

Scud Films 4

(Let us live for the beauty of our own reality.)

Love Actually... Sucks (2011)

Prologue

Scud's first three movies have been love stories, stories that trace the development of the relationships of the primary couples, though unlike conventional love stories they none of them have happy endings, and I characterised them as stories of disappointment. This, his fourth movie is not an account of the development of the relationship of a single couple: there are, rather, a number of characters in a number of scenarios, a number of stories that are effectively stories *about* love which, as the subtitle to the movie, '*Love is life, life as it is*' tells us, is a universal concern. And since the stories are about love, they are, as we shall see, also about sex. When I was discussing *Amphetamine* I likened it to a symphonic composition, a composition in which scraps of melody came together to create a symphonic whole that was greater than the sum of its parts.¹ Here I find myself thinking more in terms some sort of musical mosaic, a fugal counterpoint of disparate elements that are woven together in various ways to create a single composition, which is again greater than the sum of its parts, and which is the film called *Love Actually... Sucks*.

There are, as I said, a number of stories in the movie which present us with various examples of the different forms that love can take. We learn little about the pasts of the characters, most of whom are not even named: they are 'Dance Teacher', 'Life Model', 'Bridegroom' etc., and at one level they act as exemplars, propositions in Scud's underlying theme that even though love does suck it is at one and the same time the very stuff of life itself. Exemplars the characters may be, but that does not mean that they are cyphers, and despite the fact that he has only an hour and a half, Scud manages to make them fully rounded characters, characters whom we care about and whose fates we are interested in. And that is the product of the way that he constructs the movie and the way that he writes and films it. One approach, the conventional one, would have been to film the stories end to end, but such a structure would run the risk of becoming very tedious as one started each story knowing simply that it was going to end badly. Instead Scud cross cuts between the stories enabling us to see how they compare and contrast with each other, and running the similarities and contrasts side by side in this way means that we the audience will feel these similarities and dissimilarities in much more powerful ways than we would otherwise, and he does this technically by finding different ways to link the stories one to another to make a coherent whole. All of which makes the movie difficult to analyse in any detail without destroying it in the process.

¹ The very definition, in passing, of what used to be known as a 'work of art'.

The Marriage

The film starts in black and white with a marriage, that idealised form of heterosexual coupledness, and we are at the reception; 'Here Comes the Bride' plays on the sound track. The guests mill around and chat, the camera moving in little jerks, stammering for want of a better word, and freeze framing discreetly at various points in order to introduce us to the characters whose stories will unfold as the movie proceeds. The happy couple, who are never named, are ushered in and the film changes to colour; things are indeed going to get more colourful. The hosts for the reception are Mandy and Ryo, best friends to the bride and groom respectively, and Mandy compares Ryo to the groom wondering who is the more handsome. Laughingly Ryo reveals that he almost fell in love with the groom when they were at school together . . . awkward pause and nervous laughter. They show a film, a home movie of bits and pieces from the groom's life as he was growing up – a romantic song plays in the background but the words turn out to be far from romantic: 'Not every love is a fairy tale'; 'She who is abandoned can be cruel'; 'I pray to God to punish this man for me', etc. More shuffling and more nervous laughter amongst the guests. Then the scene on the home movie changes and we see the groom, now naked, having sex with another man. Gasps of horror from some of the guests, outright laughter from others. Wickedly, Scud runs the title of the movie, *Love Actually... Sucks*, over the shot on the home movie of exactly that, love actually sucking. We may laugh, it's the first of a number of ostensibly comic but also unsettling moments in the film. Needless to say the bride doesn't find it funny and walks out – that marriage didn't last very long.

The Climbing Wall, et seq.

We cut to a guy on a climbing wall, he is a climbing instructor, an occupation referenced in his very name, Spider. He reaches the top – a gesture of victory. Cut to some nice shots of him in the showers (Scud can always be relied upon to maintain the scenery quotient!) He texts his girlfriend, Moon, and tells her of his success: shall we celebrate? He takes his motorbike and heads for her apartment. She's bought a cake – it's his birthday. They are unsmiling throughout and do not speak but the images show him following her every move intently; and as we shall come to realise, he is totally besotted with her. She by contrast would seem to be indifferent. Finally she tells him she is tired and wants him to take the lead sexually, and they move towards the bed; she is calling the shots: it's not a happy relationship. There follows a long slow pan around the apartment but which settles on a photo of them in happier days, smiling at the camera etc. The pan is accompanied by some single piano notes from composer Yat-YiuYu, a Scud regular, which provide the link to the next scene as we segue to a smart apartment and find Sister picking out similar notes on her piano. She is joined by Brother who comes in and gives her a little hug: it all looks totally innocent at this stage. (The two of them remain un-named throughout the movie.) A family meal follows with their mother, and they are talking about a young guy they know who may be an actor in a film?.... no, he is just an underwear model?....

who also models naked, a life model²?.... just like those two guys in the home movie at the wedding says Mother, and we cut to the same said life model on a catwalk lit by flickering tiny coloured lights. He catches the attention of a character who follows him into the showers and watches him covertly. As we shall see, he is the voyeur; one who watches obsessively; one who looks but does not 'do'. He will appear in a number of guises as the movie unfolds. And he will become obsessed with the young man.

Two Scenarios

Underlying music takes us through to the next scene again, a couple with dogs, behaving for all the world as if they are married, though seemingly they aren't. He will turn out to be the dancing master, and as we shall discover much later, his name is Kwan. He comes home from work and meets his partner going out, taking one of their dogs, Rice Noodle, to the vet. His meal is in the fridge which is full of pre-prepared meals. Looking disconsolate he puts it through the microwave and starts eating it on his own: the dogs run around at his feet and he puts his hands up in doggie begging fashion eating his meal with meat dangling from his mouth. To get attention in this household you clearly need to be a dog. It's another ostensibly comic moment.

We cut to Spider and Moon tentatively making love. She tells him that from now on she will act as his wife. Back again to Kwan in his husband role with the dogs, he even barks at them – this is what marriage would look like. Back to Spider & Moon in bed together though he has his back to her. He wishes to propose to her, but rather than turn over and ask her face to face he decides to text her, another ostensibly comic moment. She laughs at him – she wants a wealthy husband so that she can afford expensive things, and to have enough money to look after her parents when they are old etc, far more money than Spider will be able to afford with his job as a climbing instructor, and she calls him a silly boy. Unsurprisingly when she offers to make love to him he turns his back even more firmly. So much for acting as his wife. So much for marriage.

We have met a number of the major characters and seen how their stories interweave, and Scud has linked them together in various ways technically, using underlying music to take us from one scene to the next, or by having characters talking about other characters whom we are about to meet and relating them to characters whom we have previously met. Thematically it is also interesting to note that so far it is only heterosexual relationships that are fouling up, though that will not remain the case as the movie progresses. But here, as is clear in the wedding movie, homosexuality is a disruptive force, challenging the societal norms of heterosexual marriage.

Fade to Black, and a New Couple

There's a fade to black, and from here on out Scud will cut back and forth in a more straightforward fashion between the different stories as they develop in tandem with each other. We start with Brother and Sister – he is waiting for her outside school and they walk to the car,

² One who models naked.

he with his arm around her; now they do look like a couple. They talk about their situation. They both know that their relationship will come to an end, not least because Brother is off to Taiwan in the not too distant future, but in other respects there is no indication of guilt on the parts of either of them: the only problem is that they have to keep pretending:- ‘When shall we stop pretending?’ asks Brother: and in many ways their relationship is the most sympathetically portrayed in the whole movie. We end up hoping that they will make a go of it.

Scud is now in a position to introduce a new couple into the weave: a lesbian couple. The context is a dinner party to which they have been invited – the talk is of dogs (dogs again) – and a policewoman and her girlfriend are guests. Scud draws our particular attention to the policewoman by having her arrive late, making an entrance and apologising. She is dressed in masculine attire so we may guess at her sexuality, confirmed as we watch the looks that are exchanged between her and her girlfriend, though we have to watch carefully since there is no dialogue between them. One of the dogs under discussion is poorly and the same said girlfriend offers her services as a vet, and again if we pay attention we will see that her partner watches her with some scepticism, if not to say alarm. She is clearly the sensible one, her partner the foolish one.

There follows a short scene with the voyeur from earlier who turns out to be a gym instructor. One member of the class is wearing a blue vest and our gym instructor singles him out for encouragement. Initially he’s an anonymous part of the *mise-en-scène*, though the blue vest does help to bring him to our attention. In the next shot Scud places him amongst the others but in the middle of the shot, and in the next shot again he is placed at the beginning of a pan across the whole class, but we never really get a good look at him. But look closely again at the sequence, and we will see that he is the life model from the cat walk. It is hardly surprising that we don’t recognise him since the first time we saw him he was effectively in the dark, lit only by the pinpoints of coloured light, and though he is well lit in the subsequent scene in the shower, he is of course naked and it is highly likely that our attention will have been elsewhere. But close attention will see that he has a couple of tattoos on his upper arms – it is the same guy. What is established however is that the watching gym instructor has his eye on him, as does the camera. I have concentrated on details here, and it’s a brief scene, but thus does Scud construct his whole movie.

Back to Spider on his motorbike, once again texting his girlfriend: he’s bought her a new helmet and the large helmet case hangs around his neck – he will find a more macabre use for that later.

Cut to dance teacher with his class – and this is when he turns out to be Kwan, the boyfriend / husband from the doggy household. They are interrupted by a message to say Queen is coming, at which point he dismisses the class. Queen turns out to be a wealthy client who is going to pay for individual attention.

We now have a number of stories running in parallel to engage our interest – the girlfriend and the dog, the gym teacher and the life model, Spider and his helmet and his girlfriend, and the dance teacher and his wealthy client. Plus, of course, the romance between Brother and Sister.

Three Contrasted Sex Scenes

Sex can be loving, or passionate, or violent, or an exercise of power, or mundane; or..... It depends on the relationships in the first place. So time for a more extended scene as the Brother and Sister narrative builds to its climax, pun intentional. He arrives home drunk, and is sick. She cleans him up, pulls his clothes off him and when he recovers a bit they end up having sex – for the first time we gather. And the composition of the shots, the lighting, the minimal amount of cutting: Scud knows better than many how to film sex scenes erotically, and the performances of the actors help of course. He asks her where she learned to make love – from porn of course, and she tells him that their mother and her friends often watch porn before cooking. Porn is normalised, even educational, part of the everyday. He laughs, telling her, echoing the title of the movie, that she sucks. In the meantime, a seemingly unimportant detail: while she was waiting for Brother to recover she had checked out his wallet and found a photo in it of him with a girl, and she comments that the girl looks like her, and afterwards she mirrors the comment, telling him that girls tend to fall in love with boys who resemble their fathers, or failing that, their elder brothers. It's a nice example of how tightly Scud constructs his narratives.

The scene between Brother and Sister is followed by a further scene between Spider and Moon. It is introduced by a vertically downward shot from a fair height of Moon getting out of a car and saying goodbye to the driver; it looks as if he is giving her money. Cut to an interior shot, Spider is waiting for her, this time *he* has the cake, and as they eat it we see that there is a huge fluffy spider on the table in the apartment – at some stage perhaps she had actually loved him but now she tells him she's got someone else. He tells her that he was first:- 'So you speak finally,' is her repost, and it is indeed the first time he has actually spoken in the movie. The argument continues – the photo of them in happier times is in the background. She tells him she no longer loves him, re-iterating that she wants more from the relationship, that she wants to be pampered, that he can't afford her, that all he's good for is sex, that what they've got sucks. He gets violent and starts hitting her. She tries to push him off and calls for help, but they end up having sex. The camera pans until it is focussed on the door – it is dark outside, but Scud then cuts within the shot and now it is light outside, and the camera pans back to find Moon giving another guy a blow job. This scene itself is much commented upon because it is totally explicit, erect penises and all, and in a Wikipedia article Scud confirms that it wasn't simulated.³ Blow jobs aside they end up talking about what has happened between her and Spider. She tells him that Spider had forced her to have sex with him, basically he's raped her. They talk about whether she should report him to the police and he reminds her that he is the police, which is the point at which *we* discover that he's a policeman. As for the sex scenes themselves, by showing them so close to each other the contrast in mood is more evident. The first one, between Brother

³ I discuss the issue of porn in my article on *City Without Baseball*, basically arguing that it is only porn when we name it as such. Otherwise it is a sex scene. Other viewers may choose to call it porn, but that's their problem, not mine, nor Scud's for that matter.

and Sister is warm and passionate, both of them fully engaged, an expression of feeling. The second, between Spider and Moon is preceded by him slapping her around and when she tells him to get off her he doesn't, and forces her to submit. It is clearly rape. In the third there is no mutual embrace, it is all one way, the guy just leans back and enjoys the ride, and as soon as it is over he is throwing darts at the dart board that Moon has in her apartment. From Moon's point of view we may just speculate that she wants a release from the living hell that is her relationship with Spider, and the opportunity to talk to somebody else about it, a sympathetic ear. Indeed that she wants protection.

Three D's: Dancing, Dogs, and Michelangelo's David

We cut back to dancing master Kwan with Queen. She wants to purchase his services full time, but he protests that he has other students. The scene ends there for the moment, but we feel that she is not going to let it drop. At home his girlfriend makes the decisions, the dogs come first; now Queen is also making a bid to control him.

Cut to the lesbians. They are online, checking out what they need to pass themselves off as vets. The foolish one tells her partner what to look for, her partner wearily following her lead. First they must check out vet uniforms, then dog medications, and finally, of course, the wealth of the owners. Cut directly to the 'vet' scene itself – continuity of narrative for once. Our foolish lesbian is on her own and is all kitted up with white coat and case of medications and she kneels down and starts ministering to the dog who proceeds to steal the show, twisting round all the time to see what she's doing. She feeds it with one of the medications.

Cut to what I'm going to call the 'artist and model' scene. The 'artist' turns out to be none other than the gym instructor, still in voyeur mode; and his model? none other than, you've guessed it, the life model. Our artist is using an art book of the male nude as a guide and poses his model accordingly, culminating with Michelangelo's David. An outside shot from across the street sees him framed in the window – the final display. The culmination of the scene is accompanied by music bringing with it a sense of completion – once you managed to recreate the Michelangelo David, what else is there? Back, finally, to the 'vet scene', the dog is lying down, comatose, possibly even dead, our 'vet' has poisoned it. She panics and her partner arrives and they make a run for it as the dog owner threatens to sue them. Again, basically a comic scene – I just hope the dog was well paid!

Power Play

Fade to black as we cut to a courtroom scene, Spider in a suit, presumably accused of rape. Released on bail he turns up at Moon's apartment, banging at the door. Moon says she will drop the charges if he never revisits her, but he cuts his wrist, thus demonstrating what can only be called his obsession with her. Cut back to dancing master Kwan and Queen. His girlfriend watches through a window; she was going to invite him for supper, but an assistant tells her that he won't be able to get away. Queen sees the girlfriend:-

Who's that watching?

That's my girlfriend.

Does she dance?

She dances better with dogs.

She looks like a dominant woman, she reminds me of what I was like when I was her age.

Quite so!

Cut back to Moon and her policeman – should she drop her charges against Spider? She obviously retains some feelings for him – he discourages her. She’s nonetheless frightened that Spider will turn up: there’s a rapid montage of loud rattling at the window and the dartboard falling off the wall which has the effect of representing his threat. Thematically we are looking at power here; not that there isn’t plenty of power play in the movie as a whole, the film is suffused with it. Here we have the power of the law in the courtroom scene; then there’s the ever present threat of violence that Spider brings with him. There’s the financial power that Queen brings with her; and there’s the dominant power that Queen recognises in the dancing master’s girlfriend, a power which we have already seen in operation in the domestic context.

The Party

A party scene follows. Again, as with the initial wedding scene, many of the major characters are there. In the opening shot someone comes in from behind the camera and sits down with their back to it and watches what is going on. Despite the fact that he has his back to us we nonetheless recognise the artist / gym teacher – ever the watcher/observer. The guests dance on the veranda, Kwan dances with Queen, we see his girlfriend watching disconsolately from the corner, the camera swings away following the dancers and then swings back and she is gone. (We will probably not at this stage pay any particular attention to a glimpse of a very tall man who has a quick appearance here.) In another rare example of narrative continuity we cut to Kwan and his girlfriend back at home, quarrelling about his dancing with Queen. He’s in the shower, she hugs Rice Noodle. It’s another scene where the visual information is a good deal greater than is conveyed in the dialogue, and in which we realise that their sex life is virtually non-existent as he complains that she doesn’t even recognise his dick, and the scene is another that would repay shot by shot analysis, but we’d be here all night! We cut to the lesbian couple and their story is woven back into the mix as the foolish one wonders if there were any film directors at the party – she has now decided she wants to be a film actress – and they research directors on line. We return to the Queen narrative and a more extended sequence follows as Kwan plays table tennis with her and talks with her about her taste for unusual things, for the blues for instance. Her now dead ex-husband left her for a blues dancer: but no matter, she will eventually meet him in heaven. He suggests that she must love him very much: ‘That’s so untrue young man. I just hate losing. Love actually sucks.’, and we’re back again to the title of the movie. It’s an interesting scene in many ways, since sex is not on the table. Instead we see mutual fellow feeling, the basis for a friendship indeed. She understands him and has sussed out the relationship between him and his girlfriend, and he is learning to understand her and her relationship with her ex-husband. We stay with Queen but the scene has changed: she is dancing with the tall man whom we hardly registered in the party scene and we see that both he and she

are extremely good dancers as they dance together in a routine that could have come straight out of a Hollywood musical of the 1940s. And Scud knows that for such a sequence you lock the camera firmly down and have the routine develop within the frame. They dance to a catchy little tune that lightens the whole mood of the movie for a bit.

These four scenes have been unified structurally in one way or another by their relationship to the party scene, directly in the case of the argument between Kwan and his girlfriend, somewhat indirectly as the foolish lesbian speculates about whether there were any film directors at the party, referentially in the scene between the Kwan and Queen with whom he has been dancing in the party scene and whom he is getting to know better in the table tennis scene, and directly by the dance sequence as Queen and the tall man put on their display – very different from the jigging about that happens at parties, but both activities are clearly dancing in one form or another. Thus does Scud give the movie form and shape. We may not overtly notice the coherence, but we are not meant to anyway. But we will feel it.

Everything Sucks

The music changes abruptly and the whole mood changes and we are back to the artist gym teacher's obsession with his model as he watches him on the exercise machines in the gym. He follows him into the sauna where he finds him getting sucked off by another guy. The setting changes but the two of them are still the centre of our attention. They are watching Scud's previous movie, *Amphetamine*, on the television. Our life model comments that a film about a love affair between a mainlander and a Taiwanese in Hong Kong is nothing if not strange, and if we know the movie we will know that it doesn't end well, nor of course will the current relationship in *this* movie as our life model makes it clear that the artist's feelings for him are not reciprocated: he's an older guy, and if he wants a young man, look at the ads in the magazines. Love can be purchased. He leaves, leaving the artist looking at himself in the mirror. He doesn't like the image that is looking back at him so fractures it by smashing the mirror. All he can do in his frustration is masturbate, which he does, looking an image from *Amphetamine* for stimulation as he does so. As far as he's concerned love clearly sucks.

Narrative trajectories cross in the next scene as we see Kwan and a friend out running. The shot, however, has started on Spider and another guy painting a mural, but it then follows Kwan and his friend as they run past. The two of them stop for a rest, and his friend strips off his shirt to cool down. Kwan backs off, telling his friend that he's afraid that he's going to want to suck his dick: as far as Kwan is concerned the relationship is not sexual. His friend turns the tables by calling *him* a sucker as he asks how his affair with his rich client is going. Apparently she's deposited 20 million in his account, hoping thus to establish a contract between them. His friend sympathises and Kwan sums it up: 'Love or Money. Both or nothing': love is a transaction. The friend has a lawyer friend who can help 'in case it sucks', and the scene ends as the two of them leave, Kwan calling his friend the greatest sucker on earth – for getting involved we must presume.

The Killing

After a brief shot of Brother and Sister getting a room we cut to Spider on the roof of a tower block watching what's going on through the windows of the nearby apartments and we see Moon and her policeman boyfriend having sex on their balcony. Spider texts her: 'Don't do that to me', 'You are the love of my life' and he abseils down the side of the building, bursts through her window and stabs her to death. Apparently Hitchcock suggested that you should shoot your murder scenes like love scenes⁴, and that is certainly what happens here: it's all in slow motion and Spider lies on top of her as he stabs her over and over again and at the same time weeping and kissing her, as if indeed he is making love to her, and the accompanying music is peaceful – no Hitchcockian stabbing music here, and Scud bringing the 'knife as phallus' cliché vividly to life. We fade to black, and we next find the policemen sitting disconsolate outside her appartement as his colleagues enter and find her headless body and we cut to Spider getting onto a boat carrying his helmet case, which as we shall discover contains her head, and he will carry her head around with him for the rest of the movie. We watch as he gets off the boat and climbs up a cliff, takes her head from the case and puts it in a niche in the rocks. The camera pulls back and back and back until the head is a tiny spot on the cliff face – it is not clear whether it is a really strong zoom or a drone shot, but it doesn't look like a process shot – and we see that it is a real cliff face and it appears and that Spider (or strictly speaking Osman Hung who plays Spider), has indeed done his own abseiling and climbing. It certainly adds verisimilitude to the whole scene.

You Can't Smoke in Here.

Back to the Brother and Sister narrative with their mother playing mah jong with her friends. They warn her that her daughter has reached the age where she needs to be watched. Narrative continuity as we cut to Brother and Sister themselves taking a walk on the cliff top discussing their future. They find Spider sitting disconsolately on the grass clutching the helmet case and the camera stays on him as Brother and Sister leave the frame, and we have neatly changed narrative focus within the shot. Spider proceeds to take Moon's head – he's obviously rescued it – out of the helmet case and caresses it sadly. Back to Brother and Sister in the rented room and we watch them having sex, both from within the room and from outside the window – the latter shot bringing with it the sense of being observed by a third party. They discuss emigrating to another country like Japan or Korea where incest is legal.⁵ Illegal it may be, but the sex between them is decidedly consensual, in contrast to the sex in the next scene involving the artist and his life model which is far from consensual, and in which the artist corners him in the showers and assaults him. Our model pushes him off and makes a run for it, calling for security and slipping and falling on the floor as he goes. The fall looks unrehearsed but I guess they decided to keep it in – it is particularly effective in context.

⁴ and vice versa of course.

⁵ I checked on line and was amazed to discover how many countries it is actually legal in!

Cut back to the lesbian narrative as the sensible one tells her partner that, if they go on behaving in the way that they are, they're going to get caught and she will lose her job. Foolish one sulks, accusing her partner of not loving her anymore, but gets a cuddle in response, and when she tells her that she was only kidding, gets chased around the apartment and into the shower. We see them making love through the curtain.⁶ It is interesting to note that, while it seems to be clear that the sensible one is the one who is keeping order in the relationship, it is the foolish one who has the power. She's been manipulating her partner into doing what she wants throughout. But also interesting to note that the relationship works. It is one of the few relationships in the movie that does actually work.

By contrast we return to two characters each of whom are on their own, Queen and Kwan. We find Queen in her big house arranging her photographs, including one of her and Kwan, and one of her and her tall dance partner and we cut to Kwan, also alone, eating yet another meal that's been left for him, then, to prove the point, back to Queen just sitting. Finally, back to the Brother and Sister story as Mother finds them in flagrante in their hired room; the owner quite unperturbed, telling them 'You can't smoke in here.' It's another comic moment.

Spider Quite Loses His Head

A number of the stories have now been wound up, but the Spider and Moon narrative still has a little way to go. So, we find him at a roadside café, back in his no-speaking mode, as a radio announcement tells us that the police are looking for Moon's killer, describing Spider in the process. The café owner recognises him but only ruminates that 'Lovers drift apart, rivals drift closer,':- or so my subtitles tell me, but I can't help but think that it is a miss-translation. Technically I guess that the strict translation would be 'Lovers drift apart, haters drift closer', but it doesn't read well in English. Change the noun to a verb, from '*lover*' to '*love*' and, given that Scud is describing the relationship between Spider and Moon, several helpful antonyms to the word 'love' then come to mind – 'loathe', 'detest', 'despise', and yes indeed then the word 'hate' would fit. It is also worth noting that the café owner tells him that the police, along with the other characters that we have met in the course of watching the movie, suck. Staying with Spider we next find him in the sea, he's catching fish – Moon's head rests beside him as he cooks and eats it. He paints her face tenderly and sleeps naked beside her, but when he awakes she's gone. Frantically he runs back and forth along the cliff edge until a vertical shot shows him plucking up courage to jump in, which he does. Unfortunately he knocks his head off on the rocks on the way down!

There is a brief courtroom scene that ties up other loose ends in the movie – our artist is found not guilty of attempted rape, Kwan is released from his contract with Queen, and Brother faces a statutory sentence of 3 years for incest, commuted to 2 years because the 'victim' (victim? – no victim she!) has appealed for leniency; and there's a quick reprise of Queen dancing with her tall partner. Then we are back to Spider, specifically to his head floating in the sea, and we see

⁶ It's not clear why Scud films the scene so discretely given everything else in the film. Perhaps the two actresses were not happy to do it, or perhaps one can wickedly suggest that he was not interested in filming lesbian sex!

Moon's head floating nearby. As predicted by the café owner, they are drawn together despite themselves until they are floating side by side. The camera pans up, peaceful 'end of movie' music plays, and we are left looking at the sea itself. An image of the calm infinite.

By Way of a Conclusion

Love actually sucks – so the title of the movie tells us, and so we presume does its companion, sex. We have seen that together love and sex, can take a number of forms, can follow a number of trajectories. Trying to categorise them is no easy task because there are no neat fits and a lot of overlap, but here, by way of a summary, are some of them. We started with a conventional heterosexual marriage which was disposed of in the first five minutes of the movie, since it seemed to include homosexuality on the side. Next there is Spider and Moon, a nothing if not obsessional relationship which leads to murder:- if I can't have her, nobody shall. Also obsessional, and in this case driven by unfulfilled desire, is the gym instructor/artist and his model. He is a voyeur, one who looks, observes, watches, but who is doomed to be attracted only to the unobtainable, and all he has left is an image on his phone and the exercise of his right hand. And if I am not mistaken, Scud gives more screen time to these two narratives than to any of the others, though Kwan's narrative comes a close third. He, Kwan, is dominated by the women in his life, first of all by his girlfriend, then by Queen, though for one moment in the film the relationship with Queen does verge on the brink of friendship, but he realises that at its heart it's a transaction, love and money cannot be separated. Neither of his relationships would seem to include sex; with Queen it was never on the agenda, and with his girlfriend it seems to have been a thing of the past. It would be truer to say that both relationships are more about the exercise of power than they are about love and affection. And as for Queen herself, she may have been left in her big house with only her photographs for company, but it is she, the voice of experience, who comes up with the full title of the movie, 'love actually sucks'. For Moon love is also a transaction. (Do we see her being offered money for services rendered? It is never clear.) Certain it is that she wants a partner who has got plenty of money, which Spider most definitely hasn't, and indeed her relationship with her policeman is in its way also transactional: she is looking for a sympathetic ear, for someone who can give her some respite from the living hell that is her relationship with Spider; for someone indeed who can protect her should the worst come to the worst.

Brother and Sister's relationship provides us with a positive alternative. It is passionate, powerful, loving, consensual, the only problem being that it is illegal. The other positively portrayed relationship is that between the lesbian couple, though one does wonder how long it is going to survive, and here again there is an exercise in power as the foolish one uses her wiles to control the sensible one. What do we have left? Professional relationships perhaps, because the other way of looking at the relationship between Queen and Kwan is that it is a purely professional one, a payment for services given, and we may speculate that the relationship between Queen and her dance partner is also professional, though it is perfectly possible that he is just a friend. Finally there is one relationship that looks as if it is a simple friendship between

equals, that between Kwan and his running partner, the friend who sympathises with his predicament and offers him advice and support. In all of this I hope I have shown how all these narratives interweave and intertwine and in so doing serve to contrast with and illuminate each other. Whatever else, the film has shown us a variety of relationships, some good, some bad, none without their problems. And in other respects, and despite all this complexity, Scud's achievement still is to have given us a sense of an ending. Bach does it with fugues, Scud does it with films.

A final caption tells us, 'Life is love, Love is at it is' – reversing the caption at the front of the movie which told us that 'Love is life, life as it is.' If love actually sucks, so also by definition, does life itself. But it's inescapable, as UB40 confirm as they sing, 'Wise men say only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you.'

(I had also thought of Marlene Dietrich: 'Falling in love again, never wanted to, what am I to do? I can't help it.' It serves just as well don't you think?)

Copyright © Charles Sarland 2025