

## *Falling in Love is a Piece of Cake: A Cinematic Logic of Love*

**Cherie Lacey and Cindy Zeiher**  
Victoria University of Wellington

### **Résumé/Abstract**

What does it mean to fall in love? And what does film have to do with it? Love, in its fantasmatic capacity, always maintains a relationship to culture; which is to say, we know how to fall in love because we consume stories about love — love is always a love story. How, then, does love relate to traversing the screen fantasy? As Žižek maintains, one only needs to experience the nothingness behind fantasy for it to be an encounter with the Real. Florian Habicht's film *Love Story* (2011) explores love and fantasy through the metaphor of a piece of cake. The film begins with Florian seeing a beautiful woman carrying a piece of cake on the New York subway. This ignites his desire to get to know her and Florian, as both the central character and the director, decides that the people of New York will script their romance; the end result of this collaborative process is the film itself. The piece of cake becomes the motif through which people speak about their own fantasies of love. The suggestion is this: falling in love is (like) a piece of cake.

### **À propos des auteurs/About the authors**

Cherie Lacey is a lecturer in Film and Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand) and a Scholar in Residence at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies. Her primary area of research is in New Zealand film and writing, with a particular interest in texts that involve some aspect of formal experimentation, such as the film essay, magic realism, and creative nonfiction, to which she brings a psychoanalytic understanding. After completing her Ph.D. in Film Studies in 2010, Dr Lacey completed two years of psychoanalytic study (Lacanian psychoanalysis) in Melbourne, Australia.

Cindy Zeiher holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Canterbury (New Zealand). Her research focuses on how



configurations of subjective desire can be located and understood within contemporary social life and ideologies. Theoretically she draws upon those authors, especially Slavoj Žižek, who employ Lacanian psychoanalysis. Dr Zeiher has contributed writings in the areas of critical social research, political and social movements, and cinema theory.



*“Can I tell you my idea? That we just keep having fun like this, and we film it, and then we’ve got a love story and a movie. If the love story doesn’t work out, we’ve still got a movie.”*

Florian Habicht (*Love Story*, dir. Habicht, 2011)

*“The first thing to note about fantasy is that it literally teaches us how to desire: fantasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality I fantasize about eating it; the problem is rather, how do I know that I desire strawberry cake in the first place?”*

Slavoj Žižek (From *Che vuoi? To Fantasy*, 1997)

There is a point in the film *Love Story* (Habicht 2011) when Florian looks into the camera and confesses: “I fall in love too easily... with life, with people. It happens all the time.” At this moment in the film, he is sitting on a rock in New York’s Central Park, holding a slice of cake on a plate. It is left to the spectator to make the final association: falling in love is, at least for Florian, a piece of cake. This notion appears to go against our common, everyday logic: that love is entirely singular, unique, and non-transferable. To speak in unqualified generalities, most of us think that we require a stellar alignment of Shakespearean proportions simply to find a person with whom we could fall in love. However, Florian’s confession, and the film at large, invites us to think differently about love. Most importantly, the film asks us to interrogate what sort of knowledge is involved in the state we call being “in love” and, moreover, how this relates to individual and cultural fantasies about love. Piecing together a narrative that is entirely drawn from others’ fantasies about love and/in the cinema, *Love Story* hints that there might well be a logic involved in love, and that this logic might be, to a large extent, cinematic.

Set in New York, the New Zealand film *Love Story* is quite literally an enactment of the fantasy of love. Florian Habicht, visiting New York on the Harriet Friedlander New York Residency (2009), seems to be deeply in love with the city, as well as with the people he meets. However, his



shifting, hapless love quickly becomes fixed on one object: Masha, a beautiful Russian actress he sees on the subway, holding nothing other than a piece of cake. This, the opening scene of *Love Story*, is filmed in a classic Hollywood, love-at-first-sight fashion. As he tells his father over Skype™ later that night: “I wanted to go to the movies but I stayed on the train, ‘cause of this girl. She was just standing there with a piece of cake in her hand — was a bit like a fairy tale, her dress and everything.” Rather than going to the movies, then, he brings his fantasy into reality by deciding to make a film about falling in love with Masha. In a sort of pick-a-path style of narrative, Florian takes his cue from the people of New York, who collectively script the story of the couple’s romance based on their own knowledge of love and the cinema.



[Habicht 2011]

Habicht, a director well known for his intermixing of fantasy and fact,<sup>1</sup> makes it increasingly difficult for the spectator to figure out whether the couple are really falling in love (in which case, the film would fall more on the side of fact or documentary), whether they are just acting (as Masha insists — she is an actor, after all), or whether the film itself is the very condition through which the couple can, in all senses of the term, make love. Upon the film’s release, Florian was subjected to much journalistic interrogation about the reality of the couple’s romance, beyond what we see on the screen. The following extract from an interview with Radio New Zealand’s Kim Hill (June 25, 2011) is typical:

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<sup>1</sup>See, in particular, *Woodenhead* (2003) and *Rubbings from a Live Man* (2008).



KH: You're not in love with [Masha], are you? Florian?

FH: [*Laughs*]. You have to watch the film. Oh, you've *seen* the film.

KH: Yes, but I don't know what is real. As is your usual trope, I don't know what's real and what isn't.

FH: Right. Well, that's nice to know.

KH: Do you love her, Florian?

FH: I want people to watch the film and make up their own minds, Kim.

KH: Where is she now?

FH: She's in New York. She lives in New York [...]

KH: How would you describe your relationship?

FH: It's pretty much what you've seen in the film. In the film, we're making a love story, and that's pretty much what happened.

Although the film cries out for an extra-textual confirmation of the couple's romantic status, Florian, to his credit, consistently refuses to give us any additional information, other than what we see on the screen. Florian and Masha's love story is, quite precisely, nothing other than *Love Story*, the movie. The film's logic here is that one cannot separate love itself (if we can even speak of such a thing) from the story, or fantasy, of love.

### **...Speaking of Love**

This is not so different from the way in which Jacques Lacan speaks, or rather does not speak, about love. Recall the well-known remarks from *Seminar XX*: "What I say of love is assuredly that one cannot speak about it. 'Talk to me of love' — what a lark! I spoke of the love letter (*la lettre d'amour*), of the declaration of love — not the same thing as the word of love (*la parole d'amour*)" (Lacan 1999, pp. 11-12). In the absent place of the "word of love" in Lacan's discourse, we find instead a slew of metaphors, quotations, references, stories, and so on. What we might learn from this is that we cannot access some form of "pure" love, outside or beyond the expression of it; there is no love that is beyond signification. Indeed, we could go one step further and argue (along with Lacan) that love exists exclusively in its capacity to be *written*. As Roberto Harari explains:

The forms, manners and modalities whereby love arises and is established in the subject are inseparable from a certain



discourse. *Love indicates culture, history, and hence signifiers.* As a phenomenon, no matter how spontaneous it might seem and although it claims to be a sort of emanation from the inside blossoming in the most intimate part of the subject, love is a fact of the signifier and is made up of signifiers (Harari 2001, p. 149; emphasis added).

At a discursive level, then, love operates as an empty signifier (or an *open set*, in Lacan's later mathematical terminology), but — precisely because of its constitutive lack — it is necessary to fill in this space with signification. These signifiers are, as Harari sets out, borrowed from a cultural history of signifiers, from history, literature, mythology, and so on.

Further, Lacan's proposition concerning the sexual relation,<sup>2</sup> that it is impossible<sup>3</sup> precisely because it cannot be written, reveals the function of love in relation to sexuality. Although the sexual relation cannot be written, the *impossibility* of the sexual relation can be written, and it is written precisely as love. This is why, according to Lacan, love is there to cover over, or supplement, the sexual non-rapport between the feminine and masculine sexual positions. As Lacan told his audience in a speech to the *Scuola Freudiana* in Italy in 1974:

It is only with an analysis that one realizes how sex comes to be embodied in this speaking being — but one thing in any case is excluded, and that is that the connection between one sexual being and another of the opposite sex can never be written... And it is because of this that love is only written thanks to a burgeoning, a proliferation, of detours, of quibbling, of late night meditations, of madness (why not say it?) that form such an important part of everyone's life (qtd. in Allouch 2007, p. 88).

In Lacan's 1972 seminar *Ou Pire*, love, in its capacity to over-write the sexual non-relation, comes to be associated with a number of fictions. These fictions are, by necessity, borrowed from contemporary culture, such as marriage, monogamy, love-against-all-odds, forbidden love, and

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<sup>2</sup> By the sexual relation, we are referring to the relation between the feminine subjective position and the masculine subjective position, as Lacan sets out in his *Table of Sexuation* (Lacan 1999, pp. 78-81).

<sup>3</sup> We use the word "impossible" here in its Lacanian sense, as "that which does not cease not to write itself".



so on. According to this logic, love can thus be understood as an attempt to (re)write the impossibility of the sexual relation as possible, a re-writing that is entirely composed of cultural references, quotations, and excerpts.

This notion finds a point of resonance with the way in which Lacan describes the fantasy in *Seminar XIV: The Logic of Phantasy* (1966-1967). Here, he comments that, “to make a fantasy, something ready-to-wear (*prêt-à-porter*) is necessary” (I.4). In other words, we do not construct a fantasy out of nothing; rather, we choose from a selection of ready-made fantasies, some of which fit better than others, but all of which are, nonetheless, off-the-rack. It is in this seminar that Lacan emphasizes the relationship between writing and the fantasy, for fantasy, like love, exists precisely in its capacity to be written.<sup>4</sup> The final thing to say at this point is that, for Lacan, love is itself a fantasy, which writes some-*thing* in the place of no-*thing*; love is written as a fiction, precisely a love story, in order to produce some form of relationship between the people involved. It provides an interim answer to the fundamental question posed by the subject to the other: *Che vuoi? What do you want from me?* The answer is provided by the love story, which is co-authored by the people involved in the relationship, and reveals knowledge of each subject’s fundamental fantasy in relation to the Other. Sometimes we find that the fiction is convincing enough, other times it is better to start another story.

### Cine-philia

If the ancient Greeks had Plato’s *Symposium* to teach them about love,<sup>5</sup> then today we have the cinema. As the fantasy space *par excellence*, cinema literally teaches us how to love, as well as how to desire. As Tony Hughes-d’Aeth argues, in conventional Hollywood cinema, “love ultimately comes to define — and delimit — the vicissitudes of fantasy” (2013, p. 17). These cinematic fantasies of love come to dictate the narrative of Habicht’s *Love Story*. At each point in the film, Florian takes his camera to the streets, informing strangers that he is filming a love story, telling them the story so far, and asking them what should happen next. What occurs then is a sort of cinematic free association, whereby

<sup>4</sup> In setting out his “logical articulation of phantasy,” Lacan emphasises the “relation of the structure of phantasy ... to the structure of signifier,” as well as its “relation to writing as such” (I.1). Further, Lacan begins this seminar with the writing of the formula of the fantasy, [ $\$$  a], suggesting that the writtenness of the fantasy is the starting point and basis for any understanding of it (I.2).

<sup>5</sup> In the *Seminar on Transference*, Lacan repeatedly refers to Plato’s *Symposium* as a “school for love”.



each person replies with the first thing that comes into their heads. The answers people give are drawn from their own fantasies about love, all of which cannot help but appear to the spectator as one among a fixed set of cinematic clichés. In one scene, Florian follows a young stockbroker into a cab, and asks for her advice on love and seduction:

Florian: I was just wondering if I could ask you a few questions. I met this Russian girl...

Woman: You just met this Russian girl, you're here for two months, and you want...?

Florian: Love advice.

Woman: Love advice, or seductive advice?

Florian: Seductive advice.

Woman: [...] Have you tried "the shy card"?

Florian: What's that?

Woman: Women... prefer shy men, because we want to be in charge.

Florian: That's really good. Can I use that? Can I do that?

Woman: You *should* do that... she's coming back to your place?

Florian: Yes... you don't have any love-making advice, do you?

Woman: Slow and steady wins the race... Play the shy guy. Coy. Just let her know that she's in charge... Keep your hands to yourself and she'll put her hands on you.

Although this woman is, on the one hand, directing Florian in his own love story, she is scripting it based on her own fantasies about love and its close associate, at least for her, seduction. In another sequence, Florian asks a cigar-wielding couple he sees on the street for help directing the love-making scene:

Florian: What makes a good sex scene? Because I'm trying to have one in my film.

Man: Slow. Slow.

Woman: ...and just lustful.

Man: Yeah. And just ripping shit off, ripping clothes off. Switching and moving. That kind of stuff. And that's just in the bed. On the couch, on the floor, on the wall — stuff like that.

Woman: Yeah, very good.

Man: Down and dirty.





Masha and Florian then enact the snippets of advice offered by the people of New York in the making of their own love story. However, their own enactments rarely follow the advice to the letter; rather, their own love story becomes a bricolage of ideas, descriptions, and advice taken from a number of people, which becomes re-interpreted in their own way. A continuous circuit between love and the cinema is thus inscribed: from cinematic fantasies to individual fantasies, which then inform the making of a film, which is then enacted by the couple, which is then screened for the gaze of the spectator, which may well inform the spectator's own fantasies of love, and so on. In this circuit, it is impossible to designate a beginning or an end, and it is hopeless trying to distinguish between an individual's fantasies of love and cinematic ones. This is precisely the point the film is attempting to make: one cannot separate one's own knowledge of love from (cinematic) representations of it.

Although the couple interprets the scenes in their own way, the narrative itself is entirely driven by others. Indeed, the film's narrative strictly adheres to the cinematic logic of the love story, which moves from the moment of encounter, to the period of blissful romance, the climactic love-making scene, and the break-up/obstacle to love, the grand gesture (wherein Florian spells out "I love you" in socks on the lobby floor of Masha's apartment building), to the eventual reunion. The film's ending appears to give the spectator what we expect from a cinematic love story: a wedding scene, albeit rendered in true Habichtian style, with the couple being married by a Michael Jackson-impersonating dwarf on the Brooklyn docks.



[Habicht 2011]



However, this scene is revealed to be a daydream, a fantasy that is based on (no surprises here) advice given to him by a stranger he meets in a park. Outside of this fantasy, the future of the couple seems in doubt, literally “up in the air” as Florian prepares to board a flight back to New Zealand and we are unsure whether Masha will join him. And so, in the final act of the film, it passes over to the viewer to write their own ending. Whether Masha and Florian’s love story is a tragedy or comedy depends ultimately on the unconscious fantasy of each individual spectator, and the answer that we provide to this enigma reveals something about our own fantasmatic relationship to love.

### **Traversing the Fantasy of Love**

In its absolute adherence to the cinematic narrative of love, the film renders it utterly absurd. That is to say, in Florian’s attempt to enact the cinematic logic of love he makes love appear strange, outside ourselves, something not quite familiar. In so doing, *Love Story* takes something that is usually experienced in its agalmatic form, as the most intimate and interior part of ourselves and our loved one, and externalizes it, holding love itself up as an object to be scrutinized, or at least seen in a more critical light. By following the cinematic logic of love to the letter, *Love Story* opens up the possibility for the spectator to traverse their own fantasies of love in/through the cinema.

Fantasy has the function of keeping trauma at bay, while at the same time providing access to the “objet *a*”. Traversing the fantasy, on the other hand, traumatically confronts the subject with one’s lack. What remains once one traverses the fantasy, as Florian eloquently demonstrates, is pure drive; for him, a drive to ultimately possess love, to have his cake and eat it too. It is at this conjuncture where desire and drive intertwine, and cinema is the perfect vehicle for the subject to ponder the possibility of traversing the fantasy.

Given that love can be viewed as the merging of desires circulating between people (or an object), it can also be considered in terms of an act that both traverses and does not traverse fantasy. Žižek explains this process of traversing fantasy with regards to the ideological super-ego:

Traversing the fundamental fantasy can be in two gestures: it can be an ‘empty gesture’ or an ‘authentic Act’. The latter is more ‘radical.’ In the act of taking the empty gesture, the subject suspends the symbolic Law by choosing the impossible option — one that violates the symbolic Law. It appears first that the individual is free to choose, as if the superego tells: ‘you should



do it if you really want to, if not, then don't!' Between the lines, the superego further orders to 'enjoy' what one has to do. Whatever the individual chooses, one basically is guilty of not taking the other choice. A double-bind actually takes place, which involves the 'paradox of the superego' in following the demands of the ego ideal (offered by the symbolic framework, which retains one's symbolic identity), the individual is in effect guilty of rejecting his/her (from Butler's concept) 'passionate attachment' to the Thing; the same goes when one follows the fundamental desire ('passionate attachment'), as a consequence, one's socio-symbolic existence is shattered (Žižek 1999, pp. 265-268).

The question beckons: *what specific kind of fantasy of love is the subject specifically attempting to traverse?* Considering that the promise of love is that a subject will find another subject which provides wholeness, the specific fantasy is that a subject will be complete only when together with another subject. As Žižek says in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in traversing or going through the fantasy, "all we have to do is experience how there is nothing behind it, and how fantasy marks precisely this nothing" (Žižek 1989, p. 126). Such nothingness is an encounter with the Real and suggests a change, or movement, from one place to another, even if it entails that such a transition means returning to the same place. Of course, Žižek insists that it is easier to imagine an ending than to imagine change. This is the location where traversing the fantasy becomes crucial and, specifically, where the cinematic narrative compels the spectator to imagine *something*. Žižek seizes upon Alain Badiou's theorization of the act as constituting a commitment to the political investment (and potential) of the subject, on the proviso that the subject is willing to surrender to desire, an infinite passion to continually resurrect the field of experience as having the potential to organize another experience. Such an act, *to go to the end*, constitutes Žižek's description of the important process of *traversing the fantasy*. Habicht is prepared to do this, to go to the end. In repeating the question, *what does love mean?*, he is willing to risk and even accept the destruction of the symbolic supports (that is, those that govern the social systems which are deemed to be in his interests), as well as the ideological conditions which circumscribe them.

An example Žižek often cites is the demotion of God from the order of a being offering a transcendental promise to that of a law which regulates, defines, and sustains a system of ideology. It can be argued that the



ideological function of desire is one of resistance to the signifying structure of belief: “the goal of psychoanalysis and its contradictory nature, Žižek offers, reproduce [sic] the fundamental social antagonism, the tension between the individual’s urges and the demands of society” (Penney 2006, p. 205). In many ways, love is no different; like God, it compels us to traverse the fantasy, to look behind the guises and semblances of love so that the true nature of love can be revealed. As Habicht convinces both us, as viewers, and those he encounters on the streets of New York, love is worth the risk of revealing that the subject is in fact divided, because it promises that, if true and real, it will suture the divide, thereby offering the subject an opportunity to be whole. Of course, this presents the spectator, those whom Habicht encounters, and even Habicht himself with the conundrum of belief and desire. Belief subjugates desire, and the manifestation of how this is practiced is also a conviction of the ideological fantasies that support both love and his belief in it.

Habicht is in a constant state of disavowal, acting *as if* he believes (and thus operating in the manner of a *semblant* of the classic figure of the lover), and thereby producing the illusion of belief in others and, more so, belief in their willingness to also traverse their fantasy. Belief in this context is a conviction that may or may not be substantial or necessarily grounded in *doing* those rituals which support it. Certainly, holding a piece of cake is not a ritual for love, but alongside the belief in a love that is true, the piece of cake takes on a different dimension. It is not the cake, but rather the fantasy of who is holding it that apprehends Habicht. When the piece of cake is taken away, who is Masha? Herein lies the biggest risk: the truth is *something*, or more pertinently, *nothing*, which Habicht and the spectator may not be able to handle. When confronting love, one is confronting myth, which is to say “the Real of *logos*: the foreign intruder, impossible to get rid of, impossible to remain fully within it” (Žižek 2001, p. 11). The myth of belief provides the basis for which belief itself is signified. Here, Habicht and the spectator are confronted with an ethic, or the failure of an ethic, of love. What lies behind its mystery is resignation to the idea that the fantasy of love needs handling or manipulating. An idiotic enjoyment of love will not suffice, and in any case such an enjoyment would completely miss the point. It is here that cinema offers us something of great importance — we can, if we choose, traverse the fantasy through the cinematic screen. As we encounter Florian’s dilemma, we also share it, as love is yet to be experienced, yet to be articulated, yet to be provoked. It needs to be a fantasy to be traversed, but only to return to the question of love itself. The pursuit of



the question of love is repeated because new fantasies unfold, some of which cannot bear to be spoken. To reveal the fantasy means that the object is sacrificed. Herein lies the social importance of cinema — one can enjoy the possibility of traversing the fantasy within the parameters of the screen, rather than risk losing the object of desire.

*Love Story* concludes with the cake left in pieces, and maybe the spectator is also. What we are ultimately left to confront is the failure of the narrative of love, once again. However, let us not conflate love and our desire to love, which it could be argued is a stronger adhesive than love itself. Love differs from desire, in that desire cannot possess anything except itself. With desire there is nothing for the subject to lose, whereas love affords a socially valorized recognition wherein one might possibly lose oneself. Discontented love does not characterise love as empty and meaningless. Rather the opposite, since it gives love traction through the inevitable tensions that love brings. Even in our modern cynical times, manifestations of love, passion, and desire retain a strong individual and social hold. We need to be faithful servants to love now more than ever.

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