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The End Of…? An Interdisciplinary Conference on the Study of Motion Pictures
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A Conference Report by James MacDowell, University of Warwick

"Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem … is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of [one's] own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so". Henry James*, The Art of the Novel* (5).

Anyone who has attempted to construct a narrative, or indeed a coherent argument, will be familiar with the troubling nature of endings to which James refers. The challenge of where to stop a story, an investigation, or simply one's view of a particular subject is certainly an "exquisite problem". The call for papers issued in advance of this two-day conference made two related, but at first seemingly incompatible, assertions: that endings appear to be one of mankind's "fundamental obsessions", and yet that "our concern and anxiety with closures remain within the margins of academic attention". In fact, the issues apparently posed by endings and closure have been granted considerable attention by numerous disciplines, not least film studies' forerunner, literary scholarship. Yet it is certainly true enough to say that they have remained simultaneously over-used and under-examined concepts in English-language film studies.[1] It was thus encouraging to see a conference emerge that sought to confront such matters head-on, and also cheering to note that it took place against a backdrop of other recent stirrings of interest in the question of endings—however broadly defined.[2]

It would not be oversimplifying to state that the suspicion of closure in film theory has its origins in that familiar story of the 1960s/70s' adoption of structuralist, and then post-structuralist, approaches to narrative. Via various metaphors, formal resolution has all too often been recast merely as a pernicious attempt to resolve both narrative and ideological conflicts in one fell swoop. Claude Levi-Strauss effectively laid the foundations for this reputation in the 1950s with his assertion that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" (440). The emphasis placed here on the resolution of contradictions provided grounds for a suspicion of closure that has since been built upon by a great many others. Indeed, approaches to both literature and film have come to draw parallels between narrative closure and virtually every "conservative" impulse in Western culture. In varied contexts it has been said to have de facto parallels with patriarchy, the "Oedipal trajectory", traditional family values, repressive law and order, dominant models of history, the Western capitalist system, and the workings of ideology tout court. And of course, in keeping with so numerous and damning a set of assumptions, such arguments have often been accompanied by contrasting claims for ideologically progressive,

"open" texts. Whether it is the "writerly text", the practice of intertextuality, avant-garde cinema, or otherwise, the prevailing theoretical attitude towards closure has often ensured the approach can be the same: since X complicates closure, X has progressive potential.

Given such a theoretical reputation and legacy, it is both strange and yet somehow entirely unsurprising that endings and closure have received so little in-depth attention, and that asides and inference—rather than rigorous investigation—have usually been the tools for drawing their semantic fields. "The End Of…?" (organised by Emre Caglayan, Frances Kamm and Pete Sillett) clearly had the potential to make gestures towards redressing this state of affairs, as well as open up debates about its subject's significance for a diverse array of concerns. And indeed, this relatively small—but impressively heterogeneous and international—conference certainly did offer a generously inclusive interpretation of its subject. Ranging from considerations of individual films' endings to the teleological impulse in theory—via shifting industrial cycles, new consumption patterns, narratives concerned with ends (childhood, apocalypse), etc.—the "ending" was here mined for its full denotative potential. Furthermore, while playfully expressing a familiar ambivalence towards closure in its very title, "The End Of…?" as a whole did nonetheless manage to edge various debates about various "endings" forward in promising directions.

Peter Krämer's keynote address began the proceedings by introducing an eclecticism in subject and approach that would become a recurring feature of the conference. An extremely spirited opening, Krämer drew together such disparate topics as the possible end of film studies as a discipline, the globalisation of international film industries during the 20th and 21st centuries, and current political debates on climate change—all filtered through both his own personal autobiography, and two science fiction films that end with moments of profound transformation for humankind: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Avatar* (2009). A bold call-to-arms for an explicitly political scholarly practice focused on popular culture's ability to frame discussions of global importance (e.g. ecology), the address seemed to strike some attendees as overambitious. Yet its audaciousness was equally its appeal, and its scope also seemed fitting given the conference's intentionally broad remit. Touching on a multiplicity of "endings"—personal, institutional, epochal, as well as textual (both Stanley Kubrick's and James Cameron's films end with suggestively ambiguous looks-to-camera)—this was in many ways an appropriate inauguration of the multifarious purposes to which the conference's conceptual starting point could, and would, be put.

Beginning at the level of texts themselves: it was perhaps surprising that relatively few speakers in fact concerned themselves explicitly with the subject of closure per se—though there were notable exceptions. The panel "Dramaturgy and Ending", for example, hosted three researchers who were investigating matters that have been too seldom explored in English-language film studies. A paper delivered *in absentia* by panel chair Christoph Dreher, Robert Rabenalt's work probed the functions of extra-diegetic music in the process of closure, with *Punch-Drunk Love*'s (2002) playful postmodern score and *In The Mood For Love*'s (2000) more classical formal correspondences offering especially illuminating examples of music's power to affectively conclude, and complicate, cinematic endings. Meanwhile, hailing from Finland and Germany respectively, Riikka Pelo and Christine Lang both structured their discussions (of Michael Haneke for the former, of contemporary "auteur" TV series for the latter) around the concept of dramaturgy. This framework cleverly allowed them to bypass some of the more problematic issues that arise from applying language-specific concepts from literary theory to film closure. Appropriating the

dramaturgical notions of "vertical" and "horizontal" performance axes to partially overcome the binary structuralist-derived model of what constitutes "open" and "closed" narrative, Lang's paper on series finales in particular offered glimpses of an alternative approach to endings to which I was grateful to have been introduced.

Continuing the preoccupation with closure on the panel "End of Stories", my own paper, "The Sense of a Happy Ending: Myths, Fictions and the Final Couple", argued that the "happy ending"—a seemingly fundamental feature of Hollywood cinema—has had its features, meanings and very existence largely taken for granted by film scholarship, and that this has been to the detriment of our understanding of what, on closer inspection, emerges as a routinely flexible convention. The other speakers on the panel similarly questioned accepted wisdom about their respective forms of endings. In a useful call for conclusions to be evaluated in relation to all that has preceded them, Ivan Nuns's discussion of the ending of *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) suggested that Kubrick's final film finishes not with a salving reaffirmation of its central couple's marriage (as many have suggested), but rather adopts an ironic stance whose significance can only be grasped by looking at accumulated patterns of meaning developed across the entire movie. Caleb Turner, meanwhile, presented the case that the familiar, ambiguous closural image of the Western hero lighting out for the horizon has been supplanted in many recent superhero films by an invincible protagonist instead hurtling towards the viewer, blocking out the landscape, and repurposing the trope as an assertion, not of future narrative possibilities, but only of the infinite potential of this lone, domineering hero of the American imaginary.

"The End of Cinema: Changing Patterns of Consumption" was a varied panel that ranged all the way from the Finnish cinematographer Tahvo Hirvonen lamenting the demise of respect for his profession's skill set in this new age of democratised digital technologies, to David Stevens reading *No Country For Old Men* (2007) through postmodern theory and the supposed decline of value and meaning within our "post-humanist", atomised culture. Most exciting, however, was Richard McCulloch's investigation into the ways in which review aggregation websites such as *Rotten Tomatoes* are changing the status of "consensus" in public and critical discussion. Using case studies that demonstrated how the "Tomatometer" is increasingly cited by fans and critics as definitive proof of cinematic quality, McCulloch offered a fascinating analysis of an emerging discursive context in which the quantification of qualitative discourse can seem to create an illusion of the end of "subjective" evaluation itself.

Another somewhat disparate panel (even more so than many conferences, "The End Of…?" inevitably sometimes struggled with groupings) was "Images of the End and Endlessness of the Image". Addressing both industrial and thematic "endings", Sarah Forgacs examined Tsai Ming-Liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003) as a narrative about the demise of ritual cinema going, also situating it within a broader canon of films concerning the passing of cinematic eras. Meanwhile, from a more abstract perspective, Eu Jin Chua offered an interesting account of the concept of "endlessness" in film theory, tracing pronouncements about the medium's supposedly intrinsic potential for infinite vision as expressed by writers such as Bazin, Kracauer and Deleuze. Though a question was justifiably raised during the Q&A as to whether this "endlessness" was prescriptive for, rather than descriptive of, the film image, Chua's paper was nonetheless an original and promising intervention into the conference's central preoccupations—one that I can well imagine being developed in fascinating directions. Just as stimulating was David McGowan's paper on the "ageing" of

canonical cartoon characters, which he approached through the extremely productive lens of star studies. Beginning from the premise that famous figures such as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny have always been constructed less as characters than as stars, McGowan went on to demonstrate some ways in which their potential for "immortality" has in practice regularly been downplayed in favour of cycles that depict them growing older, passing the torch to younger "performers", and so on—in short, obeying very similar career trajectories to live-action stars.

The usual qualification for a parallel-panel conference applies: I was regrettably unable to see about half of the papers presented during the event. For the sake of a complete record of the proceedings, and for the benefit of future researchers, it is nevertheless worth listing those whose work I was unfortunate enough to miss. On a panel entitled "The End (or Beginning) of Cycles", Pete Falconer presented his research on the "afterlife" of the Western genre, Matthew Legat spoke about the image of apocalypse in post-9/11 cinema, and Philip Phillis delivered a presentation on endings in the cinema of Béla Tarr. A panel called "The (Violent) End of Childhood" saw Katie Barnett speak about the end of parenthood in the film *Rabbit Hole* (2010), Nigel Mather examine "innocence" and its loss in *Kidulthood* (2006) and *Adulthood* (2008), while Stephen Mitchell investigated individualism and closure in Jon Jost's *Sure Fire* (1990). "The End of Theory, Theory of the End" featured Chris de Selincourt discussing the relationship between editing and the cognitive tendency towards segmentation, Eirini Konstantinidou showing her film-essay on cinema and "artificial memories", and Varpu Rantala mapping ways still images are used in film research. A panel probing matters concerning "The Apocalypse and the Auteur" hosted Julie Bock's work on classical music in *Melancholia* (2011), Keeley Saunders's research into the "personal apocalypse" in Derek Jarman's films, and James Weaver's paper about Michael Haneke's *The Time of the Wolf* (2003). Finally, "The End of Cinematic Boundaries" offered Rebecca Wigmore's research on immersion and liminal spaces in transmedial cinema, Neja Tomsic's work on "an other cinema" within contemporary art, and Monika Keska's paper "Exhibition as Film: Peter Greenaway's Cinema Outside Cinema".

Occasionally, presented papers seemed to be only tangentially related to the subject of ends. The panel "The End of the Individual, Body and Society", for instance, saw Stelios Christodoulou treat *Rocky* (1976) as a film about the decline of the Civil Rights era, J. Dan Taylor offer a thoughtful piece on the body as a monstrous liminal space in David Cronenberg's cinema, and James Newton tackle binary, carnivalesque thematic oppositions in the 1960s–70s Italian exploitation genre of "Nunsploitation". Though one might occasionally sense such papers slightly straining to tie their topics to the focus of the conference, the fact that they invariably managed in some fashion to do so can also tell us something significant about the study of end-points in general.

It is a justifiable commonplace to note that the human mind appears to be essentially "pattern-seeking", and that one key process through which we order our perceptions is by the construction of narratives—broadly defined.[3] From the simplest daily task to the grandest of grand narratives, via histories, ideologies and theoretical paradigms, the hermeneutic drive (which is, at base, the narrative impulse) is a central component of virtually any attempt at sense-making. Once this is acknowledged, one is also then obliged to consider the critical importance of endings, since we seem forever destined, as Frank Kermode put it, to "make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, *by the provision of an end*, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle" (17; emphasis

added). Thus, appropriately, even those papers at this conference for which endings seemed to be of only secondary concern were all nonetheless intimately bound up with Henry James's "exquisite problem": drawing circles wherein one's subject might appear to stop, however temporarily—be it through a historical era, a generic boundary, or a particular theoretical framework.

Both the problems and potential for the future study of endings are thus clear. "Endings" are fundamental to discourse, inescapably tied as they are to the very process of narrativising—which might just be, as Jameson memorably put it, "the supreme function of the human mind" (123). This should be enough to tell us, firstly, that a feature such as closure should not be viewed ex cathedra as somehow malevolent. It is worth noting, on this point, that, following periods of intense scholarly scepticism and debate on the subject, we have recently witnessed numerous reports of a theoretical "return to narrative" in fields such as history, literature, sociology, feminist theory, and so on—acknowledgements that coherent stories and their endings (be they aesthetic, socio-political, or otherwise) can serve productive functions just as easily as negative ones.[4] "The End Of…?" was a valuable event partly because it bore witness to this "conclusion". What it also did, however, was demonstrate the attendant difficulties of condensing our consideration of conclusions into workable, yet appropriately nuanced, forms. As the James quotation that began this report implies, though our narratives require endings, the real-world phenomena they describe are seldom so neat. What the call for papers referred to as our "anxiety with closures" is thus both in some sense understandable, and untenable if applied indiscriminately. While implicitly acknowledging this, so eclectic a conference on so broad a subject was never going to be able to provide answers to the multitudinous questions it invited. I left Kent wondering whether, although endings can be made relevant to virtually any aspect of our scholarly endeavours, it is not perhaps time for us to begin demarcating our study of them more judiciously: say, one conference investigating textual endings alone, another concerning theoretical teleology, and so on.

There is finally no doubt that this was a most worthwhile event. It achieved its aim of furthering debates about many of the virtually endless number of topics which endings touch, and the organisers deserve praise both for conceiving and successfully executing a conference on so fascinating a subject. The desire for convenient stopping-points being what it is, though (even for the humble charge of the conference report), it is tempting to risk treating as significant the fact that no attempt was made, at the end of the two days, to offer closing remarks.

Notes

[1] The only monographs on film endings in English are Richard Neupert's *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema* (1995), and Catherine Russell's *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure, and New Wave Cinemas* (1995). In Italian there exists Micaela Veronesi's *Le soglie del film. Inizio e fine nel cinema* (2005).

[2] See the conferences "Beginnings and Endings in Films, Film & Film Studies" (University of Warwick, 2008) and "The End?" (Indiana University, 2010), both of which sought to approach the subject with a similar breadth of scope to "The End Of…?" See also the more narrowly-focused edited collection, *Happy Endings and Films* (Parey et al., 2010).

[3] See, for instance, Paul Ricœur (1984).

[4] For accounts of this "return to narrative" in these respective disciplines, see, for example: Clark (105), Nünning (236), Burke (167), Butler (17).

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