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Understanding Love: An Unfulfilled Promise?

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Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction, eds. Susan Wolf, Christopher Grau, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, 397 pages

To review a book composed of seventeen chapters that do not hold together by central arguments is in many ways an impossible task. Yet, I will follow the lead of the project and the book itself to suggest a series of reflections about the essays in this volume.

First, I will review the introduction which grants the readers an opportunity to know about the project that gave life to the book, the academic intentions of the working group, and threads suggested by one of the editors, Susan Wolf. Second, based on a small selection of pieces (three), I will suggest the type of analysis that readers can expect and how the development of the chapters can invite questions and thoughts about love. While all chapters take film and fiction as their primary material for thinking about love bonds and the experience of love, their approaches and reflections are varied, differently nuanced and multicolored.

Project and Volume Profile

Love is really not the central focus of this edited volume. This book is not about love, nor about the complexity of understanding love as a concept, a unique state, a special kind of bond, a multilevel process or cluster of conflicting feelings.

Despite the invitation of the title, Susan Wolf warns us about the collection of works in this volume: "Though the essays in this volume do not form an organized or systematic answer to any question, they provide evidence, examples, and stimuli for thought both about the relations of the humanities to film and fiction and about love."[1]

1 S. Wolf, *Introduction*, [in:] Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction, eds. S. Wolf, C. Grau, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, p. 3.

The relationship this project and book has established with love is mediated by film and literature. The idea of understanding in the title is really about understanding the place of love in certain art forms or (in some essays of the collection) understanding love by way of a discourse that seems to have less difficulties with addressing the messiness of love as film and literature.

Anticipating our problems with the title of the volume, Susan Wolf explains: "To a philosopher, a title like 'Understanding Love' may seem to promise a theory of love, including an analysis of the concept of love in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and an explanation of love's value and importance. Although neither this volume nor any of the individual essays in it aims to give anything like a theory of love, someone in search of such a theory may find in these essays both positive suggestions and negative ones. Thus, some essays may be suggestive of features that are arguably essential to love or to good love, while others, which explore unconventional relationships, may warn against simplistic overgeneralization."[2]

So why does philosophy need to resort to film and fiction to reflect on love? Are certain disciplines particularly ill equipped to take on the issue of love? Is love too messy for certain disciplines and thus the need to approach the subject by way of an artistic mediation? I do not think so. Yet, I do understand the need to resort to these terrains to alleviate the perceived disciplinary boundaries and be able to assess love with all its non-logical complications. We look from constraining disciplines to other more "free areas" to be able to say things we feel we can't say within the limits of our own disciplines. Film and fiction become territories absent of restrictions and allow philosophers to explore things they dare not do within the confines of their disciplinary domains and under the watchful gaze of gatekeepers.

"Our world and experience are not compartmentalized into disciplinary parts. A full understanding of any piece of our experience is apt to be enhanced by looking at it from multiple perspectives, and pooling information gathered from different sources will ordinarily improve the accuracy and soundness of one's investigations."[3]

The project emerges as interdisciplinary and develops thanks to a (large) grant.[4] Being empathic to the interdisciplinary interest (a dialogue across areas in the humanities) and celebrating the generous funds received, we still need to raise some questions, I believe. In many areas across the sciences, interdisciplinary projects have been present since the '70s; are the humanities such late arrivals to this discussion and need?

2 Ibidem, p. 7.

3 Ibidem, p. 4.

4 Ibidem, pp. 5–6.

Were they not pressed for these ventures before? Did they not find virtue in crossing disciplinary boundaries in the past decades? Have they reached beyond the humanities for productive and instructive dialogues? Surely we can all think of examples of projects or efforts that did embrace these drives before. But, has it been the norm?

"Underlying it is a commitment to the idea that wearing one's disciplinary training lightly and being as open as possible to the questions and ideas that humanists of all sorts are inclined to come up with will help one get the most out of a book or a movie or, for that matter, out of an exploration of a concept like love."[5] An interdisciplinary commitment, I insist, assumed and developed decades ago by many social and natural sciences. And this raises the question of being able to learn from others. Why did philosophy and the humanities not learn from the interdisciplinary experiences of other disciplines and projects?

Perhaps as a warning or to elicit a particular perspective in reading the volume, Wolf makes a distinction between understanding love from a theoretical point of view than from a personal one. "To many, … 'understanding love' refers less to a theoretical aspiration than to a personal one. Understanding love, in this more personal sense, may not require the possession of a satisfying and articulable definition of love, so much as an attunement to the complexities of relationships and to their potential both for enriching and for damaging people's lives."[6] If this is (again) a defense of the title, I think it does the reverse: it raises more doubts, both in the theoretical and personal sense about what is meant in regard to the concept of understanding. Many of us (philosophers or not) would defend both the theoretical and personal; one does not exclude the other at all, and both can (or should) coexist in a productive (and tense) dialogue and relationship. The volume does not have a qualifying subtitle, which would have been very instructive by restraining false expectations and alerting readers that it was a journey into the personal realm of love (represented in film and fiction) by academics in the humanities.

To explain the "generous" Mellon Foundation Grant that Susan Wolf received for the project, she raises a question: Can money buy love? I really appreciate the playfulness of this opening paragraph; the ambivalence that it creates for the reader. The question is not part of the issues addressed by the essays in the volume, but it does generate questions about how comfortable we (as academics) feel about receiving grants for projects that (in our minds), perhaps, should be developed without these monetary supports. Of course, it also raises questions about how funding affects the

5 Ibidem, p. 6.

6 Ibidem, p. 7.

direction of research and publishing. And, about how funding might affect the issue of "taking risks" in research and the pursuit of knowledge. While I acknowledge these are not questions we might want to address in this space, they do need to be raised because the volume emerges linked to these issues.

To elicit our interest, Wolf poses very appropriate and interesting questions about love that I believe need to be noted. "And if the reader or viewer were to ask of any of the participants in the depictions of erotic love discussed in this volume whether it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, it is not clear how they would answer."[7] There are many essays (see the thematic proposal of Wolf) that address these issues in ways I believe are very productive for reflections about love, whether personal or theoretical.

In addition, Wolf poses another series of questions that might be better situated in an intellectual horizon but that can elicit the interest of more than one about the personal domain: "Can we ever see someone as she really is? If we can, does it enhance or impair our love of the person we see? To what extent are our loves a function of what we see in our beloveds? Do we really love concrete individuals at all, or do we love the qualities we find or imagine them to exemplify?"[8]

Susan Wolf suggests five thematic connections between the essays: Love and Society; Love and Eros; The Imperfect Realities of Love; Love, Projection, and Knowledge of the Beloved; Love and Attention. However, in what remains of this review, I will not follow these themes.

From the seventeen chapters that compose the volume, I have chosen three. Since the chapters are argumentatively independent from each other and are not ordered in a substantive way, any choice would be a matter of preference. Two things have swayed my decision. The complexity of the films and filmmakers—I am personally fond of their work—as well as the critical and careful treatment that the authors gave to these. An added thread, which I found linked the three, was the issue of ambivalence and ambiguity. In love, ambivalence is an under-analyzed phenomenon, which I also find true for philosophy, at large. Together they also show the breath, versatility, and nuances of the volume, each one providing a slice of the diversity of flavors one finds in this reading.

7 Ibidem, p. 10.

8 Ibidem, p. 11.

Macalester Bell: *Grizzly Man*, Sentimentality, and Our Relationships with Other Animals[9]

Bell's reflection and particular journey is strongly driven by a series of difficult questions about the nature of the relationships we establish with other animals. He is not talking of all types of relationships, but he is interested in the type that makes this issue uncomfortable. His treatment is elegant and in many ways beautiful. While acknowledging the difficulty of the task, he does not shy away from many bumps along the way.

I do not think the placement of this chapter was random; first of the series, it opens with very complex issues about the nature of our care for other animals and questions about our conceptions of nature and the relationships we believe should have with them; all sorts of moral and ethical dilemmas are intertwined. In a philosophical sense, this is an excellent chapter to start with.

Genuinely struggling with the issue of loving other animals, Bell resorts to other authors for clarity: "On Langton's view, there is a tension between what we might call 'loving attention' and 'sentimental affection'; loving attention involves genuine knowledge of the other, while sentimental affection involves feelings of affection in the absence of genuine knowledge of the other."[10]

In Bell's mind the question is comparative: can one "really" love other animals? "Returning to the distinction drawn in the previous section, loving attention is responsive to the complexities of its target, and it does not simplify or project qualities of innocence upon its target. Instead, it is a clear-eyed and genuine response to concrete particulars. Sentimental affection, on the other hand, involves the simplification of the target and falsifies its target by projecting qualities of innocence onto the target."[11]

The exercise is not only tremendous, but he is, in fact, forcing himself to address issues that are filled with moral (and ethical, we later learn) dilemmas about otherness and humanity by way of our bonds with other animals.

Step siding the complexities, in a caption the story is about a man who decides to take care of wild bears and becomes so immersed in the experience that he loses sight, over the years, of the fact that these creatures are dangerous and can devour anyone in a glimpse, for reasons we are not sure of or cannot understand. Now, Herzog takes this story and its documentary material to create a film reflecting his readings (or not) about the experience and events that took place because of this unique bond.

9 M. Bell, *Grizzly Man, Sentimentality, and Our Relationships with Other Animals*, [in:] Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction, eds. S. Wolf, C. Grau, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 15–36.

10 Ibidem, p. 22.

11 Ibidem, p. 29.

Bell recognizes a thread of Herzog's arguments in the idea of sentimentality. "Sentimentality can be objectionable when it devolves into a kind of idolatry or leads one to demonize those seen as threats to the target."[12] In other words, it does not matter if one accepts sentimentality or not as an emotional drive to relate to others or situations, at some point sentimentality leads us to take wrong decisions or make bad choices, and these can lead to risking our lives. "Thus, while Herzog is wrong to dismiss Treadwell's affection for the bears as merely sentimental, we must conclude that some of Treadwell's sentimental affection ended up harming the bears, Huguenard, and himself."[13]

Of course, we are talking about rather unique other animals. These are not domestic pets, like cats and dogs, where the bonds we establish do not put our lives at risk. The altered state of this case is that we are talking about forest bears; bears that run free and wild in the forest and that are not, by any stretch of the imagination, used to relating to humans. Given this, the question is how did Treadwell oversee this fact, or how is it that he put himself and his partner at the risk of being killed and (partially) eaten by the bears they cared for and adored? "I would like to suggest that sentimental affection might play a crucial role in our loving relationships. Sentimental affection is valuable when it is a perspective we occasionally take up and is balanced by loving attention. A loving relationship completely devoid of sentimental affection may fail to provide the reassurance that loving relationships often require."[14] For Herzog the reason of this misfortune or tragic event was sentimentality, but Bell is not (completely) convinced or persuaded, and I would agree. Yet this, I think, dispels the quandary.

"Herzog's apparent ambivalence toward sentimentality is, I think, appropriate. We have reason to be critical of those who always respond to the world in a sentimental way. But the criticisms of sentimentality should not lead us to be critical of all sentimental responses. Sometimes, responding sentimentally is what is called for by love itself " (p. 35–36). We are left with what is, in my mind, a very productive problem and complex ambiguity.

12 Ibidem, p. 33.

13 Ibidem, p. 33.

14 Ibidem, p. 34.

Christopher Grau: Love, Loss, and Identity in *Solaris*[15]

The author chooses Soderbergh's *Solaris* (2002), over Tarkovsky's film (1972), because the newer version and interpretation of the book[16] has more to do with love, loss and identity. And, to be fair, Soderbergh's is not, in a strict sense, a remake of Tarkovsky's interpretation but a different reading of the novel.

"In short, the premise of the film challenges us to reflect on what we *really* attach to when we fall in love: do we really love *the person*, or is it just the cluster of qualities the person happens to manifest and that could (possibly) be found in another?"[17] In other words, when in love, how unique is the subject of our love and our love bond? Can love be transferred from one person to another? Does love and falling in love always imply to a specific person? Does the choice of the beloved include a specific past and identity, and does the choice imply the possibility of future change?

"[L]ove's bond, though frequently beginning in an attachment to qualities, doesn't always end there. A deep love for another person often involves an attachment that cannot be reduced without remainder to an attachment to the qualities of the beloved. The beloved is, in an important sense, irreplaceable. Of course, even those of us who affirm this sort of bond as a model of love should admit that another form of attachment is both possible and often tempting: an attachment that remains at the level of qualities; qualities that could (in theory at least) be repeated in another. How could the difference between these two sorts of attachment manifest itself?"[18]

Grau takes the film as an opportunity to reflect on the possibility of duplicity in love or on the security of our sense of who it is that we love or have fallen in love with; do we really love this subject or the qualities we admire or are attracted to in her/him? "[T]he nice thing about the cinematic thought experiment we get in *Solaris* is that it allows us to contemplate and reflect on this question regarding the focus of one's attachment. Through the film's presentation of a fictional scenario in which a duplicate (manifesting many, if not all, of the qualities of the original) is created, we can see the protagonist struggle with his own attitudes regarding what sort of bond is appropriate."[19]

Hidden in a footnote, we find Grau's analytic intentions: "I won't offer a thorough defense that love directed at an individual is metaphysically coherent and

15 C. Grau, *Love, Loss, and Identity in Solaris*, [in:] Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction, eds. S. Wolf, C. Grau, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 97–122.

16 S. Lem, *Solaris*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej 1961.

17 C. Grau, op.cit., p. 106.

18 Ibidem, pp. 106–107.

19 Ibidem, p. 107.

ethically preferable to love directed at qualities. What I want to focus on instead are the conflicts that can arise from both sorts of attraction, and the way in which *Solaris* exploits this tension for dramatic effect."[20] And this is exactly what he does, or is it?

"I've suggested that we should resist the temptation to see *Solaris* as presenting an unambiguously happy ending and instead consider that the ending of this film is actually fairly disturbing once we reflect on the possibility that the 'reunion' we see is, in fact, the coming together of two *newly created* creatures who possess merely *apparent* memories derived from the genuine memories of a real human who has perished."[21]

Grau takes a turn towards the critique of identity to suggest a more productive (in the critical sense of the word) interpretation of the ending. Based on Parfit, he argues that "most of us think that the identity of a person is some sort of 'deep further fact' over and above the psychological and physical relations that make up a person."[22]

"The film naturally evokes contemplation on the complexities of love; in particular, it encourages us to consider the nature of love's bond. The far-fetched scenario presented to us resonates with very ordinary tensions we can feel when we ourselves love."[23]

C. D. C. Reeve: Lessons in Looking: Krzysztof Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Love*[24]

"Tomek, a nineteen-year-old boy, works as a clerk in the post office … When we meet Tomek, he has been peeping at Magda for a year, masturbating while watching her make love to other men. Lonely, isolated, and friendless, … peeping at Magda is the center around which his life is organized: his alarm clock rings at the time she usually comes home in the evening, so that he won't miss anything."[25]

In this chapter, Reeve develops a very close and extremely nuanced reading of Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Love* (1988). It is a story about the development of a rather unique love bond, patched with uncertainty, doubts, and misunderstandings. The love bond emerges out of a context in which the spectator cannot believe such a bond can develop.

20 Ibidem, p. 107, see: footnote 19.

21 Ibidem, p. 114.

22 Ibidem, p. 116.

23 Ibidem, p. 121.

24 C. D. C. Reeve, *Lessons in Looking: Krzysztof Kieslowski's A Short Film About Love*, [in:] Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction, eds. S. Wolf, C. Grau, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 271–286.

25 Ibidem, p. 272.

But Reeve's brilliance is to pay attention to the significance of looking and who is looking when. The author finds a way to decipher, in a convincing fashion I believe, the play of gazes that is weaved into the story and film. "Where love is concerned, there is something of the voyeur and the stalker in all of us. Tomek is looking at Magda and following her, but so, in our own way, immersed in the film, are we."[26]

Yet, not all gazes are alike and the intention matters. "Tomek looks at Magda with a loving and observant eye, so he sees a lot. But a film, too, is an erotic object, something that invites our loving gaze. If we fall in love with it, we will look long and closely. If we don't, we are sure to miss things."[27]

Love is declared, and it is received with skepticism. An interlaced ambiguity sets in and starts defining the content of a bond that emerges fortuitously. They are not supposed to meet, but they do. "He peeps at her, he says, because he loves her. But she is skeptical. Declarations of love, in her experience, are always just disguised expressions of sexual desire. Yet he denies that he wants to kiss her or make love to her. Her laughing flirtatiousness changed now to real engagement, she asks him what he *does* want. 'Nothing,' he replies. Moved and intrigued, she leans forward as if to kiss him. But he quickly bolts past her to the other end of the corridor and runs on up the stairs."[28]

"Tomek describes what he has seen while peeping through her window. 'You make love,' he says. 'Before I used to look… Not anymore.' 'It's got nothing to do with love,' she replies … What Tomek saw through the window looked like love to him, but it was something else. What is happening now may look like what he saw, but it isn't. Never has the film's own association of lessons in love with lessons in looking been more openly on display."[29]

The film turns the bond around, and the reading signals the particular opening of new meaning. Subject and object of the gaze become dislocated by love and desire. "It is easy to forget Magda's own desires and feelings, her own investment in what is happening. Yes, she is playing the role of the teacher, the one with experience, the one who knows and is in control. But she is also aroused, wet, responding with nascent love to Tomek's love."[30]

And of course, tragedy is brought into scene; love and desire are displayed in all of its consequences. "The effect on Tomek … is galvanic. He dashes out, knocking her aside. Shocked, not just by his behavior, but by her own, Magda, too, leaps into action.

26 Ibidem, p. 274.
27 Ibidem, p. 275.
28 Ibidem, p. 277.
29 Ibidem, p. 279.
30 Ibidem, p. 280.

She watches Tomek enter his apartment building, noticing which window becomes lit up. She runs to pull down a box, rooting th[r]ough its contents until she finds a pair of opera glasses. Through them, she sees him turn out the light. (He has gone to the bathroom to try to kill himself.) She holds the telephone up to the window—a stratagem she has used earlier to get him to call. She begins to make a sign on the back of an old drawing: COME BACK. SORRY. She holds it to the window. Her art is no more now than a handy surface on which to write that simple message." [31]

"Maybe, as Kieslowski puts it: we can repeat something, but better. It is in its embrace of *this* possibility that *A Short Film About Love's* own true but properly modest optimism seems to reside. Looking can indeed feed the obsessive circle of fantasy, but when done with love, it can lead to seeing and understanding." [32]

Reeve's close reading of the film, but particularly of the bond that develops against all odds, is incredibly instructive. The careful attention to nuance and significance, instead of selling only one interpretation opens up a multiplicity of possibilities and suggests a series of different interpretations, with virtue and legitimacy and not necessarily exclusive of each other. One has to appreciate a careful analysis, a labor of love, that grants us an opportunity to travel different paths with this short film.

In Closing

Joy with the subject, fun with the task, and a certain detachment from the rigidity of academic analysis runs across the essays in this volume. And one can notice this gained freedom in each one of the chapters. Each author takes the analysis to the territories of their exploration with a refreshing disregard to an overall program or the need to discover or to unveil and to respond to preset ideas. This strength, of course, reveals (at the same time) a certain weakness: it is a collection of essays and not a whole work that develops a group of arguments, complex or not. This is not to say, of course, that connections can't be made. There are many threads that keep these together (some of them mentioned in the introduction by Wolf), but many more that remain to be discovered by each reader.

As a reader, I was ambivalent about this volume. I could not shake off the feeling of being deceived by the embedded promise in the title, yet and simultaneously I was fascinated by the readings. Perhaps deception is an inappropriate term, as it sounds too dramatic, yet there is a promise that is not fulfilled. At the same time, nonetheless,

31 Ibidem, p. 281.

32 Ibidem, p. 285.

this is really a delightful read, a very rewarding intellectual experience that I do recommend for those that want to venture into the reflections that are not standard in the philosophy of love. The seventeen essays are small journeys into uncharted territories, into the commonality or uniqueness of love bonds and their many forms and permutations. By way of their artistic representation in literature and film, each one of these journeys takes us close to the events, difficulties, and nuances of our need to love and be loved.