

# BYE BYE LOVE [1995]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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Three single fathers who have custody of their children on weekends attempt to survive both their own and their children's personal and social problems. Dave (Matthew Modine) has difficulties in establishing a relationship and is dating a young woman who seems to be closer to his children's age than his own. Donny (Paul Reiser) is still in love with his now happily remarried ex-wife and can't let go. Vic (Randy Quaid) holds a dryly cynical attitude toward all relations and has isolated himself from women in general. Each, of course, also has problems with children of various ages, from terrified toddlers to mooning teenagers. While the three men are good friends, their adventures are further linked by the presence of a pompous radio psychologist, Dr. Townsend (Rob Reiner), who devotes his weekend talk show exclusively to the topic of divorce. (Rated PG)

This film is at once frustrating and satisfying. Perhaps that is why it died at the box-office. The messages it presents – realistic and existential – are not something a Hollywood film audience typically wants. There is no ending with a rosy sunset, no fairy-tale resolution. Most will find it frustrating in that it offers no easy solutions (even in fantasy) to the all-too-real problems it confronts. One would hope that all the creative minds in Hollywood could come up with something original, something unexpected . . . at least something interesting, to a solution for the suffering these men undergo. But no. The bottom line of this film is that they must simply hang in there and suffer.

And this is also the satisfying aspect of *Bye Bye Love*. It is an existential film – from Hollywood? Remember, Hollywood is the land of the *deus ex machina* happy ending, of riding off into the sunsets, of cut to the chase and get the bad guys, of relationships happily healed. And here is a film that not only doesn't give any answers, but blatantly says there are no answers. Not only is this an existential film, but it has a healthy dose of existential angst.

Actually, that angst first appeared in this form on the silver screen several decades ago. Its roots can be seen in *American Graffiti* [1973], of which *Bye Bye Love* is both an extension and a remake. Taking earlier films and speculating on what might be happening to their characters today seems to be a currently fashionable film-making ploy. Perhaps the best recent example is *True Lies* [1994] which traces what might be going on in the life of a James Bond, now married and aging but still a spy. *Bye Bye Love* takes the young men of *American Graffiti* [1973], sends them off to college or the military, they graduate, get married, have families, and divorce. And this is where this film picks them up (even the Wolfman Jack character is brought up to date in the form of an ever-present talk-show psychologist).

As with many films, the opening sequence is rife with archetypal iconography that indicates both the film's premise and conclusion. However, in *Bye Bye, Love*, we must be careful *not* to jump to conclusions. The film begins with a wedding, that is, an alchemical Conunctio – a coming together and joining of opposites. This typically occurs only *after* great conflict and suffering by both parties (that is why so many films – and fairy tales – end with weddings). It is only after psychic growth has taken place – the retraction of projections, men dealing with a mother complex, women dealing with a father complex, and so on – that the successful joining is possible.

A good, but terribly drawn-out example of this is *When Harry Met Sally . . .* [1989]. A seemingly endless struggle toward Conunctio occupies the whole film. Despite the rather boring repetition of the film's main theme and the microscopically incremental growth of the central characters, it was (and still is) popular – a testament to the power of archetypal story telling. (Even eternal adolescents, like Jerry Lewis in *Artists and Models* [1955], are blessed with marriage/Conunctio by the end of the film.) But like many things in *Bye Bye Love*, our wedding expectations are not fulfilled.

While *Bye Bye Love* begins with a wedding, it is not one of the three heroes that is getting married – it is a friend. And, worse than that, one of the three jokingly proposes marriage to an eight-year-old. While this may be a funny bit indicating the desperation these men have toward relationships, the self-perceived hopelessness of their situation, and their lust for younger women, at the archetypal level it also indicates that these men are not ready for a real Conunctio. They simply haven't learned enough or have not themselves grown up enough.

The ending of the film, interestingly, records a successful marriage. In keeping with the generally depressing outlook of the film, this happens after the story telling is finished. It is announced during the concluding titles! Thus, the film begins with an inappropriate Conunctio and ends with an invisible one. Not much hope for an audience looking for help or seeking advice with personal problems. And this “not much hope” theme is reiterated in many different forms almost endlessly throughout the film.

Sandwiched between these beginning and ending episodes, is an interesting spectrum (actually two spectra) of relationships. The first is between the three heroes, Vic, Dave, and Donny in their various degrees of relational commitment. They vary from active avoidance and suspicion to non-commitment to hungry desperation. While the exploration of this dimension occupies most of the film, another spectrum, perhaps one which should be seen at right angles to this one, is really more interesting and rewarding.

Rather than a spectrum of relational commitment as seen through the three men, this one spans generations. At one end is the young teenager, Max (Johnny Whitworth) who sleeps in cars and who hasn't seen his father or half-brother in years. At the other end is Walter (Ed Flanders), 74 years old, widowed, and still active. At the end of the film, Max moves in with Walter. This is a glimmer of hope for a cross-generational support system – we assume that the older man will impart some of his values to the

younger man, values that allowed him to have a long-term and satisfying relationship both with his wife (they were married for 42 years) and with his children. This is in clear contrast to the desperate *status quo* of the three central characters.

Perhaps the film is suggesting that the current adult generation is so damaged that there is no longer any hope for reconstruction. Future survival exists only if the young can tap into the knowledge of the older generation. Fat chance.

Much of the film is preoccupied with the three men and their emotions – toward their children, toward their ex-wives, toward prospective lovers, and toward themselves. While the film strongly recommends that men recognize and deal with their emotions, at the same time it pulls its punches. For instance, the men say that when they were married, they worked at one (or more) jobs and never had time for their children – especially in terms of emotional involvement. They now bemoan what they missed. Yet they find that now, as the sole parent (on weekends), they take care of everything with regard to their children – physical and emotional. Is the film saying that once divorced, these men are in better emotional shape *vis a vis* their children than when they were married? Really?

Another aspect of the film's advice regarding emotions is still more disturbing. The film constantly implies that if these men were to recognize their own emotions, to become less blocked, to face themselves, they would be salvaged. Yet at one deeply emotional moment – one husband is drawn to spy on his now remarried wife in her happiness – he is about to break down and cry. What an accomplishment that would be: to have a famous hunk actor cry on screen. Yet, despite all its preaching, *Bye Bye Love*, cops out: just at the moment moisture is about to grace our hero's cheek, the sprinklers come on and wet him from head to foot. His hard-won tears (if any) are now invisible!

The women in this film are treated as oddly as the men. With one exception, the women are seemingly comfortably ensconced in middle-class motherhood. We have no idea what they do for a living – I hope the film isn't implying they are living off their respective alimonies and child support. Basically, they take care of their kids five days a week and spend the rest of their time being happy with their new men or making life miserable for their old men. (It is interesting how the women have no problems in finding new mates while for the men, the same task is seemingly impossible.) The exception to this life-style rut is remarkable: the only woman who seems to express any self-worth, Lucille (Jeaneane Garofalo), is made out to be a repulsive idiot. By putting simple-minded feminist jargon into her mouth ("I'm *the* blind date, as in *the* cow or *the* chicken?"), while at the same time showing her taking four hours to decide what to order at a restaurant while coughing up hair balls, the film makes its position pretty clear regarding any woman who doesn't toe the middle-class line.

Another disturbing incident in this film is when one of the teenage daughters, in a fit of regressive depression, climbs to a tree house and refuses to come down. The father dutifully rescues her, risking life and limb climbing first up the side of the house, then out on the roof, and then across the too-thin branches of the tree. The daughter watches. First with disdain and then, as his position gets progressively more dangerous, with growing

concern. Having arrived, the daughter now eagerly embraces her father. Again (as in *Man of the House* [1995]), is the only way a father can earn the respect of his children to endure physical danger? I realize that the metaphoric value of his adventure – going out on a limb for his daughter – is valid, but I cringe at the message at a less prosaic level.

While it is interesting to see an existential film come out of the Hollywood happiness factory, unfortunately the problems *Bye Bye Love* tackles are so pervasive that more than its advice – to endure – is needed. What is very obvious from this film is that everyone is hurting, everyone is in pain, everyone is suffering – and no one knows what to do about it.

*Bye Bye Love*. Directed by Sam Weisman. Written by Gary David Goldberg and Brad Hall. Distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, 1995.