

MONTHLY MOVIES

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From ‘Casablanca’ to ‘Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates’: the subtext of love

By T. Rob Brown

Dearly beloved: We have come together today in the presence of all to bless the union of dialogue and subtext. “Mawage is wot bwings us togeder today,” the Impressive Clergyman began at the pulpit. “Mawage, that bwessed awangment, that dweam wifin a dream ... and wuv, tru wuv, will fowow you fowevea ... so tweasure your wuv.”

While the words of the Impressive Clergyman from “The Princess Bride” (1987) might be a little difficult to understand, there is—aside from the languages of music and mathematics—another universal language: love.

From a communication perspective, love contains within it the notions of body language, proximity, emotions, sensuality and other forms of nonverbal communication. Through its dance, language moves beyond the mere barriers created by dialogue alone in a film.

It’s for this very reason screenwriters developed an interesting technique known as subtext.

What are these lines of dialogue from films really telling us?

- “As you wish,” Westley/the Man in Black (Cary Elwes) from “The Princess Bride”
- “You complete me,” Jerry Maguire (Tom Cruise) from “Jerry Maguire” (1996)
- “Here’s looking at you, kid,” (Humphrey Bogart) from “Casablanca” (1942)
- “Shut up and deal,” Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine) from “The Apartment” (1960)

- “You had me at hello,” Dorothy Boyd (Renée Zellweger) from “Jerry Maguire”
- “If you’re a bird, I’m a bird,” Noah Calhoun (Ryan Gosling) from “The Notebook” (2004)
- “I caught you a delicious bass,” Napoleon Dynamite (Jon Heder) from “Napoleon Dynamite” (2004)
- “I know,” Han Solo (Harrison Ford) from “Star Wars Episode IV: The Empire Strikes Back” (1980)

If you answered, “They all say, ‘I love you,’” then you’re correct. Each one of these films handles dialogue subtext in an amazing way—they don’t have to literally say what they mean. Instead, they get the point across in a creative and more subtle way. Honestly, this is one of the reasons that few screenwriters become Quentin Tarantino, in respect to dialogue-writing skills. Mastery of subtext is key to becoming a great screenwriter.

If a given line of dialogue were represented visually by a giant iceberg, then the literal words being spoken would be represented by that peak of the iceberg that pops out of the water. The depth and details of that iceberg that extend considerably below the waterline represent that piece of dialogue’s subtext—it’s real meaning and purpose.

With this important concept of filmmaking in mind, let’s talk about the amazing dialogue from wedding and romance films. In keeping with this month’s magazine topic, I began looking through every film in my personal collection with “wedding” in the title. I discovered—not unexpectedly—that all of them were comedies with romantic elements: “The Wedding Singer” (1998), “The Wedding Ringer” (2015), “Wedding Crashers” (2005) and “Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates” (2016). The highlight of that group of films is probably Robbie Hart’s (Adam Sandler’s) “I Wanna Grow Old With You” song in “The Wedding Singer” as well as Julia Sullivan’s (Drew Barrymore’s) sheer innocence and adoring nature. I don’t know how she does it but she’s just so charming in films like this and “50 First Dates” (2004).

“I love you very much,” Henry Roth (Sandler) tells Lucy Whitmore (Barrymore) in “50 First Dates” showing some of his own innocence and charm. “Probably more than anybody could love another person.”

Probably the most romantic—although cheesy—“Wedding Crashers” line: “You know how they say we only use 10% of our brains?” John Beckwith (Owen Wilson) asks Rachel McAdams (Claire Cleary). “I think we only use 10% of our hearts.”

So, I expanded my search looking for “marriage” variants in the title and only added “So I Married an Axe Murderer” (1993). A great Mike Myers film, by the way; it’s definitely underrated. It even has a hip early-’90s soundtrack. Ultimately though, the romance is lost when you must evade the swing of an axe on your honeymoon night.

I re-watched all of these films over the past few weeks to refresh my memory for this article. If these films only barely capture one truth about U.S. weddings, it’s that we go way overboard with these events—probably because we hold to the romantic dream that it will be an once-in-a-lifetime event.

Prince Humperdinck (Chris Sarandon) from “The Princess Bride” has this to say on the topic of true love: “Not one couple in a century has that chance, no matter what the story books say.” Well, he’s jaded. What does he know?

Continuing my search, I came across other classics that I've seen but don't own: "The Wedding Planner" (2001), part of the American Pie franchise "American Wedding" (2003), "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" (2002), "My Best Friend's Wedding" (1997), the darker toned "Corpse Bride" (2005), "Bride Wars" (2009), "Father of the Bride" (1991) and "Bridesmaids" (2011).

Everywhere we look, we can find lots of films where a wedding is featured—even if it's not referenced in the title. The list goes on and on.

Referencing back to the earlier discussion of subtext, both communication professionals like myself and Alex "Hitch" Hitchens (Will Smith) realize that "Sixty percent of all human communication is nonverbal—body language. Thirty percent is your tone. So that means 90% of what you're saying ain't coming out of your mouth."

Yes, I had the pleasure of re-watching "Hitch" (2005) recently as well. And, yes, that film ends with a wedding too. While I wish I could associate myself more as the usually smooth Hitch, we all know I relate more to Albert Brennaman (Kevin James). Well, it could be worse—at least I don't have to kick myself for being the biggest dirt bag in the film, Vance Munson (Jeffrey Donovan). Though Donovan redeemed himself when he starred in the amazing TV series "Burn Notice."

Speaking of "Hitch," this film's also flowing with romantic lines. Another great one: "Life is not the amount of breaths you take," Hitch tells the audience in a voice over. "It's the moments that take your breath away." Another: "What if 'fine' isn't good enough? What if I want 'extraordinary'?" Hitch pleads with Sara Melas (Eva Mendes).

"That's what people do," Hitch tells Melas as he pulls himself off the pavement in front of her car. "They leap and hope to God they can fly. Because otherwise, we just drop like a rock, wondering the whole way down, 'Why in the hell did I jump?' But here I am, Sara, falling. And there's only one person that makes me feel like I can fly. That's you."

Each of these films tell us a life lesson. Romance films try to tell us—though we don't always listen—to pick the right person for us, despite who we think is the most attractive, but someone we're truly compatible with and who will treat us with respect. This especially brings films like "Shallow Hal" (2001) and "Isn't It Romantic" (2019) to mind.

Most of the time, these films' most romantic lines are all about the main characters: "I'm also just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her," Anna Scott (Julia Roberts) said to William Thacker (Hugh Grant) in "Notting Hill" (1999). Roberts, also known for "Pretty Woman" (1990), "My Best Friend's Wedding" and numerous other romantic films, is arguably the queen of this genre.

"If you love someone, you say it," Julianna Potter (Roberts) says in "My Best Friend's Wedding." "You say it right then, out loud. Otherwise, the moment just passes you by." Another of her great romantic lines in that film: "Choose me. Marry me. Let me make you happy."

"It's like in that moment, the whole universe existed just to bring us together," Jonathan Trager (John Cusak) says at the end of "Serendipity" (2001) while sitting on an ice skating rink, skaters zipping behind, the snow begins to fall and he lays back to look up into the sky and take it all in. A woman's glove falls. He turns to see Sara Thomas (Kate Beckensale). Suddenly, as if by magic, it's just the two of

them. The other skaters are nowhere to be seen. The snow seems to pick up as she steps toward him. They meet, shake hands and introduce themselves. Then they kiss passionately.

What list of the most romantic film quotes of all time could be complete without several entries from "Casablanca," arguably the greatest film ever made? "Kiss me," Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) pleads Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart). "Kiss me as if it were the last time."

"Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine," a broken-hearted Blaine mumbles while pouring himself a drink as Sam (Dooley Wilson) tries to comfort his boss. Even "Play it again, Sam," flows with the subtext of a love lost.

"We'll always have Paris," Blaine reminds Lund of their brief romance on the eve of World War II as they part ways yet again. This film is chock full of some of the most romantic lines ever written in cinema.

Another tour de force romance film, "The Notebook," shares numerous romantic lines in the 1940s between Calhoun and Allie Hamilton (Rachel McAdams). "So it's not gonna be easy," Calhoun tells Hamilton. "It's gonna be really hard. We're gonna have to work at this every day, but I want to do that because I want you. I want all of you, forever you and me, every day."

"The best love is the kind that awakens the soul," Calhoun also tells Hamilton. "That makes us reach for more, that plants the fire in our hearts and brings peace to our minds. That's what I hope to give you forever." Another: "You are a song, a dream, a whisper and I don't know how I could have lived without you for as long as I have."

Sometimes, a film's best romantic quotes don't even have anything to do with the bride and groom in the film: "I knew I'd never be able to remember what Nina wore that day," George Banks (Steve Martin) said. "But I also knew I'd never forget the way she looked," from "Father of the Bride."

Even the darkest forces of horror need love: "I have crossed oceans of time to find you," Dracula (Gary Oldman) says in "Bram Stoker's Dracula" (1992).

There's a whole group of romantic comedy films where Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan team up: "Joe vs. the Volcano" (1990), "Sleepless in Seattle" (1993) and "You've Got Mail" (1998).

"I wanted it to be you," Kathleen Kelly (Ryan) tells Joe Fox (Hanks) in "You've Got Mail." "I wanted it to be you so badly."

"It was a million tiny little things that, when you added them all up, they meant we were supposed to be together ... and I knew it," Sam Baldwin (Hanks) recalls of his deceased wife as he speaks over a radio broadcast in "Sleepless in Seattle." "I knew it the very first time I touched her. It was like coming home ... only to no home I'd ever known... I was just taking her hand to help her out of a car and I knew. It was like ... magic."

Ryan also teamed up with Billy Crystal in "When Harry Met Sally" (1989), a film noted for its nature of two good friends who end up falling in love. "I came here tonight because when you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible," Harry Burns (Crystal) tells Sally Albright (Ryan) during a New Year's Eve celebration. They proceed to talk about their wedding in the aftermath and its huge coconut cake.

One that I'm partial to: "I would rather share one lifetime with you than face all the ages of this world alone," Arwen (Liv Tyler) tells Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) in "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring" (2001).

In conclusion, if we want the definitive view on true love, we definitely need to look no further than Westley (Elwes): "Death cannot stop true love," Westley tells Buttercup (Robin Wright) in "The Princess Bride." "All it can do is delay it for a while."

"The show must go on."