Paul Mazursky:
The Price of Freedom

In an interview with Freida Lee Mock and Terry Saunders for the American Film Foundation's television program, *Words into Images: Writers on Screenwriting,* Paul Mazursky characterized his films as examining "freedom, and the price of freedom; change, and the price of change." He went on to cite the post-World War II period as pivotal in the course of American social history:

> We were suddenly told after World War II that you could do things differently if you wanted to. . . . There's now this possibility: freedom. . . . Can the middle class handle all the freedom it's now being offered? Does anybody really change? . . . My pictures are about a reaction in the United States against and to authority, a reassessment of moral values and social mores, of how people live.

This response to an era of immense social and political upheaval (seen also in the works of Woody Allen and Sidney Lumet) characterizes a decidedly Jewish sensibility, one acutely attuned to both subtle and broad shifts in cultural directions. But more than any of these other American Jewish filmmakers, Mazursky's pictures explore an issue that obsesses Jewish thinkers in every culture into which they assimilate – be it Babylonia or Egypt, Spain or Germany – and one that informs the central core of much American Jewish thinking: the price of freedom.

Like the work of Allen and Lumet, Mazursky's films cannot be detached from the Jewish context that informs them and from Mazursky's personal sense of himself as both an American and a Jew. However assimilated he may be, Mazursky's oeuvre reveals a deep-seated concern, an artistic obsession, with things Jewish.

Mazursky's films demonstrate the "partially inside/partially outside" perspective that Jewish artists have assumed over the centuries and in many different societies: the Other who, however outwardly assimilated into a culture, still feels emotionally removed, to some degree or another, from the mainstream by virtue of an allegiance to a minority religion. Such a marginal position inevitably creates tension and anxiety, but it also filters personal creativity through a psychologically bifurcated lens, a unique viewpoint that can recognize the power and see the absurdity of any given situation. Though certainly not a stranger in a strange land, Mazursky still engages with American social life as both an enthusiastic participant and a detached observer. His camera work and his screenplays all demonstrate a certain distance between himself and the situation under examination, be it modern marriage, contemporary mores, or current fads.

Throughout his tracing of American culture, Mazursky employs many Jewish central characters as representative figures, and his films revolve around many American Jewish themes. One can, in fact, view Mazursky's movies as charting the evolution of a segment of Jewish American society: from the late 1940s immigrant enclaves of Coney Island and the Bronx in *Enemies, A Love Story*; to the 1950s of Brooklyn neighborhoods and bohemian Greenwich Village lofts in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*; to the 1960s of the South Bronx and the Jewish wanderer's search for enlightenment in Willy & Phil; to the 1970s of radical-chic parties and the disaffected Jewish lawyer in *Blume in Love;* to the 1980s of Beverly Hills and the fragmented Whiteman family in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills;* to the 1990s and the bickering Fifers in *Scenes From a Mall.* Such a sustained and original body of work makes Mazursky one of the most important interpreters of the Jewish experience within American society, an individualistic artist whose films explore this cultural interaction through both specific issues and universal themes.

Though he performed bit parts (*Fear and Desire,* 1953, T*he Blackboard Jungle,* 1959) early in his professional career, Paul (né Irwin) Mazursky, like Woody Allen, began the formative part of his show business life as a comedy writer (*The Danny Kaye Show,* 1961-1969) and comic performer (Igor and H; Los Angeles Second City troupe). Like Allen, he also maintains rare personal control over his work, directing all but one of his own screenplays and never directing another writer's script. Like Sidney Lumet – but to a lesser degree – Mazursky's initial directorial efforts came in television (*The Monkees,* 1966-68) rather than in film. But unlike these other American Jewish directors, Mazursky focuses his vision almost exclusively on members of America's white, middle to upper-middle classes, which he contends "are as noble a subject as the Medicis or the farmworkers." His well-educated, well-fed characters possess enough self-consciousness to perpetually analyze the quality of their lives and enough money to radically alter their lifestyles. With roughly equal portions of censure and compassion, Mazursky chronicles the feelings, beliefs, and fears of this segment of society from the 1950s until the present.

In the majority of Mazursky's films, tensions arise when a character discovers that something or someone dramatically alters his or her life. Initially, most of his characters neither plan nor even contemplate their freedom from the regular habits of a lifetime. Instead, these dramatic transformations result from one blindingly brief moment, a single thoughtless action or chance encounter that initially leaves these figures more frightened by their present losses than exhilarated by the choices before them.

So, for example, in *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas!,* uptight lawyer Harold Fine's life alters after casually meeting a young hippie, much in the same way that Willy and Phil's accidental encounter with each other and then with Jeanette forever remolds the lives of all three characters in Willy & Phil, and Gerry's arbitrary selection of Dave Whiteman's pool to drown himself changes his and everyone's life in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills.* All these seemingly brief encounters force characters to contemplate new ways of living and loving. All testify to the price and the promise of freedom.

Sometimes an event rather than a person becomes the catalyst for change, as in *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice,* when four friends must readjust their values after one couple's weekend encounter session, and Moscow on the Hudson when Vladimir's spontaneous decision to defect transfigures his life. On a larger historical level, the Nazis forever alter Herman Broder's comfortable East European existence in *Enemies, A Love Story.* In addition, just as he adjusts to America (complete with both a wife and a mistress), Herman's first wife reappears to destroy his neatly reordered new life.

Several other Mazursky films pivot around marriages that instantly snap under the weight of discovered infidelity, leaving one (or both) former partners staring into an abyss of freedom: after Steven's wife catches him in bed with his secretary in *Blume in Love;* after Erica's husband admits his affair and asks for a divorce in *An Unmarried Woman;* after Phil discovers his wife's liaison with his boss in *Tempest;* after Nick Fifer confesses his infidelity in *Scenes from a Mall. Harry,* in *Harry and Tonto,* gets equally jolted when his apartment building is demolished and he must find a new place to live, as does Jack Noah who assumes an entire new identity after he is forced to impersonate a dictator in *Moon over Parador.*

In almost all of these films, characters move from a well-known to a basically unfamiliar space, their altered environment representing the crucial psychological changes they are experiencing, the physical manifestation of their emotional search for new values and identities. They become, in effect, emotional equivalents of the wandering Jew, now facing all kinds of choices in America. So, in each of these movies, events beyond the control of Mazursky's characters open the door to previously uncontemplated possibilities, allowing his characters to taste the joys and the pains of freedom.

Mazursky's two most explicitly Jewish films are the autobiographical *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* and the adaptation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel *Enemies, A Love Story.* Since thirteen years separate these two projects, an examination of each reveals how Mazursky's attitudes have changed over the years. The earlier of these pictures, a look back at growing up Jewish in America from the vantage point of middle age (Mazursky was forty-six), presents a decidedly ambivalent portrait of Jewish home life, almost totally ignoring the religious element of Judaism. The latter movie, completed as Mazursky approached sixty, delves far deeper into the intricate connections between Jews and Judaism, as well as the immense chasm that separates those Jews who experienced the Holocaust firsthand and those who sat safely in America while Hitler exterminated European Jewry. Here the characters are obsessed with their relationship to God and to religious Judaism. Taken together, these films demonstrate Mazursky's continual concern with issues central to Jewish life in America. They also chart his deepening exploration of the Jewish experience in this country, which both joins and separates Jews from their neighbors.

SESSION FIVE

Next Stop, Greenwich Village

Film, 1976
Director: Paul Mazursky
Screenplay: Paul Mazursky

Larry Lapinsky: Lenny Baker
Mrs. Lapinsky: Shelley Winters
Mr. Lapinsky: Mike Kellin
Sarah Roth: Ellen Greene

Length: 109 minutes

Next Stop, Greenwich Village tells the tale of Larry Lapinsky's move away from a suffocating home life with his parents toward independence in his own Greenwich Village apartment. The year is 1953. The picture opens with Larry packing his suitcase, the final step in leaving his parent's home in Brownsville (a section of Brooklyn where Mazursky also grew up). Larry's parting, however, is made difficult by his overbearing mother, who forces him to feel intensely guilty over "deserting" his parents. Though he keeps repeating, "I'm not gonna argue with you, Mom," Larry gets more and more upset by the hysterical antics of his mother.

Finally, when she refuses to kiss him goodbye, Larry erupts in anger: "Jesus Christ," he screams, "will you stop! You are not going to make me feel guilty!" He storms out of the house and makes his way to "fame and fortune" in a new environment, the music shifting from the operatic arias that fill his Brooklyn home to the jazz (Dave Brubeck and Charlie Parker) melodies of Greenwich Village. But he can't leave his mother totally behind; a bit of her still clings to him like unwelcome lint: "Oh boy, am I guilty," mutters Larry standing in front of his new apartment house and admitting to himself what he won't tell his mother.

Larry: *Mom, I'm going. I have to go, I have to live my own life. I'm twenty two years old. . . . Mom, you're going to give yourself a heart attack. . . . Nothing you do is going to stop me from going.*

Larry Lapinsky's Coming of Age

Once in Greenwich Village, Larry gets a part-time job in a health food store (as did the young Paul Mazursky) and collects an odd assortment of bohemian friends. But one thing doesn't change: he remains faithful to his long-time girlfriend in Queens, Sarah Roth. Now that he has his own apartment, the two can freely make love any time they want, but Sarah seems more interested in washing her hair and keeping her makeup fresh than in enjoying

Mrs. Lapinsky: *You call this an apartment? I don't call this an apartment. . . .*

their newfound independence. For Sarah, going to bed with Larry functions mainly as a rebellious act, a covert strike against her stolid and oppressive parents, as well as against the social values she feels compelled to uphold. Rather than an act of personal commitment, or even one of sheer physical abandonment, Sarah's sexual relationship with Larry remains a sliver of excitement that momentarily enlivens her boring environment. "I love you," Larry tells Sarah as they make love early in the movie; her response, a resounding silence, speaks volumes about her feelings.

Larry's conflicts with Sarah, however, remain less heated than his constant clashes with his mother. Though he physically departs his parents' home for the free, offbeat life of Greenwich Village, Larry never leaves his mother behind. Indeed, the film often functions as a virtual compendium of Jewish son/Jewish mother conflicts, with enough pop psychology thrown in to delight any armchair psychiatrist. The weekly visits paid by Larry's parents to his new apartment betray the lack of communication that plagues this American Jewish family. The three sit silently: the good-natured but ineffectual father reads his Daily News, the emotionally volatile mother listens to her opera records and cries, and the duty-bound son stares out the window wishing he were somewhere else. Of course, Mrs. Lapinsky ritually brings her son presents each Sunday, ranging from lox and challah to tooth powder and underwear. Before each of these uncomfortable visits between a mother who still views her son as a child and a son who sees his mother as simply a dispenser of guilt, Larry imitates his mother, knowing precisely what she will say and how she will respond to each situation. He is, of course, absolutely accurate. During these moments, Mazursky captures the historical and emotional gulf that exists between the generations, here particularized as the uncrossable chasm between second- and third-generation Jews.

Next Stop, Greenwich Village represents an important key to understanding the Jewish perspective that informs all of Mazursky's pictures, since here he attempts to record his passage from Brooklyn to Greenwich Village to Hollywood. This journey represents much more than simply a geographical change; it is a psychological, emotional, and sociological transition that shapes Mazursky's comic world-view. This movement also charts the crucial role Mazursky's Jewish background plays in transforming his unique sensibilities, his particular squint at the world that expresses itself so powerfully in his movies. For Mazursky, the duality implicit in growing up Jewish in America leads either to anger or to craziness – or to some mixture of both. He understands that the United States represents a new possibility for Jews, but such a potential carries with it a multitude of fears – from a resurgence of antisemitism to a high rate of intermarriage, from a distinct alteration of family life to a breakdown of traditional, religious, and moral values. Even freedom, for Mazursky, carries a stiff price.

Larry (on leaving for California): *I'll write every day and I'll call every other, how's that?*

Mrs. Lapinsky: *Larry, be a good actor.*

While you watch, consider:

- Is this a tale of the 1950s, or is this, in some sense, a timeless story?
- How does Mazursky manage to portray Mrs. Lipinsky as a complex figure, rather than as simply a caricature?
- How does Larry's Jewish background color his world-view?
- Assuming that Larry Lapinsky is a young Paul Mazursky, do you have the sense that the filmmaker looks back on his life with nostalgia or contempt, as someone who has moved on or is still connected to his beginnings?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

◆ What is the source of this film's humor?

◆ What drives Larry toward his dreams of success?

◆ Compare and contrast Larry with Robert, the gentile poet he meets in Greenwich Village. How do they relate to women and how do they deal with difficult situations?

◆ In leaving Brooklyn, what aspects of his old life does Larry seek to leave behind? Is anything of value irreparably lost?

◆ Does Larry shed his Jewish identity? Is he apathetic or concerned about being a Jew? Beyond guilt, what binds him to Judaism?

◆ Does every generation need to make a break of sorts from their parents? Is it particularly difficult for Jewish sons and daughters to make the break? Do Jewish parents make separation more difficult?

◆ What are the differences between second generation Jews and their offspring as depicted in Mazursky's film? Is Mazursky's view consistent with your own experience?

◆ As in some of the other films in this course, there are few references to Judaism, yet it's unmistakably a movie with a Jewish theme. What does it mean to speak of Jewish lifestyle and values apart from Jewish religion and history?

SESSION SIX

Enemies, A Love Story

Film, 1989
Director: Paul Mazursky
Screenplay: Roger L. Simon & Paul Mazursky

Herman: Ron Silver
Masha: Lena Olin
Tamara: Anjelica Huston
Yadwiga: Margaret Sophie Stein
Rabbi Lambert: Alan King

Length: 119 minutes

Enemies, A Love Story represents Paul Mazursky's deepest and most overt exploration of complex Jewish issues. Based on Nobel Prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1972 novel, his first book exploring a post-Holocaust world and his first set in the United States, the film's black comedy revolves about three women and one man whose lives are irrevocably altered and affected by the trauma of the Holocaust. Looking at Mazursky's previous work, one can easily understand why Singer's novel, with its delicate blend of the comic and the tragic, its powerful female characters, and its examination of the price of freedom, attracted him. Yet in bringing this particular work to the screen, Mazursky, for the first time in his career, faced two intimidating challenges: adapting the work of a world-renowned author and dealing with the Holocaust.

The film adaptation by Mazursky (and cowriter Roger Simon) of Singer's novel remains extremely faithful to its original source. One is struck by how carefully the filmmaker transposes Singer's exact language into dialogue and his verbal pictures into visual representations. One image clearly demonstrates Mazursky's sense of visual analogy: the Wonder Wheel, a gigantic ferris wheel, which dominates the Coney Island landscape. Here the director subtly uses a concrete image to communicate an abstract idea present throughout Singer's work, the cyclical nature of history and the persistence of evil:

> The idle promises of progress were no more than a spit in the face of the martyrs of all generations. If time is just a form of perception, or a category of reason, the past is as present as today. Cain continues to murder Abel. Nebuchadnezzar is still slaughtering the sons of Zedekiah and putting out Zedekiah's eyes. The pogrom in Keshniev never ceases. Jews are still burned in Auschwitz. . . .

Herman: *The Talmud is such a great book. Why doesn't it explain what a man should do when he has two wives?*

At various points throughout the picture, Herman stands motionless, staring out the window of the apartment he shares with Yadwiga, mesmerized by the hypnotic lights and perpetual rotations of the Wonder Wheel. Mazursky even concludes the film with an image of a still-revolving mechanical ride.

Herman and His Wives

Tamara: *No, I'm not the same. I'm dead. They put nylon stockings on me, dyed my hair; they polished my nails. God help me. But I'm dead.*

Mazursky, with Singer as his guide, demonstrates no desire to shock us with visceral images. He reaches for something far more subtle: the indelible mark that a horrific experience leaves on a person's everyday existence. Initially, this manifests itself in a feeling that one is not part of this world and is, in fact, a ghost. All these characters at one time or another express this sentiment. "Anyone who's gone through all that I have is no longer part of this world," Herman tells Rabbi Lambert, who rejects Broder's point of view as unnecessarily pessimistic and accuses him of merely "playing a role." In so doing, Lambert represents those American Jews who never personally experienced the Holocaust and thus can never fathom the maimed psyches of those who did. He becomes another of those blustering American pragmatists who blithely advise their European brethren to forget about the past and get on with their lives. Such trite phrases seem to Herman a blasphemy on the ashes of the tormented.

How do mutilated psyches like those of Herman, Masha, and Tamara deal with everyday reality? First of all, no survivor of the Holocaust ever feels totally secure. They remain forever haunted by the knowledge that a seemingly safe world, one in which the rules appear clear and understandable, can suddenly change into a hostile, life-threatening place of horror, where neighbors become oppressors and friends become informers.

One other important element ties Mazursky, both philosophically and emotionally, to Singer's tale of post-Holocaust fragmentation: the unrelenting conflict between faith and doubt. In Mazursky's previous films, this conflict inevitably occurs on a secular level, i.e., the film characters commit themselves to some sort of cultural or philosophical position and the film director satirizes them.

Yadwiga: *I'm so happy. So lucky. God has sent you to me. Herman, please, I want to become a Jew. I want to have your child.*

In Enemies, this conflict between faith and doubt occurs on the religious, rather than the secular, level. These characters, all of whom have suffered at the hands of the Nazis, acknowledge their ambivalence about accepting any simple description of a benevolent God. Masha, for example, argues that "If God allowed the Jews of Europe to be killed, what reason is there to believe he would prevent the extermination of the Jews in America? God doesn't care." The equally tormented Tamara believes that "the merciful God in whom we believed does not exist. . . . If God was able to watch all this horror and remain silent, then He's no God." Traumatized by the death of her children, as well as those others who went to their deaths like saints, Tamara believes that souls exist; it's God who doesn't. Only the simple Yadwiga maintains an uncritical acceptance of divine existence and providence, beseeching Herman to help her convert to Judaism and to conceive a child with her. Both acts mirror both her faith and her hope, as she strives to side with the persecuted rather than the oppressors and to bring new life into a world obsessed with the dead.

Herman, in his typical uncertainty, veers from one set of beliefs to another. At first, he rebels against anything Jewish, ignoring the Sabbath and telling Yadwiga that "there is no God . . . and even if there were, I would defy him." He does fast on Yom Kippur, but will not attend religious services because he can't bring himself to be like one of those "assimilated Jews who only go to synagogue once a year." Slowly, he changes his position. He admits that there may be a God, but that He is quite powerless: "If a God of mercy did exist in the heavenly hierarchy, then He was only a helpless godlet, a kind of heavenly Jew among the heavenly Nazis."

All the central characters in this film find the constantly shifting terrain of American life difficult to negotiate; they face terrors and pay the price of freedom. As Jews, they invent and reinvent their identities and play various roles, creating and reformulating an ever-changing collage of ethical positions, points of view, and emotional ranges. They all wrestle with how to handle the social liberation so intrinsic to American life, so omnipresent in the postwar age. Such issues continue to haunt Mazursky. Perhaps this is why so many of his movies end with images of escape, with a feeling that things are only temporarily resolved.

"The most difficult thing to do," Mazursky told an interviewer, "is to laugh with compassion." Such a goal, in many ways, represents a very Jewish perspective on the world. In attempting to do precisely that, Paul Mazursky repeatedly draws upon his Jewish roots, as both metaphor and inspiration, to chart middle-class America's response to freedom and change over the last four decades.

Masha: *Jewish law and all the other law means as much to me as last year's snow.*

While you watch, consider:

- What strategies does each character employ to deal with the legacy of the Holocaust in his or her daily life?
- What role does memory play in the film?
- How does deception function in the film?
- How do you react to Herman Broder?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Explain the constant talk of suicide which pervades this movie. Why do you think that Masha finally does kill herself, while the others go on?

- What is the role of children in the film? Why are children so important?

- Discuss Lawrence Friedman's assertion that Tamara, Yadwiga, and Yadwiga's child form "the nucleus of a reborn Jewish community." What is the significance of the fact that men seem to be excluded from this community?

- Do Herman's experiences during the war justify his treatment of the women in this film? Do his sexual infidelities represent a meaningful "yes" to life or simply an excuse to indulge his physical appetites at the expense of others?

- Is Herman's disappearance at the end of the film an act of cowardly desertion or moral courage?

- How does Rabbi Lambert represent American Jewry's responses to the Holocaust and its victims? What is Mazursky's attitude toward Rabbi Lambert?

- Can American-born Jews ever truly understand what Holocaust survivors have gone through? Now that the last generation of survivors is aging, what can be done to preserve their memories, their legacy of torment, for the world?

- How are questions of religion presented in the film?

- Many survivors have lost their faith; others embrace tradition. Can you feel empathy with both points of view? Is it possible to give up on religion and still feel very Jewish?

- Many Holocaust survivors are only now, 50 years later, beginning to open up about their experiences during the War? What kept them silent for so long?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

Books

◆ Fox, Terry Curtis. "Paul Mazursky Interviewed." Film Comment 14-15 (March-April 1978), pp. 29-32.

◆ Friedman, Lester. The Jewish Image in American Film. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1988. Historical overview of American Jewish Cinema, with over 400 photographs.

◆ Singer, I.B. *Enemies, A Love Story.* New York: Avenal Books, 1982.

Films

◆ *Blume in Love* (1973). Liberal Jewish lawyer, unfaithful to his wife, desires to get her back – very much in the Woody Allen mode of sharply observed characters and witty dialogue.

◆ *Harry and Tonto* (1974). Rare foray for an American film – the problems of aging and the aged in American society. As one character says of Art Carney's Harry, "If you hadn't told me, I'd have though you were Jewish."

◆ *An Unmarried Woman* (1979). Well-to-do Manhattan couple divorce. Profeminist and insightful; Annie Hall seen from the woman's perspective.

◆ *Willy & Phil* (1980). Americanization of French classic Jules and Jim, focuses on a Jewish high school teacher and an Italian photographer undergoing identity crises and sharing the love of the same woman.

◆ *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984). Sometimes bittersweet tribute to America's largesse to immigrants and ethnics, a celebration of the "melting pot" ideal.

◆ *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986). High-energy comedy of nouveau riche Jewish businessman who reclaims a street person for the ranks of the middle-class.

◆ *Scenes from a Mall* (1990). Woody Allen stars in another Mazursky tale of contemporary Southern California Jewish culture, here paired with Bette Midler as a couple who separate and reunite many times over the course of a shopping expedition on their anniversary.