

In the beginning was the word

[Brian Dunnigan](#)

" Men like poets, rush 'into the midst', *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in media rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations."

Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending*

A tall grey-haired man pushes through a crowd. He is in a hurry, glancing at his watch and breathing hard. The sounds of breathing and of time ticking away on the soundtrack prepare us for the revelation that the man now hurrying to the bank is also rushing, unknowingly, to his death.

We see him a few minutes earlier, winding his wristwatch before a class of writing students. We will see the watch twice more, as he holds it up to the guard at the bank and finally on the hand of his younger self. The watch is both a structuring device and a symbol; for this story like all stories and life itself takes place in time and is shadowed by the end. Where what is lost in time may be regained or recovered: redeemed. And this is a story of redemption. Of an embittered, middle-aged writer whose passion for writing and words has cut him off from life, and of his rediscovering the spirit that gave him life and gave his life meaning.

The opening scene takes place in a classroom and is almost a third of the film's running time. It is also a major addition to the original short story and provides a necessarily more detailed exposition of character and theme. Here we are introduced to the intense, unforgiving character of the writer as teacher, pacing a room full of unresponsive students, berating them for the lack of passion and truth in their writing. This may be a righteous, cleansing anger, which the students need to hear, a clarion call to try harder, go deeper. But you also sense that it is an expression of personal disappointment and frustration: the destructive feedback of a writer who is tired of his students, and of teaching what cannot be taught. For this is a man who regards writing and words with an almost religious passion: he has the ferocity of an old testament prophet, a preacher excoriating his parishioners for their sins and warning them of the hellfire to come. Writing, like the religious life is an urgent calling and true inspiration a divine gift. You have to believe you are chosen. You have to hear the call. At one point he drops to his knees before a student and asks him if he believes that you can be moved by something as timid as a word. Can words save us from the rational? He is clearly a believer in both words and the need to break with the rational, but the lack of response from the students suggests that he is alone in this belief: a prophet speaking in the wilderness. And his words will be prophetic.

All plots have an element of prophecy in them. Something seen or said

that seems of passing importance but which anticipates the final revelation. For this writer and teacher, it is his belief in the power of words that leads directly to his death and salvation. It is words that will move him to laugh irrationally and words that in his dying moments will redeem him and lead the audience to an understanding of this beginning.

For this man is someone driven a little crazy by words and, you imagine, by the long hours of isolation, of reading and thinking and writing. The romantic outsider, the rugged individualist of American letters and literary tradition, whose foundation is the Puritan revelation, high standards and self-reliant passion of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and on through Hemingway and Carver to Tobias Wolff, the writer of the short story which inspires the film. (Larzer Ziff 1985, p 26). This is a writer whose very reality is literary and who despises the too rationalised modern world of consumption and commerce and where ironically his "comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love" will flare up and die. From the classroom we have arrived at the temple of Mammon where he laughs three times at the words spoken by one of the bank robbers. Oblivious to danger or in spite of that realisation, like a child in church he cannot help himself laugh at the clichés and their literary antecedents. In the short story the decisive loss of control is triggered by his view of the pretentious and vulgar ceiling paintings. In the film it is his memory of what he asked the student, " Do you believe in the power of a *word*?"

As he falls to the floor of the bank, time slows. We step back from the more immediate drama of his external life to a third person account of his internal imaginary. The narrative voice that guides us is cool and disinterested, lifted directly from the literary text and counterpoints the flow of filmic imagery. We cannot know for sure (how reliable is the narrator?) but we are told of all that he does *not* remember and in that account glimpse a life lived and now almost lost. Moving between shots of him writing and rewriting we are *told* that what he does not remember are his first lover, his wife before they fell out of love, his daughter as a child, a woman jumping from a building, but because they are not only *named* in the narration but also *shown* through the imagery, they are paradoxically like Adam's naming of the animals, brought to life, *remembered*. Being shown and told at the same time, intensifies our experience and move us as they also amplify the background story of a man increasingly isolated and tired of life. However there is nothing redemptive in these memories: they offer *chronos*, mere passing of time in contrast to *kairos*, time fulfilled (Frank Kermode 1968, p 47). So the story cannot end here.

Thus flaring between these forgotten memories is another time and place where time itself stands still. The narrator's voice mellows, music plays under, shots of waving grass and high-blown clouds, the sounds of insects. This is an image of Eden: eternity. Through the long grass on a long summer's day we enter the redemptive and sacred space of childhood, the ground of a specifically male and American dream of innocence: the baseball field. Here the writer as a child is checking his watch, the same watch as we saw in the beginning. And as in the beginning he is bored, when two words spoken by a boy whom he will never see again, suddenly move him and transform his day. A moment of

epiphany that his nature responds to, and which shape his life, a life that is now being taken away by the bullet in his brain. These words resonate and provide an image of affirmation. A break in the rational, that allows the light of some inexplicable joy to penetrate and illuminate, at once locating the ground of his being, the source of his inspiration and the recovery of what had been forgotten before all is forgotten - forever.

This is the ending that fiction can provide, an ending consonant with the middle and with its origins. It humanizes time by placing our lives and actions in a meaningful context, and gives us home *in media res*; a place where we belong and where our life has meaning. While the redemptive arc of the Hebrew prophets shadows all our stories, the spirit of revelation in a secular world has migrated from an ethereal heaven to the childhood beloved of the Romantics. From *Citizen Kane* to *Hunger* the answer to the enigma of our life, these films and the narrative form itself seem to suggest, lies in our *beginnings*; a moment in time that anchors our faith, propels us into life and provides an image that shapes our lives. It's what art and literature can suggest by providing us with hopeful narratives. At the same time the sudden shift from the drama to the disinterested and god-like narration, reminds us that life is rarely that neat; that our individual destinies and personal tragedies are played out against an indifferent cosmos. Humans are both unique and insignificant. Our lives in time a fiction shadowed by our death, which may arrive at any moment. What we are likely to be thinking or whether that moment will be redemptive, no man can say. In the end the narrator tells us that the writer was thinking of no one but himself. And we in turn are moved by his life and fate to think of our own.

References:

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Wolff, Tobias. *Old School*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Wolff, Tobias. "Bullet in the Brain" from *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories*. 2008.

Ziff, Larzer. (ed) *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*. New York: Penguin American Library, 1982.

[to the top of the page](#)