January 2017

Before I Fall

John C. Lyden
Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, johnclyden@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Before I Fall

Abstract

This is a film review of *Before I Fall* (2017), directed by Ry Russo-Young.

Keywords

Time-loop, Young Adult, Suicide, Teens, Adolescence

Creative Commons License

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

Before I Fall (2017), dir. Ry Russo-Young

Since *Groundhog Day* came out in 1993, time-loop movies have become increasingly popular; a few recent ones include *Source Code* (2011), *About Time* (2013), and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014). When these films allow characters to relive part of their lives, they allow them the chance to fix their mistakes, and to see what they will do when forced to live only in the moment. Forced to reiterate the same day, they find they can make that day better, or worse; this is of course just as true in our everyday lives, but when presented with an eternal recurrence of the moment, the existential crisis suddenly becomes more obvious. Some things can be changed in these films, but not all, and that is also part of the message of *Before I Fall,* a film adapted from the Young Adult novel of the same name by Lauren Oliver.

Samantha Kingston is a rich high school girl whose friends are the cool kids, those who benefit from being on the top of a social ladder that excludes and condemns others, including openly gay Anna and the alienated social outcast Juliet. On February 12, "Cupid Day," when roses can be sent to fellow students, Sam starts the day in the most ordinary fashion, being picked up for school by her three best friends, receiving a rose from her boyfriend Rob as well as admirer Kent. She attends a party that evening at Kent's house, intending later to lose her virginity to Rob. But events take a darker turn and the day ends in violence, emotional as well as physical, with her death in a car crash.

When Sam awakes on the same day, over and over again and unable to understand why, she tries to address the cause. Her own complicity in the cruelty of her friends is revealed to her by being forced to re-experience it, and she attempts to change that. Ironically, while we all know at some level that the awful days of high school will end and the pains we suffer there (and the sins we commit there) will someday be forgotten, this is not the case for Sam. She has to see those acts forever, and even with her own efforts to change, this does not change others. She grows to understand the pain of those others, however, whether they are the victims or the perpetrators of emotional abuse. At the Q&A after the screening I attended, Lauren Oliver noted that her interest in writing a novel about high school life was to examine whether character can change—are people malleable—and also, what would redemption look like in such a scenario. Sam can change some things, but not all; yet she can appreciate the moment, all the moments she has lived, which gives them eternal value even alongside the bad moments. The lesson in her English class on that fateful day was the myth of Sisyphus, and for those who know Camus's treatment of it, this provides a clue to how she finds meaning. In true existential fashion, Camus claimed that while Sisyphus could not escape his fate, he can give it meaning by how he approaches it. Sam actually has more

ability to influence events than Sisyphus did, but it is not enough to turn everything into a happy ending.

This could have been a typical film adaptation of a melodramatic YA novel, full of adolescent angst, but it turns out to be a fine entry into the time-loop genre. In part, this is due to the superior performances by the actors, notably Zoey Deutsch as Sam, who brings great emotional depth to the character—as does the screenplay by Maria Maggenti. At the Q&A, it was clear that all these folks work well together, and that contributes to the success of the film. But I was also impressed by the film's refusal to resolve the issues in the film in typical genre fashion; it celebrates female agency and authentic identity (and passes the Bechdel test, as these young women discuss more than just boys), forgiveness, and the complex factors that make us who we are; it avoids the simplistic portrayals of "good" and "evil" character that are so common in teen movies. It does not erase the histories in which we hurt one another, but affirms that meaning can be found in and through those. It also manages to be a message film against suicide, which is always welcome in the youth market. As someone who freely admits that the time-loop movie is my favorite genre, I have to confess that I am happy to add this to my list.