



## Love, Death and Always

### Monday, October 19, 2015

*It was my first Christmas alone, living in a crummy apartment in a big scary new city, when this Spielberg movie opened in December 1989. I went to see the film several times. Perhaps that's why my [Spielberg Film Society](#) review is a bit 'out there' and tinged with ethereal musings, although the movie is like that, too, I think. It was never regarded as one of Spielberg's best, but I have great fondness for it, and still find it quite moving – and the aerial photography, both full-size and miniature, is ferocious and stunning.*

#### *Love, Death and 'Always'*

By (a guy named) Joe Fordham (May 1990)

John Williams' music does not make its appearance in Steven Spielberg's latest film, *Always*, until almost halfway into the first act of the story: well into the slow-burning introduction of our hero 'Pete St. Pete' (Richard Dreyfuss), his long-suffering girlfriend Dorinda (Holly Hunter), his friend and fellow fire-fighter flyer 'Al the Pal' (John Goodman), and Ted Baker (Brad Johnson), the square-jawed klutz summoned to them by providence and a mistaken birthday invitation.



Dorinda loves Pete, 'always,' despite his flashy



flying and his obvious attempts to buy her off with 'girl clothes.' They've been more than friends for a long time, and it is this that stops Dorinda as she sees Pete's plane the night before his death. As lit by Mikael Solomon (*The Abyss*), the silver A-26 sits in a pool of

floodlights like a giant death's-head moth. Dorinda and Pete are taking a shortcut home across the airfields after her birthday dance. The scene is very brief but the music sets the mood of dreamlike foreboding, gently unnerving. Pete's number is up. Despite the driving bellicose theme that underscores Pete and Al's jeep as they swing towards their planes the next morning, and despite the frantic exhilaration that sends Dorinda pedaling after them on her bicycle, there is the sense that the die has been cast – although Spielberg does not sacrifice the brutal finality of the moment when it arrives.

Since 1982, Spielberg's public has been waiting for this, his 'real grown-ups kissing' movie, as intimated on Steven and Diane Freeling's late night TV in *Poltergeist*, where they are watching the 1943 movie – *A Guy Named Joe* – that *Always* is based on:

Spencer Tracy: "I'm either dead or I'm crazy."  
 Friendly Ghost: "You're not crazy, Pete."  
 Spencer Tracy: "You mean... I'm dead?"

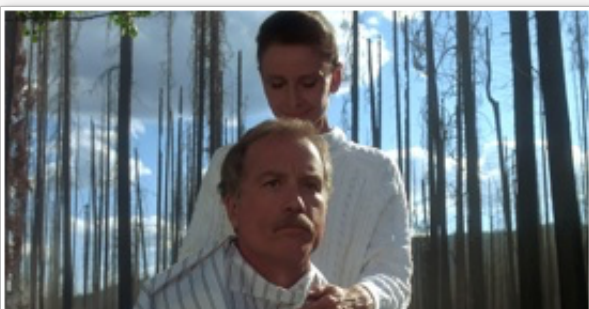


As a much-publicised retranslation, rather than a remake, the final movie does not disappoint. It is a tour de force for Holly Hunter, a brilliant arrival for the consistently excellent John Goodman (*Sea of Love*), and a welcome return with particular resonance for Richard Dreyfuss. It has been eleven years since he disappeared into the *Close Encounters* mothership and been absent from Spielberg's films.

As Pete, the cocky mortal, Dreyfuss' character is forced to face aspects of his personality that have been as obscure to him as the apparent afterlife that he has now woken up to. Without a single marble pillar or dry ice machine, it is a surreal hallucinatory vision appropriate to Pete, a smoldering burnt-out forest populated by fleeting ghosts of wildlife that may once have lived there; at the centre of which is a glade of silver birches, an island of exposition where the rules are laid out. Again, John Williams' score completes the final spell, suspending the sequence in a musical atmosphere as Pete's spirit guide, Hap (Audrey

Hepburn), points out, with film editor Michael Kahn, that time and space are indeed "funny stuff."

"Spiritus... Divine Breath," the ability of a soul to linger and affect others is Hap's message to Pete. He is now a ghost, a memory, a thought or





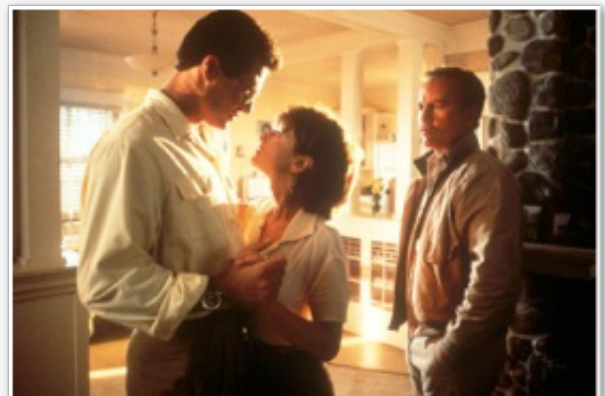
feeling, existing on a wavelength that only we, the moviegoer, can see or hear. It is a graceful cinematic metaphysic which touches on ideas similar to young Jamie Graham's in *Empire of the Sun*: "Maybe that's how it is, maybe we are God's dream and He is ours." A view of super-nature based on palpable emotion.

Pete embarks on his influencing mission – inspiring young Ted Baker – rarely with the reverence all this may seem to imply, often inadvertently causing more confusion for his mortal protégé than an inspiration. From early training runs, through an inspired encounter with Roberts Blossom as a loony vagrant in a long abandoned Badlands aerodrome, the film continues deftly and with, often, great hilarity to explore this pupil/teacher communication.

Perhaps the most involving moment is, typically for Spielberg, a scene that works through music. Pete teaches young Ted to relax and unwind before approaching a bomb run, using his technique of whistling while flying. Pete begins to demonstrate and, as they near the target, Ted joins him in a syncopated riff, and the two continue on, a transcendent duo, scoring hit after hit.

But *Always* is a film that deals with love and death, and so consequently takes us into territory that undercuts the humour and the romance of this fantasy to disarm us with scenes of Bergmanesque soliloquy, and a final climax of unrelenting power.

Grief brings pain, sometimes despondency, and sometimes also anger. Spielberg and screenwriter Jerry Belson memorably confront these feelings in a scene between John Goodman and Holly Hunter at the depths of Dorinda's downward spiral, set in a nightmarish apartment where planes overfly the flimsy building, which has been built apparently in line of sight of an airport flight path.



Pete, too, is made to suffer as it becomes apparent to him that Dorinda's future happiness almost certainly relies on her ability to move on to other relationships with other (taller!) men. It becomes a question of life as a rationale for self, versus self as a purpose for life – a very human conflict for any ghost to face.

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