

# The Actor-Writer as Author in the *Before Sunrise* Trilogy

Jennifer O'Meara

Discussions of actors' relationship to authorship tend to foreground the difficulty of distinguishing performers' choices from those of the director. As acting scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke rightly notes, editing and sound recording techniques can radically alter an actor's performance, giving montage the power to "redefine the relationship between director and actor from one of collaboration to one of authority and control."<sup>1</sup> Be that as it may, the dynamic between performer and director can be more complex than analyzing what happens on set and in the editing room. The overlooked agency of actors is tied to the overlooked agency of screenwriters, with both groups suffering from the well-established focus on the director as the dominant creative force behind a film. What happens, then, to the relatively small number of actors whose role includes both performing and screenwriting?

This essay will consider this doubly marginalized figure – the actor-writer as author – through a focus on the *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995), *Before Sunset* (Linklater, 2004) and *Before Midnight* (Linklater, 2013) trilogy. Although Richard Linklater directed the trilogy, he co-wrote the second and third films with Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke, the performers who play the trilogy's central couple, Céline and Jesse. The essay aims to examine how actors such as Delpy and Hawke develop mutually beneficial co-authoring relationships with filmmakers like Linklater. To do so, I will draw on selected performance scholarship, as well as interview discussions of the trio's work processes. In addition to analyzing the films themselves, I will gauge whether Delpy and Hawke's co-authorship with Linklater served as a stepping stone that helped them create solo authorial projects.



**Figure 1: Linklater, Hawke and Delpy discuss *Before Sunrise*; the trio writing the screenplay for *Before Sunset***

Linklater is an openly collaborative filmmaker. He brings a respect for actors' work to the process, as well as a background in acting, which is uncommon among directors:

"I trained as an actor for five years. [...] I didn't want to be an actor but I liked the environment creatively [...]. I always liked rehearsals. It's like if you're an athlete—I liked practice more than the games. It's fun, [and] it's very creative. I like to work with the actors and treat them like collaborators, and they come up with a lot of lines."<sup>2</sup>

With regard to *Before Sunrise*, Linklater is quick to point out that he didn't cast Delpy, a relatively unknown actress at the time, by chance. Instead, he looked for, and praises Delpy as, an actress capable of developing Céline's honest and distinctive voice.<sup>3</sup> Linklater typically schedules several weeks of rehearsals before shooting, during which time he allows performers to improvise dialogue that is incorporated into a revised script. In the initial screenplay for *Before Sunrise*, several scenes were deliberately left "bare" for the actors to "fill in."<sup>4</sup> Linklater took his collaboration with Delpy and Hawke much further with the second and third films, for which Delpy and Hawke received co-writer credits, as well as a variety of screenwriting awards and nominations, including Academy Award nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay for *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight* for both films.



**Figure 2: Hawke and Delpy with their Critics' Choice, Louis XIII Genius, Awards in 2014.**

To fully understand Delpy and Hawke's authorial contributions, it is necessary to summarize the trilogy's approach to charting the relationship between their characters. In *Before Sunrise*, Jesse (an American writer) and Céline (a French student) meet on a train and spend the rest of the day and night exploring Vienna while getting to know one another. Jesse must leave for the airport at sunrise, and, although they agree to meet up again exactly one year later, this doesn't happen for another nine years, as seen in *Before Sunset*. This time around, Jesse and Céline meet by chance in Paris, where he is promoting a book that is loosely based on their meeting in *Before Sunrise*. Again, their time together is limited, as Jesse has to return later that day to his wife and child in the U.S. Nine more years have passed when we revisit them in *Before Midnight*, with Céline and Jesse now married and living in France with their twin daughters. The couple continues to negotiate their relationship, with considerable arguments and the added responsibility of co-parenting. In each low-key film, characters are shown in long sequences that encourage audiences to read their exchanges as happening in "real-time" and limit the ability of the director and editor to control Delpy's and Hawke's performances after the fact. Moreover, given that the films revolve around a series of intimate and meandering conversations, Delpy and Hawke's contribution to the writing is highlighted in a way that would not necessarily be the case in a typical action-driven plot.

This leisurely pace allows audiences to become intimate not only with the characters, but also with the actors' performances. This sets them apart from the kind of fragmented gestures and movements that Steven Rybin identifies as typical of performances broken up by intensified continuity in much contemporary Hollywood cinema.<sup>5</sup> In an introduction to a 2014 dossier on film acting in *The Cine-Files*, various prominent acting scholars were asked to write about a performer of their choice, and Rybin sees it as no coincidence that the majority of them focus on early Hollywood stars, since "perhaps the relatively expansive time and space afforded to the actor in classical filmmaking holds attraction for the scholarly film lover." Despite the *Before Sunrise* trilogy's radically different production context in contemporary independent cinema, it is similar to classical Hollywood in how it provides its actors with a relatively expansive canvas, one that encourages more attentive performance analysis. Given that we spend approximately five hours with two characters who rarely share the screen with supporting players, Delpy and Hawke have even more time to display their performances than classical Hollywood actors had. Since their performances tend to play out in very long takes, their ability to control or author the finished product is much greater than for actors whose performances are edited extensively to conform to Hollywood's current intensified continuity style. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Delpy and Hawke's capacity to determine their own performances was not partially a result of Linklater's own authorial tendencies.

In particular, David T. Johnson highlights Linklater's preoccupation with "the experience of temporality, for both character and spectator."<sup>6</sup> By representing characters at a variety of points in their fictional lives, Linklater has developed ways to naturalistically capture human development over time and to challenge the understanding of film characters as diegetically confined. This impression is particularly strong in *Boyhood* (Richard Linklater, 2014), given that the film was shot for a short period each year, over twelve years. Although this strategy garnered *Boyhood* and Linklater three Golden Globes, an Oscar, and dozens of other accolades, it seems less experimental to viewers who have already watched Delpy's and Hawke's characters develop from young adults to middle-aged parents over the course of the *Before* trilogy.<sup>7</sup>

The structure of the series, with nine-year intervals in between each film, challenges the notion that characters are confined to the events captured on-screen. In the second film, Céline and Jesse allude to things that have happened since they last met, nine years previously in *Before Sunrise*. Similarly, in *Before Midnight*, they allude to their lives in the period between *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*. Obviously this does not grant the characters independence, but given that there was nearly a decade between each production, combined with their physical signs of aging, the impression for the viewer is no less credible than seeing someone from his or her own past in reality. You accept that they have continued to exist, even though you were not there to see it.

The way that Delpy and Hawke contributed to their characters' development further complicates this impression of the characters' partial independence. It is not uncommon for actors to play versions of themselves, but in this case, the characters directly incorporated elements of Delpy and Hawke's lives. For instance, what was described in the *Before Sunrise* screenplay as "Scene in a café, their relation goes to a new level, something very intimate for the first time," became the scene in which Céline pretends to phone a friend back home to tell her about meeting Jesse, who pretends to be the friend.<sup>8</sup> Jesse then does the same. The scene becomes a clever way for both characters to playfully allow each other (and us) insight into what they are feeling. Both characters use the device to subtly compliment and insult the other, thus bringing the relationship the intimacy that Linklater desired but didn't know how to achieve when writing the initial screenplay. The scene took shape only when Delpy suggested and improvised the fake phone call device – something she had done in the past with friends. Many fans went on to cite that sequence as one of the film's highlights.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking to Johnson in a 2010 interview, Linklater described how actors can feel more empowered when asked to contribute parts of themselves to a character.<sup>10</sup> Delpy and Hawke do not have co-writing credits on the first film, which was instead co-written by Linklater's friend, Kim Krizan, who came up with the main characters. Yet Linklater always intended to rewrite the script with whomever he cast to play Céline and Jesse, and the trio spent three weeks reworking it. They continued to work on the script throughout the filming, embracing what Linklater refers to as a "living, breathing process."<sup>11</sup> Reading through various accounts of their more explicit collaborations on *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*, the striking impression is that the group projects developed in a balanced and egalitarian way. As Linklater describes, "As a team, three is a good number because if two of us really like something and the third doesn't like it, usually, it's not in the movie."<sup>12</sup> No one's opinion is more or less valued, and as a result, they generally find it difficult to attribute certain parts of a given film to one particular person. It is worth returning here to Sharon Marie Carnicke's scholarship, since she usefully examines the various dynamics between actors and directors in "Screen Performers and Directors' Visions" (2004).<sup>13</sup> Carnicke draws on Jean Renoir's division of directors into two types: those who focus on the camera (most directors), and those who focus on the actors.<sup>14</sup> She expands on Renoir's model, in order to acknowledge that a director can nurture an actor's performance without encouraging creative input, while another director may focus on visual design and still find a way to collaborate with performers creatively. Carnicke places only Robert Altman and Neil Jordan in this category. Linklater, whose aim of both nurturing actors' performances and encouraging broader contributions, is thus a rare commodity.

In addition to the uncommon working relationship that Delpy and Hawke developed with Linklater over the course of the trilogy, their work with him appears to have helped Delpy write and direct films such as *2 Days in Paris* (2007) and *2 Days in New York* (2012) and to have helped Hawke write and direct film such as *Chelsea Walls* (2002) and *The Hottest State* (2006). Reflecting on their two-decade long collaborations, Hawke expressed gratitude for Linklater's experimental approach and indicates that he was naïve in expecting the same from other filmmakers: "You think you're going to meet lots of writers who want to say [to the performers] help me make this [...]. We wouldn't be back here doing [*Before Midnight*] if it wasn't in fact extremely rare."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Delpy's solo projects share much with the *Before Sunrise* trilogy, including candid exchanges between openly flawed characters and a focus on the complex dynamics of romantic relationships. In *2 Days in Paris* (Julie Delpy, 2007), Delpy's character, Marion, is very similar to the character of Céline, and just as Delpy treads a fine line between character, actor and author in the *Before* films, she casts her own parents (Marie Pillet and Albert Delpy) as Marion's parents. This intensely personal approach to filmmaking encourages audiences to consider Marion as a direct extension of Delpy, much as the *Before Sunrise* series encourages viewers to consider Céline as an extension of her as well. In both cases, such an interpretation requires that audiences be aware of these production details, but given that media reviews tended to foreground Delpy's close ties to her character, it seems reasonable to assume that, for many viewers, Delpy takes on the status of character-actor-writer in the *Before Sunrise* trilogy and character-actor-writer-director in *2 Days in Paris* and *2 Days in New York*.



**Figure 3: Delpy and her mother, Marie Pillet, play mother and daughter in *2 Days in Paris***

Delpy can be located among the growing body of female actor-writers and actor-directors. This trend – which includes fellow indie performers such as Greta Gerwig, Lena Dunham, Sarah Polley and Lake Bell, as well as more high-profile names, such as Jodie Foster and Angelina Jolie – suggests an increased determination among actresses to take an active part in creating the kind of roles they are not being offered. This is not to suggest that male performers do not also cross over into filmmaking territory, with Clint Eastwood, Mel Gibson, George Clooney and Ben Affleck being just a few who have worked in front of, and behind, the camera. The proportional representation is what differs. With women so sparsely represented among working screenwriters and directors, hybridized careers such as Delpy's take on added significance. And despite Delpy appearing in a range of well-regarded European art-house cinema, including roles in Jean-Luc Godard's *Détective* (1985) and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Trois Couleurs: Blanc* (1994), she is best known for her collaborations with Linklater. That is, Delpy's writing collaborations with Linklater (and Hawke) appear to have played an important role in allowing her to *solely* author subsequent films – ones which, while similar, are told even more overtly from the perspective of Delpy and the parallel characters she plays.

Hawke has proven equally keen to work behind the camera. In addition to directing two films, he has published three novels since 1996. In terms of his writing, Hawke is praised for his ability to craft complicated characters rather than for his skills in developing narrative structure.<sup>16</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the *Before Sunrise* trilogy also derives its impact from nuanced characterization rather than from the loose plot. Caryn James effectively captures the advantages and disadvantages that come with performers who decide to create their own works. As she notes in a *New York Times* review of Hawke's second novel, *Ash Wednesday*: "[W]hen celebrities branch out, they often cross a line between ambition and star-driven hubris."<sup>17</sup> As James rightly surmises, anything that Hawke's writes automatically receives more attention than that of the average, non-celebrity author, but this is often tinged with "unusual hostility [...]" as if critics were offended that he dared to write at all.<sup>18</sup> While none of Delpy's and Hawke's solo projects has enjoyed the same kind of critical and commercial success as the *Before Sunrise* films, this does not detract from the likelihood that their writing contributions allowed them to diversify their creative output in ways that they found fulfilling.

Discussion of Delpy, Hawke and Linklater's working process seems to testify to the benefits of a collaborative relationship between director and performers. Linklater has never fit within a conventional "auteur" model of filmmaking. Not only does Linklater move freely between personal films and bigger Hollywood projects, but he also views the performers who appear in his work as significant contributors. In the case of the *Before Sunrise* trilogy, the intensely character-driven nature of the films seems to lend itself particularly well to collaboration. Yet, Delpy and Hawke are certainly not the only actor-authors at work today. Taking on multiple roles is increasingly common, especially among female performers. The career trajectory of Greta Gerwig seems particularly similar. With Noah Baumbach, Gerwig has co-written two of her major roles in *Mistress America* (2015) and *Frances Ha* (2012), and she has numerous other acting, writing and directing credits to her name. While Baumbach may have directed both films, Gerwig's distinctive presence and contribution to these roles means that it is easy to consider her as their co-author, if not main author.

The presence of actor-authors destabilizes the precarious status of the director as sole author or "auteur." The movie industry has long valued the role of the performer in generating interest in, and money for, a given production, while Film Studios has dedicated pools of research to the cultural and commercial aspects of stardom and, to a lesser extent, theories of on-screen performance. Yet, as this study of the *Before Sunrise* trilogy has aimed to reveal, it can be impossible to separate what actors do on-screen from what they contribute off-screen. This especially includes the lines they write or improvise for their own, or other, characters. Delpy and Hawke may remain better known for their contributions as actors, but their ability to combine authorship with acting is nonetheless worthy of attention. By providing creative input and helping to blur the line between character and performer and between actor and author, Delpy and Hawke lend much more to the trilogy than their physical presence and star power.

#### Works Cited

1. Sharon Marie Carnicke, "Lee Strasberg's Paradox of the Actor" in *Screen Acting*, ed. Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer (London: Routledge, 1999), 76.
2. Richard Linklater quoted in David Schwartz, "Transcript: A Pinewood Dialogue with Richard Linklater," *Museum of the Moving Image*, March 15, 1998 (Link accessed 30th May 2016).
3. Linklater has discussed Delpy in such terms at various points over the span of their eighteen-year collaboration. One of his more recent discussions of Delpy's casting and contributions can be found in David Gritten's "Before Midnight: the lovers return", *The Telegraph*, June 21, 2013 (Link accessed 30th May 2016).
4. Schwartz, n.p.
5. Steven Rybin, "Introduction to Dossier", *The Cine-Files*, special issue on Film Acting, Issue 6, Spring 2014 (Link accessed on 30th May 2016).

6. David T. Johnson, *Richard Linklater* [Contemporary Film Directors series] (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 8.
  7. Maria San Filippo notes and expands on this in "Growing Old Together: Linklater's Before trilogy in the Twilight Years of Art House Distribution", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Spring 2015), 53-59. As she explains, the trilogy "constitutes Linklater's most sustained experiment in cinematic temporality and duration in his pre-Boyhood (2014) period; each Before film employs Linklater's signature 'single day' narrative schema, long take/real time style, chronicling of moments made and missed, and probing of memory of mortality", 53.
  8. Schwartz, n.p.
  9. Ibid.
  10. David T. Johnson, "Interview with Richard Linklater" in *Richard Linklater*, 127-150.
  11. Ibid, 133.
  12. Ibid, 141.
  13. Sharon Marie Carnicke, "Screen Performances and Directors' Visions" in *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance*, ed. Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 42-52.
  14. Ibid, 43-4.
  15. Suzy Evans, "Ethan Hawke, Julie Delpy, and Richard Linklater Reflect on 'Before Midnight,' their 20-year Collaboration", *Backstage.com*, December 6, 2013 (Link accessed on 30th May 2016).
  16. See Caryn James, "Books of the Times; So He's Famous. Give Him a Break, if Not a Free Ride," *New York Times*, August 16, 2002 (Link accessed on 30th May 2016).
  17. Ibid.
  18. Ibid.
- 

**Author bio:**

**Dr. Jennifer O'Meara** lectures in Film Studies at Maynooth University, Ireland. Her recent publications include articles in *Frames Cinema Journal*, *The Journal of Digital Media Arts and Practice*, *Cinema Journal*, *The New Soundtrack*, and *The Soundtrack*, as well as contributions to podcasts, film posters, film music, and film dialogue.

---

The Actor-Writer as Author in the Before Sunrise Trilogy by Jennifer O'Meara is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#)

ISSN 1558478X