In Memoriam:
Aaron Allen Smuts (1975-2022)

Photo courtesy of Heidi Bollich

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I first “met” Aaron first via email back in 2009 when he submitted a paper for an SPSCVA session at the Eastern APA. His paper “‘Pickman’s Model’: Horror and the Objective Purport of Photographs” stood out as the most interesting submission I had seen in a long time. (It was later published in Revue internationale de philosophie.) At the session we talked and quickly figured out that we had a lot of philosophical interests in common beyond the philosophy of film. We started corresponding regularly, sending each other papers for feedback and generally chatting. That correspondence continued for the next twelve years, amounting to several thousand emails. Thanks to the internet we ended up becoming quite close even though we only ever managed to meet in person twice (once at that SPSCVA session, and once when I visited Rhode Island College as an external evaluator).

Aaron was an unusual academic because he was not only especially good at philosophy but also talented at many other things. Had he chosen to go into finance, I’m suspect he could have retired at 35. Had he decided to become a personal trainer, I have no doubt he would have been extremely successful. (He was an avid weightlifter.) He could code professionally at a very high level, and he beautifully remodeled portions of his own house. But for most of his life what he most wanted to do was philosophy, and he did it very, very well. Like his mentor and friend Noël Carroll, Aaron was remarkably prolific. Sometimes he could over-extend himself with projects and would bite off more than he could chew, but what he managed to chew was, in the end, still much more than most of us will accomplish over our careers. More importantly, his output is notable not only because there’s so much of it—his work is consistently illuminating, enjoyable to read, and as Google Scholar and PhilPapers have documented, quite influential. How many other philosophers are there who can be said to have made lasting contributions to topics as diverse as meaning in life, film as philosophy, humor, love, death, and video games? I believe his influence is due not just to the fact that he took bold stances and defended them with aplomb, but also because he had a knack for investigating underexplored (i.e., “not mainstream”) topics that are nonetheless naturally compelling to pretty much anybody with an interest in philosophy. In addition, he managed to maintain a lively sense of humor while also having little tolerance for bullshit, whether it be of the Continental faux-profound variety or a result of the Analytic tendency to engage in unnecessary
technicalities and formalizations so as to seem “scientific”. I often didn’t agree with Aaron on particular philosophical issues, but I invariably enjoyed engaging with him and his work. He reminded me that philosophy can, when done well, actually be fun while still sincerely pursuing the true and the good.

I have assigned Aaron’s “Rubber Ring: Why do we listen to sad songs?” every time I have taught aesthetics, and without fail that has been the reading which inspires the most fruitful discussion of the semester. It’s not that students buy every assertion he makes, but they just love that someone is philosophizing insightfully about something so approachable and engaging—who hasn’t wondered at the mysterious sway a sad song can have over us? In that essay Aaron explicitly connects the importance of sad songs to their ability to help us recognize and appreciate personal loss, arguing that undergoing such recognition and appreciation is crucial for figuring out what one most cares about. Further, he argues that a proper understanding of such loss requires emotion—it cannot be achieved through mere abstract intellectual reflection. He ends that essay, strikingly, with: “Feeling sadness is constitutive of what it is to understand the significance of our lives.” That bittersweet remark has always impressed me as deeply true, and I’ve found myself listening to sad songs a lot these past few days while trying to process the untimely loss of a remarkable thinker and good friend.

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