

## The Topography of Love: A Study of the *Before* Trilogy

Abisha Jasmine Suganthy S\*, Karunanithi V

Department of English and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. \*Corresponding Author's Email: abishajasmine29@gmail.com

### Abstract

Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy, encompassing *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013) provide a cinematic excursion into the development of love and intimacy over the course of time. The films offer a nuanced exploration of human connection by following the relationship of Jesse and Céline over the course of twenty years. This examination ranges from the spontaneous spark that ignites a connection to the complications of a long-term partnership. Authenticity and spontaneity serve as important thematic pillars throughout the trilogy, which demonstrates how these characteristics influence the dynamics of characters and the paths their relationships take along the way. The intention of this study is to analyze the ways in which unplanned meetings, the transformational effect of travel, and the power of place intersect with these themes. The purpose of this research is to shed light on how Linklater's cinematic approach leads to an in-depth comprehension of the human condition and the enduring nature of love. This will be accomplished by a close examination of the narrative structure, dialogue, and visual style of the films. By analyzing the way in which the trilogy depicts love as a dynamic and ever-evolving process, the purpose of this research is to provide an insightful investigation on the human condition, a deep appreciation of travel, and the timeless quality of love.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, Richard Linklater, Spontaneity, Time, Travel.

### Introduction

The cinematic exploration of truth, a concept pondered by philosophers and artists alike, finds a unique manifestation in Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy. According to J. Epstein, "cinema is truth, a story is a lie" (1). Heidegger considered that "truth happens in the Van Gogh's painting" (2); and G. Deleuze and F. Guattari declared that "no art, no sensation, was ever representational" (3). Cinema enjoys a privileged condition due to the intrinsically realistic characteristics of the device: "Cinema is, due to its material device, the literal incarnation of this unity of opposites, the union of the passive and automatic eye of the camera with the conscious eye of the filmmaker" (4). Richard Linklater is a master filmmaker whose vision is shaped not by singularity and intensity, but by patience, curiosity, and spontaneity (5). He emphasizes the beauty of everyday life, the endless possibilities and questions it presents, and the value of embracing a state of being dazed and confused (6). The *Before* trilogy— comprising *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013) —presents a unique cinematic exploration of love and human connection. Spanning two decades, the films follow

the evolving relationship between Jesse and Céline, capturing the complexities of intimacy with a raw authenticity that resonates deeply with audiences. A cornerstone of the trilogy's success lies in its commitment to spontaneity, realism, and authenticity. These elements, combined with the films' distinctive use of location and time, create a cinematic experience that is both profoundly intimate and universally relatable. This research paper examines the ways in which Linklater employs spontaneity to construct a compelling narrative of love and life. The films eschew contrived plot devices in favor of improvised dialogue and real-world locations, creating a sense of immediacy and realism. Moreover, the trilogy's exploration of European cities goes beyond mere backdrop, becoming integral to the characters' emotional journeys and the evolution of their relationship. By examining the interplay of these elements – spontaneity, authenticity, and place – this paper seeks to illuminate the *Before* trilogy as a groundbreaking cinematic work that offers profound insights into the human condition. The term "topography" traditionally refers to the "land forms and features themselves, or a description

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(Received 31<sup>st</sup> July 2024; Accepted 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2024; Published 30<sup>th</sup> October 2024)

or depiction in maps” (7). However, in the context of the *Before* trilogy and in this research article, topography takes on a more expansive meaning, encompassing not only the geographical landscapes but also the emotional and psychological landscapes of the characters. The three *Before* films were each filmed in a distinct European city. As aptly said, “It is the art of cinema, come alive in a trilogy across Europe” (8). *Before Sunrise* was shot in Vienna, Austria; *Before Sunset* in Paris, France and *Before Midnight* in Messinia, Greece. Linklater’s approach to duration in the *Before* trilogy can be seen as an extension of his previous experiments with time and narrative (9). As he mentions, “time and narrative have always been overlapping constants that are worthy of exploration” (10). These experiments challenged traditional Hollywood narratives and temporality. By permitting the actors and audience to experience the passage of time in sync, and then shifting the focus towards the couple at each decade, the narrative style of observation is enhanced (6). Given that these films solely comprise of dialogues between two individuals, the continuous tracking shots are hardly interrupted during conversations to preserve the smoothness and authenticity. Fassbinder’s depiction of strolling in *Love is Colder than Death* (1969) fails to fully capture the sensation of immersion in an area unlike Linklater; yet, the technique of prolonged duration creates a temporal space that encourages audiences to contemplate the moral foundations of the film’s narrative (11). In the trilogy, the spectator can observe the bustling activity of real people going about their everyday routines on the streets, visible in the background of each frame. The purpose of these “social shots” is to emphasize that our characters are simply regular people being seen by the audience. There is a significant amount of life happening that goes beyond our observations. Linklater’s heroes are not the focal point of the universe, as they typically are in other narrative works. There are no heroes. There are no villains. Individuals grappling with their circumstances in a given moment, endeavoring to comprehend the meaning of life or the progression of time. Chantal Akerman and Béla Tarr are both rigorous exponents of “cine-trance,” a nebulous filmmaking mode that pertains to the experience of seeing their films and acknowledges the common

aesthetic affinities between cinema and walking (11). While Linklater’s approach is not centered around developing characters that simply respond to things and allowing those responses to shape their identities. Instead, he prefers to have his characters carefully analyze their surroundings and attempt to understand them.

## Methodology

The primary data for this research consists of the three films comprising the *Before* trilogy: *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013). This research employs a qualitative analysis to delve into the themes of spontaneity, authenticity, and the city within Richard Linklater’s *Before* trilogy. Multiple viewings of the films have been conducted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and thematic elements employed by Linklater. Key scenes and dialogues are transcribed and analyzed to identify patterns and recurring themes. The analysis draws upon theoretical frameworks from film studies, including Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, and American independent cinema, to explore the significance of spontaneity and authenticity in the films. These theoretical concepts are applied to interpret the films’ significance within the context of cinematic history.

## Results and Discussion

### Spontaneity, Authenticity, and the City: A Tripartite Analysis

From the inception of cinema, filmmakers have been captivated by the idea of revealing a certain truth within the mundane. Linklater draws clear artistic inspiration from the techniques of Italian Neorealism, while also infusing his own artistic interpretation to delve into the topic in a manner that distinguishes him as a genuine auteur (6). Spontaneity and authenticity entered cinema with Italian Neorealism in the aftermath of World War II, focusing on the everyday lives of ordinary people, often using non-professional actors and real locations to enhance the sense of spontaneity and realism. *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) by Vittorio De Sica is a quintessential example of Neorealism. It raises the question of whether morality can thrive in a social system where there is little hope or economic opportunity for the people who live with one other. Then came along the French New Wave which was influenced by Italian Neorealism and

characterized by its rejection of conventional filmmaking techniques, emphasizing improvisation, natural lighting, and real locations. The combination of realism, subjectivity, and authorial commentary created a narrative ambiguity in the sense that questions that arise in a film are not answered in the end (12). Later on, American independent cinema of the 1990s continued the tradition of spontaneity and authenticity, focusing on character-driven stories and naturalistic performances. Films of Richard Linklater, exemplifies spontaneity with its loose, episodic structure and the use of real locations. With its focus on intimate relationships, love, and romance, Soderbergh's film sets the stage for one of the most significant trends in independent filmmaking of the 1990s: the confessional comedy which prioritizes word over action and emotion over irony (13). Not because they lead viewers to locations other films would not dare to go, but rather because films like *Rambling Rose* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Smoke* (1995), *Walking and Talking* (1997), and many more provide an alternative to conventional Hollywood. Instead of travelling to highly elaborate fantasy realms, the bravery lies in seemingly remaining in the ordinary lives of their primarily young characters. This trajectory in cinema history highlights the evolution of spontaneity and authenticity, culminating in Linklater's work. The trilogy focuses on chance encounters, spontaneous conversations, and the exploration of the city without a goal-oriented desire to reach a destination can be seen as elements of serendipity. Mindful mobility serves as a method of conscious experiential learning, providing novel avenues for generating empirical material and emphasizes the concept of encounter as a focal point (14). Additionally, it explores the theme of authenticity through the characters' discussions on art, individuality, and the rejection of modernity. The dialogues fluctuate with a realism that conceals the meticulous design of the screenplay. The genuineness of the conversation in the *Before* trilogy renders it compelling. Jesse and Céline's appreciation of Seurat's art and their rejection of the modern emphasis on individuality suggest a desire for authenticity in a world of homogenization. The characters' wandering and examining the city allow for unexpected and meaningful experiences to unfold, emphasizing the

importance of embracing the unexpected in life. The *Before* trilogy, devoid of intricate special effects or complex story developments, relies significantly on its language, transforming what may appear as a mere dialogue into an insightful examination of existence, love, and interpersonal connections (15). The films depend on the potency of the scripts and the veracity of their conversation to engage viewers with minimal action. This audacious narrative decision proved successful, as demonstrated by its lasting popularity and critical praise. In *Before Sunrise*, Jesse (Ethan Hawke), a young American, and Céline (Julie Delpy), a Parisian, forge an unexpected connection during a chance encounter on a European train. Their conversation, marked by intellectual curiosity and emotional vulnerability, quickly deepens into an intimate exchange. As their train approaches Vienna, Jesse proposes they continue their conversation beyond the fleeting moment. He suggests that spending the night together in the city will prevent the gnawing doubt of a missed opportunity from haunting Céline in the future. From the outset of their journey in Vienna, spontaneity becomes a central theme. Their decision to explore the city without a predetermined plan allows for genuine interactions, unburdened by the constraints of a premeditated agenda while exhibiting the characteristics of the *flâneur*. The film concludes with poignant recollections that quietly pull at our emotions as all the locations where they had shared moments reappear on screen, now devoid of their presence, waiting the sunrise in the city of Vienna. It poetically concludes right where it commenced, the railway station. Secondly, in *Before Sunset* spontaneity continues to shape their experiences in Paris, albeit with a layer of nostalgia and regret. Nine years after their chance encounter, Jesse, now a published author, finds himself back in Paris for the final leg of his book tour. His novel, *This Time*, is a thinly veiled account of their one night together in Vienna. As he reads from his work at the iconic Shakespeare and Company bookstore, fate intervenes. Paris has long held a formative place in geo-spatial imaginaries of love (16). The impromptu decision to engage in a boat ride along the Seine River captures the essence of unplanned moments. These instances contribute to the authenticity of their connection by allowing the characters to respond to the city

and each other in a way that is unscripted and unrehearsed. The spontaneity here was tempered by the weight of missed opportunities and the complexities of their separate lives, but it still provided a space for genuine, heartfelt reconnection. As their journey progresses to Greece in *Before Midnight*, spontaneity takes on a different dimension within the context of a long-term relationship. Jesse and Céline navigate the challenges of parenthood, introducing a new layer of authenticity to their interactions. The nature of their conversations and confrontations reflects the unpredictable nature of life and love. Linklater's portrayal of spontaneous exploration and its impact on character development invites the spectators to reflect on the fluidity of human relationships. However, the spontaneity that once defined their relationship has been overshadowed by the practicalities and responsibilities of life.

"...this room gives me the creeps; I was expecting something quaint, like the real Greece. What the hell are we doing here anyway? This is all too planned, like we're supposed to have this great evening. There's no room for spontaneity, it is all gone from our lives. It's stupid and it's not working..." (17).

This scene captures the essence of the transformation in Céline and Jesse's relationship over the years, moving from the exhilarating spontaneity of their initial encounters to the structured, routine-filled reality of their mature relationship. This evolution from the spontaneous, dreamlike beginnings to a more grounded, reality-based relationship speaks to the natural progression of love and the need to adapt and find new ways to connect as life changes. This shift is emblematic of many long-term relationships. While physical attraction initially brought them together, it was their intellectual connection that sustained their conversation and ultimately led them to fall in love (18).

### **Geography of Desire: Topographical Mapping of the *Before* Trilogy**

Travel is more than just a backdrop in the *Before* trilogy; it's a dynamic force that shapes the narrative and the characters' relationships. Travel serves as an opportunity for introspection and personal growth (19). Being in unfamiliar surroundings strips away the comforts of routine, forcing the characters to confront their deepest thoughts and feelings. The act of exploring new

places together creates a sense of shared adventure and intimacy, which is essential to their evolving relationship. The trilogy's use of topography is a powerful tool for mapping the intricate journey of love between Jesse and Céline. By examining the physical spaces they inhabit, the film explores the ways in which these locations influence their emotions, relationships, and personal growth. The winding streets of Vienna, the romantic charm of Paris, and the idyllic landscapes of Greece each contribute to the unique atmosphere of their encounters and the evolution of their connection. The trilogy's use of travel as a narrative device also reflects the broader metaphor of life as a journey. Each film represents a different stage in their relationship, and the locations serve as symbolic markers of their progress. The *Before* trilogy, a cinematic exploration of love and human connection, employs topography as a powerful tool to enhance the narrative and deepen the characters' emotional journey. Beyond its geographical significance, topography in the trilogy serves as a symbolic representation of the characters' inner states, a reflection of their relationships, and a catalyst for personal growth. The trilogy's narrative structure mirrors the unpredictability and complexity of real-life relationships, much like a topographical map reflects the varied terrain of a landscape. The trilogy's choice of locations, Vienna, Paris, and Greece, is deliberate and significant. Each city carries its own historical and cultural weight, influencing the characters' conversations and their understanding of their own lives. Vienna, with its rich history and romantic atmosphere, sets the stage for the initial spark of love between Jesse and Céline. Paris, a city synonymous with love and art, provides a backdrop for their reunion and exploration of their shared past. Greece, with its ancient myths and modern realities, offers a place of reflection and renewal, mirroring the challenges and complexities of their long-term relationship. Beyond their symbolic significance, the physical spaces in the trilogy actively shape the characters' experiences and their emotional journeys. The topography of the locations featured in the *Before* trilogy plays a crucial role in shaping the exploration of time, location, and emotion. The trilogy spans two decades, capturing the evolving relationship between Jesse and Céline. Each film represents a different stage in their relationship,

reflecting the passage of time and the changes in their emotional connection. The trilogy spans several years, and the seasons change accordingly. This seasonal variation affects the characters' moods, their activities, and the overall atmosphere of the films. For instance, the autumnal setting of *Before Sunrise* creates a sense of melancholy and longing while the vast, open spaces of Greece in *Before Midnight* feels overwhelming and isolating. The cities mirror the characters' internal states. Vienna's romantic aura, Paris's nostalgic charm, and Greece's intense beauty parallel the stages of Jesse and Céline's relationship, from initial connection to mature complexity. The youthful energy and romantic idealism of *Before Sunrise* are mirrored in the vibrant city of Vienna. It's a place of new beginnings, where the characters are full of hope and possibility. The city's enchanting atmosphere provides a fertile ground for their spontaneous connection, allowing them to delve into deep conversations without the distractions of everyday life. Vienna's character as a place of dreams and possibilities is mirrored in the characters' own aspirations and uncertainties about the future. Vienna's labyrinthine streets and atmospheric cafes mirror the characters' own exploration of each other. The city's architectural grandeur and historical significance create a sense of enchantment and possibility, which is reflected in the characters' own sense of wonder and excitement. The film's use of long takes and tracking shots allows viewers to experience the city as the characters do, immersed in its sights and sounds. The long-take is employed in film theory to achieve a diverse array of aesthetic and philosophical objectives. Opposing discourses regarding the long-take have been employed to sort through the pursuit of realism, the pro-filmic event mark, experiential immersion in the diegetic environment, and spectatorial ambiguity (20). Vienna, in essence, is more than just a setting; it's an active participant in the story. The city's romantic aura, combined with its physical spaces, creates a perfect environment for the blossoming of a new love. *Before Sunset* takes place in a more mature and cosmopolitan setting, reflecting the characters' growth and evolving relationship. Paris, a city of love and art, provides a fitting backdrop for their reunion and exploration of their shared past. The city's romantic reputation creates a sense of expectation and nostalgia, while its

contemporary energy represents the characters' own evolution. The film's use of the Seine as a central location is particularly significant, as the river symbolizes the flow of time and the passage of life. The characters' movement through the city mirrors their own emotional journey. As they discover new corners of Paris, they confront the complexities of their shared history and the challenges of their current lives. The city's atmosphere of both romance and reality reflects the characters' own conflicting desires and emotions. The Greek setting in *Before Midnight* is characterized by its intensity and beauty, mirroring the complexities and challenges of a long-term relationship. The juxtaposition of idyllic landscapes with the characters' internal struggles creates a powerful contrast. In contrast to Vienna, Peloponnese coast in the Southern Greece in *Before Midnight* is a more mature and complex setting. The idyllic Greek landscape, while beautiful, is juxtaposed with the challenges and complexities of a long-term relationship. The heat and intensity of the Messenia summer mirror the emotional temperature between Jesse and Celine, who are grappling with the realities of parenthood, career, and the passage of time. The choice of Greece as a setting is deliberate. It's a place where ancient myths and modern realities collide, much like the characters' own struggles to reconcile their past with their present. The setting also evokes a sense of cyclical time, suggesting that certain patterns and conflicts in relationships may repeat themselves. Geographical Topography refers to the specific locations featured in the films, such as Vienna, Paris, and Greece. The characters' physical movement through these locations, such as walking, exploring, and traveling, contributes to the narrative and reflects their emotional journeys. Emotional and Psychological Topography refers to the characters' inner worlds, their thoughts, feelings, and memories. These internal landscapes are often mirrored or reflected in the external landscapes they encounter. The characters' emotional journeys can be mapped onto the physical spaces they inhabit. The term "topography" in the context of the *Before* trilogy is not limited to geographical movement but also extends to the mapping of emotional and psychological landscapes. This interconnectedness enhances the depth and richness of the narrative,

allowing the films to explore themes of love and the passage of time in a meaningful way.

### **The Answer Must be in the Attempt, Right?**

The capital of Austria, Vienna, has a long history of studio productions dating back to the silent and early sound eras. The foundation for a flourishing film industry was built by firms like Vita Film and Sascha-Filmindustrie between the 1930s and 1950s. Even while Vienna does not produce as much film these days as it did in the past few decades, the city nevertheless produces some exceptionally good films and remarkable actors. Vienna has been an important location in a number of contemporary films, even before Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*, including, Nicolas Roeg's *Bad Timing* (1980), and John Glen's *James Bond: The Living Daylights* (1987). *Before Sunrise* uses the city of Vienna as a backdrop to depict the spontaneous journey of two characters, reflecting on the urban experience and the act of walking as a form of personal and social exploration. The

purpose of cinematic images of walking is to investigate the manner in which they fulfil a cinematic function in the representation of mental, psychological, and physical spaces (21). The *flâneur* here is reimagined as a postmodern wanderer, engaging with the city's architecture, spaces, and metaphors, ultimately creating a narrative that intertwines the physical journey with a deeper existential inquiry. While Hollywood films have generally avoided getting into the concept of *flâneur*, which is typically linked to urban experiences in everyday life, *Before Sunrise* offers a glimpse into contemporary *flâneur* culture by centering on the mundane routines of a young couple who decided to travel incidentally in the middle of Europe (22). The film is likened to a Cubist rendition of falling in love, suggesting that it presents this experience from multiple perspectives, much like how Cubist art shows multiple viewpoints of a subject simultaneously. The film captures the essence of falling in love through a series of conversations and encounters as the characters walk around Vienna.



**Figure 1:** The First Meeting in the Train Scene (23). (A) Jesse Initiates the Conversation with Céline, (B) Céline is listening to Jesse

The film the narrative structure undergoes a significant transformation when Jesse convinces Céline to disembark from the train. Initially, the film employs a shot-reverse-shot technique (Figure 1), utilizing alternating single shots of the protagonists as they engage in conversation, reflective of their initial uncertainty about one another. As their conversation progresses, however, Linklater subtly incorporates the back of the listener's head into the frame (Figure 1), signifying a gradual shift towards more intimate double shots. This technique foreshadows the change in cinematographic style that occurs once they step off the train. Wood observes that Linklater's extended takes—usually including a

static camera or movement dictated by the actors' actions rather than the camera—affords the actors freedom, enabling spontaneity (24). The moment Jesse and Céline begin exploring Vienna together, the film transitions predominantly to double shots. Close-ups become rare, and the urban environment of Vienna itself emerges as a vital character within the narrative. This shift illustrates the couple's evolving relationship and growing comfort with each other. The film occasionally reverts to shot-reverse-shot during moments of introspective dialogue where Jesse and Céline explore their divergent worldviews, often leading to respectful disagreements. The actors perform in real time, without cuts, pauses, or accelerations,



allowing us to join them through their experiences as if we were their invisible travel companions. As they discuss love, philosophy, and the passage of time, the urban landscape becomes a silent yet influential character in their interactions. Long takes are inherently poetic; they meander and undulate, progress gradually, and provide viewers

an unexpectedly profound experience, irrespective of the context (25). The ebb and flow of the city seep into their dialogue, shaping the rhythm and tone of their exchanges. As aptly expressed, “It was simple. And that is why it was real,” encapsulates the authenticity and simplicity embedded in their dialogue (18).



(A)

(B)

**Figure 2:** In the Streets of Vienna Scene (23). (A) Céline Takes a Seat to Listen to Jesse, (B) Jesse Opens up to Céline

A notable instance of this occurs during a scene where, after a tracking shot through Vienna’s streets, Jesse takes a seat. Here (Figure 2), Jesse exhibits vulnerability, shedding his facade of a jaded cynic to reveal his true nature as a hopeless romantic. In his monologue, he questions the value of romanticism and whether a pragmatic, self-improvement-focused approach might be more fulfilling than the idealism that led him to Europe and ultimately to a failed relationship. This moment foreshadows Jesse’s character arc throughout the trilogy, where his fear of ending up in a passionless marriage materializes despite his success as a writer and the complexities of his relationships, particularly with his teenage son following his decision to be with Céline in *Before Sunset*. Céline’s response to Jesse encapsulates the trilogy’s core idea:

“I believe if there’s any kind of God it wouldn’t be in any of us, not you or me but just this little space in between. If there’s any kind of magic in this world it must be in the attempt of understanding someone sharing something. I know, it’s almost impossible to succeed but who cares really? The answer must be in the attempt.” (23)

This sentiment reflects the essence of their relationship. After that, there is a pause that both Céline and Jesse appear to take pleasure in. It is also significant that Jesse’s gaze is telling at the end of the interaction; with Céline’s remark, the substance of the dialogue has run its course to

fulfillment in the sense that Dewey believes aesthetic experience is characterized (26). This is also a highly aesthetic moment in the sense that it is a moment of bonding with one another through discussion. When examining the *Before* trilogy as a whole, one can observe an evolution of life stages. The first film, *Before Sunrise*, is an attempt at understanding and connecting between two strangers. The films focus on the process of connecting and understanding each other, suggesting that the magic lies in the process itself, not necessarily in its success. This chance encounter imbues the narrative with excitement and suspense. The idea that the attempt to connect is what truly matters reflects a broader philosophical stance on relationships and human interaction. Nine years later, *Before Sunset* revisits Jesse and Céline, capturing the essence of reconnection at the Shakespeare and company. The original Shakespeare & Company bookstore, owned by Sylvia Beach, was a frequent haunt of James Joyce, who’s *Ulysses* was published under its imprint (26). *Before Sunrise* takes place on Blooms day, June 16th, a date associated with *Ulysses* and the original script included references to John Huston’s film adaptation of Joyce’s *The Dead*. Both films hinge on serendipitous meetings, lending them a sense of unpredictability and immediacy. Jesse’s reflection during his book reading further elaborates on this theme:

“But my life, from my own point of view, has been full of drama, right? And so, I thought if I could write a book that could capture what it’s like to really meet somebody. One of the exciting things that’s ever happened to me is, to meet somebody and make that connection. And if I could make that valuable, you know, to capture that... anyway, that was the attempt...” (27)

His attempt to capture the essence of this connection in his book *This Time* mirrors Céline’s belief in the importance of the attempt to understand and share with another person. Their relationship, built on moments of genuine connection and shared understanding, emphasizes the value of the journey rather than the destination. The trilogy, through their evolving interactions, showcases that the true magic and fulfillment come from the continuous effort to connect, understand, and share with another person. The trilogy represents Jesse and Céline’s attempt — and Mr. Linklater’s — to control the flow of experience, to find meaning (28). When Jesse first sees Céline after nine years, he utters the phrase at the book reading “And it’s obvious to him that time is a lie” (27). This suggests that love transcends time and that their emotional connection remains strong, despite the physical distance and the passage of years. The statement can also be interpreted as a philosophical reflection on the nature of reality and the illusion of control we have over our lives. Time, like many other aspects of reality, may be beyond our grasp. In his Hollywood debut, *Sunrise* (1927), Murnau pioneered a new approach to camera movement, revolutionizing the use of dolly shots and reestablishing mobile framing as a conventional technique (29). By experimenting with various dollies, Murnau created innovative point-of-view shots, allowing the camera to embody the character’s perspective and immerse the viewer in their gaze (21). A particularly memorable example is the tracking shot of the male lead walking through a marsh for a minute and a half in length. While both directors share a commitment to innovative camera work, their overall styles differ. Murnau’s films often have a more expressionistic and stylized quality, while Linklater’s work tends to be more naturalistic and grounded in reality. The cinematography, particularly the use of tight, narrow Viennese streets, visually reinforces this theme. The film’s transitions from shot-reverse-

shot to medium-wide shots highlight moments of genuine connection between Jesse and Céline, emphasizing the importance of their shared experiences within the city’s labyrinthine alleys. This imagery symbolizes the “little space in between” that Céline references, suggesting that true understanding and connection are found within the shared, often ephemeral moments of their journey. Over time, directors have honed the Steadicam’s potential as a narrative tool, employing it to capture the dynamic nature of conversation and create a sense of movement and fluidity. Linklater, in particular, has mastered the use of the Steadicam for peripatetic dialogues, allowing him to seamlessly blend conversation with exploration (21). As famously said, “To stroll is to vegetate, to *flâneur* is to live” (30). This sentiment is encapsulated in Jesse and Céline when they wander through the streets, engaging in deep conversations and immersing themselves in the urban landscape, they not only discover more about each other but also reflect on their own desires, fears, and personal growth (31). Contrastingly, *Before Midnight* diverges from this formula by presenting a narrative grounded in the quotidian realities of Jesse and Céline’s lives together as a couple with twin daughters, residing in Paris. The trilogy, while centred on fervent romance, chance, and fate, also appropriately explores the subsequent aspects: the ordinariness and reality of not only a romantic relationship but ultimately a marital one (32). These themes come a full circle in the final installment.

#### **From Idealism to Reality in *Before Midnight***

The *Before* trilogy is set within this historical reality and offers a rich, comedic perspective on the continent’s social and geopolitical landscape. While the three films are set within a shared European context, the distinct characteristics of each location and the unique times in which their respective events occur necessitate individual analysis. Linklater’s intention was to uncover the relational aspects of life and find the true identities of two individuals who initially shared complete anonymity and placing Jesse and Céline in foreign countries was a deliberate choice made by the director, as traveling often fosters openness to experiences beyond one’s usual realm (33). *Before Midnight* heavily references Rossellini’s *Journey to Italy*, which is itself loosely based on *The Dead*. Interestingly, Joyce once translated Gerhart



Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (*Before Sunrise*, 1932) and also alludes to this work in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The filmmakers chose Greece as the setting for their third film, a country profoundly impacted by the economic crisis and emblematic, along with Spain and Italy, of the significant divide between Northern and Southern Europe. Over the eighteen years since the first film, the social landscape has transformed, and the latest developments have further distanced it from the already tenuous optimism of the first narrative. Aesthetic and cultural practices are uniquely influenced by the evolving perceptions of space and time because they involve crafting spatial representations and artifacts from the ongoing flow of human experience as they consistently mediate between the states of Being and Becoming (34). *Before Midnight* catches up with them on the cusp of middle-aged domesticity, in medias res, as they go about the business of living (35). As the couple explores the southern Peloponnese, Linklater, Delpy, and Hawke craft a rich and evocative comic space by deeply engaging with the authentic locations and demonstrating a remarkable alertness of their historical, social, and cultural contexts, both past and present. The geographical setting of *Before Midnight* embodies a collection of trajectories and an ongoing series of micro-histories that provide significant insights into the history of modern Greece and the broader European continent. This context may ultimately shed light on both the aspiration for and the challenges of achieving a pan-European project at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Joy and laughter are evident in a space which is made up of a multitude of individual and communal stories, crucially including, as will be seen, those that tell of transnational encounters, intercultural alliances, and mixed social groups as well as individuals (36). Throughout the film, viewers are invited to perceive this transnational comic space as a source of joy, while still acknowledging its numerous issues and contradictions. Europe was undergoing what seemed to be an era of transformation in the early 1990s. The social space turned comic space in the *Before* trilogy is Europe. Far from a static reality, Europe was, in the eighteen years' interval between the releases of the three films, characterized by rapid change and fiercely contradictory impulses and discourses, the meeting point of a plurality of stories (36). A neo-

realist reference subtly emerges in the backdrop of Céline and Jesse's rising tension in *Before Midnight* (26). This time, it's a nod to Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954), which depicts the unraveling of a marriage in a scenic Mediterranean setting. The transformation in their relationship dynamics is evident: Jesse and Céline, who once speculated on each other's thoughts, now engage in conversations reflecting deep familiarity. Their exchanges have evolved from philosophical musings to discussions rooted in past mistakes, daily struggles, and future considerations, such as the well-being of Jesse's son from a previous marriage and Céline's career prospects. These discussions often lead to conflicts, showcasing their ability to reconcile and maintain their bond despite challenges. *Before Midnight* retains the authenticity and naturalness that define the trilogy. The trilogy and its dialogues offer an insightful exploration of how to facilitate interaction between two individuals, initially strangers, evolving into a genuine familiarity and closeness, both physically and emotionally (18). The ideas, settings, and emotions encompass a broad spectrum, yielding an engrossing film. Rather than romanticizing the conclusion of their story, it presents a nuanced portrayal of a mature relationship, complete with its imperfections and reconciliations. This approach ensures that the film remains true to the trilogy's core themes, providing a realistic depiction of love's evolution over time. *Before Midnight* can be simply put as "walking, driving and an inconclusive attempt at sex" (28). In the course of their stroll towards the beach, Jesse and Céline stumble upon a 13th-century Byzantine chapel adorned with ancient frescoes spanning the walls. The sunny, quiet places that Céline and Jesse visit are the result of a cacophony of voices from the past (36). Jesse informs Céline that the chapel is dedicated to Saint Odilia, known as the patron saint of eyesight. Ironically, many of the figures depicted in the frescoes have had their eyes scratched out, an act Jesse attributes to the Turks, who allegedly defaced the images to show disrespect. The meandering nature of *flâneur* allows for the exploration of the cities on a deeper level, revealing layers of history, culture, and architecture. Reflecting on this scene, Jesse draws a parallel to Japanese monks and their practice of painting with water on hot rocks. The ephemeral nature of this art form resonates deeply

with Jesse, as it underscores the idea that the essence of creation lies not in the final product but in the process itself—a concept rooted in impermanence and philosophical depth. This theme of valuing the journey over the destination permeates throughout the trilogy. Linklater’s cinematic opus exemplifies the potency of conversation in narrative construction. His proficiency is apparent in the fluidity of Jesse and Céline’s dialogues, which create an authentic atmosphere that allows spectators to feel like clandestine observers of a genuine interaction. *Before Midnight* seems more closely aligned with Jesse than Céline. For instance, when they fight and Céline storms out of the hotel room the camera stays with Jesse, not Céline. The spectators don’t see Céline’s emotional turmoil. Instead, we are invited to take up Jesse’s perspective in a series of point-of-view shots. The final half-hour, during which the relationship faces challenges, does not seek to dismantle the couple. Instead, it embraces the relationship’s complexity and ambiguity, effectively capturing love in its duration. The ending presents a fresh start, highlighting the couple’s capacity to perpetually reset their story, blending the eternal promise of a happy ending with the fervor of their initial meeting throughout the narrative’s course. Maybe *Before Midnight* is the closest thing to what life is (37). The *Before*

trilogy unfolds as a series of psycho-geographic journeys, with the characters traversing landscapes that serve as both backdrops and emotional mirrors. From the fleeting vistas of a train journey to the timeless allure of the Seine and the ancient echoes of Greece, these settings underscore the passage of time and the complexities of human connection. However, this lyrical exploration of place and emotion abruptly shifts in *Before Midnight* with a jarring confrontation in a sterile hotel room. The film’s final act is a stark departure from the previous films’ fluid movements, as the characters’ carefully constructed facade of harmony shatters into a tempestuous display of conflict. Towards the end of the movie, a conflict arises resulting in a series of arguments. However, the manner in which they manage their conflict is commendable and essential for the preservation of the relationship as this approach deepens intimacy and compels both parties to discuss the root of their anger and the source of their pain, which leads to mutual support and understanding and the resolution of the issue (38). In a sense, it conveys to the audience that disagreements can be advantageous and, in certain instances, even essential for the purpose of fostering a deeper understanding of our partners and solidifying our relationships.



**Figure 3:** The Ending Scene (17)

The final scene of *Before Midnight* is a delicate balance of conflict and reconciliation. After a tumultuous argument in their hotel room, Jesse and Céline find themselves on a café overlooking the sea (Figure 3). The scene is marked by a playful and somewhat surreal dynamic. Jesse adopts the persona of Céline’s future self, claiming to be a time traveler sent to offer advice. Initially, Céline is

resistant, but she gradually engages with the playful banter. This light-hearted exchange serves as a temporary respite from their earlier conflict. It allows them to re-establish a connection, albeit a playful one, and offers a glimmer of hope for their relationship. The film concludes with Céline’s response to Jesse’s time-traveling act, “Well, it must have been one hell of a night we’re about to

have” (17). It suggests a potential for renewed passion and intimacy between the characters. The film’s ending, while ambiguous, suggests a tentative reconciliation. It’s recognition that their relationship is far from perfect, but it’s also a testament to their enduring connection. It is evident when Jesse says, “If you want true love, then this is it. This is real life. It’s not perfect, but it’s real” (17). This final film eschews the spontaneous thrills of the previous films, focusing instead on the complexities of sustained intimacy and daily life. The trilogy’s conclusion, with Jesse’s attempt to reconcile with Céline through poetry, reiterates the central message: the value lies in the continuous attempt to understand and connect.

## Conclusion

Richard Linklater’s *Before* trilogy stands as a testament to the power of cinema to capture the complexities of human experience. By prioritizing authenticity, spontaneity, and the exploration of ordinary life, the films offer a refreshing departure from conventional romantic narratives. The trilogy’s emphasis on dialogue and character development, coupled with its use of real-world locations, creates a sense of intimacy and realism that resonates deeply with audiences. Through careful examination, this research has illuminated the ways in which Linklater’s cinematic approach contributes to a unique understanding of love, time, and place. The research highlights the importance of both geographical and emotional topography in the movie as this approach underscores Linklater’s capacity to utilize physical environments to enrich the narrative and intensify the characters’ emotional trajectories. This study provides a detailed examination of Linklater’s filmmaking technique in the *Before* trilogy, emphasising the importance of emotional cartography, and the director’s dedication to realism and authenticity. This research enhances the discourse surrounding Linklater’s unique style and his capacity to produce profoundly relevant and emotionally compelling films. The research explores how the trilogy’s exploration of European cities – Vienna, Austria; Paris, France and Peloponnese, Greece – reveals how these urban landscapes serve as both backdrops and active participants in the characters’ emotional journeys. Linklater creates a cinematic world that feels both intimately personal and universally relatable. Furthermore, the research primarily focuses on

the textual analysis of the films, with limited exploration of audience reception and interpretation. A more comprehensive study could incorporate audience surveys or focus groups to gain insights into how viewers experience and interpret the films. Future research could also explore the potential impact of gender and cultural background on audience interpretations of the trilogy.

## Abbreviation

Nil.

## Acknowledgment

The authors wish to express that there are no specific acknowledgments for this research.

## Author Contributions

Abisha Jasmine Suganthy S: Responsible for conceptualization of the study and the primary manuscript writing, V. Karunanithi: Contributed through critical review and editing.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no apparent or actual conflicts of interest.

## Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

## Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant or financial support.

## References

1. Epstein J. *Bonjour cinéma*. Siren Publishing. 1921; 276.
2. Heidegger M. *A origem da obra de arte*. Lisboa: Edições 70. 1992; 44.
3. Deleuze G, Guattari F. *What is Philosophy?* London; New York: Verso. 1994;170.
4. Ranciere J. *Intervals of Cinema*. S.L.: Verso. 2014;194.
5. Goble B. *A Beginner’s Guide to Richard Linklater*. Consequence. 2017. <https://consequence.net/2017/11/a-beginners-guide-to-richard-linklater/>
6. Reynolds S. *Making Bricks: A Study on Films of Richard Linklater*. Medium. 2017 March 19. <https://medium.com/@renwald12/making-bricks-a-study-on-films-of-richard-linklater-c1f69cbbe14a>
7. Topography. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topography#Etymology>
8. Francis M. *How The Before Trilogy Gave Me A New Definition of Love*. 2023. <https://www.filmcompanion.in/readers-articles/before-movies-series-sunrise-sunset-midnight-how-the-before-trilogy-gave-me-a-new->

- definition-of-love-richard-linklater-ethan-hawke-julie-delpy
9. Sanders M. Richard Linklater's "Before" Series: Time, Duration, and Memory. Carleton University Ottawa, Ontario. 2016.  
<https://repository.library.carleton.ca/downloads/0r967455w>
  10. Linklater R. Richard Linklater by David T Johnson. University of Illinois Press. 2012;138.  
<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2012/book-reviews/richard-linklater-by-david-t-johnson/>
  11. On cinema and walking. Moving Image Artists. 2020.  
<https://movingimageartists.co.uk/2020/02/22/article-on-cinema-and-walking/>
  12. Thompson K, Bordwell D. Film History: An Introduction. McGraw-Hill Companies. 2010; 322-5.
  13. Levy E. Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film. New York: New York Univ Press. 1999;273.
  14. Benjamin W. The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press. 2006;32-46.
  15. Dialogue as a Driving Force: Writing Tips Inspired by "Before Sunrise". A.I. in Screen Trade. 2023.  
<https://aiinscreentrade.com/2023/11/21/dialogue-as-a-driving-force-writing-tips-inspired-by-before-sunrise/>
  16. Phillips A, Vincendeau G. Paris in the Cinema. Bloomsbury Publishing. 2018;156.
  17. Before Midnight [film]. Directed by: Richard Linklater. Sony Pictures Classics, Miracle Film Distribution. 2013.  
[https://www.primevideo.com/detail/ORMLEUTMT19714DEARRK0KVJE0/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/ORMLEUTMT19714DEARRK0KVJE0/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r)
  18. Ramachandran S. Analyzing Conversations with Respect to Richard Linklater's 'Before Sunrise'. 2011 Aug 5.  
[https://issuu.com/sandhyaramachandran/docs/dissertation\\_study](https://issuu.com/sandhyaramachandran/docs/dissertation_study)
  19. Suman. Can Travel Replace Therapy? Nomadic Shoes. 2020.  
<https://nomadicshoes.com/responsible-travel/can-travel-replace-therapy/>
  20. Bazin A. What Is cinema? Berkeley: University of California Press. 2005;41-52.
  21. Tucker TD. Peripatetic Frame: Images of Walking in Film. Edinburgh University Press. 2020;98-129.
  22. Ülkeryıldız E, Engür EC, Yıldız D. Understanding Cinemantics through Spatio-temporal Meta-codes in a Postmodern Urban Flâneur Diary: The Case of 'Before Sunrise'. of the book: Contemporary Approaches in Urbanism and Heritage Studies. Aug19;107-17.  
<https://doi.org/10.38027/N10ICCAUA2021236>.
  23. Before Sunrise [film]. Directed by: Richard Linklater. Warner Bros., Columbia Pictures. 1995.  
[https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0G3YJN30V5L8C82IE13QG7RZDK/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0G3YJN30V5L8C82IE13QG7RZDK/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r)
  24. Wood R. Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998;318-35.
  25. Ghosh A. Analysis of Single-Shot and Long-Take Filmmaking: Its Evolution, Technique, Mise-en-scène, and Impact on the Viewer. Indian Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism. 2022 Dec 30;2(2):4-12.
  26. Maes H, Schaubroeck K. Before Sunrise, Before Sunset, Before Midnight: A Philosophical Exploration. Google Books. Routledge. 2021;119-37.  
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=yXQhEAAAQB-AJ&pg=PT167&lpq=PT167&dq=%E2%80%9CWe+are+everything+and+we+are+nothing.+It+is+just+the+big+paradox+of+being+alive.+We%E2%80%99re+tiny+details>
  27. Before Sunset [film]. Directed by: Richard Linklater. Warner Bros. 2004.  
[https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0R5NIGUFNVJ9RCYO62A9R6BH2W/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0R5NIGUFNVJ9RCYO62A9R6BH2W/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r)
  28. Scott AO. Nine Years Later, Once More. The New York Times. 2013 May 23.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/movies/before-midnight-with-julie-delpy-and-ethan-hawke.html?searchResultPosition=2>
  29. Schrader P. Game Changers: Camera Movement. Film Comment. 2015.  
<https://www.filmcomment.com/article/game-changers-camera-movement/>
  30. Balzac H de. Physiologie du mariage. Gallimard Education. 1950; 11.
  31. Aroles J, Küpers W. Flânerie as a methodological practice for explorative re-search in digital worlds. Culture and Organization. 2022 Feb 22;28(5):398-411.
  32. Penny L. The Space In-Between: Richard Linklater's Before Trilogy. Medium. 2017.  
<https://medium.com/@itsmelukepenny/the-space-in-between-richard-linklaters-before-trilogy-cb44c7348362>
  33. Donahue C. Love in the Aftermath. Film Threat. 1995; 21(2).  
<https://filmthreat.com/uncategorized/film-threat-april-1995-number-21-vol-2/>
  34. Harvey D. The Condition of Postmodernity. Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell. 1989;201-26.
  35. Lim D. The Before Trilogy: Time Regained. The Criterion Collection. 2017 Mar 1.  
<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4445-the-before-trilogy-time-regained>
  36. Deleyto C. Stories So Far: Romantic Comedy and/as Space in Before Midnight. In: ReFocus: the Films of Richard Linklater. Edinburgh University Press. 2024;139.
  37. Delpy J. We Are Everything and We Are Nothing. Aesthetics for Birds. 2020.  
<https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2020/10/07/interview-with-actor-filmmaker-julie-delpy/>
  38. Gama D. Why The Before Trilogy by Richard Linklater is The Most Realistic Portrayal of True Romance. Medium. 2022.  
<https://danielamgama.medium.com/why-the-before-trilogy-by-richard-linklater-is-the-most-realistic-portrayal-of-true-romance-30a1bcbcebeb>