about their problems, blame and defensiveness reappear, and the accusations begin to fly again.

Finally, a stonewalling Céline walks out of the room. After waiting a while for her to return, Jesse finds her on a seaside landing where they had romantically watched a sunset in a previous scene. In the end, Jesse is able to win Céline back, at least temporarily, but the specialness of their relationship seems lost.

We are grateful to Linklater, Hawke, and Delpy for presenting a vision of an ideal relationship. Unfortunately, though, an opportunity was missed with *Before Midnight*. It would have been more in keeping with the spirit of the previous films if the couple had shown more compassion for each other and more earnestness in solving the problems in their relationship. Solving the inevitable problems for even the most loving couple is a critical skill in maintaining long-term relationships. We look forward to the next sequel, and we hope that Jesse and Céline again become visible to each other; their relationship deserves it.

References

- Gottman, J. M., & Driver, J. L. (2005). Dysfunctional marital conflict and everyday marital interaction. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *43*, 63–77. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v43n03_04 PsycINFO →
- Gottman, J. M., Ryan, K. D., Carrère, S., & Erley, A. M. (2002). Toward a scientifically based marital therapy. In H. A. Liddle, D. A. Santisteban, R. F. Levant, & J. H. Bray (Eds.), *Family psychology: Science-based interventions* (pp. 147–174). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/10438-008> PsycINFO →
- Locke, E., & Kenner, E. (2011). *The selfish path to romance: How to love with passion and reason*. Doylestown, PA: Platform Press.
- Walker-McBay, A. (Producer), & Linklater, R. (Director). (1995). *Before sunrise* [Motion picture]. United States: Castle Rock Entertainment/Columbia Pictures.
- Walker-McBay, A. (Producer), & Linklater, R. (Director). (2004). *Before sunset* [Motion picture]. United States: Castle Rock Entertainment/Warner Independent Pictures.