



Aesthetics of awkwardness in romance

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates awkward moments in two films and a novel which feature the reunited lovers trope: *Before Sunset*, *Past Lives*, and *Call Me by Your Name*. Whilst it is commonly regarded as a negative affective force owing to its association with unease, embarrassment, and alienation, I argue that awkwardness can be aestheticized and employed in romance to highlight honesty, intimacy, and raw emotions between characters. For this reason, despite its distancing effect, awkwardness can also invite emotional involvement from the audience and even effect catharsis in the narratives. The discussion this research article offers is best described as *postcritical*, an approach posited by Rita Felski, who seeks to diversify the hermeneutic frameworks whereby one can academically study artistic materials. With this framework, my examination of the selected texts does not seek to critique the texts. Rather, the article adopts a descriptive approach in order to disentangle and articulate the aesthetic experience that art can create for its audience.

KEYWORDS

Awkwardness, postcritique, romance, film aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

“You need to resign yourself to the awkwardness of life. Only if you find peace within yourself will you find true connections with others,” says a fortune teller to the protagonists in *Before Sunrise* (1995), the first film in Richard Linklater’s *Before* trilogy. Though delivered in a rather random fashion, this short statement accurately captures the mood and tone of the film, which revolves around a whirlwind romance between the two protagonists: Céline [Julie Delpy] and Jesse [Ethan Hawke]. Despite the clichéd premise of a chance encounter, *Before Sunrise* is notable for the way it insists on beauty in slice-of-life mundanity as the audience only follows the two protagonists’ flâneuring around Vienna in one evening while listening to their random discussions on various topics. One can say that the film avoids over-the-top situations prevalent in melodramas as well as the romantic-comedy genre, does not resort to larger-than-life characterizations, and instead regales the audience with an aleatory yet moving conversation between two people falling in love.

A point that merits our attention is the fact that awkwardness is a mood that recurs and pervades the entire narrative of the film. From the very beginning, when the two protagonists meet on a train, the audience first sees a German couple arguing loudly, creating a sense of discomfort for other passengers. This awkward situation, however, is an inciting action that

prompts the two protagonists, who are strangers, to start talking to each other. On the spur of the moment, both decide to get off the train and spend one day in Vienna, a decision that eventually turns into an unforgettable night for them. When one puts aside the romantic orientation of the film, the setup of the story exemplifies a somewhat awkward situation. Two strangers who have just met have to spend time together for a day, not to mention that they also decide to engage in conversations that reveal their most private and most personal thoughts about themselves. At one point, not long after they get off the train, the two characters also admit that the situation feels “kinda weird” and “a little awkward” (Linklater, 1995). Even the aforementioned scene where Céline has her palm read by a palmist starts awkwardly as the fortune teller walks up to her and offers to give her a prediction in exchange for money. Notwithstanding her awkward intrusion into their space, the prediction together with the fortune teller’s cryptic demeanor helps strengthen the surreal, dream-like mood which characterizes Jesse and Céline’s romantic evening. This is the aesthetic facet of awkwardness in romance that this article seeks to unpack, though the discussion in this paper will focus on the film’s sequel, *Before Sunset* (2004), which is centered upon the reunion between the two protagonists and is shaped by awkwardness even more than the first film. My argument is that *Before Sunset* presents a case in point where the awkward, an affective category commonly construed as negative, can be rendered aesthetically pleasing. Apart from the second film in Linklater’s *Before* trilogy, this article will also examine Céline Song’s *Past Lives*, a 2023 film with a similar premise, together with *Call Me By Your Name*, a novel by André Aciman. What these stories share is the narratives that turn awkwardness into something to be welcomed rather than shunned as awkward situations in the narratives ultimately help bring about moments of truth, honesty, and intimacy for the characters.

In discussing the effects of awkwardness in fictional narratives, my examination of awkwardness is informed by Rita Felski’s theory of *postcritique*. Paradigmatically akin to the idea of *surface reading* posited by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, Felski’s theory seeks to restore the language of attachment and connection to scholarly discussions about art, particularly literature, which for a few decades have been characterized by an orientation toward detachment and indifference as well as grandiose interventionist rhetoric. Felski stresses that attending to how art hooks us or draws us in is by no means less important; nor should it be automatically deemed as a form of weakness (Felski, 2020, p. 3). In Felski’s words, being attached to an artistic work “is not something to be regretted or repudiated” and should not be regarded “as the condition of those unable to slide through the world with sufficient dexterity and ease” (Felski, 2020, p. 3). Rather, attachment is “a nonnegotiable aspect of being in the world” (Felski, 2020, p. 3), and it is “a matter not only of individual receptiveness but also catalysts, sparks, triggers—all those influences that steer us toward an affinity for certain works” (Felski, 2020, p. 7). This article participates in Felski’s postcritical project by attending to moments in fictional stories that call for affective involvement from the audience. Moreover, focusing on aesthetics, which may at times prove challenging to study due to the linguistically elusive nature of aesthetic categories in general, this article should also contribute to scholarly attempts to approach awkwardness in media and storytelling, as exemplified by academic works of Naughton and Naughton (2012),

Middleton (2014), Duncan (2017) and King (2021). While these scholars have explored awkwardness from different angles, what distinguishes this article from their works is the focus on the genre of romance or the theme of romantic relationships in fiction. One can say that the aesthetic of the awkward still remains rather undertheorized and is normally viewed as a negative affective category. King's *The Cinema of Discomfort*, for example, examines awkwardness in indie films in conjunction with other negative categories, such as the disquieting and the embarrassing, thereby reinforcing the common negative perception of the awkward. In a similar vein, Duncan's discussion of cringe comedy posits that awkwardness found in the genre entails "an unusually onerous kind of labor," which "converges on our endurance of a state of 'awkwardness' whose negative phenomenological effects extend from psychic unease to real physical pain" (Duncan, 2017, p. 37). In this light, the awkward encapsulates cumbersome, undesirable affects, ones to avoid as much as possible. Departing from this understanding of the awkward, however, this article seeks to conceptualize narrative enactment of awkwardness and its aesthetic effect, arguing that the awkward can be rendered aesthetically powerful when awkwardness is acknowledged and unleashed for the sake of honesty and intimacy.

THEORIES OF AWKWARDNESS

The word *awkwardness* itself encompasses broad concepts. As explained in Pauwke Berkers and Yosha Wijngaarden's *A Sociology of Awkwardness: On Social Interactions Going Wrong* (2025), awkwardness can describe personality traits, outcome of social interactions, feelings, or even cultures (p. 17-18). To unpack this fluid concept, thus, I deem it best to provide a survey of theoretical discussions relating to awkwardness first.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai (2012) has discussed three minor aesthetic categories, namely the cute, the zany, and the interesting. The discussion in this book is meant to draw the readers' attention to how "the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism" has transformed our aesthetic experience (Ngai, 2012, p. 1), and, according to Ngai, the focus on major aesthetics like the beautiful or the sublime no longer suffice in the current "hyperaestheticized" world, should one wish to comprehend the power of art and the aesthetic experience it yields (Ngai, 2012, p. 20). In light of this observation, this article turns to the awkward as a topic of inquiry. The awkward, too, exemplifies a minor aesthetic category which is sometimes ignored in discussion about narrative art. This article proposes another way by which we can understand and account for the multi-faceted affective connection one can make with fictional stories.

It should be noted that my discussion mainly examines the idea of awkwardness in two aspects. First and foremost, my use of the term *awkwardness* refers to a particular affect. Given that Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2020) describe affect as what is found "in intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (p. 1), my focus on awkwardness as an affective experience is meant to attend to external

forces that influence one's emotion. However, I also wish to contend that awkwardness can be aestheticized in fictional stories, by which I mean it can be rendered beautiful, affecting, and artistically pleasing. This postulation entails considering awkwardness as an aesthetic category or a quality in artistic materials that can prove emotionally pleasing for the audience.

Etymologically, the word *awkward* means “turned in the wrong direction” (Ayto, 2005, p. 44). The *OED* provides seven definitions of the adjective, some of which are conceptually proximate. The meanings most relevant to the discussion in this article include the following: “untoward or unfavourable for one's purpose”; “lacking dexterity or skill in performing their part”; “ungraceful, ungainly in action or form; uncouth”; “embarrassing, inconvenient” (Oxford University Press). These definitions share a common theme, pointing toward a disruptive or incongruent characteristic which involves absence of comfort, coherence, or smoothness. Theorizing awkwardness from a philosophical perspective, Alexandra Plakias explains that awkwardness is “a property that characterizes social situations or interactions when one or more participant(s) finds themselves lacking the guidance of a script and feels awkward as a result” (2024, p. 22). Whilst awkwardness, being a form of “social dysfunction, dysfluency, and dysregulation” (Plakias, 2024, p. 3), designates a sense of loss and disorientation, Plakias also states that it is “a direct consequence of our social nature” (Plakias, 2024, p. 2). This observation can imply that awkwardness is almost inevitable so long as we need to interact with one another, especially in the situations where such interactions go beyond superficial or perfunctory exchanges. Awkwardness thus should be deemed a natural part of our social life. This idea is also addressed in Adam Kotsko's *Awkwardness* (2010), in which he explains,

The experience of awkwardness, then, is an intrinsically social one. And this means that, paradoxically, certain violations of the norms we rely on to navigate our way through social encounters—either violating specific rules, as in everyday awkwardness, or more broadly violating our expectation that there will be rules applying to every situation, as in radical awkwardness—actually create a weird kind of social bond. (p. 9)

This notion that unusual social bonds can be born out of awkwardness merits further investigation, for its positive implication can also point toward the possibility for the aestheticization of mundane moments that usually are deemed awkward. To live with awkwardness and without fear of faux-pas is arguably an art in itself. Sometimes, it can even give rise to beautiful or cathartic moments in our day-to-day interactions. That is to say, the fortune teller's advice in *Before Sunrise* about resigning oneself to awkwardness may hold water more than one assumes. The concept of awkwardness thus involves more than social mistakes or failure to follow “correct” social scripts but rather encapsulates affecting moments of unmasking, the result of which is profound connections.

ON BEING GENUINE: AWKWARDNESS IN RICHARD LINKLATER'S *BEFORE SUNSET* AND ANDRÉ ACIMAN'S *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

The stories to be examined in this section share a similar premise. They revolve around the reunions of past lovers and their awkward interactions as their reunions force them to reflect on the unfulfilled promise of their relationships and its relevance to their current lives. In creating a sense of awkwardness, the narratives in these stories play with the audience's knowledge of the characters' background to a great extent. This is highly notable in the case of Linklater's films considering the history of the director's famous trilogy. *Before Sunset* was released after *Before Sunrise* had left its audience with an obscure cliffhanger for nine years. Literally, just as Jesse and Céline have to wait for almost ten years for this reunion, so too do the audience who watched the film since its first release. This ten-year wait therefore becomes something that both the characters and those viewers share, an element that is meant to induce a sense of anticipation from the audience and can still be appreciated even among those who did not watch the first film when it was first released.

Ten years after their romantic escapade, Jesse and Céline reunite in Paris during Jesse's book tour, where they have an opportunity to re-enact their romantic encounter. Both walk around the city of Paris and update each other about what they have been up to after their separation. When the two characters first meet, Jesse says to Céline that "this is so weird" (Linklater, 2004) referring to their unplanned meeting and inadvertently repeating the same comment he made years ago. In terms of its discursive function, the sentence itself is akin to the expression "this is awkward" used in contemporary parlance. As Middleton observes, when one employs such an expression to describe a moment of discomfort, they can paradoxically ease the feeling of awkwardness that the situation itself conjures up, usually in a lighthearted manner (2014, p. 2). In acknowledging the awkwardness of the situation they find themselves in, Jesse as well as Céline shows that both are highly self-conscious of the distance that their nine years of separation is supposed to create, yet, the point of the second film is concerned with this awkward reconnection.

One element that proves artful in *Before Sunset* is how its narrative constantly plays with demarcation between intimacy and distance, and the characters' failure to maintain this balance can result in awkwardness. Having spent one passionate night together and later having been apart for years, Jesse and Céline may face the challenges as to what script they should follow. In other words, they cannot decide whether they should behave like ex-lovers, close friends, or mere acquaintances. Given the audience knowing the old flames between these two characters, the narrative and the dialogue in the film keep enticing viewers with the possibility that the two characters will address the awkward question as to whether they want to rekindle their relationship or not. To do so, however, means going off-script, thereby potentially making the situation more awkward. Nevertheless, with the nine-year cliffhanger that the first movie offers, the audience is also encouraged to anticipate the moments where the two characters admit that they have not outgrown their whirlwind romance. This is the contradiction that defines the dynamic in *Before Sunset*.

The failure to keep awkwardness under control is most heightened at the crucial moment toward the end of the film when both characters get into a boat and later ride a car back to Céline's place. The comedic, lighthearted exchange between Jesse and Céline eventually turns more serious as Jesse and Céline drop the act and decide to be honest with each other about their lives so far. This is arguably the most awkward moment in the film. Based on the characters' conversation, Jesse admits that he has never been happy with his marriage, and he only stays with his wife for the sake of his son. Moreover, he is never able to forget their first encounter in Vienna, a sentiment that Céline also shares. The admission in this scene proves awkward because it disrupts the roles they are supposed to play, ones that are marked by measured distance as opposed to strong and impulsive passion. At one point, both even seem to blame each other, claiming that their one-night escapade in Vienna has made them give up on the idea of romantic love. Jesse, for example, tells Céline about how he often cries at night when he thinks about their time together:

Jesse: and I wake up in sobs, all right? And my wife is sitting there, looking at me, and I feel like I'm a million miles from her and I know that there's something...wrong! You know, that I ca...that I can't keep living like this, that there's gotta be something more to love..than commitment...But then I think that...I might have given up...on the whole idea of romantic love. That I...I might have put it to bed, that...that day when you weren't there. You know, I think I might have done that.

Céline: Why are you telling me all this? (Linklater, 2004)

Céline's question highlights how awkward this confession is for both, as she does not know how to react to it. Nevertheless, this dialogue serves a climatic purpose as it creates a crucial and moving moment in the film where the tension that has gradually been built up from the beginning is released. The characters no longer attempt to suppress their emotion and vent out their sincere sentiments regardless of the consequence. Albeit disruptive at first, the awkwardness in this scene reinforces a sense of intimacy and effects a catharsis in the narrative, resulting from the characters trying to be truthful to each other.

The idea that awkwardness can be associated with truthfulness is addressed by Melissa Dahl in *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness* (2018). Based on Dahl, awkwardness arises at the moment when someone's mask slips (2018). To make one's true self visible or to reveal one's honest feelings can oftentimes lead to awkwardness, and a situation can become awkward when there are misalignments, contradictions, or incongruities between the expectations and performance of the two parties who interact. Dahl's observation here is informed by Erving Goffman's Shakespearean characterization of our social interactions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). In this book, the author posits that the way one socializes with others is similar to how an actor performs on stage. For Goffman, our people's daily interactions usually involve "performance," a term which he defines as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence

before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (p. 13). To maintain such performance, however, is not an easy task. As Goffman explains,

The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulses with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs (p. 36).

Still, what *Before Sunset* illustrates with the aforementioned car ride scene is the affecting power when such discrepancy is acknowledged and normalized. This is far from surprising given that, in romance, expressions of honest feelings are often the key components that lead to the resolution in the story. Awkwardness sometimes comes with disarming honesty. It helps emphasize vulnerability which, according to the logic of the story and its romantic convention, is something both Jesse and Céline should welcome. Along the same lines, since this awkward scene proves crucial to the trajectory of the film, the film’s narrative seems to encourage the audience to anticipate, accept, and even enjoy the awkwardness it induces too. The scene thus instantiates an aesthetic dimension of the awkward which is not always driven by emotional alienation and unease.

Linklater’s films are not the only examples of romance where awkwardness is employed in the manner discussed so far. The aesthetics of awkwardness is apparent in the dynamics of courtship between Elio and Oliver, the two protagonists in André Aciman’s 2007 novel, *Call Me by Your Name*. When examined closely, the awkward situations featured in the novel share similar functions to those found in Linklater’s films. For one thing, the story starts with an awkward atmosphere between the two protagonists as they do not know how much they can reveal to each other about their feelings. For instance, the following passage with Elio’s internal monologue illustrates well the character’s struggle to find the right script by which he can behave accordingly:

Perhaps, in this, as with everything else, because I didn’t know how to speak in code, I didn’t know how to speak at all. I felt like a deaf and dumb person who can’t even use sign language. I stammered all manner of things so as not to speak my mind. That was the extent of my code. So long as I had breath to put words in my mouth, I could more or less carry it off. Otherwise, the silence between us would probably give me away—which was why anything, even the most spluttered nonsense, was preferable to silence. Silence would expose me. But what was certain to expose me even more was my struggle to overcome it in front of others. (Aciman, 2007, p. 17)

From the protagonist’s juvenile perspective, failure to follow appropriate scripts and the concomitant awkwardness can be exposing. That is, awkwardness leads to even more

awkwardness, a situation that reflects Plakias's comment about the "epistemic double-blow" that awkwardness can entail:

When a topic is awkward, it's hard to get information about others' attitudes. Thus awkwardness is an epistemic double-blow: by stopping us from discussing topics, it stops us from gathering the information about others' expectations needed to determine which norms govern the issue. So even as awkwardness signifies an absence, it impedes our attempt to remedy it. (Plakias, 2024, pp. 72-73)

In this light, an awkward situation can result in a dead-end, causing more unease to those who find themselves in it. This dynamic defines the initial flirtation between both the protagonists in *Call Me by Your Name*, which oscillates between Elio's efforts to get his feelings across and his desire to keep them a secret. Paradoxically, it is this sense of threatening impasse that propels the narrative forward as the ping-ponging exchanges between the two characters induce a voyeuristic excitement to readers. The first portion of the narrative thus largely involves the two characters trying to read the other party's behaviors, treading water, and testing each other constantly.

If the awkwardness in the first portion of *Call Me by Your Name* results from the characters' reticence and their attempt to maintain a nonchalant facade, the awkwardness both characters experience in the second half of the novel is mainly caused by Elio's decision to spell out his long suppressed feelings. After Oliver leaves Italy and returns to the US, he gets married and works as a professor. Many years later, when Elio decides to visit him on campus on an impulse, the protagonist cannot help bringing up the time they spent together and the profound connection they formed, another awkward topic that both men end up revisiting with nostalgic feelings. In this instance, Elio is both straightforward and articulate. He even predicts the future where both are in their old age and how they are going to regard the memory they share:

And like the old men who sat around the piazzetta facing the Piave memorial, we'll speak about two young men who found much happiness for a few weeks and lived the remainder of their lives dipping cotton swabs into that bowl of happiness, fearing they'd use it up, without daring to drink more than a thimbleful on ritual anniversaries. (Aciman, 2007, p. 237)

The metaphor Elio employs here does not hide the regret that he believes both parties must harbor. Similar to the set-up in *Before Sunset*, readers are encouraged to anticipate such an awkward but honest expression of emotions in the story, for they offer a moment of relief by which the narrative revisits the promise it fails to fulfill, a romantic consummation that Aciman's narrative refuses to indulgently give to the readers. This is also why the ending of the story can prove emotionally impactful. In the last scene, Oliver, revisiting Elio's place in Italy, tells the latter that "I'm like you [...] I remember everything" (Aciman, 2007, p. 248). The two men are already at the point of no return in their relationship, yet Oliver's final

sentence in the novel teases readers even more about the possibility of a reunion. The narrative does not reveal how Elio responds to this comment but ends with a final paragraph where readers enter into Elio's thoughts:

I stopped for a second. If you remember everything, I wanted to say, and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you're just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there's not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name. (Aciman, 2007, p. 248)

Oliver brings up a topic that he is not supposed to mention, but such an awkward yet tempting topic is almost welcome in the narrative. This ending allows readers to still entertain the possibility of a rekindled relationship, though in actuality it no longer seems to be plausible. As for Elio, the protagonist knows that he is not supposed to cling on to the past, and, as a narrator, he only confides his honest desire to the readers. Such a conclusion, I contend, serves as another case in point where an awkward situation can become aesthetically pleasing in fiction. Elio's statement at the end may go against what should normally be deemed appropriate and realistic; however, in defying the expected acceptance of the protagonist's situation, the last paragraph revives the passion in the narrative for the last time, creating the last emotional impact to the final episode of Elio and Oliver's love affair.

HUMANE AWKWARDNESS: CELINE SONG'S *PAST LIVES*

So far I have discussed how awkwardness can connote genuineness. In this section, my discussion will focus on the aestheticization of awkwardness in Celine Song's *Past Lives*. Similar to *Before Sunset* and *Call Me by Your Name*, awkwardness in this film signals moments of honesty. Still, my examination of the film also shows that awkwardness in this film is also executed to highlight humaneness and empathy, thereby attesting to the flexible and versatile nature of the aesthetic category in question.

Song's *Past Lives* is centered around the triangular relationship between three characters: Nora [Greta Lee], Arthur [John Magaro], and Hae Sung [Teo Yoo]. The title alludes to the term *in-yun*, a concept in Korean cultures connoting the notion of destiny and soul mates. Growing up in South Korea, Nora and Hae Sung were schoolmates and each other's "puppy love." Their juvenile romance came to an end when Nora's family migrated to the United States. About a decade later, the two reconnected on social media, with their romance reignited. Nevertheless, as an aspiring writer, Nora found herself unable to focus on her writing. To Hae Sung's dismay, she decided to put their relationship on hold for a while. Both promised that the breakup was going to be a mere temporary separation, but their romance ultimately did not continue. Nora later met Arthur, a Jewish American, at a

writer's retreat she attended in Montauk. They then got married and lived together in New York.

Like the romantic connection between the two protagonists in *Before Sunset*, the narrative in Song's film gradually establishes the relationship between Nora and Hae Sung which span over two decades. It is this long-time frame that allows the audience to feel emotionally invested in fictional relationships. The main focus of the film thus lies in Hae Sung and Nora's second reunion 12 years after they reconnected online. In this second reunion, Hae Sung decides to visit Nora in the United States for two days. With the two characters' history, there is a tension already built up in the narrative. Their interaction is at times awkward because of the unfulfilled promise with regard to their past. Hae Sung and Nora, through a lens of romantic conventions, are narratively positioned as two people with a prolonged bond who are supposed to be destined "soul mates" whereas Arthur is a man who, to quote Arthur himself, "stands in their way" (Song, 2023).

With this triangular relationship, the film makes use of several awkward situations to tease the audience with the possibility of a reignited romance between Nora and Hae Sung. When the two protagonists eventually meet face-to-face in New York, Nora first greets Hae Sung by hugging him, a gesture that makes the latter appear ill at ease initially. When they first get on a subway train, the camera shows that their hands almost touch while holding on to the pole. This visual choice points toward romantic possibilities for this reunion and at the same time hints at the characters' reluctance to revisit their passionate past, both of which contribute to an awkward atmosphere between the two characters. This is mainly because toying with those possibilities means not following appropriate social scripts, the opposite of how a rational person should act in their situation. The two protagonists then start conversing about general things, but the conversations occasionally veer toward awkward topics, such as Hae Sung's strained relationship with his girlfriend or the fact that Nora tried to reach out to Hae Sung when she was about to marry Arthur. Again, these pieces of information allow the audience to entertain the possibility that the two characters should have ended up together and now could actually be the time for them to rekindle their romantic relationship. Hae Sung's arrival itself can signify the call of the past, evoking many what-if questions for Nora. As the story progresses, the interactions between the characters become increasingly awkward. At one point, Nora decides to ask Hae Sung why the latter started looking for her 12 years ago. In their current situation, this is a rather awkward question to address, because any answer that suggests a possibility for a renewed romance can affect Nora's own relationship with her husband. Hae Sung's response as a result is understandably elusive. He simply states that he finds her sudden departure upsetting. This answer, however, understates the romantic feelings he is unable to let go. The character wishes to express his romantic feelings for his childhood friend, but he realizes how irrational his honest admission can be.

Based on the interactions discussed here, I contend that the narrative in *Past Lives* is marked by an oscillating dynamic. That is to say, there are two opposing forces at work which contribute to the emotional appeal of the film. One is the film's orientation toward the trope of *passionate love* commonly found in romantic drama. Based on Erica Todd's

explanation in *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema: Romance and Film Genre* (2013), the passionate love convention is one that depicts an idealistic, fleeting form of love where the main characters “encounter a strong, but fleeting, love and are torn apart by circumstances beyond their control” (p. 7). The situation in *Past Lives* fits this description with Hae Sung’s arrival representing a longing for an idealized version of romance. At the same time, the story is also grounded in realism, with an implied knowledge that following one’s passion or hopelessly subscribing to belief about *in-yun* is, albeit romantic, not a reasonable course of action. This idea is suggested when one considers the depiction of Nora’s loving relationship with Arthur, who is also a writer like her. Nora may at one point admit that her decision to marry her American husband is also driven by a pragmatic benefit like securing a green card for US residency, yet the film makes it clear with the portrayals of their intimate relationship that this fact alone does not suffice to discredit the genuineness of their love. In this light, awkwardness in the film is also narratively enacted via the film’s bi-directional orientations, which leave the audience unable to identify the best course for Nora to pursue. In other words, the audience finds themselves in a situation where it is difficult to decide the right “script” they should choose too.

What further complicates the awkward atmosphere in the film is the presence of Arthur himself in the second portion of the film. When Hae Sung and Arthur finally meet face-to-face, their interaction may not be marked by hostility as those commonly found in melodramatic conventions in which awkward situations are caused by antagonism and jealousy between two romantic contenders. They greet each other in a genial manner, yet awkwardness is still palpable in this scene, presumably because the two men are aware of each other’s significance in Nora’s life. In a promotional video entitled “Creating Chemistry on *Past Lives*” posted on A24’s official YouTube channel, Song and the cast reveal that, during the rehearsals and the workshop, the director limited how Lee, Yoo, and Magaro could interact with one another. The scene where Hae Sung meets Arthur was also when Yoo and Magaro actually encountered each other in person for the first time (A24, 2023). Song also did not allow Lee and Yoo to make any physical contact with each other when they rehearsed, so the first bodily contact between the two actors was actually captured in the scene where Nora hugs Hae Sung for the first time after their 24-year separation (A24, 2023). While most “chemistry” in romantic stories is created from an artifice of proximity, in the case of *Past Lives* the characters’ chemistry in the film is actualized with carefully orchestrated distance. The directorial instruction given by Song attests to the director’s understanding of how crucial awkwardness can be as an aesthetic, particularly when it helps accentuate the theme of separation and yearning in films.

The sense of awkwardness is most heightened in the bar scene toward the end of the film. Since Hae Sung is not fluent in English, Nora needs to talk to him in Korean. This situation creates a rather awkward dynamic between the three characters. In this scene, where Arthur and Nora take Hae Sung to a local bar on his last night in New York, Nora sits between the two men and has to translate what Hae Sung says to her husband. As the night goes on, Nora turns toward Hae Sung more, speaking mainly in Korean. In tandem with this shift, the camera shot also leaves out Arthur for quite some time and focuses more

on the two characters only. This is also the part where Hae Sung confesses his feelings for Nora while toying with the question as to what could have happened to them instead, had he not let her go twelve years ago. Despite the poetic nature of the two characters' exchange, the narrative creates a sense of awkwardness still with the awareness of Arthur's presence.¹ Later, when the two men actually talk, Hae Sung apologizes to Arthur for talking only in Korean and says that he will stop. Arthur also says that he is glad that Hae Sung is visiting. The awkwardness in this exchange is marked by the two characters' awareness of the difficult situation they are in and their knowledge of the other's role in the life of the woman they love. However, this awkwardness also arises out of the two men's attempt to be considerate of each other. This exchange thus highlights the kindness that the two characters have for each other, a sentiment that reflects Song's insight into the emotional intricacies that awkwardness itself can encapsulate.

Noteworthy here is that this bar scene is also based on Song's actual experience. In an interview with *BAFTA*, she describes an evening she spent with her husband and her childhood friend at a bar in East Village in New York City as follows:

[...] And I actually, while sitting there translating between these two men, I actually felt like beyond translating between two languages and two cultures. I also was translating between two parts of my own self. And I think that there was something about it that felt both totally contradictory and very strange, and magical, all those things. And I think there was something about it where it inspired me to think, "Oh, maybe, this is a story that I can tell. Maybe this is a thing that I can make a film about." (*BAFTA*, 2023)

The ontologically bi-directional nature of Nora's experience addressed by Song here accounts for the awkwardness of the entire situation. Yet, the director succeeds in turning an awkward situation into a moment of beauty while demonstrating that awkwardness can translate into a positive and humane interaction, one that affirms rather than negates connections we can make with one another.

Even in the final portion of the film in which Nora bids farewell to Hae Sung, the cathartic relief in this situation is also shaped by a sense of awkwardness. As Hae Sung is about to leave in a taxi, he asks Nora for the last time what their next life will be like, given that they did not end up together in this life. This conversation alludes to the notion of *in-yun* introduced earlier in the story. Nora realistically answers that she does not know, the last gesture that refuses to reciprocate the residue of romantic feelings Hae Sung has clung to. This answer is supposed to give them the closure they mostly need to move on with their lives. However, Nora's strong facade and determined persona eventually give in. After Hae Sung's taxi takes off, the camera follows the character slowly walking back to her home. She starts crying uncontrollably. When she reaches her apartment, Arthur, who is waiting for her, has to walk down the stairs to comfort her. Many components in this interaction can be regarded as awkward, yet this scene is supposed to produce a catharsis, a release of strong emotions that have been built up from the beginning of the film and culminate in this last

moment. Given how she constantly chooses not to dwell on the possibility of her past romance with Hae Sung, Nora's crying in the end betrays the side of her that she tries to repress. In a normal circumstance, her outpouring of emotion is likely to lead to an awkward consequence because she expresses regrets to the last person she is supposed to show them to. Still, Song's narrative manages to turn this supposedly awkward circumstance into a humane one. Arthur reacts by embracing and consoling his wife, choosing kindness over jealousy just as he constantly does throughout the film. Equally worth noting is that, in contrast to the intrusive gaze at the beginning of the film, the scene of Nora's walk is also shot from afar, a distance from across the street. The audience only hears Nora's cry but is unable to see her facial expression in her most vulnerable state. The narrative seems to suggest that this interaction can be awkward, and such an intimate, emotional moment between a woman and her husband should not be intruded upon. Paradoxically, it is the narrative insistence on distanciation that is meant to connect the audience with the characters as it asks them to view Nora's plight with compassion. In the end, it is this awkward situation that makes clear the intimate connection between Arthur and Nora while showing the audience that awkward situations are more than a "drama" to be witnessed and enjoyed at the expense of those going through it. In presenting Nora's closure in such a way, Song's narrative invites her audience to attend to what awkwardness can really encapsulate. It can entail more than embarrassment or discomfiture and instead can signal vulnerability that we share with one another.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined three stories and the moments of awkwardness in them, attending to the multi-valence and versatility of what we normally deem awkward situations. My argument is that the three works discussed in this article instantiate how the awkward as an aesthetic category offers more than moments of discomfort. It is both multifaceted and multivalent. As shown in the texts, an awkward atmosphere or an awkward interaction can serve a thematically significant function, affirming intersubjective ties the characters forge with one another while also inducing emotional involvement from the audience. I acknowledge though that one of the limitations of this study is that its discussion focuses only on three texts. Nevertheless, the comparable use of awkwardness and its aesthetic should not be uncommon in a lot of romance with the aforementioned trope. In terms of its application, my discussion seeks to enrich our analytical framework with regard to aesthetics. This paper eventually should offer a new perspective through which awkwardness can be made analytically intelligible. I maintain that our attention to various aesthetic categories, no matter how minor they are, should allow us to discern the complexities and different means whereby our affective experience is formed, affected, and mediated by artistic materials.

NOTE

1. In an interview with the cast where Magaro recounted how this scene is filmed, Magaro reveals that despite the fact that he will not appear on camera while Hae Sung and Nora are having a heart-to-heart conversation about their feelings, Song insists that Magaro sit there with them throughout the entire scene no matter how awkward he feels (A24, 2023).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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