

# Love and Modernity: before Sunrise and before Sunset in Cultural Studies Criticism

**Zhang Jinjin**

*College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University, Shantou, 515000, Guangdong, China  
goldenjasmine@126.com*

**Abstract:** *This thesis explores some of the possibilities of the relationship between love and modernity by mainly doing close textual analysis of two movies, Before Sunrise, Before Sunset. It also introduces a Japanese movie, Adrift in Tokyo, to be a comparison and discuss love between family members. Love, as an emotion, has its own initiative. It is in the confrontation against modernity that emotion will emerge. But the relationship between love and modernity is complicated, love arising between the characters in the movies is not only anti-modernity, but also seems to carry the inherent advancement of modernity.*

**Keywords:** *love; modernity; cultural studies; rationality; alienation*

## 1. Introduction

The films *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* were shot in 1999 and 2005 respectively. *Before Sunrise* (1999) tells the story of Jesse, an American man, and Celine, a French woman, who met by chance on a train and became attached to each other in Vienna where they spent one night together before leaving and agreed to meet again a year later on the same platform. As the sequel of this film, *Before Sunset* (2005) tells the story of their meeting nine years later at a bookstore in Paris, where they walked together on the banks of the Seine-et-Marne and confided to each other their current situation and state of mind. Interestingly, it is a chance encounter of the film's cast that fosters the sequel. Just as Hawke, the film's writer-director and lead actor, mentioned, "It's not like anybody was begging us to make a second film. We obviously did it because we wanted to". Thus, the fact that a film about encounter was born out of a chance encounter manifests clearly how much the cast cherish it. In the films, the only clue is the advancement of time and the talk between Jesse and Celine. Regarding the time, in particular, the film time of *Before Sunset* takes the same as reality. The time span of both films does not exceed one day, so they are named according to the time point of the rising and setting sun. Meanwhile, the great randomness of spatial arrangement seems to be a brief glimpse of the talking of two city flaneurs. The love arising between them is not only anti-modernity, but also seems to carry the inherent advancement of modernity.<sup>[1]</sup>

The word "Love" in the title represents not only the love between men and women, but also refers to the care and affection between people. Indeed, love as an emotion existing in all times, is not exempt from the tide of modernity; however, at the same time emotions have their own initiatives—at times when they go against modernity, they quietly emerge. In the film, it is when the hero and heroine are not working but walking aimlessly in the state of a city wanderer that they unconsciously realize their love. However, the author also realizes that on the contrary, their love itself possesses the characteristics of modernity. Therefore, what is the mutual connection and interaction between love and modernity? To what extent does modernity affect the universal emotional pattern of people? Is it known to all? Based on these questions, this thesis would like to make an analysis.

## 2. Love in Modernity

### 2.1. Love and Rationality

The film *Before Sunrise* starts with rapidly changing tracks in the company of fast and intense music. The towering iron bridge, the rapidly receding scenery... all of which indicates that the hero and heroine, as well as the audience in front of the screen, are living in a modern society speeded up by the Industrial Revolution. What follows is a couple's quarrel, revealing the alienation brought by modernity which has seeped into the closest people.

Speed is a major characteristic of modernity. However, we are all prisoners trapped by the wall of speed, and the only way out is deceleration.<sup>[2]</sup> Sitting in the train, the hero and heroine in the film both read quietly. In the era of rapid development of electronic media where paper reading is rare, their reading indeed demonstrates their intentional resistance to modernity. Moreover, they chose to slow down their way of life, roaming in the city at a leisurely pace. Therefore, the love quietly arising between them is in a state of deceleration.

Soon the train arrived in Vienna. Jesse got off and then returned to the carriage again to invite Jesse to get off with him. Nevertheless, when Celine asked Jesse, "What would we going to do?" Jesse just replied, "I don't know...all we going to do is walking around..." Thus it can be seen that the he hasn't decided on his next destination yet, but Celine agreed without hesitation and even without any excessive explanation of why she makes this decision. In *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky has mentioned, "... reason is a good thing, that can't be disputed, but reason is only reason and satisfies only man's intellectual faculties, while volition is a manifestation of the whole of life, I mean of the whole of human life including both reason and speculation."<sup>[3]</sup> At this point, both the hero's rash invitation and the heroine's groundless consent are purposeless and non-utilitarian, which cannot apply to the notion of rationality in modernity to interpret. Therefore, such can be seen as a decision of volition behaviors. Without such an irrational beginning, love would lose its breeding ground.

This aimless approach continues after arriving in Vienna. Once off the train, they took a walk like city flaneurs. Although they asked for their destination as soon as they got off the train, they forgot it (the theatre) at the end. They have been touring all night, talking aimlessly about what they have seen and heard, and only at the end did they seem to remember that, "Oh, we miss the play". In *The Cinematic City*, David Clarke contended, "City flaneur holds a tense and transient view of life. They attracted to a world of joy and infinite possibilities, free from the conventions and constraints of tradition, and at the same time escaping the functional efficiency of modern rationality."<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, the whole process of walking is a confrontation with the rationality of modernity and love grows in the casual, aimless walk.

Nine years later, they found their lost love in the same way. When walking out of the Shakespeare bookstore, their original destination is a café. But in reality, the café is not the final destination because their walking continued after that. To take a closer look at their conversation, they seemed to be unfamiliar and polite to each other before leaving the café, talking on topics mostly irrelevant to their inner self, like their current situations, views on recent affairs and politics. However, after walking out of the café, they turned the topics to themselves, gradually recalling the night nine years ago, and that long-lost love was slowly being recovered in the midst.

Personally, what makes so is because love, family affection and other feelings among people are originally non-utilitarian. Emotion itself is a kind of care, a warmth that cannot be measured by tools or rationality. Thus, when modern people focus on a specific purpose - such as their career success - they do not experience emotions. That is why alienation exists among people, for instance, Celine's parents were unable to understand her ideals and turned them (e.g., writer, pet shelter) into lucrative professions (e.g., journalist, veterinarian) each time. In this process, instrumental rationality leads to misunderstandings and then alienation between parents and young Celine.

Nevertheless, the confrontation with rationality only lasts for a short night. Jesse and Celine deliberately refused to leave any contact information when separated on the platform. In the light of their dialogue, they feared that increasingly trivial routine would gradually use up the passion of the moment. However, I believe that it can also be interpreted as a rational choice for instantaneous satisfaction. In an age of instantaneity, "rational choice" refers to seek satisfaction, but also to avoid its consequences, especially the responsibilities that those consequences may imply and entail. Today's persistent satisfaction comes at the expense of tomorrow.<sup>[5]</sup> If Jesse and Celine keep in touch after leaving the platform, it means that the experience of that night will have an impact on their respective daily lives and they need to be responsible for each other. Apparently, this is not what they want. Hence, they only took notice of their instantaneous satisfaction, and therefore, with a rational choice, gradually lose the burgeoning love of that night.

## **2.2. Love and Distraction**

As for Celine and Jesse, walking creates symbolic meanings - they walked together in Vienna and Paris, talking all the way and spending time with each other. Additionally, walking in another Japanese film *Adrift in Tokyo* which is directed by Satoshi Miki displays different connotations. For one million, Fumiya Takemura, a young college student, agreed to take a walk with Fukuhara, who had accidentally

killed his wife. However, in the course of walking, he was gradually aware of the significance of family affection. Fukuhara and Fumiya's walk is a "search" for symbolic meanings - Fukuhara would like to retrieve the memory of his wife, and Fumiya had found some memories of his childhood. Interestingly, in searching for their own memories, Fukuhara and Fumiya also unknowingly created new common memories: due to the attraction of the guitarist, Fumiya separated from Fukuhara and felt very nervous. Finally, he met Fukuhara at "Shinjuku Mom". At that time, his internal anxiety was overwhelming. At this point, "Shinjuku Mom" becomes a symbol of special significance that Fumiya and Fukuhara can share.

When going for a walk, memory of nine years ago came back to Celine and Jesse - for instance, walking across the lawn reminded them of the night they spent together in a park in Vienna nine years ago. They even recalled many details of that night. It wasn't until the topic is brought up again at the end of the film that the audience realizes that both of them remember that night very well despite their disputes on the walk.

The scene where Fukuhara and Fumiya separated and reunited appears in the middle of the *Adrift* in Tokyo. Likewise, the plot of Jesse and Celine separating and reuniting appears at the very beginning of the second film, *Before Sunset*. If the two films can be considered as one, the plot appears in the middle. The time at which the plot appears in the film is used by directors and screenwriters to hint that separation and reunion is the central of finding and creating symbols.

The coexistence of finding and creating symbols, which filled the interpretation of symbols with abundant possibilities, enrich the process of walking. The source of possibilities lies in the difference between concentration and distraction, which helps audience view things differently. In other words, distraction makes possibilities possible.<sup>[6]</sup>

The episode of losing purpose in the walk is also reflected in *Adrift* in Tokyo. Fumiya initially agreed to take a walk with Fukuhara just for the sake of one million, but he gradually felt the love between father and son and the warmth of family affection in the course of the walk. By contrast, the original purpose of having one million has ceased to be important. When Fumiya bought curry sauce for his "last dinner" with Fukuhara, his reluctance was beyond words. In the last scene, looking at the back of Fukuhara who had walked into the police station, Fumiya gently complained: honestly. Such word is full of blazing emotion which is valuable than one million.

Walking is a process of distraction. The rapid development of modernity tends to obscure the vision of Jesse and Celine, which means only certain things can be visualized but precious things has been shadowed. A city is full of signs, yet the interpretation of the signs is various. Ferdinand de Saussure intends that signifier and signified are inseparable and make up of signs. The connection between signifier and signified is not innate but random. Thus, meaning is not fixed, and different meanings can be produced when interpreted in different ways.<sup>[7]</sup> However, instrumental rationality of modernity will compel concentration, which makes the symbolic interpretation singular. In the distractions of walking, interpretation of symbols becomes diverse. On a leisurely walking, Celine and Jesse saw the tombstone of a thirteen-year-old girl in the park, and they recalled how they felt when seeing tombstones at the age of thirteen. Nevertheless, busy commuters in the city will not pay attention to these symbols but to go straight to their working place, just like the scene of commuters crossing the street in Tokyo as shown in *Adrift* in Tokyo.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **2.3. Love and Alienation**

A closer look at their love begs the question: why did Jesse and Celine fall in love with a stranger? Why did they pour out their innermost thoughts to a new acquaintance? As mentioned above, Celine's parents could not understand her ideals. With the accelerated pace of life and the fierce competition, walls have been built between familiar people. The relationship between relatives may be cold. For instance, in the opening scene of *Before Sunrise*, a German couple were having a quarrel. Similarly, in *Adrift* in Tokyo, when Fukuhara and Fumiya were eating snacks at the "Aiyumiko" store, the store owner and her son were arguing, and the son even threw water all over his mother. Besides, with the convenience of transportation, people get used to moving away from home to develop in other places, and the contact with their relatives and friends may be broken due to the distance. Moreover, fierce competition among colleagues impedes their sincere communication, which can be seen in the communication among the three colleagues of Mrs. Fukuhara in *Adrift* in Tokyo. They only talked about superficial and trivial issues that could not go deep inside the heart. In general, this kind of cold relationship between relatives and between colleagues in effect is an embodiment of emotional alienation.

Marx has noted that social attributes are unique to humans, which distinguishes them from animals. Humans bearing social attributes want to have emotional communication with others in their hearts. Nevertheless, due to the alienation between people brought by modernity, their emotional demands become difficult to meet, and they also need an outlet -- so Jesse and Celine chose to communicate with strangers.

Facing a complete stranger, they feel safe to communicate the most intimate things -- as strangers are safer than familiar people, who don't know their details and will not affect their daily life. Hence, those usually alienated feelings, accumulating in an instant, were poured into a stranger.

From this perspective, the love between Jesse and Celine as well as the generation of family affection between Fukuhara and Fumiya may be accidental, but it is also inevitable as the result of accumulating sense of alienation. When loneliness and sense of alienation cumulate to a certain extent, it is not surprising that emotions boil over.

#### ***2.4. Transiency and unrecoverable love***

Jesse and Celine's love itself, which arose in just one day, is highly transient in nature. They have not known each other for a long time, and soon fell in love. As a result, the love is also fleeting, just like fireworks blooming with colorful splendor, but becoming only a flash in the pan of the moment. After the sunrise, they separated at the platform, meeting for less than a day. Likewise, Fumiya and Fukuhara went into their own different worlds at the end of their walk, spending together for less than a week. This transient, fleeting emotion itself is a reflection of modernity.

However, although the love occurred for only a moment, Jesse and Celine managed to record it for a long time. Jesse devoted an entire book to the story of one night. This may well account for the deep influence of that night on them.

In the works of modernist writer Virginia Woolf, she has mentioned "The Moment of Being", which means, "These are times when one experiences release and unity, unity of self with the world, and these are moments of serenity; renewed and reenergized enough to face life and again with confidence and hope".<sup>[9]</sup> It is this brief moment of serenity that brings them confidence and courage, so when they returned to their own worlds and faced the alienation around them again, they needed emotional support and would then try to find ways to extend their memories indefinitely. Derrida has noted, "there emerges a law: that of the endless link series, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary meditations that present the sense of the very thing that they defer: the impression of the thing itself, or originary perception".<sup>[10]</sup> In consistence with the law, Jesse wrote a book to commemorate the details of that night while Celine went to New York to study in the United States - to live in Jesse's city, both in search of symbols to act as complements, in order to extend the memory of the originary. This contradiction between fiction and reality indeed is a reflection of the loss and shock of reality for them, who tried to construct an ideal love with their own efforts.

In addition, another way of trying to find or perpetuate the "originary perception" is to juxtapose the past/future with the present so as to find a kind of satisfaction in a juxtaposed space-time. Jesse made this very clear in the opening scene of *Before Sunset*. When asked about his plans for his next film, he replied that he wanted to write a book describing a moment in time, such as when he saw his five-year-old daughter climbing onto a table to dance and was worried about her and wanted to stop her, only to find that the song she danced to was the same song his first love had sent him home with. And as he described it, the film used a montage of shots to cut to a scene where he recalled the farewell scene of his meeting with Celine nine years ago, and then cut back to reality - the scene where Celine appeared in Shakespeare's bookstore. The two scenes described by Jesse, his self-imagined scene, and the real scene in the bookstore are seemingly unrelated, but they coexist simultaneously. Back to the very beginning of their love, Jesse's reason for convincing Celine to get out of the car was not based on this moment. Instead, he asked Celine to imagine, "one day, ten or twenty years later, you have a quarrel with your husband, and then you think of the men you used to date, and I am one of them - and you find that they are nothing special compared to your husband - so you made the right choice". He was not asking Celine to consider the here and now, but to take her vision decades into the future. An intertwined picture of the collage of present and future as well as a reflection on the present with possible future endings lead Celine to agree to get out of the car and tour Vienna together.

As can be seen, the synchronic existence of different scenes creates a picture of collage and hybridity, which in effect have been a common characteristic in western painting art such as symbolism, expressionism, and even surrealist painting since 19th and the 20th century.

Nonetheless, Derrida has also pointed out, "the original is never to be grasped".<sup>[11]</sup> In the long days apart, Jesse and Celine seemed to make efforts to look for "the original love", but in fact, they were also imagining and processing "the original love" in a romanticized way. As the montage employed by the director indicates, they left behind the romantic moments they like, while deliberately ignoring the reality that they have left each other for shirking their responsibilities. Meanwhile, for Fukuhara and Fumihara, they also added their memories to the real life -- for example, when Fumihara rode on a roller coaster with Fukuhara, he felt delighted, as if he was actually sitting next to his father, while Fukuhara was thinking of his young son. Accordingly, they just made use of each other to satisfy their beautiful fantasy, but never realized that the "original love" is unattainable as well as unrecoverable.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, love, as an emotion, has its own initiative. It is in the confrontation against modernity that emotion will quietly emerge. The love between Jesse and Celine and the father-son bond between Fukuhara and Fumiya are accumulated and nurtured in the course of irrational, distracting walks. Whereas their love is inextricably linked to the modern environment in which they live. Their desires and imaginations also have a tendency to romanticize their emotions in order to prolong their momentary love.

At the very beginning of *Before Sunrise*, the fast-moving train is seen as a symbol of modernity. Jesse and Celine, however, were turning the pages of the paper quietly and slowly. Reading quietly in their seats, they seemed to be motionless, but they were actually on a train running at high speed. In fact, they kept pace with the constant changes outside the window. This scene, which seems to be against modernity but is inevitably in modernity, is the best illustration of the relationship between love and modernity.

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