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NOT SUCH A HAPPY ENDING: THE IDEOLOGY OF THE OPEN ENDING

ERAN PREIS

Many films with open endings, like *8 1/2*, *Citizen Kane*, *Grand Illusion*, *Bicycle Thief*, and *The 400 Blows*, are considered an artistic cornerstone in the history of the cinema. Other open-ended films, such as *The Pawnbroker*, *The Graduate*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Blow-Up*, were very well received by the public. However, the present absence of such films on American screens suggests that the days of open endings are over. Herman Lewis writes in *A Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting For Theater and Television Films* that "Box-office statistics prove that no matter how inartistic a happy ending picture may be, it will always get better box office than a more artistic unhappy-ending picture" (88). This fact, one could assume, makes it almost impossible to get a studio to produce a film with an unhappy or open ending.

In this paper, I am going to approach this issue of the open ending from a theoretical and pedagogical point of view. I will define and analyze some of the ideological conditions which motivate a writer to conclude his screenplay with an open ending, and then question whether screenwriting instructors in the 1990s should encourage their students to write non-classical Hollywood cinema endings.

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The Open Ending

My approach to defining the open ending is to use the classical Hollywood cinema ending as a point of reference. In *Screenplay, The Foundation of Screenwriting*, Syd Field argues that in good writing for film "everything is resolved dramatically, in terms of action and character: all questions raised are answered" (63). Viki King writes in her book *How To Write A Screenplay In 21 Days* that "by page 120 the audience is satisfied that you gave them the story you promised them on page 10" (41). Classical Hollywood cinema offers closure on at least four levels: the plot, the story, the emotional state of the viewer, and the ideological assumptions of the film.

The open ending by contrast often leaves us with an ambiguous or missing plot resolution. The story may not offer any clues to the whereabouts and future of the main characters. An open ending often fails to fulfill the viewer's emotional expectations by not offering a climax or other emotional relief. Finally, I will argue, an open ending doesn't confirm or reassure existing ideology; it questions ideology and demystifies it.

Ideology

Since my main intention is to define the relationship between ideology and the open ending, I would like to offer my preferred definition of ideology. In *Film Art*, Bordwell and Thompson suggest that ideology is a "relatively coherent system

of values, beliefs, or ideas shared by some social group and often taken for granted as natural or inherently true" (386). In *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton offers a Marxist definition which considers ideology a part of the "super-structure." Its function is to maintain and legitimate the "power of the social class which owns the means of economic production" (Eagleton 5). Consolidating these two definitions, ideology in my paper will be characterized as shared values and ideas, taken for granted as natural and true, used to sustain the well-being of the governing powers. (This is an orthodox definition of ideology. A more complex definition will follow.)

The Relationship Between Art and Ideology

In *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton discusses three types of relationships between literature and ideology. In his first category Eagleton suggests that "literature is nothing but ideology" (19). Like literature, film can become a "prisoner of 'false consciousness' unable to reach beyond it to arrive at the truth" (19). Classical Hollywood cinema and its happy ending obviously represents this tendency, offering the audience an illusionary world to be viewed uncritically. It is a given world, "well made," and structured on the three-act formula of exposition, confrontation, and resolution. Through a chain of causes and effects, an agent, or protagonist, brings the film to closure. The viewer's perception of the cinematic world as real is a condition for his or her ability to accept its ideology as valid and unquestionable truth.

The second category of relationship between art and ideology brings the two forces into collision. "Literature challenges the ideology it confronts, and makes this part of the definition of literary art itself" (Eagleton 18). Authentic art, according to Ernst Fischer in *Art Against*

Ideology, "always transcends the ideological limits of its time, yielding us insight into the realities which ideology hides from view" (qtd. in Eagleton 18).

When discussing the third category of relationship, Eagleton quotes Althusser who argues that "art gives us the experience of that situation which is equivalent to ideology" (19). In this instance, the viewer identifies with the agent. The agent experiences what Macherey calls the "illusion" (meaning essentially, ideology) and reveals its falsehood. This revelation enables the viewer to see "the nature of that ideology, and thus begins to move us towards that full understanding of ideology which is scientific knowledge" (Eagleton 19). According to Macherey, the writer transforms the "illusion" into fiction by giving it form and fictional limits so that art is able to distance itself from ideology and reveal its true nature.

This third category of the relationship between art and ideology is a combination of the first two. Art reveals the true nature of ideology not by purely criticizing or mocking it, but by experiencing it. This combination, I would like to suggest, motivates the writer to conclude the screenplay with an open ending. Using this framework, it is possible to analyze a few films including an early one of my own.

***Stigma*—An Open-Ended Film**

I will analyze my own film, *Stigma* (directed by Uri Barabash, Israel, 1982) in order to trace the ideological reasons for choosing its open ending, and, given the constraint of the intentional fallacy, reduce the need for others to second-guess my motivation. Like most of the personal films produced in Israel before and after the War with Lebanon, *Stigma* had an open ending because "the classical narrative forms were incapable of containing the explosive ideological complexities of the Israeli reality" (Shohat 225). The open

ending suggests dissatisfaction with an existing ideology and the seeming lack of alternatives.

The motivation for the writing of *Stigma* (the Hebrew title was *Mark of Cain*) was a very personal one. An army friend of mine suffered an attack of paranoia. During the time of his collapse, he physically abused his wife, forcing her to prove that she didn't commit adultery. The police were called and he was sent to a private mental institution. During his short stay in the hospital his wife decided to divorce him. I was the only non-family member who knew about the hospitalization. My friend was preparing for his bar exams and was afraid that the revelation of his medical history would ruin his career.

Fearing that his medical profile would be lower and he would be expelled from the army reserves, he hid his hospitalization from the army authorities. One month after his release from the hospital, I was shocked to discover my friend standing in line ready to sign up for equipment and join our platoon on its way to the Golan Mountains. He made me keep his secret and help him maintain his old identity of the happily married law student and fellow warrior.

In order to understand my friend's motivation to maintain his old identity, one need understand some codes of Israeli ideology, especially those concerning the character traits and personality of the Sabra, the native-born Israeli. According to Ella Shohat in *Israeli Cinema*, the Sabra "was raised by the immigrant generation of pioneers . . . as a hope of Jewish salvation" (40). Ella Shohat notes, among others, three main codes that formulate the Sabra's identity. First, the Sabra is a son of the collective. His or her ideal figure of education is not the father but a collective, an abstract "I." Second, the native-born Israeli is cleansed from Jewish inferiority complexes. He/she is a child of nature, confident, proud, and brave. Third, he/she

is fully rooted in the Biblical landscape, working the land and cultivating it. Being fully rooted has the ironic connotation of willing to defend the land and give one's life for it.

The above ideology was consciously and unconsciously chosen and conceived by the founders of the State of Israel in order to maintain its security and sustain its well being. Udi, the narrative agent of *Stigma*, was raised on the codes of the Sabra ideology. His Sabra identity had collapsed when he got sick. Physically and mentally, he was no more the confident, proud, and brave Sabra. Revealing his past would have caused him to be discharged from the army and would have excluded him from participating in defending his country and shaping its history. A release from the army would have meant losing the support and warmth of the collective.

On the story level, the screenplay follows the real events. It starts on the day of Udi's release from the hospital. The plot uses basic story elements but puts them in the context of highly dramatic conditions. The process whereby members of the platoon reveal the secrets of one of its soldiers occurs before and during the first day of the 1982 Israeli war against Lebanon, which turned out to be, according to many Sabra (including the creators of *Stigma*), an imperialistic and unnecessary occupation of a sovereign state.

The last scene takes place on the first day of the war. Udi's secret has become public knowledge. The platoon is on its way to cross the Lebanese border and clear a mine field under fire. Udi is ordered to stay behind. He refuses. In a documentary-style long take, he is seen approaching each of his army friends. He begs for their personal permission to join them. He prefers to risk his life in a war than to confront an unknown future with a new identity. His friends refuse to look him straight in the eye and admit their fears or prejudices. Their responses are ambiguous.

The radio urges the platoon to depart. It is up to Udi to make a move. Frustrated and emotionally drained, he meets the gaze of the one friend who shared his secret and urged him from the start to confront his past. Udi smiles, and approaches his friend. He checks his dog tags and straightens his shirt. The begging turns into farewell. Udi is back in control.

He has reached the distance needed for scientific knowledge. He has recognized the situation, the illusionary world which according to Althusser is the equivalent of ideology, a stagnant inflexible world that deals with stereotypes he no longer accepts. Udi strips himself of his rifle, helmet, and personal equipment. He hangs these military symbols on an iron pole by the bunker. He enters his red car and heads down the Golan Mountains. The platoon, his army friends, members of his collective, turn toward the border in the opposite direction.

As a writer unconsciously witnessing history in the making I wasn't aware of the significance of Udi's mental illness. I chose it because it was part of my past. I was focusing on the paranoia as a stigma and not on its symbolic connotations which suggested that in the Israel of 1982 one must be "mentally disabled" in order to refuse the war. We weren't aware of it, but our viewers were.

Stigma confronted the Israeli viewer with not only an open ending, but an unhappy one. The film played for about six weeks and vanished (an additional unhappy ending for the producers and investors). However, the film was better accepted by some of the critics. The main actor received the Israeli equivalent of an Oscar for Best Actor.

I am convinced (I hope not as an excuse for the screenplay's shortcomings) that one of the reasons for the audience response was the ideological problem of the

film as embodied in its open ending. Now, years later, I am ready to consider possibilities for different endings.

We could have ended the film by allowing Udi to join his friend and become a war hero. He could have saved a soldier or been responsible for the success of the mission. In that way, the hero would have confirmed the existing ideology by suggesting that personal effort and determination can overcome the stigma of mental illness and be rewarded. The personal and social balance is in the hand of an agent who follows the existing codes of ideology. The above ending proposes that somehow art functions as ideology without revealing that it does so.

We could have ended it unhappily, with Udi forcing himself into the war and being killed in a meaningless act. This ending brings forward the cruelty of ideology and condemns it for the death of the protagonist. Art demystifies ideology by opposing it.

We chose the only ending our honesty and integrity allowed. It was our first feature film. We didn't have the viewers or investors in mind. I am a Sabra. (I am using a collective "I," one that includes the director, the actors, and the crew). All I knew was that I didn't have a solution. God, my God, might be dead, but I don't have a replacement.

Equating God with ideology is intentional. The Israeli ideology was conceived by pioneers who rebelled against a fanatic religion often by replacing it with fanatic ideology. According to Ella Shohat, *Stigma* belongs to the genre of the Personal Film. This genre reflects "a world of uncertainty and vagueness as well as the collapse of the value systems regnant during the first two decades of Israeli existence" (224). In her analysis of the genre, she suggests that "the marginalization of the protagonist does not represent a form

of mediated solidarity with the oppressed but rather a pretext for narcissistic self-contemplation” (209).

I find a lot of truth in her argument. The Sabra filmmaker is a prisoner of ideology, ready to reflect and question ideology, but not ready or able to act. Not unlike the Israeli soldier fighting the Intifada in the West Bank, the Sabra are “shooting and crying.” The open ending in *Stigma* and other personal films comes from, as Shohat mentions, the inability of the classical Hollywood cinema to contain the ideological complexities of Israeli politics, and the inability of art to replace one ideology with another.

***Alice’s Restaurant*—Briefly on Past and Future**

While the Israeli audience seemed to reject questioning ideology in a state in siege, the American viewer of the late 1960s and early 1970s welcomed it. In *Alice’s Restaurant*, Arthur Penn exposes his audience to what David Cook regards as “certain dark realities of contemporary American life which the audience had itself largely chosen to ignore” (632). The last shot of this open-ended film continues after Arlo and Mari-Chan drive away. They leave the scene with an ambiguous promise to return, but they are clearly facing the future. It is we who, as Robin Wood suggests, “contemplate Alice at such length” (116).

In a very long take that tracks back and zooms in simultaneously, we concentrate on Alice standing still by the church. The tree trunk blocks the camera view, distancing us to recognize our place as viewers of a film. The flat background emphasizes the screen’s two-dimensionality, helping us to recognize the methods of production. What we see is Alice, the character, a representative of hippie ideology, contemplating whether to return to

her old/new marriage and to a church that was sold as a house of God and failed as a house of love. When it comes to a confrontation with death or loss, Alice and Ray have “no stable tradition or set of values from which to draw sustenance . . . they are thrown back on their own inner resources” (Wood 115). Much the same can be said about Udi in *Stigma*, Joe Buck in *Midnight Cowboy*, and Antonio in *Bicycle Thieves*. They are all left with a conflict rather than an answer. The tension of Alice’s last shot between the tracking away and zooming in brings forward the hardship of breaking away from existing but failing ideology. The somewhat abused metaphor of the cutting of an umbilical cord seems very appropriate. In Alice’s case, it is the kid, Arlo, who was cut free. The mother, Alice, the writer, and we the viewer, are left standing by the shattered corpse of the old ideology not knowing exactly what went wrong. This transition to the unknown through an open ending succeeded in connecting with the viewers of the 1960s, a period that could be considered one in which history was “visible in the making” (Eagleton 29).

Syd Field claims that “. . . the days of the ambiguous ending are over. Vanished. They went out in the 1960s” (58). However short the period of questioning ideologies was, it helped to break conventions of form and content. David Cook compares it in kind, though not in degree, to the Czech new wave of 1968. It “released a surge of creative energy whose influence continued to be felt long after the hope was crushed” (635).

The Pedagogical Dilemma

I find it appropriate to conclude my discussion of the ideology of the open ending with an open question. Based on the above, a successful use of an open ending requires: (1) A writer with ideological awareness and the ability to penetrate to the true nature of the experience; (2) A

historical situation that allows him/her access to such insights; and (3) A viewer willing to replace closure with conflict, and accept ideology as a process rather than taken-for-granted truth.

With this complexity in mind, how should one encourage his or her student to write in the 1990s, when, as Terry Eagleton argues, "art . . . becomes trivial and emasculated, because the sterile ideologies it springs from yield it no nourishment" (58)? Should one teach and encourage one's students to write for the industry, because that is where most employment opportunities lie? Should one sensitize his or her students to question ideologies because "in such an era, the need for explicitly revolutionary art again becomes pressing" (Eagleton 58)? I consider this dilemma to be part of a larger issue in modern education, that of training versus education, an issue which we as educators must continually address.

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