Zack Bermack

Confusion Cinema: Puzzle Films

Dr. M

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The Attack of the Hollywood Story Machine

From Aristotle to Kurt Vonnegut, to data-mining academics, and to Christopher Booker, many cherished thinkers and writers have posited that there exist a limited number of stories. The number has fluctuated anywhere from three to twenty-seven, but this harshly pessimistic theory has withstood the test of time since the age of the Ancient Greeks. Hollywood acts as a fantastic mirror to this theory, as old stories are constantly reduced, reused, and recycled. Disney has recently started to remake their old hits. Aladdin (Ritchie, 2019) and The Lion King (Favreau, 2019) are prime examples of Hollywood studios substituting fresh creative horizons for easy cash. For young directors to make anything new, it seems as though the righteous path is through the independent scene. Enter Aaron Moorhead and Justin Benson, two renegade filmmakers with a couple of friends, a camera, a measly $20,000, and a passion for change. Moorhead and Benson are fighting, one micro-budget narrative feature at a time, for new stories. Through the use of temporary and permanent gaps, self-consciousness, and changeover misdirection, Resolution (Moorhead and Benson, 2012) and The Endless (Moorhead and Benson, 2017) offer a harsh critique of the traditionalist tendency for Hollywood to pull directors into the repetitive, monotonous grind of churning out the same stories over and over again.

While the main argument of this independent duology will come from The Endless, much important set-up can be gleaned from the first film Moorhead and Benson made in the public eye. Resolution is the story of Mike, a bold city guy with a pregnant wife waiting for him back home, who goes to save his best friend, Chris, from a drug-bender in a cabin out in the country after receiving a concerning video. Mike finds Chris in a bad state and decides the only way that Chris will survive his meth addiction is if he goes cold turkey. Mike handcuffs Chris to a pipe and tells him that he is going to have to sweat it out. Then, things get weird. Messages and stories are left around for Mike to find, and they seem to be showing the future, the past, and something in between. Using the few clues that the audience is given, the best working theory for the cause of the weirdness in Resolution is that some entity is hungry for a story, and it will use anything and everything it can to make it a good one.

As can be easily inferred from the convoluted description in the previous paragraph, Resolution is a film full of temporary and permanent gaps, some of which also may be possible to understand through Eleftheria Thanouli’s principle of self-consciousness. To begin laying the groundwork for the reading of Resolution and The Endless as any sort of critique of Hollywood, important to note is the breaking of the fourth wall that occurs at the very end of the film. After Chris and Mike receive many tapes, CDs, digital recordings and other types of media, it becomes clear that they are seeing versions of their deaths. Chris and Mike can do nothing but watch with horror as Mike’s computer begins to play a recording of druggies, Billy and Micah, bursting into the cabin and proceeding to brutally crack their skulls. Mike and Chris use the provided media to avoid dying in the ways that are shown to them. In the final moments of the film, Charles and his goons stage an attack on the cabin, killing Billy and Micah, and setting the cabin on fire. As the house is consumed with flames, the camera rises and angles itself down at Mike and Chris. Chris apologizes, then bows down in worship and Mike asks, staring directly into the camera, “Can we try it another way?” A roar, a flare, a shake, and then a cut to black.

           In this shocking moment, Resolution makes clear that something is amiss in the woods through the direct subject-audience interaction. Mike is talking to the camera, and the camera is the apparatus. Mike is talking directly to the audience, through the entity. Eleftheria Thanouli writes in “The New and the Old in Oldboy” that “The self-consciousness refers to the degree in which the film acknowledges its constructed nature and breaks the illusion of being a segment of reality. More specifically, narration can be self-conscious to different degrees, depending on how much it flaunts the actual transmission of data to the audience.” (226) The subject’s eyes are quintessential to maintaining suture within a film. If their eyes are looking the wrong direction, suture breaks. If their eyes are looking in the right direction but are not visible suture breaks. If their eyes stare directly into the camera, any semblance of suture will be demolished. Unless the stare is heavily motivated by the content of the film.

Resolution motivates this content to the highest possible degree, as careful hindsight reveals that every shot of the film is through the same cinematographic gaze of the entity. The entity, in all of its hunger for story, creates one of its own. Chris and Mike are merely trapped subjects, as the entity crafts the horrific story for its amusement. A simple syllogism helps the logical progression from the syntax of Resolution to the semantics. The entity stands in, through its commanding perspective, for the viewer. The viewer stands in, synecdochally, for the Hollywood viewership. This reading of the entity will be explored further in the coming analysis of The Endless, as the thesis of this paper discusses the demands of Hollywood. However, it is important to first note a few temporary and permanent gaps that will be developed by the follow-up to Resolution.

           As mentioned, Resolution is a film full of gaps, both temporary and permanent, that are worth noting before leaping into the project of dissecting The Endless. Temporary gaps, as described by Cornelia Klecker in “Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration,” Klecker suggests that “A temporary gap is eventually filled, whether more or less immediately or at a much later stage. By contrast, a permanent gap is left open for good: the missing information is never provided.” (130) In the case of Resolution, some of the permanent gaps may not be as permanent as they once were as one continues the viewing experience with The Endless. The second film, although not exactly a sequel, answers many questions that a viewer might have while asking many more.

Throughout Resolution, there exist many strange choices in cinematography. One such example, which is a permanent gap and does stay permanent even after The Endless, is a strange flare that occurs during many long takes. Even acknowledged by Mike at one point, the flare has a striking resemblance to something within the apparatus itself. These flares share an important visual quality with the burning of film stock. Film stock may burn for many reasons. Among the pool of options are the stock catching somewhere in the body of the projector, as projectors use very hot lights. Film stock can also burn if the projector is knocked in a certain way, the substance is quite delicate. Most importantly, film stock can burn if it is put through a projector many times. The more times the same film has been watched, the more it burns. Clearly, the entity has watched these stories more than once.

One last permanent, but soon to be a temporary gap in Resolution that inspires much thought concerning the Lovecraftian duology, is the flower. When Mike visits Byron in his RV to break the devastating news of the death of his dog, Sarah. The dog was previously slaughtered by Billy and Micah. Upon telling Byron the news, Byron invites Mike in for tea. Byron then proceeds to roll what appears to be a cigarette, but the ambiguous plant that Byron stuffs into his rolling paper appears to be an odd crimson. Mike inquires about the plant, but Byron deflects and goes on to describe something truly strange. As Byron puffs away at the strange flower, waxing poetic about some students who disappeared long ago, he explains to Mike that if he looks far enough into the infinite, he sometimes may start to see a film. This film, as Byron explains, is one that he can see through to another film, and another, and another. Beginning, middle, end. The language that Byron chooses is specific. He speaks of the repeating of the same “film,” as it begins, and ends, only to begin again. The theme of repetition is not quite explicit yet in Resolution but is a quintessential plot device in The Endless. Nevertheless, Byron has these thoughts and experiences when he smokes the flower. The flower helps him see the film, and it helps him understand what is happening.

While not a direct sequel, The Endless is Moorhead and Benson’s follow-up to Resolution. The Endless follows two UFO death cult escapee brothers, Aaron and Justin, as they receive a strange video recording from the cult, Camp Arcadia, years after they escaped. The video shows a woman, Anna, who tells the royal viewer that if they show up to the camp and no one is there, they should just make themselves at home as the cult will be returning soon. Much to Justin’s dismay, Aaron wants to go back to visit the cult for one day and one night. Upon returning to the cult, strange things begin to unfold as the residents of Camp Arcadia are revealed to be worshipping some unknown entity. Justin, the skeptic, is constantly trying to pull the rug out from the whole operation and reveal it to be some grand conspiracy, while Aaron is simply happy that he is somewhere with people who like him and want him to stay. As the incidents became stranger and stranger, The Endless is revealed to be an odd brand of time-loop film. Each separate story is contained within the strange totems that encircle various cabins and campgrounds, each with time constraints and deadlines. What remains constant, is that the entity forces the people trapped within the campgrounds to repeat the same stories, with little variation, for a very long time.

As previously outlined, the entity is a representation of the royal Hollywood viewer. The person who watches reboots, remakes, and rip-offs. The entity has cabins full of recordings, in various mediums, of the same people doing the same things. The people in the stories are representative of the people who create entertainment for the masses. Mike, Chris, Justin, Aaron, Shitty Carl, Byron, Hal, Anna, and countless others are people stuck in the same loops, for no purpose other than to entertain the entity. These characters, when read as creators of entertainment for the entity, make Moorhead and Benson’s critique of Hollywood transparent. The Endless bashes the tastes of mainstream Hollywood viewership for taking visionary directors, stripping them of creative freedom, and forcing them to make the same films time and time again for the consumption of bland, conservative, repetitive entertainment.

In order to illustrate that the film’s criticism of the creatively oppressive Hollywood viewership, *The Endless* makes use of what Matthew Campora defines as a multi-strand narrative structure. Campora writes in “Art cinema and New Hollywood: multiform narrative and sonic metalepsis in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” that:

Multi-strand films, as the name suggests, feature more than one narrative. The multiple strands of these films generally feature multiple protagonists and, as a result, are more complex than those with a unified structure… The complexity of films [that make use of this structure] is often simply the result of multiplying the number of elements spectators must process in order to make meaning. (121)

In the case of *The Endless*, clearly there exist many separate narratives. The separate narratives are so well demarcated that they are contained within clear, pulsating domes. Due to the inability of those trapped within each dome to traverse the hills between the domes, the events that transpire within each dome are absolutely separate. Within the reading of this film as a critique of the Hollywood system, this represents that the aforementioned forcing of filmmakers to sell out and make the same films, methodically and repetitively, is by no means an isolated incident but refers rather to the entire system.

Many of the permanent gaps in Resolution are revealed to be temporary in The Endless. One such example is the flower that Byron smokes in the earlier film. Within one strand of the narrative in The Endless, which is the primary narrative of Aaron and Justin returning to the cult, Aaron smokes some of the strange flower, the very same that Byron smokes in Resolution, with Anna and the subjective experience of the drug is revealed. After Anna gets Aaron high, she takes him to a strange area within the campgrounds in which he can see, with great visibility, the strange “mirroring of the moon” effect that Hal told Justin was a “northern lights” kind of illusion. The moon, to Aaron, is mirrored by a strange, pulsating film. Only once they have smoked the flower do Aaron and the other camp members see the domes that contain each separate time loop. This film is that which was referred to by Byron in Resolution and it only serves to further develop the criticism of the Hollywood viewership. The filmmakers who are financially coerced into making these Hollywood-style tried films are trapped inside and cannot see the borders. The filmmakers lack certainty about the alternatives to the system they are stuck within, and unless something external helps them see out of the circles in which they are trapped, they sit in their bubbles, complacent.

Moorhead and Benson offer a harsh critique of the Hollywood spectator and the director who makes film for this spectator in Resolution and The Endless. But what about the independent director? Is she safe to make movies in any way she sees fit? Absolutely not. Justin and Aaron, the characters not the directors, symbolize the naïve independent film director. The brothers get dragged in, manipulated, and ultimately trapped by the entity in the same way that an indie film darling may be dragged into the Hollywood story machine, manipulated into performing in a certain way by a paycheck, and then trapped because they are unable to see an exit. In the final moments of The Endless, Justin and Aaron are driving as fast as they can toward the edge of the Camp Arcadia time dome, as the entity in its most physically manifested form chases after the brothers. The domes, impenetrable to the shadowy birds and most of the prisoners, can be passed through by anyone who has not yet been trapped in a full loop. Meaning, anyone who has not been killed and resurrected in a time dome will pass through, unscathed. Within the reading of the film as the previously outlined critique of Hollywood, the two independent directors must escape from the blockbuster machine before they make their first film in the system. Just once is all it takes to be trapped forever, as Mike warns Justin when he goes to the familiar cabin to ask Chris for a gun for Shitty Carl. Moorhead and Benson are warning independent filmmakers to not be seduced by the glitz, glamor, and green of Hollywood and continue making unique stories.

The Endless is a complex, mind-twisting, dense puzzle film, but it is not impossible. The film would fit far better into the category of the changeover misdirection film. Seth Friedman defines the changeover film in his article “Cloaked Classification: The Misdirection film and Generic Duplicity” in simple, easy language. “The changeover,” Friedman explains, “is an incident within the narrative that forces a character, typically the protagonist, and the spectator to question the "reality" of all that precedes its emergence.” (19) In the case of The Endless, the incident is Justin’s interaction with Shitty Carl. Until that point, Justin did not have a reference point for the rules of the greater Camp Arcadia area. At that point, he had no idea that there were many time loops. He was even in the dark about the geography of the location he had been inhabiting for the past couple of days. When Justin sees Shitty Carl’s dangling, hanged body and a new, living Shitty Carl he begins to understand, and so does the viewer. After this incident, even Resolution can be better understood, as Chris’ cabin shares the rules with Camp Arcadia. Shitty Carl is trapped. Shitty Carl explains to Justin that the stories are repeated over and over again for “that thing’s amusement.” That thing, the entity, is the Hollywood Viewer. Shitty Carl, an object of entertainment for the entity, is trapped. He prefers to kill himself over and over again than to repeat the same stories and let himself fall into the routine, and yet he cannot escape. The ever-hopeful Shitty Carl repeats the same story, the story of his suicide, over and over again. The Endless thus presents this story repetition as a fate worse than death.

           The Hollywood story machine snatches up artistic, new independent filmmakers and locks them into the studio system every day. Much creative talent is lost due to Hollywood executives caring more about the money than the product. Progressive film tends not to makes as much money as the tried and true formulae, forgetting the problematic, racist, misogynistic, hetero-normative and generally hateful ideological undertones. The young filmmakers of tomorrow often are never given a chance to make their passion projects. Seduced by the many dollars of the Hollywood viewership, it takes a strong filmmaker to resist the temptation to sell out. Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead offer a hidden warning in the form of their independent duology of puzzle films. Through the critique of the Hollywood story machine that Moorhead and Benson offer in Resolution and The Endless, they urge the next generation to stay strong. Filmmakers must not sell out. They must continue making new stories. The fate of the film industry depends on it.

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