

Introduction: The ‘happy ending’: the making of a reputation

Take something as obvious as Hollywood’s happy endings . . .

(Maltby 2003: 16)

The Hollywood ‘happy ending’ is among the most over-utilised and under-analysed concepts in discussions of popular cinema.¹ Though it has seldom been addressed in any detail, the term is nonetheless ceaselessly employed by audiences, filmmakers, critics and scholars, and is one that evokes a whole host of assumptions about mainstream American filmmaking.² This book is the first to interrogate some of the most significant and tenacious of those assumptions, and it does so by delving more deeply than is usual into one especially famous feature associated with the ‘happy ending’: concluding a film with the union of a romantic couple.

One way of describing the status of the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ would be to say that it is burdened with a considerable reputation.³ Indeed, as we will see, for few phenomena of popular filmmaking does the matter of reputation seem more relevant than for the ‘happy ending’. A central aim of this book is to question that reputation. As such, let us begin by outlining some of its contours.

UBIQUITY AND HOMOGENEITY

As in the popular imagination so in academic discussion – the most fundamental assumption about the ‘happy ending’ is that it is a ubiquitous feature of Hollywood cinema. It has thus become virtually traditional for scholars to precede mentions of the term ‘happy ending’ with words like ‘standard’ (Dolar 1991: 38), ‘standardised’ (Mulvey 1978: 54), ‘predetermined’ (Maltby 2003: 16), ‘predictable’ (Schatz 1991: 152), ‘typical’ (Booker 2007: 42), ‘necessary’

(Mayne 1990: 363), 'inevitable' (Kracauer 1960: 65), 'required' (Sharrett 2007: 60), 'requisite' (Tally 2007: 129), 'statutory' (Brownlow 1987: 122), 'mandatory' (Kapsis 1990: 39), 'expected' (Rowe/Wells 2003: 59), 'customary' (Sterrit 1993: 10), 'usual' (Žižek 2001: 7), 'formulaic' (Umphlett 2006: 38), or – most frequently – 'clichéd' (Orr 1991: 380). The same impulse can provoke claims such as 'few conventions of the Hollywood cinema are as noticeable to its producers, to its audiences, and to its critics as that of the happy ending' (Bordwell 1982: 2), and even that this is the 'most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomena' (Wood 1989: 52). Indeed, it is not uncommon to imply that virtually *all* Hollywood films have the 'happy ending' in common: Redman refers to 'the happy ending, which is present in almost every Hollywood film' (2003), Strinati to 'the "happy ending" associated with the typical Hollywood film' (2000: 34), Bratu-Hansen to 'the Hollywood convention of the always-happy ending' (1997: 101), and so on.⁴

These are very bold pronouncements. Given their assuredness and prevalence within an academic discipline, we might assume that they have been arrived at based on considerable evidence. Yet it is surprising to realise, in the light of the pervasiveness of these claims, that the 'happy ending' has received barely any in-depth attention, or even a satisfactory definition, from film studies. Perhaps the closest we have to a substantiated claim about the ubiquity of the 'happy ending' is David Bordwell's assertion that, 'of one hundred randomly sampled Hollywood films, over sixty ended with a display of the united romantic couple – the clichéd happy ending, often with a "clinch" – and many more could be said to end happily' (1986: 159). This, at least, is certainly the most frequently cited scholarly proclamation on the subject. Neale and Krutnik, for instance, assert that 'as David Bordwell has pointed out, [. . .] the convention of the happy ending was almost universal in Hollywood during its classical period' (1990: 29).⁵ There are several problems here. I will return later to the issue of defining a 'united romantic couple' as 'the clichéd happy ending'. Regarding the rest of the statement, though: by never revealing the definition by which these many (unnamed) endings 'could be said to end happily', Bordwell exhibits two common impulses governing critical responses to the 'happy ending': (1) an assumption of its obvious intelligibility as something we all immediately recognise and understand, and (2) a use of this assumption to bolster an argument that the device is near-omnipresent in Hollywood cinema. When combined, these twin claims have an unfortunate potential for circular logic: we know what it looks like *because* we see it repeatedly, and we know we are seeing it *because* we know what it looks like.

One reason the 'happy ending' is an important subject is that it is common for scholars to use such unquestioned assumptions about it to mount broader generalisations about Hollywood filmmaking. Rather than attempting to demonstrate the prevalence and homogeneity of something called the

'happy ending', Rick Altman, for instance, moves directly from a citation of Bordwell's proffered statistics towards the proposal that classical Hollywood narrative 'reasons backward', is 'retro-fitted', in order to ensure that all films arrive at 'the same basic ending' (1992: 32). Similarly, in his book *Hollywood Cinema*, Richard Maltby says of the relationship between Hollywood and its audiences that,

the hidden reason Hollywood movies have happy endings [is that the] re-establishment of order renders the viewer's experimentation with expressive behavior a matter of no consequence, contained within the safe, unexplored, unconsidered and trivialized space of entertainment. (2003: 36)

It is worth noting that both the claim about most Hollywood films sharing the 'same basic ending', and the statement 'Hollywood movies have happy endings', are treated here as agreed matters of common sense. We might imagine how persuasive Altman's and Maltby's arguments would appear if there did not exist an unquestioned assumption between critic and reader that Hollywood films do indeed regularly – even *usually* – offer something called the 'happy ending'. Even when quite possibly exaggerated beyond reasonableness (here it is not simply that even *most* Hollywood films have virtually interchangeable 'happy endings', but that *all* do), so easily-mobilised are assumptions about the convention's reputation that they can be relied upon as key components in arguments that might otherwise have little chance of convincing.

Given the types of claims we have already encountered, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover that the 'happy ending' has not been viewed kindly by film studies. Indeed, it has regularly been seen as representative of Hollywood's worst tendencies.

IDEOLOGICAL CONSERVATISM

Probably the second most common scholarly assumption about the 'happy ending' is that it is inherently ideologically conservative. Mentions of the convention are often accompanied by suggestions that it constitutes an 'ideological straightjacket' (Wood 1998: 37) designed to 'reaffirm the status quo of American society' (Benshoff/Griffin 2004: 28), and 'maintain the culture of which [Hollywood films] are a part' (Maltby 2003: 16).⁶ It is extremely surprising that there should be a paucity of research into a convention that is routinely considered not only an 'extrinsic norm' (Bordwell 1986: 159) but *also* inherently ideologically pernicious. As it stands, however, even the only

English-language monograph on cinematic endings, Richard Neupert's *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema*, though it usefully addresses numerous aspects of closure (as will be discussed in Chapter 2), says little more on the matter of the 'happy ending' than that it 'has become a cliché of the classical Hollywood cinema' (1995: 71).⁷ A recurrent underlying critical assumption should thus be becoming clear: we need not think too deeply about 'something as obvious as Hollywood's happy endings' (Maltby 2003: 16).

Yet, while film studies has tended to avoid addressing the 'happy ending' in detail, assumptions about it have helped greatly in the construction of many highly influential theoretical paradigms – even if often tacitly. For instance: models of 'classical narrative' stressing 'a process whereby problems are solved so that order may be restored to the world of the fiction' (Cook 1999: 40); theories of Hollywood genres focused on their purported 'methods of problem-solving based on tradition' (Hess 1995: 55); delineations of the 'Oedipal trajectory' – once treated by many as the key to understanding American popular narrative – which emphasise 'the resolution of a crisis and a movement towards social stability' (Hayward 2006: 286). Such models have been vital to the growth of some of film studies' most fundamental attitudes towards Hollywood movies. We might again consider how influential they would have proved if they were not undergirded by implicit assumptions about the homogeneity and prevalence of the 'happy ending'; note, for example, the ease with which Raymond Bellour enlists the term in the service of his argument that the American cinema as a whole 'finds itself enacting [. . .] the most classic paradigms elaborated for the subject of Western culture by Freudian psychoanalysis' – that is: 'the movement from the adventurer, lawless and faithless [. . .], to the husband, the future father and good citizen. In this case we have a film with a "happy ending"' (Bellour 1979: 93).

Lying behind many such theoretical tendencies is the further presupposition that narrative 'closure' is in itself ideologically suspect – a view rehearsed many times in both literary and film scholarship since at least the 1960s. In literature we might point to Eco (1962), Miller (1981), MacArthur (1990), Booth (1993) or Reising (1996) for extended critiques of 'closed' narrative form, while in film studies we could cite Oudart (1971: 5), Wollen (1998: 111/12), Mulvey (1989: 159) or Kuhn (1994: 16) for more localised objections to the narrative device. While less overt today than it once was, the suspicion of closure on ideological grounds has had a significant legacy – one that means that, as Don Fowler balefully puts it, 'given a simple choice of being open or closed, it is difficult for a twentieth [or twenty-first] century person to choose to be closed' (1997: 6). It is against this intellectual backdrop that one of the only extensive studies of cinematic closure, Russell (1995), concerns itself exclusively with championing various New Wave films for 'condemning "closure"' (1995: 3) –

a negative process framed as 'a practice of resistance, with aspirations toward a radical politics' (ibid.: 2). I will address explicitly closure's own unenviable critical reputation in Chapter 4, but for now it is enough to register that this theoretical context further ensured that the Hollywood 'happy ending' should fall into critical disrepute. Perhaps more surprising is that this climate did not prompt more thorough investigation into the convention, or even into film endings more broadly.⁸

Before we can conclude that the vast majority of Hollywood films conclude with the 'happy ending' – and *well* before we can use this assumption as a linchpin for ambitious arguments about Hollywood film as a whole – we need to know whether there is something called the 'happy ending' in the first place. This is one question I shall be addressing in this book.

THE IMPLAUSIBLE 'HAPPY ENDING'

Tellingly, the negative reputation of the Hollywood 'happy ending' has also been fundamental to the only widespread critical tendency ever to have made *positive* claims for the convention.

In 1948 Fritz Lang wrote an article called 'Happily Ever After'. In it, he condemns certain 'happy endings', yet argues that they are acceptable under certain circumstances, including in the case of one of his own films, *Woman in the Window* (1944). Lang here argues, specifically (and usefully), for what he calls 'the *affirmative* ending, in which virtue triumphs through struggle' (ibid.: 29). Meanwhile, by far the most famous dedicated scholarly work on the cinematic 'happy ending', David Bordwell's 'Happily Ever After, Part Two', is a riposte of sorts to Lang. Bordwell suggests that it is ironic that the director cites *Woman in the Window*, since this film's conclusion – by suddenly revealing the majority of the preceding narrative to have been a dream – is an example of what Bordwell calls the 'unmotivated happy ending' (1982: 6). By apparently reneging at the last minute on Hollywood cinema's conventional reliance upon cause-and-effect plotting, generic consistency, and coherent narrative point of view, Bordwell argues 'the unmotivated happy ending is of importance both aesthetically and ideologically' (ibid.: 6), since it 'puts on display the demands of social institutions (censorship, studios) which claim to act as delegates of audience desires' (ibid.: 7). By analysing only conclusions which supposedly 'pose problems for the happy ending' (ibid.: 2), Bordwell implicitly suggests that its 'motivated' instances are, by contrast, self-explanatory. This suggestion – that this convention requires our attention primarily when it is being undermined – is extremely common in film scholarship, and may take a number of forms.

It is sometimes argued that 'happy endings' become acceptable if they fail

fully to resolve earlier narrative issues, meaning we should instead focus on 'the amount of dust the story raises along the road, [. . .] which [puts] up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes' (Mulvey 1978: 54). Equally, it may be claimed that a 'happy ending' includes dissonant elements which succeed in 'undercutting, even spoiling' the convention (Orr 1991: 384), or becoming in some other way unconvincing. This has become a ubiquitous and resilient critical category: the 'happy ending in which the mechanics of cinema are exposed' (Geraghty 2009: 106), the 'pseudo-happy ending' (Affron 1980: 51), the 'happy ending that seems to "wink" at its viewers' (Leonard 2007: 122), and thus 'ironically undermines the codes of the happy ending' (Straumann 2008: 186) – one which appears to be 'virtual self-parody' (Armes 1994: 75), or a 'deus ex machina' (Stern 1979: 95), apparently 'tacked-on' (Smith 1977: 1), 'ironic' (Grant 2007: 79) 'unconvincing' (Camper 1971: 61), 'forced' (Pollock 1977: 109), or 'self-consciously artificial' (Shingler/Mercer 2004: 60). As I will explore later, this critical category of 'false happy endings' (Harvey 2002: 186) that guarantee 'we cannot rest secure' (Modleski 1988: 54), or leave a 'subterranean bitter taste' (Žižek 1991: 9) took root early in the history of film studies, and clearly stems again from the familiar assumption that what might be considered the more *typical* 'happy ending' is both homogeneous and exceedingly prevalent. For convenience's sake, I will be calling this model the implausible 'happy ending'.

Claims about implausible 'happy endings' can serve different critical purposes. Since the 'happy ending' is often seen as a commercial and industrial demand, critics desiring to praise a filmmaker's artistic integrity may invoke the implausible 'happy ending' to recoup what might at first seem to be an uninspiringly traditional conclusion. Robin Wood provides a stark example of this tendency when he says that 'directors like Sirk, Ophüls and von Sternberg used various strategies of style and emphasis to produce irony: finding the happy ending a prison for the artist, they manage to suggest that it is also a prison for the characters' (Wood 1998: 37). The model of the implausible 'happy ending' has since been used to defend 'happy endings' in the movies of many auteurs, from Preston Sturges (Durgnat 1969: 169), through Alfred Hitchcock (Sterrit 1993: 24), to Kathryn Bigelow (Schneider 2003: 87). For other critics, the implausible 'happy ending' has served ideological purposes. As Barbara Klinger has noted, the concept was highly useful for the development of 1970s 'Screen theory' as a whole (1984: 22), playing a key role in the establishment of the category of 'the formally subversive "progressive" text' (ibid.: 17) – an ideologically acceptable permutation of Hollywood's 'classic realist text' (MacCabe 1974: 7).⁹

That the most common approach to the 'happy ending' should be to point to instances in which it somehow *fails* is indicative of the fact that critics have preferred to construct the convention as a 'bad object' rather than analyse it

in depth. I do not wish to argue that there are not films in relation to which the implausible 'happy ending' might be a useful concept – indeed, we will encounter such films throughout this book. The category is significant, apart from anything, because it allows us to see the extent to which the negative reputation of the 'happy ending' controls the discourses surrounding it. However, we have not yet currently grasped the nature of the 'happy ending' *itself* anywhere near well enough to hold it as an assumed monolith that is only critically accessible when being undermined. This approach is only viable if we know there to be an existing standardised norm that it is desirable to 'subvert' – a claim virtually no one has yet attempted to prove. While an important topic for discussion, then, the implausible 'happy ending' model should not be the only critical game in town.

Despite the continual desire to refer to the concept, film studies has thus far too long been equipped with merely one or two vague, yet tenacious, assumptions to structure its dealings with the convention. Not only are these assumptions persistent but, as the preceding survey suggests, they are also pervasive. In whatever other ways theoretical approaches to Hollywood cinema differ, the 'happy ending' as 'bad object' seems one matter that virtually all can agree upon: from MacCabe's '*Screen* theory' to Robin Wood's close criticism, from Tania Modleski's psychoanalytic feminism to Kevin Brownlow's film historicism, from Bordwell's neo-formalism to Žižek's neo-Lacanianism. It may be that this convention's reputation turns out to be quite justified. My point is, however, that currently we simply cannot say, since that reputation has tended to be built upon assumption rather than demonstrated to be deserved. A major aim of this book is thus to begin a discussion about how merited the reputation of the 'happy ending' might be.

CLICHÉ OR CONVENTION?

Before we can begin interrogating the 'happy ending' and its reputation, it is necessary to do some preliminary thinking about what in fact it *is*. In his aforementioned article, Fritz Lang offers the following definition:

The traditional happy-ending story is a story of problems solved by an invincible hero, who achieved with miraculous ease all that his heart desired. It is the story of good against evil, with no possible doubt as to the outcome. Boy will get girl, the villain will get his just deserts, dreams will come true as though at the touch of a wand. (ibid.: 26/27)

I think we can see something like this description as charting a basic discursive field regularly surrounding the 'happy ending'. A few points need to be made

about this characterisation. Clearly, the account is exaggerated: certainly not all actual 'happy endings' feel as effortless ('with miraculous ease') or inevitable ('no possible doubt as to the outcome') as suggested here. Relatedly, what Lang presents is a hyperbolic compression of the possible endings of many different *kinds* of films into one imagined ending. A conclusion in which 'boy will get girl' will usually occur in a romantic comedy or musical (as well as certainly cropping up, with varying degrees of reliability, in films of other genres), while the references to 'good against evil', and a 'villain [who] will get his just deserts' are far more suggestive of genres such as Westerns, thrillers, science fiction, horror, or adventure movies.

It might be objected that Lang is not in fact attempting an image of an actual 'happy ending', but rather a general impression of what the 'happy ending' *represents*; we might say that we know, in short, what he means. This, however, is exactly the point: that Lang should allow himself to become so hyperbolic on this subject – and that we know roughly what he *means* – suggests how simple, exaggerated, and pervasive the convention is routinely viewed as being. The 'happy ending' he sketches is not 'traditional', it is *prototypical*. Yet the assumption (which the reader is encouraged to share) seems to be that to describe the 'happy ending' using such overstatement and generalisation is merely to choose the appropriate rhetoric for so overstated and generalisable a convention. What is being offered here, then, is in fact the *idea* – or, rather, an abstracted *ideal* – of the 'happy ending', and it is this that makes the account telling.

It seems to me that a prototypical description like Lang's is more representative of what *the* Hollywood 'happy ending' is than the conclusion of any real film could hope to be. That is to say: the 'happy ending' is less an actual, observable type of ending repeated again and again across Hollywood cinema than a discursive imaginary amalgam of the kinds of exaggerated images conjured up here. Rather like the way in which genres are sometimes treated, it is essentially a Platonic ideal, existing in the minds of critics, filmmakers, studios and audiences, and often exerting its influence most forcefully by what it represents *as an ideal*. Just as Hollywood cinema has plainly produced a great many of what we call Westerns, but never *the* prototypical Western, so has it produced a great many of what we call 'happy endings', but never *the* 'happy ending'. Yet this oversimplified conception of the 'happy ending' is unfortunately seldom acknowledged as such, but is rather understood to be referring to an actual, existing 'type' of ending. This is what permits the surprisingly common critical practice of implying that almost all Hollywood films have this ending in common – references to 'the "happy ending" of most Hollywood films' (Hallam/Marshment 2000: 63), or simply 'the Hollywood happy-ending convention' (Buckland 2006: 219). Unlike the critical discourses around genre, which have often been concerned to question just such Platonic

understandings of the concept, film studies has demonstrated little interest in disabusing itself of the notion that the prototypical 'happy ending' not only exists, but may be virtually ubiquitous. In other words, viewed in this prototypical, Platonic form – and tied to the definite article – *the* Hollywood 'happy ending' has come to be treated absolutely as a cliché. How appropriate is this characterisation?

Stemming from the French word for a particular mechanical printing process (Haberer 2005: 1), the term 'cliché' has gone on to mean, for language, 'set word-combinations which are reproduced in a form fixed once and for all' (Permyakov 1979: 12), and for literature, 'a hackneyed [. . .] expression whose origins and freshness of appeal have been lost through overuse' (Myers/Wukasch 1985: 65). This overuse, however, needs to be of a particular kind; as Ruth Amossy and Terese Lyons put it, 'clichés are clichés by virtue of a phenomenon of repetition [. . .]. Moreover, this repetition must be perceived as something purely mechanical, as parroting' (1982: 34–5). It is important to stress the fixed and mechanistic quality of cliché, for without it the word is easily confused with other useful terms. Shira Wolosky, for instance, distinguishes between cliché and topos – a particular recurring subject or conceptual scheme: 'a cliché [. . .] repeats something the same way. A topos repeats in different ways. It is always used distinctively. It is a building block, but one that is put to different uses from text to text' (2001: 69–70). Another helpful term whose relation to cliché might be said to be somewhat similar to that of topos is convention. Whereas cliché serves the function of a standardised code, 'a convention in art is not just an established rule,' but 'an agreement to be secured' (Perez 2000: 21, 23). Furthermore, the nature and development of that agreement – though still predicated on repetition – can in practice be a dynamic process that produces extremely varied results; indeed, as Andrew Britton puts it, 'artistic conventions are at the furthest possible remove from those of mathematics, and they are useful not because of their invariance, but because they conduce to the most complex particularized modifications and inflections' (1993: 214).

As we have seen, film studies has tended to treat the 'happy ending' as if it almost always functioned the same ways, and meant the same things – that is: as a cliché. By contrast, I will be concerned to suggest that the 'happy ending' is better conceptualised, not as an unvarying cliché, but rather as an artistic convention, and that it is thus – unsurprisingly – as conducive to variation as is any other convention. At the same time, however, I will be suggesting that the seeming flaws in the Platonic model of the clichéd, unchanging 'happy ending' do not mean that we shouldn't engage with this model. In fact, I believe it is necessary that we *do*, since that model (however misleading it may be) also exerts an extremely significant influence – over audiences and critics, but also over Hollywood films themselves (see, in particular, Chapter 3).

As common in public as in critical discourse, the characterisation of the Hollywood 'happy ending' as a standardised cliché has undoubtedly been helped by the fact that the history of the American cinema seems to be filled with well-rehearsed production stories about altered endings: *Baby Face* (1933), *Suspicion* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), *The Vanishing* (1993) – tales of directors, writers or source texts betrayed by additions of 'upbeat' conclusions.¹⁰ Such familiar tales help to present the process of creating cinematic conclusions as a battle between binary alternatives: 'happy' vs. 'unhappy', 'commercial' vs. 'artistic'. In doing so, they have the power to make the kind of hyperbole employed by Lang appear reasonable. It sometimes seems that, given a choice between two entirely demarcated options, Hollywood will always settle upon one rather than the other. It is absolutely true that many endings will have been affected by choices of this kind, and that there will have been screenwriters, directors and producers who conceptualised the issue along precisely such lines. Yet the truth is, of course, that – whatever may go on behind the scenes – what ends up on screen never merely reflects one simple choice. One aim of this book is to draw attention to the many choices that may affect film endings beyond the bald logic of merely 'happy' or 'unhappy'.

MY FOCUS AND APPROACH

Barbara Creed brings together several strands of the scholarly view of our subject when she refers to the 'happy ending' 'in which all loose ends are usually neatly tied up and the values of the status quo confirmed – the couple, family, society and the law' (1995: 155). Rather like Lang's list, and those scholars who imply that virtually every Hollywood film shares the 'happy ending' in common, Creed's words demonstrate that the convention is often taken to refer to something simultaneously very specific and very broad. This is in part facilitated, here and elsewhere, by ensuring that the clichéd Platonic image of the 'happy ending' evoked by the critic collapses distinctions between possible differences between different kinds of films and kinds of endings: how many Hollywood conclusions that we might wish to call 'happy' can be equally concerned to neatly tie up and 'confirm' values associated with the couple *and* the family *and* society *and* the law? A few, no doubt, but very far from all. A main point to note here, however, is that there are a great many features that are regularly linked to the 'happy ending' – all of which deserve careful scholarly attention.

While it would be theoretically possible to try to discuss all the many sub-features so often associated with this convention, to attempt this within the space of one book would risk sacrificing the penetration of depth for the

illusion of breadth. As may already be clear, something like this mistake is far from uncommon, finding its most extreme expression in indiscriminate lists of all that this Platonic cliché called *the* 'happy ending' is imagined to contain. At this early stage in the development of critical work on this topic, a more productive approach, I argue, will be to restrict oneself to an aspect of the convention about which one can hope to be somewhat more detailed and specific. While I therefore look forward to future research on, for example, the convention of a hero defeating a villain, or the upholding of the law, this book will concern itself with one particularly famous element of what is commonly assumed to make up the 'happy ending': in Creed's terms 'the couple', in Lang's 'boy will get girl'.

The assumption that the 'happy ending' requires a 'united romantic couple' (Bordwell 1986: 159), can be seen again and again throughout film studies: Benschhoff and Griffin define the 'Happy Ending' as a 'type of narrative closure usually found in Hollywood cinema as the protagonist [. . .] "gets the girl"' (2004: 325); Mellencamp economically twins the concepts via a hyphen: 'the couple – the happy ending' (1995: 56); Strinati refers to 'the coming together of the male and female leads in a romantic happy ending.' (2000: 217); Lapsley and Westlake refer to 'the standard happy ending in which the lovers come together all set to live happily ever after' (1992: 43). In large part because it is routinely considered so 'standard' a feature of 'the cliché "happy ending"' (Bordwell 1986: 159),¹¹ the presence of the romantic couple in a film's final moments will be my predominant focus in this book. For brevity's sake, I will henceforth be calling this convention the 'final couple'.¹²

Narrowing my main focus further, I will for the most part be restricting myself to films whose narratives concern themselves to a significant extent with romantic love. One reason for this is simply that – as will become clear – the scholarship surrounding romance genres (and particularly romantic comedy) has produced noticeably more thoughtful work on the subject of 'happy endings' than most other strands of film studies. It thus seems fitting, apart from anything, that the first extended study of the 'happy ending' should collect together some of this disparate writing and draw upon its most worthwhile findings – something that focusing on depictions of romantic love allows. However, a few more words regarding my corpus and approach are required.

I will be excluding from my account films that clearly grant their romantic storyline an auxiliary function, and whose endings thus render the final couple of only secondary concern. Equally though, so as not to narrow the focus *too* far, in order to be suitable for analysis a film does not necessarily need to be straightforwardly a 'romance' per se – be it a romantic comedy, romantic melodrama, or otherwise. This allows us to consider the function of the final couple beyond narrowly genre-specific parameters (a necessary measure, given the common association of the convention with Hollywood films of all kinds),

whilst simultaneously not broadening our focus beyond all manageability. Whether or not a film is applicable for analysis, then, depends on how central matters of romance are to its resolution. The moment virtually any Hollywood movie introduces a potential romantic couple, narrative and ideological expectations surrounding fictional depictions of romance all but guarantee that one question in particular is likely to be raised: will these characters become and remain united by the film's end? However, this question will assume more significance in some cases than in others. For most romantic comedies it will almost certainly be the primary or sole focus. In other movies the development of a romantic relationship will exist alongside other concerns, but still be of significant importance. *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), for instance, although concerned with the 'social problem' of returning veterans, relates that issue intimately to its characters' romantic relationships. Equally, *The Graduate* (1967), for example, focuses on youthful alienation and ennui, but also establishes that the romance between Ben (Dustin Hoffman) and Elaine (Katharine Ross) may be importantly linked with that ennui being overcome. On the other hand, a film such as, say, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) does contain a potential, and finally united, romantic couple, but treats it as far more peripheral to the narrative and its ending than (in this case) the film's serial killer plotline. The function of the final couple for films as comparatively unconcerned with romance as Hitchcock's is an interesting topic in itself, but not one with which I will concern myself here.

My study will draw on many periods, with the earliest movie discussed in detail having been made in 1923, the latest in 2006. This is not, however, a history of the final couple 'happy ending', nor a survey of permutations it may have gone through over time. I will necessarily be taking into account the historical moments in which particular films were made and, where appropriate, will make reference to the significance of this context. Indeed, part of the reason for not confining myself to a finite period is in order to test the assumption that the final couple 'happy ending' is an unchanging monolith, or in other words that Hollywood narrative has 'since its codification', ended thus: 'the heterosexual couple is united romantically, [. . .] signaling a traditional "happy ending"' (Benshoff/Griffin 2004b: 61).¹³ While not attempting a coherent history, it is nonetheless important for my study to remain cognisant of the role historical context can play in a convention's shifting meanings. This is partly why, as my thinking has progressed, I have become increasingly interested in the ways in which more recent films have navigated the concept, since they shoulder the greatest burden regarding the convention's foregoing history (see, in particular, Chapter 3). However, although historical specificity will always affect the development of any convention, when it comes to the final couple it is necessary to add a few qualifications.

The act of concluding a narrative with a final couple has just as material a

historical genesis as any other artistic convention, even if its origins may be difficult to define with certainty (while Germaine Greer has suggested that Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Clarissa* is 'the real source of the marrying-and-living-happily-ever-after myth' [1971: 213], we can certainly trace the outline of the convention at least back to the Ancient Greek 'New Comedy' [Frye 1969: 1]). This is due to nothing so much as the plainly historical nature of conventions *tout court*. Yet, although not ahistorical, it is certainly true to say that the final couple 'happy ending' is most undeniably *old* – a fact that, for our purposes, is as important to the convention as its formation under specific historical conditions. Consider the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), in which one of Shakespeare's (Joseph Fiennes) benefactors demands of him, 'Let us have pirates, clowns and a happy ending' – the joke being that the convention's supposed stranglehold on the entertainment industry stretches back to the sixteenth century. Interestingly, though, looking at Shakespeare's plays themselves in fact confirms quite how old are precisely such assumptions about the convention's antiquity. The final scene of *Love's Labour's Lost* (first published 1598), for example, sees Berowne comment on the unceremonious interruption of the play's various courtship plots by observing that 'our wooing doth not end like an old play; Jack hath not Jill'.¹⁴ Although made four hundred years apart, both these references to the 'happy ending' rely upon the assumption that it is equally *old*.

This, it seems to me, is because what is generally being referred to in invocations of the final couple 'happy ending' tends to be less a historically-specific phenomenon than a cross-medium version of the imagined, clichéd Platonic ideal mentioned previously. It is important to distinguish between the convention in this abstract sense and its embodiment in any particular instance – a distinction that will become key to this book. Quite evidently, to end a narrative with a final couple on an Elizabethan stage could only ever hope to mean something very different than to end a 90s Hollywood film in a superficially similar manner. Yet despite this, the references in both *Shakespeare in Love* and *Love's Labour's Lost* can be fairly unproblematically assumed to be referring to broadly the same (idealised) narrative convention. While its particular execution and meaning will always be historically specific, then, it seems likely that virtually any popular Western fiction engaging extensively with romance – especially if we are focused on the last one hundred years or so, as in the case of film – also necessarily finds itself in dialogue with a largely unchanged paradigm of the final couple as a narrative event. This book will be dedicated in part to exploring tensions arising from this relationship between the ideal and its navigation in actual, realised cases.

One immediately obvious potential problem for this study is the quite possibly subjective nature of the term 'happy ending'. The issue of opinion is never far from the surface of virtually any critical discussion, but the

matter becomes even more relevant when speaking of a term made up of two words, one of which is an adjectival description of an emotion. We must of course face the fact that, for instance, although *I* may be made 'happy' by an ending, someone else may easily not be. Could this mean, then, that the task of addressing the 'happy ending' would in fact be best served by, say, research into audiences? I am keen not to engage in detail, at this early stage, with the hugely complex matter of whether meaning is better conceptualised as being dictated by text, context, viewer, etc. – something which must wait until Chapter 4 to be addressed somewhat more explicitly. Research into groups of viewers' responses to, or definitions of, 'happy endings' would undoubtedly produce interesting findings, but it will have to be carried out in a different book than this one. I do not at all wish to imply a hostility towards reception studies, ethnographic research, and so on; on the contrary, I will be drawing on useful findings of such work later on. However, I also agree with Judith Mayne that analysing spectatorship involves, at least in part, 'an analysis of one's *own* fascination and passion' (2002: 84). Furthermore, I am equally of the opinion that, as Carl Plantinga argues, a 'film's *intended* affective focus can be reasonably well determined in many cases' (2009: 11; emphasis added).

Given these twinned assumptions, throughout the book I will be making use of a similar process to that described by V. F. Perkins in 'Must We Say What They Mean: Film Criticism and Interpretation', wherein he explains his reason for analysing a particularly striking moment of the film *Caught* (1945): 'the starting point for an inspection of the *Caught* fragment was a desire to figure out what it was in the moment that made me smile' (Perkins 1990: 6). As Perkins goes on to say: 'the evidence of feeling demands an acknowledged place in the process of interpretation' (*ibid.*: 6). Yet this kind of evidence must also, as Perkins acknowledges, serve only as a 'starting point', a guide to judgment, which becomes valuable if practised in the context of the corresponding recommendation that 'film criticism becomes rational, if not "objective", when it displays and inspects the nature of its evidence and the bases of its arguments' (Perkins 1993: 7). It is primarily with these two complementary forms of 'evidence' that I shall be engaging in this book.

Tackling issues raised by 'the happy ending' from a variety of perspectives, and divided into four chapters, my discussion is focused around four key aspects of our subject's critical reputation: homogeneity, closure, 'unrealism', and ideology. Since this book is the first in-depth study of the cinematic 'happy ending', I believe it necessary for it to offer such a wide-ranging interrogation of these exceedingly widespread assumptions regarding the convention. The hope is that approaching the subject from multiple angles will both permit a better view of what the 'happy ending' can be and mean, as well as provide some alternative theoretical groundwork that may serve either to supplement, qualify or revise existing scholarly commonplaces.

Chapter 1 necessarily confronts the most basic assumption, touched on above: that there exists in Hollywood cinema something homogeneous that we can justifiably call *the* 'happy ending'. My discussion here tries to construct a definition for the 'happy ending' – and finds the task a challenging one. To avoid possible accusations of unfairly comparing chalk with cheese, this chapter confines itself to one demarcated period and one sub-genre: the romantic melodrama between 1939 and 1950. A central aim of this discussion is to allow me subsequently to begin analysing individual 'happy endings' relatively free from suspicions about the convention's innate uniformity; yet, almost as important as the many variations uncovered in this chapter are the traits that many 'happy endings' *do* seem to share, which will help guide our investigations in following chapters.

In Chapter 2 I interrogate the assumption that the 'happy ending' and the final couple necessarily create definitive narrative closure. Partly via a detailed discussion of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), I explore the process and implications of *ending* a film with a romantic *beginning*, arguing that while this film succeeds in making such an ending feel emphatically 'closed', other films (I look in detail at *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *The Graduate*) use different strategies to render the same convention comparatively 'open'.

Chapter 3 examines the familiar assertion that the 'happy ending' is in some sense 'unrealistic'. Firstly, I consider the traditionally close conceptual relationship between the final couple 'happy ending' and fictional narratives *tout court*, suggesting that this association has frequently motivated films (such as *Pretty Woman* [1990]) to cast doubt upon the plausibility of their own 'happy endings'. Secondly, in part through a discussion of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), I probe the relationship of the disordered, 'open' nature of life to the necessarily finite and 'closed' nature of narrative – particularly as this matter relates to the convention of the final couple.

Chapter 4 approaches the issue of ideology and the final couple from three main angles. Firstly addressing the broad question of popular film's potential for ideological influence, I discuss (with particular reference to *Before Sunrise* [1995]) the possibility that the cultural concept of the final couple might help structure viewers' attitudes towards real-life romantic relationships. Secondly, I take up the question of the ideological implications of closure, particularly as they relate to the model of the implausible 'happy ending', made especially famous by critical work on the films of Douglas Sirk. The chapter concludes by addressing conclusions taken from different periods within romantic comedy, a genre that is often taken to be innately 'conservative' precisely because of its 'happy endings'.

The films I will be analysing in detail have not usually been selected because I consider them typical, nor, for the most part, because they are somehow exceptional. Rather, they have been chosen because they dramatise certain key

features associated with the ‘happy ending’ in a particularly potent fashion, and in ways which allow us either to deepen or challenge traditional critical understandings of the convention. As such, rather than attempt an overview of what percentage of Hollywood endings seem to do certain things and what percentage do not, this book aims primarily to open up new theoretical terrain by testing the flexibility of the convention against the relative inflexibility of its reputation. I might say I wish to broaden our conception of what ‘happy endings’ clearly have the *potential* to do, and to explore some of the implications of that potential. While I do not in the least intend to imply that ‘happy endings’ *never* function in the ways they have so frequently been assumed to function, I am nevertheless keen to convince the reader that, at the very least, there is little in the convention that ensures they must *always* do so. Demonstrating this is the necessary first step towards a much-needed reconsideration of this most famous and maligned of conventions.

NOTES

1. The term ‘happy ending’ seems to have been present in discussions of American cinema since some of its earliest years; see, for instance, Woods’ (1910) citation of the concept in the course of making the point that critics should be concerned with ‘not what the public most unmistakably wants but what it ought to want’ (ibid.: 16); taking a contrasting view, an early screenwriting guide counsels, ‘Happy Endings Preferred’ (Sargent 1911: 613); see Bratu-Hansen (1991: 67).
2. I engage with scholarly assumptions about the ‘happy ending’ throughout this introduction and elsewhere. As for statements about the convention made by reviewers and filmmakers, we are spoilt for choice, since throughout Hollywood’s history it has been, and remains, extremely common to decry the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ on a variety of grounds. *New York Times* critic Mordaunt Hall, for instance, claimed in 1931 that ‘no muddle is beyond the motion picture producer when he desires to give the audiences a happy ending’ (1931: 1); reviewer Parker Tyler described the ‘happy ending’ as ‘purely conventional, formal, and often, like the charade, of an infantile logic’ (1970: 177); Fritz Lang lamented that ‘it has always been stated authoritatively by “authorities” that the motion-picture audience’s preference is for “happy endings”’ (1948: 23); the director Neil Labute more recently expressed his distaste for ‘the pat Hollywood happy ending [. . .] that big lie that they tell us over and over and that has no correlation in reality’ (O’Hagan 2001: 1), and so on. It will become clear throughout this book that there is considerable overlap between scholarly understandings of the convention and those employed outside the academy.

3. Of course, the reputation of the 'happy ending' is by no means confined to the cinema, and the convention's existing critical status in other art forms doubtless laid the groundwork for the standing it would come to enjoy in film. In relation to drama, as early as 1818 Charles Lamb was using the term to criticise Nahum Tate's notorious revision of *King Lear* (1818: 26), long before Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil notably mocked the convention in *Happy End* (1929). In fiction, we find Anthony Trollope in 1879 writing that the admiring reader of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* momentarily 'fears that he is again about to enjoy the satisfaction of a happy ending' (1879: 212); meanwhile, in 1912 George Bernard Shaw famously lamented that 'romance keeps its stock of "happy endings" to misfit all stories' (1958: 140).
4. I think we may at least admit that, given kinds of endings regularly found in *film noirs*, melodramas, and 'social problem films' alone, the hypothesis that *all* classical Hollywood films share the 'happy ending' cannot be reasonably entertained – no matter *what* definition one uses.
5. Other unhesitating citations of Bordwell's claim include Wexman (1993: 19), Cooper (2003: 226), Maltby (2003: 16), and Altman (1992: 32).
6. See also: Oudart (1971: 5), Aumont (1980: 53), Bordwell (1982: 6), Elsaesser (1987: 46), Creed (1995: 155), etc.
7. Neupert's approach to the Hollywood 'happy ending' seldom moves beyond the widespread assumptions that this book is dedicated to interrogating: that the convention is homogeneous ('overly codified' [ibid.: 35]), prevalent ('a cliché' [ibid.: 71]), and innately ideologically problematic ('satisfies individual and social desires for moral authority' [ibid.: 35]), yet potentially subversive if appearing 'unmotivated' ('unmotivated happy ends [. . .] do not just make the real world more palatable by unwarranted cathartic endings, rather they foreground the artifice of narrative films' [ibid.: 72–3]).
8. There are a few exceptions, including the aforementioned Neupert (1995) – to be addressed in Chapter 2 – though his book seldom engages the 'happy ending' itself (see previous note). Brylla (2004) largely concerns itself with confirming Neupert's approach (though expands it through reference to socio-historical and reception contexts), and likewise does not address the 'happy ending'. Russell's *Narrative Mortality* (1995) establishes a self-professedly 'idiosyncratic' (ibid.: vii) approach to closure within various European 'art' cinemas, and as such does not address the concept of the 'happy ending' in any detail. In Italian there exists Veronesi (2005), though this study too operates generally according to very familiar assumptions about the 'happy ending'. The recent edited collection *Happy Endings and Films* (2010), meanwhile, focuses exclusively on the 'happy ending', yet a number of its chapters still adopt the usual critical attitudes towards the convention's homogeneity and need for subversion

- (e.g. Tuhkanen [2010: 125], Ludot-Vlazak [2010: 70], Wells-Lassagne [2010: 92]). Nevertheless, the collection does contain innovative work, some of which I shall be touching on later (see Azcona [2010], Deleyto [2010], Ruiz Pardos [2010], Chauvin [2010], and Sipièrè [2010], plus my chapter, *Does the Hollywood Happy Ending Exist?*). Other individual articles on cinematic endings will be acknowledged in the course of the book, including Colwell (1981), Preis (1990), and Meyer (2008).
9. In its generalising and prescriptive nature, the conception of the ‘happy ending’ as an unchanging trope that requires subversion is indeed a perfect fit for the now near-universally abandoned category of the ‘classic realist text’ (see Wilson [1986: 192–200] for one convincing repudiation of the model in relation to film, Lodge [1990: 45–57] in relation to literature, and Britton [2009: 314–34] in relation to both). Yet, while film studies may have largely left the illusions of that model firmly behind, those surrounding the ‘happy ending’ continue unabated (see Chapter 4).
 10. For academic references to these changes, see: Jacobs (1991: 80) for *Baby Face*, Bordwell (1982: 6) for *Suspicion*, Perkins (1999: 72) for *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Gibson (2006: 1) for *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and Leitch (2002: 57) for *The Vanishing*.
 11. See also: Altman (1981: 197), Cowie (1984: 79), Orr (1991: 380), Polan (1991: 137), Wood (1998: 80), etc.
 12. Acknowledgment must be given here to Carol Clover, who coined the term ‘Final Girl’ to refer to the heroine of the slasher film: a female character who survives the killer’s rampage, often dispatching him. While stemming from very different generic traditions, there are ways in which the conventions of the Final Girl and the final couple are suggestively related. (1) Referring to endings in its wording, the Final Girl also implies, in its own way, a type of ‘happy ending’: the killer’s threat eliminated or temporarily overcome, an indomitable character may go on living her life. (2) Just as we will usually be able to predict with certainty the putative outcome of a slasher film by quickly recognising who will likely become its Final Girl (1992: 39), so in most cases will we know in advance which characters will make up a final couple. This fact can have a similar significance for the hermeneutic drive of narratives in each genre; I will explore this in relation to closure in romantic comedy in Chapter 2.
 13. For similar pronouncements about the convention’s uniformity across history, see also Burch (1990: 196), Gianos (1998: 4); Dowd/Pallotta (2000: 568), etc.
 14. A reference to what Shakespeare describes in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* as an ‘old proverb’: ‘Jack shall have Jill / Naught shall go ill’ (Act III, Scene II) – another suggestion of the longevity of cultural depictions of the final couple in public discourse.