AN INTERVIEW WITH OSKAR
ON THE TOPIC OF LOVE LETTERS

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INTRODUCED by
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The transcript has been edited for the purposes of concision and readability.

INTRODUCTION

A Love Letter to (Our) Difference

"In fusion is the annihilation of difference, and falling in love is perhaps the best illustration of this [...] It would seem that some of the intensity of the experience of falling in love derives from the joyful, albeit deluded, recognition of ourselves in another. This would simultaneously explain some of the tension and hatred generated when we no longer ignore some feature of the other that clearly does not fit into our own view of ourselves - that is, into our own self-image."

Bruce Fink, in *Lacan on Love*

Most of us understand the love letter as a means of communicating our most intimate feelings – disagreement emerges when asked how that might be accomplished. Some argue for prose, others poetry; but irrespective of medium, most will sow romance through the recollection of that which is shared. Pushing this tendency to its most radical limit are those psychotic lovers who aspire toward a zero-degree of intensity, who's Eros is located where speech is absent. Assailed by a sudden and emphatic romance, words seem at once insufficient and redundant - such is the sense of symbiosis. But this is folie à deux; these relationships emerge not of telepathic connection, but narcissistic identification; they're partners in parallel play, immersed by discreet and simultaneous fantasy.

Whilst the rest of us might cast judgement, we ought not be too hasty in patronise the infatuated. Their méconnaissance is all of ours. Of course, not everyone desires to merge with their significant other such that their otherness is diminished entirely. But we are each limited by our own perspectives, and therefore in constant negation with phantasms of our beloved. One may have seen another by so many aspects (and in as many lights), yet each tinted by one's own desires, mise-en-scéne, subjective blindnesses... Our difference forecloses upon our knowing each other as we know ourselves - and we can admit the absurdity of objective self-consciousness, surely.

Which returns us to the initial question. How do we communicate our love (in all its singularity) to another who cannot have experienced it, and who can only conceive of it by the mediation of their own distinct perspective? Regardless of its excruciating detail, no description can account for the inevitable misunderstanding of the reader; the exact point is always nearly missed. Yet, hopefully, the impossibility of this question does not preclude the possibility of love.

To risk accusations of being a romantic, it seems to me that love is constituted of an infinite series of errors. You're always realising that the other is other than you expected, always being met with their resolute ineffability; their exceeding themselves in whatever awe-inspiring or heartbreaking way. Love is in our briefly meeting them, stripped, by naked bewilderment and disjunction; and in those canny instances of fantasy's renegotiation; and in our returning and turning each over together; this movement of rupture and reconciliation is what makes love so contingent and sublime.

There is, then, something especially romantic about insisting upon one's difference; or rather, that difference shared. It is to point to exactly the problematic which spurs the relationship - our distinct personhood, our unique perspectives, our disparate angulature and intensities. In this interview, Oskar makes the case that in the hierarchy of values proper to the love letter, honesty supersedes legibility. When understanding is illusory, and relationships live or die by the conflict and compromise of twin-fantasy, perhaps embracing misunderstanding is the greatest possible affirmation of the lovers' becoming together in difference. I want to thank Oskar for his thought-provoking contributions to this project, and for his long-enduring friendship – both of which have proven untiringly inspirational.

OSKAR

Have you written love letters?

Yeah, and poems...

Is there a difference between the two?

I guess they both show the same side of whatever you want to say, but one of them is a little bit more direct than the other - obviously the letter, than the poem. Should we talk about the poem?

Whatever you like.

This was my first Ex in London. She used to live in Halls, and there was this little flame that was always in her bathroom. And for some strange reason, every time I went to the bathroom, I'd always stare at it. [...] The poem became about this flame and how the love was growing from [it]. It was something that I talked about – the flame – constantly... I don't remember the poem anymore, but the central part of the poem was this little flame; how it just kept growing. It didn't really matter what was happening, that little thing just kept in my brain, getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And that was quite cute... But I guess with love letters, you just write things you [literally] mean; they're very straightforward. They're not as symbolic, I guess. Although they can be – you can have little things in there.

If you're writing a love letter, you value directness...

Yes

What does that directness do?

[It] Translates? Translates love? Obviously, love is very different for everybody; there isn't really one answer... It's funny, receiving a love letter you sometimes expect something that you would write yourself, but more often than not it's something completely different. And it does kind of sweep you under, because every time I've gotten a love letter it's always 50-50... I don't know... I'm always scared to read it because I don't know what to expect. I've gotten love letters for Valentines Day. I've gotten love letters at the end of a relationship. I've gotten love letters just randomly – little notes and stuff – and every time they're always so different... But as I said [...] A poem's where someone's trying to figure out a symbolic way of expressing their love. That's what happens with a poem. But with love letters – that directness, in that moment, onto paper... The whole thing can be scrapped and something new can be written after, and then there's a new final-thing that the person writing it can be happy with – "this is what I want to share with this person".

Just to clarify what you mean, do you think that there's a sort of seriality to a love letter...

Yes...

And a finality to a poem? Or an erase-ability?

No, I think... You can say "I love you" so many times – but it doesn't necessarily mean anything. I feel like if you're sitting down to write something, there's a directness which I value more.

You know what people say about gifts, that it's the thought that counts? I think that when people say that, they're not really pointing to the thought as such, but the effort – the act. Is the love letter like that too - actions speak louder than words, something in the act of writing is what's important?

I think writing is definitely an act [of love], but also the letters are in it, the words are in it; they can sway both ways... But it's also to the person getting it, how they read it. If somebody is expressing their love, it's not your love, it's their love of you; it's like a war waged over what love actually is. And it's very hard, you know... Two people can love each other, but then their love can be completely different – it doesn't necessarily translate, and it's just a whole muddy battlefield. "I love you, but I love don't love me this way". But that's where the love is – that's where love lies.

In the relationship?

In the relationship, between two different types of love; two different types of people even. Speaking from experience...

When you're writing a love letter, are you insisting upon your love?

Yes, I write it from my perspective to the person that I perceive. That's the person that I love, and that's the person that I'm writing to. It's a very personal way of showing [love]. The other person might not take it that well because of how raw it is. It can scare some people off sometimes.

Is that risk an important part of writing a love letter?

For me? Yeah. I think for other people, when they think of [love] letters, it's very much like, "I love, you smell like flowers, your eyes are like fields" - but that becomes a poem. "I love the way your hair flows in the wind, I love the way that X, Y, and Z..." – that's what a love letter shouldn't be. I think you should be more personal; how do you perceive this person, why do you love them... When I've written [love letters] in the past, I've talked about the first day we met, how that day went, why that day was so important. It's so magical, the first time two people meet, those feelings you only really talk about three or four months down the line solidify in your brain – I value that first moment with someone... Sorry, I feel like I'm running away with it...

No, Go...

Because every time I've fallen in love, I've fallen in love from day-one. And that's how I know that I do really like someone; if day-one is that type of moment. I'd say I know that it's love if that feeling is there further down the line. Now, going back to the love letter, that's the reason why I talk about the first day; how that feeling keeps going, how something magical happened. Then you can talk about how they smell, how their hair flows, the little things they do; what I value about them, the way they treat me, the way they talk to me, the way they're welcoming in this and that way... About my perspective...

Can we go back to that love at first sight experience – that real Fall into love... Can we delve further into what that feeling is and why it's so important to you?

Well, the first time that I had that sort of moment, I was going to see a play. I went with a friend who knew one of the girls [performing] – I'd never met her before. I knew how she looked but I didn't know who she was. I don't really remember what the play was about, but the audience were sitting in a square and they would perform in the middle. [...] They all run on, the lights are off, I think there's 20 people on stage at the start, running on in two separate lines. At the end of one of the lines is where I was sitting, and it was where this girl was, and then the lights turned on... I still remember that feeling, and that was seven or eight years ago; it made me realise what finding someone beautiful is. Through high school I wasn't really attracted to anyone, I didn't want anything from anyone; I wasn't flirting, I wasn't doing anything... But then there was this moment, and I was just a kid sitting in this theatre having his lights turned on by this girl... She's looking off into the distance and there's me, just being like, "Oh my God..." Obviously after the show we met each other and said hi, whatever – but it was such a weird chemical feeling, something that had never happened [to me] before, and it shot in out of nowhere. At the time I didn't know what

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that feeling was, but now having had it happen so many times [...] that's what love is; it's that visceral... your body just... like the butterfly feeling... your body's getting lighter... That's a deciding factor for me, whether I want to be with someone or not – romantically.

Can that feeling emerge when you see somebody in a new light, as if seeing somebody for the first time? Or is it really just that initial encounter?

I've had it with friends before where we've been friends for so long, then I learn about something, or hear about something, and then my body just tenses... It's like a negative version. It's happened a couple of times. I've learnt to listen to what my body's saying in those moments. If that answers the question...

What I was thinking was... I've had it with friends - that falling-feeling - and although the moment's sudden, it only comes after some time. Eventually, out of nowhere, I would see something; they looked different... It wasn't that they were a different person, it's as if you see them by another aspect which changes everything. It's not that they've changed, if anything you've changed. And then there's that lightness, and there's an awe which overcomes you and... and then you think, "Uh-oh, this isn't going to end well", right? So, I was wondering what you think about that? That delay, or getting-to-know? Is there something integral about a leap of faith – the not-knowing and this sudden, explosive possibility which bursts out...

I think the feeling with friends is more like pulling off a cover. Somebody gets exposed. Or maybe you were seeing something consistently, but then there's this moment of something happening again – that's when you think "shit". But you can't say anything. Slowly over time, you realise this person isn't someone you want to be friends with anymore. [...] But that's all a natural thing anyway. Obviously if someone did something really bad and you heard about it, you'd instantly think, "fuck this person" [...] But it's like a glass keeps being filled with stuff from this person, and then it starts to overflow - that's what I mean about the cover being pulled – then it just explodes... You ask yourself "wait, is this a person I'm actually friends with?".

Would you want to talk to them because you love them? Or loved them?

I'm having this recently with one of my friends; we're drifting in a really sad way – because I do want to say something, but at the same time, I don't really... I might still be friends with them. I might not be. I don't know which way it's going to go, and I don't really want to be the person making that decision. I just want to see – naturally – where it goes instead of sitting them down and talking about what's happening, or, you know, whatever else...

Yeah. [...]I do want to say something, but at the same time I don't – to see where it goes. I want us to say something at the same time. Which I guess is a love letter.

Or saying "I love you"... This is what I'm thinking about as you're talking: are these all connected - the way you use letters in your love life, these conversations that you may or may not have with friends, this approach to relationships... Are these types of conversations akin to the type of love letter you would send or receive at the end of a romantic relationship?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I mean – if it wasn't weird I would probably send him a letter telling him how awkward I feel, or telling him I feel that something's wrong. For him though, he'd just be wondering why he got a letter. In a [romantic] relationship, you've shared so much with each other, there's no stigma around giving something at the end. But then also, with either a partner or a friend, you never really know if it is the end...

Why would you value a letter [from a friend] so much?

[...] I love letters, I love getting things, I love getting gifts. If my friend gave me a letter, I'd think it's amazing; you know, "Thank you so much for giving me this, and writing something about how you feel at the moment, X, Y, and Z". So, yeah, I wouldn't find it weird, but then I don't write one because I think they'd find it weird... It's like a wall between us... I should probably be more forward in relationships and with friends...

I find actions speak louder than words. [...] I don't necessarily think "I love you" is love's peak. There's so much more that can be done. I think words are cheap in that respect, because it's more about actions – how you're to portray your love. So that's what I think a love letter is – it's [language's] peak. You're writing, you're taking the time, you're performing the action of writing... And then you have to be happy with what you wrote, enough that you want to give it to this person [...] Saying "I love you" is important, but it's not as important as being there to give it to them.

Do you think that that hesitation, the possibility of not sending the letter, is important to what makes the love letter valuable? The fact you can read it and think "that's not really what I mean" or that it otherwise fails to capture something? The fact you can do that, then scrap it... Is trying-again important to the love letter? Or does it need to be immediate?

The second rendition is more refined, certainly, than the first. But it's double edged. The first draft has the raw emotion, the second is tempered – it's smoother. With the second one you've realised what you're actually trying to say. So, I think both matter. But if you're happy with the first, you think, "this is actually okay", you don't need a second.

When I'm writing anything, to anyone, I don't really delete anything I've written. I read it before I send it, but then I just send it. [...] If I'm in an argument over text I don't delete anything – If I read something and regret it, instead of deleting what I said I'd rather apologise for what I said. [...] I'm just a very forward person. I say what I think, always. But then I guess it's different with friends...

You know, it makes me wonder... In every relationship there's a degree of compromise. And you've already talked about how the point of a love letter is not to resolve difference, it's to insist upon it – then it's in the relationship itself where that compromise happens... But I'm wondering if the act of writing a love letter entails – necessarily – some sort of compromise. Not strictly between yourself and your partner, but between yourself and the fullness of your feeling?

Yeah, Yes...

Yeah, I mean, you can only say so much with ink and pen and paper and words... obviously love is so much larger than what's ever said. [...] Thinking about all the times I've expressed my love in words, the only issue I seem to have is getting everything down; that's the compromise – I can't say everything [...] It's really hard to write your emotions down in a way that expresses – to another – how you really, fully feel. They need to have felt it, and reading it, they need to link what you're saying to their experience. You're trying your best to convey something that only you've felt; you're your own person, you're your own love... That's why so many relationships fail – it's because they can't show their love in a way that connects with their partner.

Considering what you were saying about your friend, where do you think you're most willing to stretch that capacity for compromise? Do you think it's in a romantic relationship, or a friendship? And does that relate to your willingness to write a letter, or to sit somebody down and talk to them, or otherwise... let it ride?

Yeah well, considering that, what's on my mind now about compromise is how much hurt can you go through. That's how I'm taking compromise right now. And I think – it's funny – I think with friends I could take more, consistently, than in a [romantic] relationship. Because, I mean, why would I be with someone that would con-... or maybe not "consistently"... It's not that... If you think about it in volumes... [...] I see it right now; I'm seeing it as like, lines...

Let me try to help focus it – I've drawn a diagram [fig.1], tell me what you think... The broken line is friendship, right? And the solid line is the

Yeah, yeah, yeah...

OSKAR

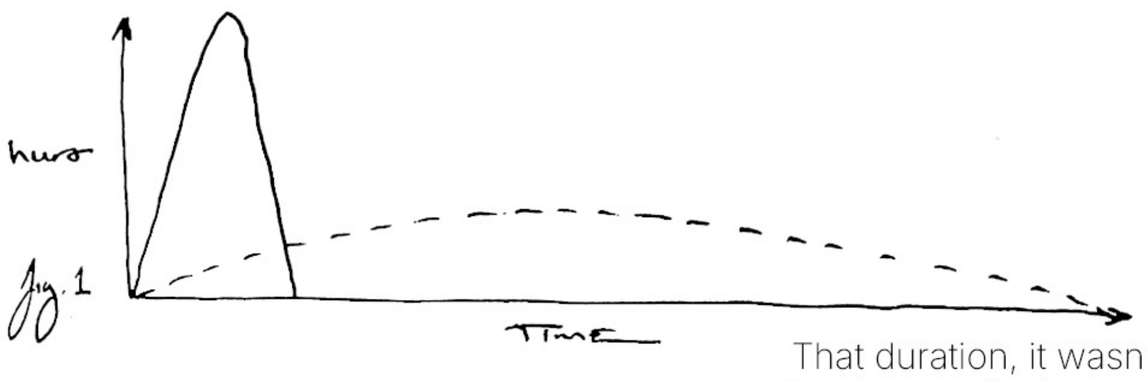
relationship... Is it that you can take a lot of hurt in a relationship in a short time – so long as it doesn't draw itself out...

But with a friendship you can sustain a continuous low-level hurt? An acute, severe sort of hurt might damage a romantic relationship, but would likely destroy a friendship? Equally, if your partner continually hurt you, not in an existential way, but in a more subtle every-day way – eventually you'd just tire out?

Yeah, which I guess is the answer about compromise. I think that graphs it, but I was thinking of more straight lines [gesticulates irregularly], and then the heart is a big one, then it stops at one, whilst the – which is basically what you did – but then the friend one was like... line, line, line, line, line, line...

Can you draw it ? Is that [fig.2]... proportional?

Yeah, it's basically the same thing [...] A friend could be going out and just, not ask you to come out with them, or they cancel plans, or you weren't really thought about, da-da-da... In a relationship, just because of how close you are, not being thought about in that moment is quite detrimental... Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah....



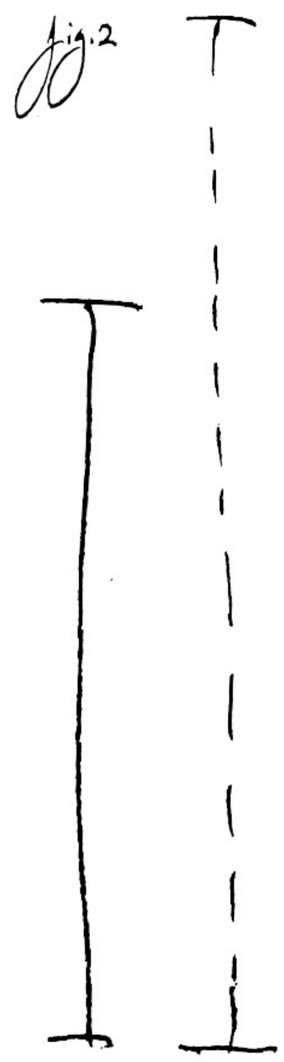
In a relationship, there's this intensity – a degree of expectation. That's in part because romantic relationships, as they're generally understood, are kind of like contracts. There are conditions attached to the question "Will you be my girlfriend". As a result, could we say that a reason why you'd write a letter to your partner, and not to your friend – besides any residual weirdness – is that there's an explicit issue, a violation of contract, which can then be addressed in writing... You're so direct in writing these letters, almost confrontational-

You know, thinking about it – for both friendships and relationships, I am the same person, except, I'm not having sex with my friends.

Is it because there is a certainty to the terms - or at least a desire for certainty – in your relationships? You feel there's something you can pin down in a letter. Or that you must pin down, expeditiously... In a friendship there's not strictly a next date, or a "when will we see each other next", at least not with that intensity, or immediacy... Over time things can accumulate, but there's less pressure in the moment – am I going in the right direction? Or am I imposing?

Right.

I say "I love you" to my friends, they say it back. Kissing will happen at some point with both [friends, partners]... Whenever we do drugs together, there's always a moment in the night where we're standing in the smoking area and it's clear we're there because of each other; we love each other so much... That happens in relationships too, it's just that drugs don't have to be involved. Sending a love letter to a friend is quite taboo [...] but then again, every time at a birthday, or when somebody's leaving, or I'm leaving and I won't see someone for a long time, I always give them something written. I'll bring a postcard. I don't necessarily write "I love you", "I remember the first time we met", "I love the way your hair blows in the wind", it's just our current situation. One of my colleagues recently left work. We're friends. She was leaving, she invited all of us out, and I came with a postcard. All it said was "Hello, I've loved-" I don't know if I said love but, it was something like "I very much enjoyed all the conversations we've ever had"; every time I saw her, we'd talk about anything and everything... She's also trying to become a food critic, and she's travelling all around Asia for content. So, I wrote "good luck, hope you eat well". It was very, to the point. For a birthday, "Happy Birthday". I'd probably write "I love you" in a birthday card, and, you know, "hope you have a great day!". And then I'd draw something if need be – If the card's boring enough I'd probably draw something inside...



But with a love letter, you're writing about all of everything that led you to writing that letter. For Valentine's this year, [my Ex] sent me a 2-minute video – which was the love letter. I sent an 18-minute video essay, covering start-to-finish everything. Which was fine. I wasn't... She probably didn't expect 18 minutes, but I didn't know what to expect from her.

That duration, it wasn't duration for duration's sake; it's because you had so much to say...

I remember doing it, and halfway thinking "fuck, there's still so much to say". But whenever I talk, I talk – there's a lot, even though sometimes I'll talk really fast and some people don't understand what I'm saying... But during this letter, I felt like I needed to say so much. I needed to say more and da-da-da-da-da... And when I finished, I was like, "I guess that's that" and I pressed the end button. Immediately felt like there was still so much more I left unsaid. I just had to tell myself to leave it. And I left it; I didn't listen to it ever again. [...] Because I believed I believed in what I said when I said it.

As you're talking about all this, there's a real emphasis on the moment. Even to the point that the text of a love letter describes everything all the way up until the moment you finish writing it. Is there something about the temporality – the temporal situatedness, situational specificity – of the love letter which allows it to be true to that moment. And not necessarily true in itself, forever in every moment - but forever true to that particular moment in which it was written? It's almost like... you know how the President of the United States delivers a State of the Union Adress; a love letter from you is like receiving your State of the Union.

"Everybody sit the fuck down! Listen!" Yeah... I don't [just] sit down and write something. I pick the right moment, or state of mind. And I don't force myself. I think that's where you can trip up, and that's where you scrap the first draft, and you wait a couple hours, and only then can you write again. I wait until I feel good enough within myself to express something I want to write, and to give. I mentioned earlier that the person reading it also has to be in the right state of mind to take what they're reading in the right way. When I'm writing a love letter, I wait until I'm happy enough to write it. But sometimes you need to be sad enough to write one...

When I'm receiving a letter, I don't open it straight away. I like to find a moment in the day where I can read it again and again if I need to – to fully take in what's being said. Obviously, your reaction upon the second reading will be completely different to the first – because you've finished it, and now you're going back and reading it again in its full context. "No man steps in the same river twice"...

That's a great endpoint from

Yeah, I'm not trying to hide anything in

OSKAR

which we can launch into this rather disparate final question... Whenever I talk to artists about love letters, I'm always interested to find out whether or not there's a parallel with their work, and how they work. To preface this, I am cautious that because I'm motivated to establish a connection, this may be exactly that - motivated reasoning, projection, imposition. So, I really want you to feel you can push back on this if any of what I'm saying isn't the case. But, it's interesting that you've stressed the moment here, as your photography is all about the moment – a glance. It's very matter of fact, right? It's very direct, they're exactly what they are: you saw something, you responded to that something, you took a picture of that something in a way that somehow holds all of that happening... I was wondering if there's a connection here, and if so, if you could expand on what that might be? If not a methodological parallel, perhaps there's something about shared values [...]

either [...]

What do you value in your photography?

I guess... the scene that I'm in. I'm not necessarily looking through the viewfinders to capture something – I very much believe that things align, or they don't; If I don't get it, I don't get it. And I'm okay with that. I'm okay with the fact that I stopped, I looked, I took a photo, but then I kept going [...] I'm stumped by this love question... It's making me realise how direct both [love letters and photography] are. Or how direct I am, with both. And I never... I'm never conscious of the after. I'm always conscious of the now; of the moment – in photography and in love.

OSKAR