

Before Celine

From the much loved coming-of age romantic comedies of my teens to the equally cliché ridden rom coms of my young adult life, I've never quite shaken the desire to consume as much romantic bullshit as I can - no matter how opposing it is to my feminist ideals. It's no surprise that there aren't many modern films within the genre that have women in their writing credits.

Julie Delpy is the kind of writer I'm looking for, a force guiding the genre towards a more relatable female character and a more honestly flawed male.

Before Sunrise, Before Sunset and Before Midnight are 3 films directed by Richard Linklater, filmed and set 9 years apart (1995, 2004, 2013). They all star Julie Delpy as the environmental advocate Celine and Ethan Hawke as writer Jesse - they also share co-writer credit on all three films with Linklater. In fact, Delpy and Hawke had a fundamental role in shaping each other's characters; this is palpable in each film. They aren't just truer representations of people, they are a reflection on how people perceive the opposite sex and heteronormative relationships.

"You know, I have this awful paranoid thought that feminism was mostly invented by men so that they could like, fool around a little more. You know, women, free your minds, free your bodies, sleep with me. We're all happy and free as long as I can fuck as much as I want."

Before Sunrise introduces us to Celine and Jesse when they're in their early twenties, a meet cute on a trans-European train trip. The first time you meet Celine, her appeal is magnetic. She's aloof, intelligent and beautiful. Jesse's eyes grow large as she talks because she's so dynamic; thoughtful and funny and most importantly, quite candid about her opinions. When we have been acclimatised to watching such accommodating female characters, it's refreshing to see Delpy's Celine deliver such unabated criticisms on feminism to modern greed.

"You know, I want to kill them! Why didn't they ask me to marry them? I would have said "No," but at least they could have asked! But it's my fault, I know it's my fault, because I never felt it was the right man. Never! But what does it mean the right man? The love of your life? The concept is absurd. The idea that we can only be complete with another person is evil! Right?!"

Nine years later they meet again in *Before Sunset*. Jesse is on a book tour in Paris, his marriage is falling apart and Celine is in an unhappy relationship. Celine is not presented to us as the classic “relationship type”, but here she is caught in a loop of bad decisions. Her frustration with this pattern boils down to her (and I dare say, “our”) understanding that we should all be looking for The One in order to achieve Completion; she calls out this attempt at fulfillment as a fool’s errand, an abstract and intangible concept.

Of course, this honest reflection on their failed pursuits of romantic relationships and what it means to love, and be loved, ultimately unites them. The spark that develops between the two characters is born out of a common enemy - the recognition that the void they feel inside has developed from unrealistic expectations of romantic love. In Celine’s case, she doesn’t want to be married, but feels the pressure to desire it because classic representations of women and relationships lead us to believe it is the answer to fulfillment. Jesse did marry, but could not maintain the romantic ideal, leaving him feeling just as exasperated by his reality as Celine.

“You always play the part of the one-and-only rational one and I’m the irrational, hysterical, hormone crazy one because I have emotions. You sit back and you speak from your big perspective which means everything you say is level headed and true... The world is fucked by unemotional rational men deciding shit.”

Before Midnight, sees the couple frustrated by the realities of their life together and the loss of passion in their relationship. Celine continues to reject the traditional notion of marriage; while she now has a family with Jesse, she refuses to conform as society expects her. When they are gifted a night alone together by friends, it ends in an explosive argument, (it lasts for a solid half hour). During the fight, or “love scene” as Linklater refers to it, Celine reveals her difficulty with motherhood, admitting she hated herself when she was pregnant, not wanting to harm her kids, but herself. She alludes to the fact that she may have cheated, and accuses Jesse of the same thing. The statements are bold, arguments petty, the accusations are harsh and the momentum is lightening fast. A witness to the carnage, the camera places you as the third character in the room.

Celine is ferocious, and while watching her it’s easy to think that she has gone bat shit crazy - until the familiarity sets in. Her reactionary response is all too relatable, things said in anger, regretted, but it’s too late. When Jesse engages with her, we feel his anxiety and dread over the relationship ending; but we understand Celine’s anger and frustration over feeling like a failure for not living up to his or

society's expectations. Because no matter how self aware these characters are, like us, they fall into the same patterns they are so critical of because that's what we do - we're creatures of habit.

Though set 9 years apart, each film presents two characters that are so complete, they are as familiar to us now as they were 9 years before. Both characters develop so realistically because they have grown with the actors in real time.

Delpy has spoken about the importance of having control over her character's direction, to avoid making any film a "little male fantasy". The films lack sex scenes, the camera doesn't linger or entertain the male gaze like other relationship films. Instead of belittling the female experience by boiling it down to a lifelong search for Mr. Right - the Before... films embrace the complex relationship between love and romance by revealing passion through anger and frustration, as well as love.

- Daniela Rossi