CHAPTER 8

Stories So Far: Romantic Comedy and/as Space in *Before Midnight*

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In one of the most often quoted lines from Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy—*Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013)—Céline (Julie Delpy) locates God in "the little space in between" people. The dialogue with Jesse (Ethan Hawke) in which this line appears takes place in Vienna when they first meet in *Before Sunrise*. For Céline, this is an intimate space, the glue that brings the bodies and souls of people together. From a generic perspective, in the *Before* trilogy, this "little space" seems to evoke romantic comedy, the genre of intimate protocols and short distances. But, in a different sense, this space is not so little: it expands and contracts in major ways in the course of the eighteen years that the story lasts. It is a transnational space that comprises the cities of Vienna and Paris and the region of Messenia in the Peloponnese. It includes also all the places in which the characters have lived or visited (some mentioned, some not) at least in the two nine-year intervals between the films, if not beyond them: the trilogy sparks this particular kind of imagination in spectators, who feel compelled to fill in the gaps between the three brief moments in the lives of the characters depicted by the films. In other words, Céline's "space in between" is both intimate and transnational—in part, intimate because transnational. In this chapter, I would like to explore this intimate/transnational space in the third of the films, *Before Midnight* from the comic perspective offered by the trilogy and this film in particular.

The very prominent different national origins of the lovers in the trilogy—Céline French, Jesse American—have, surprisingly, gone practically unmentioned in the abundant scholarship on the films. It is as if critics had implicitly agreed on the irrelevance of this difference—reluctant, perhaps, to admit that such things matter anymore in a supposedly borderless world. However, we do not live in a borderless world and borders as well as national differences

continue to matter. If anything, as Cooper and Rumford affirm, borders proliferate today more than ever before.[1] In this chapter, therefore, I want to stress the narrative importance of the transnational couple—not primarily through human interaction but rather through an exploration of the spaces in which their relationship develops. These spaces are, as we shall see, the result of a cinematic rendering of the geographical and social spaces in which the story is set: Vienna, Paris, the southern Peloponnese. As a whole, the trilogy offers a remarkably accurate if subtle perspective on Europe and the process of transnational European integration in the eighteen years and three decades that the films span: from the 1990s to the 2010s. It could be argued that the process of European integration and its ups and downs in the three decades—from early ambitions of progress toward political union, through subsequent, often failed, attempts at bringing it to fruition, to the growing tide of nationalist retrenchment and magnification of internal and external difference—are the trilogy's deep, if almost invisible, structuring principle. The trilogy exists in this historical reality and develops a rich, comic perspective on the continent's social and geopolitical space. While the three films share a common European space, the specificities of the three places and times in which their respective actions happen are such that they demand individual consideration. For this reason, this chapter will focus only on the third instalment, *Before Midnight*, and on the intersection between social space and comic perspective, one that encompasses the little space of romantic comedy but also, as will be seen, a larger comic space. After a brief theoretical discussion of this intersection and its particular manifestation in the film, I first explore the production of the southern Peloponnese as cinematic and transnational space offered by the film and then examine its comic perspective. Taking issue with those interpretations of the movie that consider it more melodrama than comedy, I focus on Céline and her relation with space as a conduit for the film's comedy and on Delpy's performance in three specific scenes. Finally, the chapter ponders on the significance of a cultural text that looks at the recent history of Europe through a comic lens.

THE COMIC PERSPECTIVE AND THE SOCIAL SPACE

Classical comic theory developed along two lines: the Aristotelian tradition that inscribed comedy within the realm of the social and described its goal as corrective, and early twentieth-century anthropological speculations on the origins of the genre in fertility rituals and seasonal celebrations. Once the ritual turned into theatrical performance and then into narrative, it would produce, among other manifestations, Old and New Greek comedy and, many centuries later, Shakespearean and romantic comedy. What transpired from this history was

not only a series of generic clusters but also a particular way of looking at the world—a "comic view," with humor, laughter, *eros*, resilience, the impulse of survival and the renewal of life as its main characteristics. In recent film the-ory, Andrew Horton and Joanna Rapf include variants of these two trajectories among their six "observations" on the genre: comedy as a way of looking at the universe and as "one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself."[2] These two insights bring together the location of comedy in the realm of the social and the comic as a particular perspective on the world.

In one of the first books on film comedy, Gerald Mast had argued that, apart from "comic plots," what characterizes the genre is a "comic climate," through which "an artist builds signs into a work to let us know that he considers it a comedy and wishes us to take it as such."[3] Among these signs, he lists certain types of characters, comic dialogue, and cinematic techniques of mise-en-scène, framing, editing, and performance. He concludes that what may not be a comic plot in itself can be turned into comedy through the cinematic articulation of this comic climate. This notion helps Mast to explain why the same story can produce a relentless melodrama in Eric von Stroheim's film version of *The Merry Widow* (1925) and a musical comedy in Lubitsch's 1934 adaptation of the original operetta.[4] In a previous work, I have posited a similar concept as one of the central elements of romantic comedy: the comic space of the genre. Drawing on Northrop Frye, Deborah Thomas, and others, and starting from the comic worlds of Shakespearean comedy and its Renaissance predecessors, I have defined the space of romantic comedy as a magic space of transformation that allows intimate desires to be expressed in a less inhibited way than in the social space of everyday relationships, one that protects characters from social pressures and repression and may help them mature.[5]

The comic space is one of the ways through which comic texts negotiate a culture's conversation with itself. This conversation is carried out precisely through the deployment of a magic space in which anything can happen, where love, but also friendship and sociability, can flourish and where a comic perspective on the world around us is the only requirement. This transformation of social into comic space tells us as much about the society and the historical time in which the text exists as about the text itself. We may read the comic space as a way to understand the social space but also as a way to remember, more generally, that every story is susceptible to a comic angle and, further, that our grasp of our place in society and history would be incomplete without it. (To illustrate with a brief example, *Trouble in Paradise* [Ernst Lubitsch, 1932] transforms a social space of stifling sexual protocols and inhibitions and, secondarily, social unrest as a consequence of the financial crisis of the early 1930s into a magic space in which desire, if subject to its own contradictions and crises, successfully overcomes social repressions, which are duly (and hilariously) ridiculed. The film both enters in conversation with the social debates of its time and

insists that a comic lens such as the one it applies to its view of society is essential not only because social critique is important for a society to progress but also because our lives would be sadly incomplete without the capacity to laugh at the world around us.)

This comic space does not erase the dramas, conflicts, and grim realities of the world, and is thus firmly rooted in everyday experience, but it entreats characters and spectators to find comedy and appreciate its value in the midst of those grim realities. Classical theorists have tried to describe this comic principle in various ways, from the expression of the human capacity to endure, to resist, and to keep going to the insistence to make game of "serious" life.[6] It is present in Freud's view of humor as a victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability and defiance of the world,[7] and is also behind Horton and Rapf's assertion that in the world of comedy, nothing is sacred and nothing human is rejected.[8] Comedy is celebratory, anarchic, and iconoclastic. Because it demands our right to laugh at everything and find joy in life even against all odds, Bakhtin's description of medieval carnival continues to be one of its most comprehensive expressions: a time of the year in which everything is permitted, hierarchies are upended, the low becomes high and the high low, a moment in which people laugh at everybody and everything, with a laughter that is both satirical and festive. Carnival occurs on the border between art and life, a form of play that becomes a way of life.[9] The combination of celebration of life and defiance of death, of iconoclasm and joy, is the guiding principle in the construction of the comic space and of comedy's approach to the social world. In *Before Midnight*, we find joy and laughter 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. For the duration of the film, spectators are asked to look at this transnational comic space as joyful, without denying its many problems and contradictions.

My focus on space in the analysis of comedy can be framed within the more general notion of the spatiality of cinema. As Mark Shiel suggests, film is more a spatial than a textual system, by which he means that the deployment of space is more important than the narrative. As such it is particularly adept at illuminating the dynamics of lived spaces.[10] The spatiality of romantic comedy is part of this spatial turn that the cinema has shared in recent times with other disciplines, including geography, philosophy, art history, and literary studies. In spatial theory, space is not a backdrop for human action but something produced by humans. Most influentially, Henri Lefebvre sees space as socially produced through both discourse and social practices.[11] For her part, geographer Doreen Massey laments the split between space and time that in the course of the twentieth century relegated the former to synchrony. Space is often seen as immovable whereas time lasts, flows, changes. She argues

that space and time are inseparable. Space is as mobile and subject to constant change as time: never fixed but constantly flowing. The commuter that looks from the train window at the same place every day does not see exactly what they saw the day before. When we travel, we do not only travel through space but also across earlier trajectories and ongoing stories. Places constantly change. For example, adults' dreams of returning home to find the location of their child-hood are illusory.[12] She describes space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far and a multiplicity of durations.[13] We perceive space through stories and our under-standing of a place is the aggregate of all the stories that have occurred in and have been told about that place. With this in mind, I will argue that cinematic space—both in the sense of the fictional or fictionalized location in which the characters are placed and of its formal construction—is, as Antoine Gaudin argues, a dynamic phenomenon produced by the film and one that is located in history.[14] Both in its changeability and its constructedness, cinematic space is no different from social space.

Therefore, the social space that comedy transforms into a comic space is not only constructed through social practices and discourse but also through time and history. It is the sum total of the stories associated with a particular place. These previous stories are incorporated into a dynamic cinematic space, however indirectly or invisibly. When a comic text transforms a social space, it is contributing a comic view of that space and prompting spectators to add the necessary comic perspective to their understanding of it. That is, comedy offers an interpretation of the social world, a social world which exists in real places. As John Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel argue for film in general, part of the power of comedy lies in its explanatory power of real places, their history and the stories that make up what those places are.[15]

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. In the early 1990s, Europe was in the throes of what appeared to be an epochal transformation. As such it became part of the space of *Before Sunrise*. Since then, from their small place in culture, the three films have traced, in often indirect ways, a history of vigorous hopes and growing frustrations. Beyond the interpersonal relationship they narrate, the three stories are transnational stories, created within the context of the uneven process of European integration, and participating in what Randall Halle has called a transnationalization of European culture.[16] The first two films are, in industrial terms, essentially U.S. products, while *Before Midnight* was produced by Faliro House, a Greek company that has participated in the production of both Greek and U.S. films. The three of them, although more directly in the case of *Midnight*, participate in this cultural process, while adding, through Jesse's presence, an American

perspective to a trans-European movement in which the cinema was, as Halle asserts, fully integrated.[17]

A transnational Europe becomes, then, the general space of the trilogy. As a result, the films do not only create a very distinct, if unstable, comic world but also cast their comic view on the idea of European integration and the series of crises and setbacks undergone by the continent during the eighteen years between the first and the third, and further into the future. In the next sections, the article explores some of the stories-so-far that are used as part of the construction of the comic space of *Before Midnight* and suggests the ways in which the film contributes, through its comic space, a comic view of Europe as the site of intense and sustained transnational mobilities.

WELCOME TO KARDAMYLI

The three films of the trilogy are set in locations where, as Maria San Filippo says, "history looms large."[18] The three show a sharp awareness of history in their construction of space but, I argue, it is their recent history as part of a changing European reality that is gradually brought to the forefront. The first two films had used Vienna and Paris to construct vivid comic spaces at two different stages in the transnationalization of European culture—early optimistic belief in greater political integration and turn-of-the-century setbacks—which provided an apt environment for the blossoming and re-awakening of transnational romantic desire between the protagonists. Given the conceit of two characters walking and talking under the intense scrutiny of the camera, the space around and beyond them could have receded into invisibility and irrelevance, yet Linklater often suggests otherwise. Most apparent are the two montage sequences, at the end of *Before Sunrise* and the beginning of *Before Sunset*, of the places visited by the characters, once they have become separated in the first film, and before they get together again in the second. Beyond more specific meanings about the desolation of Vienna once the lovers have gone their different ways and the hope in the tentative reunion of the couple in Paris, this is a direct warning to spectators not to ignore the centrality of space in the trilogy, a warning that is spelled out in *Before Sunrise* when Céline describes the painting by Georges Seurat "La voie ferrée" as a world in which the environment is stronger than the people, humans appear-ing to dissolve into space in his paintings.

In general terms, Linklater had, by the time of *Before Midnight*, developed a strong sense of space in his films. Critics have highlighted and described the director's realistic approach to cinematic representation, including the films of the trilogy, and have mentioned his use of "real" locations, the simplicity and transparency of his cinematic style, the recurrence of long takes, and the real-istic performances he elicits from his actors among other techniques as some of

the ways to implement this approach.[19] From *Slacker* (1990), Linklater's brand of 1990s "American" realism has been the organizing principle of his constructed spaces.[20] In the trilogy, these same formal strategies are also the tools through which the European spaces are imbued with a comic perspective. At the same time, the trilogy's depiction of space is, as in Massey's theory, closely linked with temporality. The spectators are ushered into the different European locations as Jesse and Céline walk through them and they are revealed to them and us in the course of their wanderings. In this, Linklater's creation of filmic space from the real places in which the films were shot reminds us of the role of the road in the paintings of Paul Cézanne, in whose landscapes the bend of the road constantly alters our point of view and heralds the irruption of the new.[21] In *Before Midnight*, as the couple discover the southern Peloponnese, like Cézanne, from the road, Linklater, Delpy, and Hawke create a rich and evocative comic space through a deep engagement with the real places where the story is located and a remarkable alertness to their historical, social, and cultural realities, both past and present.

By now familiar with the presence of transnational Europe at a crucial period of its history and its bearing on the romantic developments in the ongoing relationship, we come to *Before Midnight*. In the summer of 2012, when the film is set, things have changed in the fictional world: the brief summertime encounters in European capitals of the previous two instalments have given way to a stable relationship and a family. The transnational romance which in the two previous films had produced cliffhanger endings rather than serious conflicts—Will they meet again in six months? Will he miss his flight back to the U.S.?—is now threatened by transnational realities. Living in Paris, Jesse has been separated from his son Hank (Seamus Davey-Fitzpatrick), who lives in Chicago with his mother and only sees his father during the holidays, and he begins to find the separation unbearable. In the course of the film, this brings Jesse and Céline to the verge of breakup. In keeping with the trilogy's open endings, the film leaves the couple's conflict unresolved. In the meantime, the dream of Europe as a geopolitical reality in which borders would work as sites of encounter and exchange rather than exclusion and repression has suffered serious blows: first the series of national resistances culminating in the failure of the European Constitution to be implemented in 2005, and then the financial crisis of 2008 which, having originated elsewhere, hit the continent hard, with populist nationalisms on the rise and transnational aspirations on the retreat throughout the Union. The filmmakers set their third episode in Greece, the country that was most seriously affected by the economic crisis and that, together with Spain and Italy, came to epitomize the depth of the divide between North and South within the continent. The refugee crisis of 2015, again with Greece as its epicenter, intensified the North/South chasm and dampened the dream of transborder tolerance. Thus, the transnational couple

in crisis is thrown right in the middle of one of the fault lines of the transnational European project.[22] The social space has changed in eighteen years and the most recent stories that have accumulated have brought it further away from the already fragile optimism of the first film.

Jesse and his family have been invited to a writers' retreat in a house in the southern Peloponnese. For the central part of the narrative Linklater breaks the pattern established in the two previous films and in the long initial scene of this one, when, in the central section of the movie, Céline and Jesse share an important segment of the story with other characters. These are the people staying in the house in what seems to be the last day of Céline's and Jesse's holiday. They are the host, a British writer called Patrick (Walter Lassally), married couple Ariadni (Athina Rachel Tsangari) and Stefanos (Panos Koronis), Patrick's friend Natalia (Xenia Kalogeropoulou), his grandson Achilleas (Yiannis Papadopoulos), and the latter's partner, French actor Anna (Ariane Labed). The ebullience and extroverted behavior of these characters, as seen particularly during the dinner scene but also in previous conversations between the men in the garden and the women in the kitchen, transcend realism and become part of the process of transformation of the social space into a comic space. At the same time, the transnational make-up of this group is reinforced by extra-filmic elements that reinforce the credibility of the resulting comic space.

The central section of the film was shot in Kardamyli, in the Messenian Gulf, in the house of popular travel writer and ex-British Army Officer Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor, who had died the previous year. Born in London, Fermor traveled on foot from Holland to Constantinople, then settled in Greece, before joining the British Army and playing a central role in the abduction of a Nazi general in Crete, an episode that was made into the film *Ill Met by Moonlight* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1957). He then continued to travel around the world and, in his later years, lived between England and the Kardamyli house. The fictional host of the house, Patrick, is also a writer, played by first-time actor and celebrated British cinematographer Walter Lassally, who, among other accolades, had won the Academy Award for *Zorba the Greek* (1964). Born in Berlin, he moved to London as a boy, a refugee from Nazi Germany, and lived in Crete for the last two decades or so of his life. Athina Rachel Tsangari, who plays Ariadni, is a film director who had recently garnered some critical success in the festival circuit for her film *Attenberg* (2010) and had made her only previous acting appearance in *Slacker*. She was also co-producer and an important presence throughout the production of *Before Midnight*.[23] Panos Koronis, who plays her husband Stefanos, is an actor and director of commercials. He lived in Los Angeles for a long period of his life, where he was a theater director. He would appear again in Tsangari's next film as director, *Chevalier* (2015), also produced by Faliro House. Natalia is played by Xenia Kalogeropoulou, a celebrated stage actor in Greece, who trained and made her debut in London. Ariane Labed is a

French-Greek stage and screen actor, who spent her childhood between Greece, Germany, and France. She was the protagonist of *Attenberg*, in which she plays a young Greek woman and for which she received several awards. In *Before Midnight*, she is a French stage actor, who has played Perdita in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* at Epidavros.

Thus, the film features a transnational cast with a certain artistic pedigree and a location with transnational connotations. The action takes place in an atmosphere in which border crossings, particularly around Europe, are an everyday fact of life, various languages are casually used, and people are comfortable in a mixed social environment. The Greece embodied in these characters is very distant from that of the people demonstrating every day at Syntagma Square in Athens against the Greek and European authorities' handling of the financial crisis and its terrible consequences for the population at approximately the same time in which the film was conceived, shot, and released. By contrast, these are Europeans who appear to live in a social bubble while the crisis is raging outside and putting the European project in jeopardy. Despite being removed from the realities of discontent in the country, this is, however, a believable space. It is shot in real, recognizable locations, if relatively distant from the most popular tourist sites. We see the family drive from Kalamata Airport to the writers' retreat and then, in the evening, walk to a seaside town where they watch the sunset and check in at a hotel. The filmic space is made up of various localities in the Messenia region. These include the seaside towns of Kardamyli and Pylos, the small village of Platsa and the medieval fortification of Methoni, certainly not within walking distance of one another but—placed within an approximate 100-kilometer range—sharing a common history as part of a centuries-old single geographical reality, that of the southern Peloponnese.

Are Céline and Jesse at all aware of any of the stories-so-far that, following Massey, have gone into the creation of this space? Some of the filmmakers' comments suggest that, as part of the film's realism, they are. In the "Making of" documentary that accompanies the DVD of the film, Hawke mentions Eros, a password for love and desire. The god does not figure in the film, he says, because he does not need to: the whole movie is dominated by Eros, both because it is a film about love and because it takes place in Greece. "That's what Greece does to you," he concludes. Linklater relates this effect to the country's ancientness, which adds to the "little [. . .] paradise [the characters] find themselves in at the beginning."[24] Close analysis of some moments will suggest that, as the couple traverse the various spaces, they are aware of the stories they evoke, even if they do not voice their sense of growing enchantment at the place.

A brief account of the various locations the characters first drive and then walk through may reveal important slices of the region's fraught past and of the weight of history in their present realities. Kalamata is the port where the Franks disembarked at the beginning of the thirteenth century on their way

back from Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, eventually conquering most of the Peloponnese. The Mani peninsula, where Ariadni was born, was the destination where local Greeks kept retreating and fortifying themselves after various invasions, starting with the Slavs in the sixth century. The little chapel in Platsa stands for the impact of the three-and-a-half century long presence of the Ottoman Empire in the region but also represents the continuing religious conflicts between the Latin and the Orthodox churches in the medieval period and beyond. Methoni was for many centuries one of several Venetian strongholds and witness of the expansion of the Republic as a trading power and a political actor in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Ancient Pylos, as old as Mycenaean Greece, and as such mentioned in the *Iliad*, witnessed the medieval rule of the Franks, the Venetians, and the Ottomans, and, centuries later, became the site of the Battle of Navarino, where the Franco-British-Russian alliance defeated the Turco-Egyptian fleet in 1827, thus paving the way for the independence of modern Greece.[25]

Thus, the sunny, quiet places that Céline and Jesse visit are the result of a cacophony of voices from the past. These are stories of invasion and conquest, of transnational encounters and cultural exchanges: of the alleged purity of the Maniots, who sometimes claim a direct line with the ancient Spartans; of the Tzakones, probably the children of Slavic invaders and Greek women who remained in the peninsula long after their ancestors had gone; and of the *gazmoules*, the descendants of middle- and lower-rank Frankish soldiers and Greek women in the thirteenth century. They tell us of the city of Mystra, built as a fortification by the Franks in the foothills of the Taygetus Mountain Range, that became the capital of their province and was later turned by the Byzantine Despots into the most important cultural center of the Empire at the end of the fourteenth century. They are made up of the voices of Western crusaders, Venetians traders, Ottoman rulers, Catalan and Albanian mercenaries, Greek lords and slaves, Orthodox bishops, and local farmers. They evoke political, military, and economic powers that thrived, declined, and disappeared, and a varied assortment of peoples who lived through long periods of relative dearth and prosperity. Thus, the geographical place chosen for the location of *Before Midnight* is the sum total of a series of trajectories and a never-ending succession of micro-histories that offer important insights into the history not only of modern Greece but also of the continent, and that may ultimately explain the desire for and the difficulty of a pan-European project at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In admittedly indirect ways, the parallels between the teeming voices from the past and the Kardamyli group proliferate. That this accumulation of stories so far may be constructed by the film as the magic space comedy may seem a hopelessly misguided cultural operation, but the long history on which the space of the film is based offers as many reasons for celebration as it does for distress. Seen through a comic lens, it is all a matter of perspective.

É UNA FESTA LA VITA

These words, uttered by Guido (Marcello Mastroianni) in the final scene of Federico Fellini's *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), encapsulate the comic perspective. They may also serve as a description of the comic space of *Before Midnight*. Yet, for all the complexity of this comic space, most commentators have avoided defining the film as a comedy or, in some cases, have actively opposed it.[26] While Philip Horne concedes that "there could be tragic or comic readings of what happens in the film,"[27] Rob Stone considers its shift toward the melodramatic to be the film's main asset.[28] James MacDowell has persuasively suggested that what had started as a romantic comedy in *Before Sunrise* eventually becomes an ongoing romantic melodrama, climaxing "in the bitterness and recrimination of *Midnight*," one that, additionally, adopts a misogynistic point of view in the gender conflict and finally leads the spectator to a "desolating ending."[29] Yet, in a later essay, he finds more hope in a nuanced analysis of the ending in which the characters are left at the moment of resolving an argument.[30] San Filippo explains the ending as "a present made possible by, however tentatively, making peace with both one's past and future."[31] Still more affirmatively, Carolina Amaral, who also regards the trilogy as a love story in three parts, describes its plot as the unfolding of an amorous encounter.[32] The last half-hour, in which the relationship is threatened, does not attempt to destroy the couple: it rather embraces it in its complexity and ambiguity, thus, succeeding at portraying love in its duration. She argues that love is not threatened by obstacles but, rather, by a superficial "safe" view that promises love without risks. The ending offers a new beginning and thus shows the couple's ability to restart their history indefinitely, a way to inscribe both the eternity of the happy ending and the passion of the first encounter within narrative duration.[33]

Melodrama and comedy, obstacles and new beginnings, then, coexist in the movie as part of "the struggle to keep love alive,"[34] like they coexist in romantic comedy in general. While we may agree that the film's ending is up for interpretive grabs, and its resolution, left once again outside the text, may ultimately depend on the nature of our investment in the story, we should be warned against allotting too much importance to the endings of romantic comedy. In comedy, attraction and rejection, hostility and affinity are all part of the ride and of the fun of being alive.[35] And, as Maria San Filippo reminds us, contemporary romantic comedy is as much about *un*coupling as it is about couple formation.[36] It is the erotic and life-affirming ride that counts and that continues to attract.

In *Before Midnight*, various contemporary iterations of the battle of the sexes are subjected to a comic perspective. The dinner scene makes this explicit: set against Greece's "ancientness," the characters discuss various ways of understanding intimate scenarios: from Natalia's touching evocation

of the uniqueness and durability of the love for a special person to Achilleas and Anna's belief that the idea of a love that will last forever is a thing of the past—just not practical. Between them, the two middle-aged couples, Ariadni and Stefanos, Céline and Jesse, recreate the battle of the sexes with an emphasis on men's continuing sense of entitlement and privilege—Ariadni apparently more amused and resigned and Céline more frustrated by persistent inequality and male selfishness and self-centeredness. Throughout, however, the comic impulse remains palpable, with the specialness of the transnational group conferring a privileged way of discussing conflicts and the characters and sympathetic spectators deriving pleasure from being part of the conversation. Patrick verbalizes this feeling when he deflects the focus away from romantic love and says that ultimately it is not the love of a person that matters but the love of life, as concise a statement as we could find of what comedy is, uttered by the closest we get to an authorial figure in the story.

The emotional impact of this scene hangs over the rest of the film, even though, as we approach its final part, at the hotel, the divergences and quarrels that threaten the couple begin to gain ground. As MacDowell argues, in this section Céline deploys a feminist critique of the couple's relationship: she describes the burden of a centuries-long history of female subjugation in Jesse's attitude to her career, her own anxieties about motherhood, the rational/emotional typecasting, and other well-known forms of patriarchal programming.[37] For this critic, the film is ultimately unwilling to take the woman's side in the gendered conflict, tilting the scales in Jesse's favor and denying us direct access to her point of view.[38] Yet, as MacDowell himself later argues, Céline takes the initiative at the most important moments in the film and she—not Jesse—becomes the embodiment of several dimensions of the comic perspective.[39] There are three such moments in the final part of the film: the visit to the little chapel, the moment when they reach the seaside at the end of their walk, and the final minutes of the film.

The chapel is, as we have seen, a minuscule microcosm of the history of the area, including religious conflict. Jesse has been told by the caretaker that it was the Turks that scratched out the eyes from the Byzantine icons on the walls. In the DVD commentary, the filmmakers acknowledge that the long history of conflict between Greece and Turkey was in their minds when scripting and shooting this scene and they were wary of striking the wrong note. In the film, however, Céline starts with a dismissive remark about the power of religious miracles and then goes on to turn the hostility between the two countries into an obscene line: "I'll never suck another Turkish cock," invoking the spirit of carnival and reminding us that "comedy is sacrilege."[40] She then mocks Jesse, who appears a little nervous about her audacity, and calls him "a closet Christian." Given the rise of religious fundamentalism and the extreme right, Céline's defiant comic spirit is timely, a reminder that, as Sypher asserts,

the irreverence of carnival is a sign of wisdom.[41] Her relatively gentle poke at Jesse here will become openly sarcastic later in the hotel room when she, for example, mocks the chasm between the admiration he constantly courts from younger women and the reality of his serious limitations as a lover. In the meantime, through her comic intervention in the chapel, she is, then, both victim of the social evil of sexism and Aristotelian agent of change.

Céline's sarcasm in the hotel room moves her and the film away from comedy and brings the story to the verge of abandoning its comic vision, a dark moment that is not at all unusual in comedy. However, we find her again as a comic agent at the end of the film. A few minutes after she dramatically leaves the room saying, "I don't think I love you anymore," Jesse joins her on the terrace by the sea and initiates a playacting game: he is a traveler from the future with a message for Céline from her 82-year-old self. She is initially unwilling to participate and twice asks Jesse to stop playing and remember instead what she has just told him upstairs. He finally gives up and they seem to have come to a stalemate, she firm in her rejection and he warning her that he will not keep trying forever. However, Céline has one more surprise up her sleeve for us and for Jesse. Delpy's performance is crucial and worth considering here: a lesson in transitioning from melodrama to comedy, and a reminder of the simultaneity in people's experience of the tragic and the comic spirit. Her acting is minimalistic. After Jesse's attempts at reconciliation run out of steam, a tense silence ensues: Céline frowns trying to keep her tears in check, swallows, looks away, reaches down for something on her leg, touches her hair, crosses her legs and her arms, breathes out almost imperceptibly, turns to look at Jesse while he is looking away, looks away again as he turns back to her (reminding us of the scene at the record shop booth in *Before Sunrise*, and opening up a possibility of hope). Then she turns her head once again, not quite looking at him, and speaks: "So, what about this time machine?" In the course of thirty-seven seconds Céline has traveled a long road between the melodrama described by MacDowell and Stone and the playful world of comedy. As she speaks, it cannot be said that she is enjoying the game yet, but she has come to the realization that it is a game worth playing. Finally, she is ready to engage in her favorite performance: the admiring "dumb blonde" that mocks her partner's view of his own irresistible appeal for young women. This is an abridged version of the more extended performance she had already put on at the dinner table: "Wow, you're so smart . . .," to everybody's delight. The impersonation is again pure Aristotelian comedy but, seemingly devoid now of the biting sarcasm of the previous iteration, it highlights the eroticism and the delight of play, even as it continues to ridicule patriarchal sexual protocols. It suggests that, against all odds, the comic spirit will prevail. Nothing has changed magically, and the jury is still out on the future of the couple (and of the family), but Céline is back, as it were, in the realm of comedy. By the time the camera pulls away from the

characters and, in the purest romcom fashion, frames them surrounded by the social world represented by the other tourists having drinks by the sea, Céline and Jesse have relaxed. She then utters the final line of the film: "Well, it must have been one hell of a night we're about to have," verbalizing not only the dynamic in love between instant encounters and duration described by Amaral but also the upside-down world of comedy, here upturning temporal logic for the sake of the comic game. Whatever may happen after the final fade-out, spectators remain firmly in the comic space.

Delpy's performance of Céline's transition at the film's close is the continuation of a previous moment in the film: the couple's contemplation of the sunset before arriving at the hotel. If the final performance takes place in the little space between the characters, in this earlier case Céline's interaction is not primarily with her partner but with the wider space of the southern Peloponnese and, I would argue, with Europe at large. It is as if, following Patrick's statement in the dinner scene, Céline had come to realize that the little space where she had placed her idea of god is not so little after all, and that intimacy between people is only a manifestation of a larger kind of comic engagement with the world around us. The sequence, less than a minute long, is constructed with Linklater's customary transparency: a medium two-shot of Céline and Jesse looking at the sunset is interrupted twice by shots of the sun setting, one from their approximate position and another from behind them. Recalling the ending of Eric Rohmer's *Le rayon vert* (1986) (minus the green ray), another summer film taking place in another coastal European town, the film subtly breaks the relative democracy of the two-shot and highlights Céline by giving her the initiative and by having the soft orange light of the sun falling primarily on her. On the surface, this seems an isolated moment, the last micro-episode in their walk, but Delpy's performance and the visual rhetoric that surrounds it invest it with greater significance. As she narrates the imminent disappearance of the sun behind the stretch of land across the harbor, Céline takes a deep breath and smiles, looks at Jesse, who smiles back, then her smile becomes more wistful and finally disappears when the sun is gone. She looks again at Jesse. She wants her partner to read what is going through her mind and her heart, but she is unreadable for Jesse. This is a moment of communion with her environment. She turns back to the sun, an almost imperceptible smile momentarily back on her face, and then lowers her eyes and picks up her drink. The microscopic wonders of the performance suggest a solemnity that exceeds an emotional reaction to the setting sun. Rather, they convey the wisdom that she has gained in the course of the narrative. The slow movement of the sun—"it's still there, it's still there . . . it's gone"—visualizes Céline's earlier preoccupations with mortality in the three films, but it also suggests her gradual understanding of the temporality of space and of the value of the transnational in Peloponnesian, Greek, and European history as seen through a comic lens.

GIA ENA TANGO

We may compare Céline's communion with her environment in this moment with a similar one in a slightly later film, Fatih Akin's *In the Fade (Aus dem Nichts*, 2017). Katja (Diane Kruger) has travelled from Germany to Greece in pursuit of the neo-Nazi couple who have killed her husband and child in Hamburg. Once she has located them, she decides to plant a home-made bomb in the caravan where they are hiding, but at the last minute she changes her mind and goes back to the house by the sea that she has rented. Sitting on the deck, looking out at sea, she notices that, for the first time since the terrorist attack, her period has returned. Kruger's performance, comparable in its understated excellence to Delpy's in *Before Midnight*, suggests that Katja cannot accept the return to normality that her period indicates. With her family gone there is only one way ahead for her. The location, Schinias Beach, near Athens, is not so distant from the Kardamyli seaside, and the Attica region is the product of a comparable accumulation of stories-so-far as the southern Peloponnese, yet, surrounded and overwhelmed by death, Katja is impermeable to comedy. Her acquired wisdom consists in the acceptance of the finitude of existence. In contrast, Céline is going through a crisis that might lead not to death but to the end of love, but her absorption of the exuberant social space around her has taught her that life is a precious thing, to be enjoyed while it lasts, and that the world, with its inequities and sufferings, is also a laughing matter.

A slightly different point of comparison is explicitly offered by the film, in one of many intertextual references in the trilogy, in this case to *Viaggio in Italia* (Roberto Rossellini, 1953). Continuing the recurrence of death in the couple's conversations pointed out by critics as one of the trilogy's most recurrent topics, Céline mentions a memory of a black-and-white movie she saw as a teenager in which a couple walk through the ruins of Pompeii looking at bodies that have been there for centuries, forever caught in their sleep, intertwined in one last embrace.[42] *Viaggio in Italia* is another film about a middle-aged couple in crisis. Absorbed as they are in their marital problems and their desire to end their relationship, the characters isolate themselves from the social space of Naples, until, in the last minute, they become overwhelmed by the teeming life of the Italian city and reach a reconciliation, however fragile. This reference may be taken as an anticipation of Jesse's and Céline's trajectory but Rossellini's film is not a comedy and its social space, however richly portrayed, is not a comic space. In *Viaggio in Italia* the characters are, as it were, on their own. In contrast, *Before Midnight* constructs a rich canopy around the couple and, through Céline's vision and Delpy's performance, it plunges its spectators in an unrepentant comic world. This comic world is once again condensed, after the final fade-out and as the credits start to roll, in "Gia Ena Tango," a melancholy song

about lost love turned into exhilarating experience by the wondrous voice of famous Greek singer Cháris Aléxiou and by the relentless appeal of popular music. Whatever may happen to the couple beyond the film's ending, its space remains resolutely comic. Just as importantly, the song is a reminder of the geographical specificity of its discourse on the future of the continent.

For what both *Viaggio in Italia* and *In the Fade* share with Linklater's trilogy is their trans-European identity and their awareness of themselves as European cultural objects. With English George Sanders and Swedish Ingrid Bergman as the married couple, and Rossellini as director, the trip the characters take in the former may be seen as a response to the feeling of exhaustion and uncertainty as the continent was beginning to face the future after the all-too-recent realities of genocide and destruction of the Second World War. More than sixty years later, *In the Fade* traces a very different map of Europe that links Germany and Greece, with Turkey implicit in the mix, and describes a European Union beset by its own incapacity to deal with difference and the external Other and threatened by a clandestine alliance of racist, ultra-nationalist, neo-Nazi groups. *Before Midnight* exists in the same geopolitical space as the latter, with the present of transnational culture in Europe as its structuring principle. However, unlike in the other two, the same transnational culture becomes the engine of comedy. Linklater's realistic method rules out any temptation of naïve optimism, yet it insists to turn the European project, like the frail eighteen-year-old relationship it protects, like the century-long history that precedes it, into a comedy into which we enter with our eyes fully open. What Céline sees in the fading orange light of the sunset is a map of Europe crossed by lights and shadows, but she has become the most powerful agent of comedy and, as such, she asks us to defy darkness and embrace the enduring joy of transnational European encounters from the vantage point of the continent's southern margins.

NOTES

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4. Ibid., 12.
5. Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 30–38.
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19. Robin Wood, *Sexual Politics & Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 323; Rob Stone (2013), *The Cinema of Richard Linklater: Walk, Don't Run* (2nd ed.) (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2018); Leger Grindon, "Taking Romantic Comedy Seriously in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *Before Sunset* (2004)." in Horton and Rapf, *A Companion to Film Comedy*, 197; James MacDowell, "Comedy and Melodrama from *Sunrise* to *Midnight*: Genre and Gender in Richard Linklater's *Before* Series," in *After "Happily Ever After": Romantic Comedy in the Post-Romantic Age*, edited by Maria San Filippo (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), 47.
20. Stone, *The Cinema of Richard Linklater*, 16–17.
21. Guillermo Solana, *Cézanne: Site/Non-Site* (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2014), 44.
22. See Stone, *The Cinema of Richard Linklater*, 3–4, 131.
23. Ibid., 131–132.
24. Philip Horne, "Passing Through," *Sight & Sound* 23:7 (2013): 32.
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27. Horne, "Passing Through," 32.
28. Stone, *The Cinema of Richard Linklater*, 135.
29. MacDowell, "Comedy and Melodrama," 49, 62.
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37. MacDowell, "Comedy and Melodrama," 54.
38. Ibid., 55–57; see also Stone, *The Cinema of Richard Linklater*, 134–136.
39. MacDowell, "Romance, Narrative," 189.
40. Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," 38.
41. Ibid., 37.
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