

ENDEARMENT, CONDITIONS FOR; A REVIEW OF  
"TERMS OF ENDEARMENT" (1983 film) -----

#1781



As artcritic, I rate "A" the two artworks represented by this thinksheet: (1) U. of Mich. art prof. granduncle Jn. Zwickey's offhand calligraph of my father's (and my, and our first son's) name;\* and (2) the film *I, this 2nd day of '84*, predict will be the #1 Oscar-grabber of '83. The following are Christian observations from seeing the film, reading about it, and leading a church discussion of it. (\*Discovered last week in Pappy's effects.) ("Christian observations": the adjective could refer to either the quality or the source; I mean the latter, viz., that the observations are by a Christian, i.e., one who seeks to see film, indeed the world, sub specie domini, "under the aspect of" Jesus.)

1. Paradox: The film is powerfully biblical/antibiblical. The former: "Where it's at," what's important, is dynamic love as dynamic: the anatomy, physiology, psychology, sociology, axiology of love as the endearment process: how do human beings come to love one another and to sustain love relationships, and what are the pro/anti-forces/circumstances vis-a-vis this process (thus, my "conditions for endearment" as synonym of the film's "terms of endearment")? What gets your attention gets you; and what gets the Bible's and this film's attention is love, its reality and ramifications...The latter: But the film, in what it leaves out, is profoundly and tragically antibiblical. Love is given no metaphysical grounding: it exists, clinically and solipsistically, as a human characteristic (as blackness is a characteristic of coal). For this myopic vision of love, these do not exist: God, nature, the wider human society beyond intimacy relationships, history, the future other than as extension of intimacy relationships. It's a feminine film in the bad sense of feminine, viz., as under sexism "a woman's place is in the home" and "it's a man's world," so in the film love's place is limited to intimacy relationships and the rest is "the outside" as meaningless cosmos and "cold, cruel world."

2. Why the explosive popularity? A few reasons: (1) Attention is shifted from the world "we can do nothing about" to a miniworld we still think we might do something about; in a time dangerous because people feel powerless, there's some relief and hope in this shift. (2) As narcissistic, the film seems in this narcissistic time "real," "realistic," "the way it is." The two in the first of the film's three generations are one expansive narcissist (Jack Nicholson as degenerate, drunk and womanizing, ex-astronaut) and one contractive narcissist (Shirley McLaine as selfish, loveless, unloving, embittered next-door-neighbor to J.N.). (3) Things are now tough all over: privately, people are botching it, their bungling of intimacy leaving them lovelorn and lonely, as much as publicly, governments are botching it, leaving their populations anxious with personal, national, and even species-wide survival-worries. A few bellylaughs might help, and the film's heaped with them. (4) The film's salacious, loose-genitaled; titillating fornicating and adulteries 'nuf to go 'round. The film creates the never-never-land illusion that one can have it both ways: "new morality" sexual permissiveness + the joys-satisfactions of covenant-intimacy. But at the same time it's wistful and cueful about love's necessary disciplines, loyalties, tightassness (to use a current negative word for responsible living). (5) Great actors, including Debra Winger as central in the middle generation (with her spectacular, admirable emotional freedom and honesty--rare virtues in our phoney time. She's salvific (a Christ-figure) in self-giving and in the positive effects of her dying (the real loves emerging therefrom being, as it were, her resurrection). (6) The women's movement is rightly addressing the mother/daughter relationship, which is the film's centerpiece. (7) We're paying more attention to intergenerational realities today, and the film's 30-year span of three generations fascinates us: "the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer.31.29 KJV--but in context, Jer. individuates, contributing to a tradition which has born the bitter fruit of hyperindividualism, which grasps for intimacy but is unwilling-unable to "commit myself," to make and keep covenants private or public (thus, the deteriorating of private and public morals/ethics)).

\*His real-life style, on which see #1765.