

Long distance relationships: Exploring how *Happiness* (Agnes Varda, 1964) exemplifies the ambiguities of narrative closure and how its arguably unreliable narration exhibits a necessary distinction between an implied author and narrator.

Despite being integral to scholarly reflections on narration, writing on narrative closure is somewhat sparse in relativity to the scale of wider conversations. Seemingly thought to be the periphery of narratological study, narrative closure is seldom granted its appropriate focus. This essay does not look to develop an argument for or against the qualities of existing research within this realm, but rather to advocate a continued discussion on this comparatively underdeveloped area of study. To achieve this goal, I shall place the ending of *Happiness* (Dir. Agnes Varda, 1964) within existing frameworks of narratology to display the contradictions that result. As well as this, I shall look to pertinent contributions in relevant areas for an enlightened understanding of irony found in my chosen film, which will assist the enquiry into just one potential constituent of adequate resolution. This discussion on irony will also help to demonstrate the necessity for an even more thorough scholarly criticism of reading narrative closure. By outlining inconsistencies between Varda's film and writings on classical adequate narrative resolution, it is hoped that the areas for potential enhancement and development made vacant by the dubious and obscure nature of such debates become clear. Moreover, it is wished that the reader will recognise how the debates regarding endings prove to be more salient with wider discussions on film theory than is currently apparent - my two exemplary areas of note being irony and art film. The structure of this essay shall be that of two sections: The first shall demonstrate how *Happiness* counters ideas of adequate narrative closure, thus elucidating my notion of contradiction and inconclusiveness within such debates. The second section shall explore theories surrounding ironic distance between reader, narrator, and implied author and how these observed relationships may further one's awareness of the ambiguities regarding closure.

Classical closure, narrative logic and inadequacy

It may be of use to first clarify what is meant when 'adequate resolution' is referred to in this essay. The definition of this term shall represent a quantified level of satisfaction that is felt towards a narrative's termination, leaving minimal necessary story gaps outstanding, with sufficient stylistic indication of a narration coming to an end reinforcing such closure. The motivation for such specificity lies in the necessity of recognising *the feeling* of an ending and, more intricately, the interpretive nature of this feeling (more on this later). What is widely accepted among scholars as the canonical precursor to experiencing such a feeling is the reading of classical narrative closure. Richard Neupert's extensive work puts one in an advantageous position when considering the different types of closure: Establishing a distinction between narrative story and discourse allowed Neupert to differentiate between four hypothetical types of ending; Closed Text; Open Story; Open Discourse; Open Text. (Neupert, 1995, p.33) The Closed Text is largely considered to be the ending

that traditional mainstream Hollywood endings “adhere to... so wholeheartedly.” (p.35) When summarising the closed text film Neupert explains that “[the] narrative logic is that story resolution is completed and reinforced by discursive devices that signal the film’s end and produce a stable product, the Closed Text film.” (1995, p.36) This notion of completion via story and discourse can be developed nicely by turning to James MacDowell’s more recent writing on happy endings. Though MacDowell does not specifically address the distinction between these two terms, he nonetheless picks up on closure at both the level of story and of discourse: Reflecting on Henry James’ idea of drawing a circle around a selected portion of human relationships, MacDowell outlines that when this circle “feels complete despite the basic fact of the endlessness of human relations, we may speak ‘appropriate cessation’.” (2013, p.59) A key consideration is made here, which is that story closure can and does occur within narration, contrary to the reality of ongoing life. More significantly, MacDowell picked up on this closure *feeling* appropriate - an observation that alludes to the subjective nature of an ending being adequate. With regards to discursive closure, MacDowell notes that recurring imagery leads to a continual exposure among spectators which, eventually, teaches audiences “to associate endings with particular aesthetic signifiers of finality... achieved partly simply by the repetition itself - the learned knowledge that such motifs tend to be present at endings.” (p.65) It may be justified, then, to suggest that the feeling of adequate resolution is the result of learned awareness of signifiers of termination found within both the story and the discourse.

This is an ideal moment to begin unpacking the ending of *Happiness*. Varda’s 1964 romantic drama tells the story of François, a working husband and father pursuing an affair with another woman, Émilie, in a covetous search for even more happiness than is already granted by his family and job. François’ eventual confession leads to his wife, Thérèse, committing suicide. After a short period of mourning Émilie assumes the role of housewife and mother in François’ family, restoring his life to one filled with happiness once again. The final shot of the film features a stationary frame with all four remaining protagonists walking away from the spectator’s position as it fades to yellow. [Figures 1-3]



Figures 1-3

It is clear that both the story and discourse terminates here. Neupert would consider this a closed text ending as “story resolution is completed and reinforced by discursive devices,” namely the long stationary shot, crescendoing score and the characters departing from the physical standpoint of the

spectator. (1995, p.36) These stylistic devices, involving sound, cinematography and mise-en-scene, are congruent with MacDowell's aforementioned notion of aesthetic signifiers of finality being associated with endings through repeated exposure, as they are typical of devices seen in many other films; the Western genre, for instance, frequently employed the signifier featuring departing characters riding into a sunset/away from a settlement. Another device used in *Happiness* is known as bracketing, whereby "similar opening and closing sequences allows [the film] to maintain a cyclical unity for its narrative" (Neupert, 1995, p.22) This occurs in the opening shots of the film, when the original family (prior to the dramatic events) walk towards the spectator's position. Furthermore, such an ending tessellates with the consistencies in classical Hollywood closure, whereby "an intrinsic norm, the need to resolve the plot in a way that yields "poetic justice" [sic], provides a structural constant..." (Bordwell, 1985, p.159) The satisfaction of these plot resolution norms is sometimes referred to as "erotetic narration;" narration that answers the questions that it proposes (Carroll, 2011, p.211). As Carroll describes, "Closure obtains when all the pronounced questions the movie has elected to put emphatically before us have been answered." (p.211) In *Happiness*, all questions regarding François and his children's wellbeing are answered: The spectator is made aware of his emotional state, his desire for Émilie, her newfound place as a domestic housewife, and the family's re-established happiness. Thus, it follows erotetic logic.

Having identified an appropriate apparatus for recognising how classical narratives obtain closure by resolving all pertinent questions and reinforcing these resolutions with discursive devices, evaluating the level of closure within *Happiness* should be a simple task. Contrarily, however, Varda's film exhibits a gap in this formula: Despite answering all questions regarding the family's loss and eventual recovery, as well as the stylistic reminiscence of closed texts in Hollywood cinema, there may still persist a feeling of inadequacy. How are the characters so indifferent to their recent trauma? Was Thérèse's death really so inconsequential? What repercussions are to come of François' arguably immoral infidelity? Such frustrating gaps within a seemingly gratifying denouement leaves an aura of insufficient resolution and leads one to reconsider the true source of adequacy within closure, and what is missing in these previous considerations.

Splits, distance, and implicit narrators

The potential feeling of inadequacy towards the ending of *Happiness* is atypical of the expected response towards a closed text ending. It is here that I intend to deviate from asking what does and doesn't constitute closure, and instead focus on what would or wouldn't constitute the feeling of adequacy, using this irregularity as exemplary point. After establishing the source of this particular case of inadequacy, I shall turn to the question of whether such a feeling is to be thought of as unanimous among all spectators. It is possible that the story resolution in Varda's film could be considered to be of questionable motivation due to the previously observed inconsequentiality of the

protagonists' actions. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger & Kristin Thompson note that "if the ending, especially the happy ending, is inadequately motivated, then the film creates a possibly productive split of story from narration." (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985, p.83) This split is an intriguing notion, as it alludes (albeit succinctly) to a particular separation from two units that, to the layperson's understanding, are integrated and operate concurrently. Sarah Kozloff further articulates this idea by illustrating the relationship between the narration and images of a film on a continuous graph (Kozloff, 1988, p.103). The resulting symmetry between the two "tracks" allows one to visualise the varying levels of "cooperation, harmonies, or dissonances" that are possible (p.103). Though specifically speaking here of voice-over narration, Kozloff suggests that the most contradictory correspondence between images and narration is what can create irony, "exploited by filmmakers... [either by keeping] the connection between the image-maker and the narrator tight... but giving the narrator ironic temperament... [or to] throw the narrator's telling into question, make him or her out to be more or less unreliable." (p.110) These two potential ironic narrations are demonstrative of a distance that may exist between what is *seen in* and what is *meant by* a film. MacDowell has also explored irony, stating that "One way a narrative medium can create such ironic distance is by mediating its story through a particular point of view," later attributing this point of view to that of a narrator (2016, p.59). This demonstrates the split between what is shown and what is being implicitly narrated, and how such disparities call for a distinct reading separate from surface-level acknowledgements of a text.

Seymour Chatman, I believe, offers the most enlightening clarification of the relationships that forge this separate level of communication with a text, further elucidating Kozloff's ideas. Chatman would describe a narration that remains distant from the reader as an "unreliable narration... that the implied reader must call into question." (1990, p.151) I suggest that this is the closest articulation of what a spectator experiences when reading the cinematic narration in *Happiness*: A suggestion for the implicit diegetic narration within this ending would be somewhat akin to "Now they were a happy family again, and they all lived happily ever after." This is what the narrator implies is true, but it is not adequate for the implied reader. The implied author has constructed a happy ending that the implied reader takes to be suspect or incomplete, thus a layer of communication between these two parties is established. Chatman's illustrated model visualises this communication as a "broken line [that] indicates the secret ironic message about the narrator's unreliability." (p.151) Chatman draws his broken line below his diagram, but I contend that the reversed depiction would have been more accurate, as this secret messaging takes place at a higher level of discourse *above* that of the text. There is also a vital distinction that is worth mentioning here, which is the unreliable narrator versus the fallible filter (pp.149-151). The reason I raise this distinction is that, were François (a filter) to be unknowingly experiencing a form of happiness at the expense of either explicit or implicit narration,

the closure to *Happiness* may have felt more adequate. Instead, however, it is the implicit narrator's apparent insistence on this happy ending being resolution in its truest form that pulls it into question.

Neupert, too, picks up on a level of communication that is distinct from the filmic text when concentrating on the narration within art cinema; "...art films typically manipulate the notion of a primary narrator, beginning and ending in a more dispersed and unconventional manner which cues the viewer to question the unity and function of the whole concept of narrator" (1995, p.25) This is particularly interesting when discussing *Happiness* as it raises the noteworthy point of alternative viewing procedures of art cinema. The specification of the boundaries and defining characteristics art film is a task greater than what is possible or necessary here. But it is worth questioning whether ironic distances established in the readings of a fictional cameraman in *Sans Soleil* (Dir. Chris Marker, 1983), or the film noir-esque post-war romance in *Europa* (Dir. Lars von Trier, 1991), are partial resultants of the alternative consumption practises of art film. If these films were seen by mainstream audiences, would these diegetic narrators constructed by each implied author be called into question? It seems improbable. As Chatman notes himself, "[much] of the effect rests on the implied reader's understanding that the narrator is unconscious or at least ambivalent about the... naiveté of his account." (1990, p.154) To clarify, one could ask the following question: If we were to imagine two implied readers, one being an enthusiast (scholar or artist) and regular recipient of art film, the other a spectator whose regular viewings seldom sit outside of the Hollywood mainstream, would a secret communication take place between the implied author and reader of *Happiness* in both instances? It would appear to be an unlikely eventuality. What seems more probable is that there would be two distinct readings of the film - one recognising the implied author's deliberate construction of an unreliable narrator, and one unaware of such communication. Kozloff herself picks up on the potential indefinite nature of irony in non-voice-over film, noting that "the image-maker can be ironic to a certain extent... [but] as expressive as these instruments may be, [he] is hampered... by his silence." (1988, p.110) This is attributed to an implicit diegetic narrator being just that - implicit, and not explicit, about its meaning. As is now clear, the specification of adequate resolution and closure is a far more problematic and ambiguous matter than story, discourse, or even ironic distance.

George Wilson also shows awareness of these vital considerations regarding "interpretation of narratives" by stressing Peter Brooks' emphasis on how "the reader's sense of a proper ending is highly variable and has a complicated range of determinants." (Wilson referencing Brooks, 2011) To ascertain and define these determinants is, again, not possible or relevant here. It is worthwhile, however, to remain cognizant of the individual, and the individual's unique activity when reading narrative. To suggest that there is a singular, ubiquitous reading of each ending in cinema that is the product of several components, independent of a spectator's individualistic viewing behaviour, may be to echo narrowing and archaic claims that a spectator is a passive agent. Meanwhile, I suggest that,

if one is to determine the constituents required for adequate resolution, the subjective nature of feeling or interpreting adequacy is inseparable from other considerations about a narrative's story and discourse. One identifiable phenomenon that may elucidate the necessity of this notion is the "omniscience effect." (Branigan, 1992, p.115) Edward Branigan offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of narration in which he attributes the individual's impression of resolution adequacy to "the reader's toleration of a boundary or limit to what finally can be known in the text. This boundary, in a more or less arbitrary manner, usually attempts to dissipate the desire to know more." (p.115) Here, Branigan alludes to a narrative achieving satisfaction within an implied reader by taking all reasonable measures to resolve outstanding enquiries in a narrative, and successfully refraining from missing the appropriate markers of finality, achieving a "measure of completeness" (p.115). To place this template over *Happiness*, it can be seen that the "boundary or limit to what can finally be known" may not have been adequately reached for some spectators, as questions regarding the consequences of the characters may still lie within the domain of such toleration. More importantly, however, Branigan leaves room for an awareness that this toleration will vary from viewer-to-viewer: As previously noted, the aforementioned questions may not necessarily be of much importance to some viewers, rendering the film's ending to be satisfactory.

To summarize the ideas in this section then, one may recognise two key points: The first point is that, despite fulfilling traditional criteria for a closed text, a feeling of inadequacy may still persist with *Happiness*, and that this may be attributed to an ironic distance between the film's unreliable implicit diegetic narrator and the implied reader that has been constructed by its implied author. One revelation that I suggest, afforded by this first key point, is that the violations of classical narrative norms is not directly correlated to achieving a double-layer of meaning at a second level of discourse. This is proven by Varda's ending demonstrating a cue for assuming a double layer of meaning (that is, calling the implicit narrator into question) despite appearing to be congruent with established classical narrative norms. The second point raises awareness of the subjective nature of recognising this distance, potentially resulting in varying degrees of suspicion towards the reliability of the narration. With differing levels of awareness of and investment in this supposedly distinct communication beyond the discourse of the narrative text, the significance of each individual's cognitive activity when evaluating the fulfilment of a narrative's endeavours cannot be ignored.

Concluding thoughts

The task of giving closure in an essay such as this carries with it its own degree of irony. It is hoped though, that no supposed distance is apparent, and that a comprehensive set of conclusions can be made. The most definitive observation that has been evidenced in this essay is that closure in narrative film is far more ambiguous than is presently acknowledged. Many scholars have gone to great lengths to cement an understanding of fictional narration but some, I suggest, have neglected to emphasise the

pertinence of individual evaluations of adequacy within narrative resolution. The identification of these omissions has been the result of gauging the compatibility of an art film, *Happiness*, with writings on the constituents of classical Hollywood closure. The self-evident contradictions pointed to the question of why *Happiness* was an outlier in this equation - which demonstrated the ambiguities of closure within art cinema and, more widely, cinematic narration: Not only are the discussions about the varying reasons for typical (in)adequate resolution inconclusive, but also are the debates surrounding independent and subjective interpretations of narration. Moreover, it is hoped that the reader can appreciate the value of further articulating and researching endings as an area of narratology that neatly and vitally concentrates relevant talking points regarding narrative comprehension, despite being somewhat neglected from the scholarly canon. If nothing else, this essay has displayed the salience of narrative closure with other theoretical debates in film, namely the conventions of art and Hollywood cinema, and the psychological behaviours in film viewers - an endeavour contributed to by the cluster of scholars placed under the umbrella term 'cognitive film theorists'. As with many other debates in narratology and wider fields of film theory, there is a long way to go until film theorists can claim to have reached an adequate resolution to these difficult questions.

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