

MacDowell, James. *Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema. Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple*. Pp. 218. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. UK £70.00; £24.99 (paper). ISBN: 9780748680177.

Review by Zorianna Zurba

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Not only do we know *how* it will end, but we know it will end *well*. Boy gets girl, or girl gets boy, and they live happily ever after. The happy ending depicting the union of a couple is synonymous with Hollywood cinema. Fritz Lang (1948) described the happy ending as the following:

The traditional happy-ending 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 desserts, dreams will come true as though at the touch of the wand. (26-27)

James MacDowell suggests that a majority of film scholars have assumed the prevalence of ‘the’ happy ending or simply a happy ending, and as a result have not attempted to investigate it more deeply.. A key figure in film studies and a scholar of Hollywood cinema, David Bordwell claims “of one hundred randomly sampled Hollywood films, over sixty ended with a display of the united romantic couple” (1986: 159 as cited by MacDowell, 2013, 2). The happy ending is standard, necessary, typical, usual, formulaic, and so on and so forth. Indeed, MacDowell begins his query with a long list of descriptors pulled from the texts of key figures in film studies used to describe the happy ending. For MacDowell, the presumed happy ending of all Hollywood films is a false reputation that has been largely assumed. In his *Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliche, Convention and the Final Couple*, MacDowell offers an over-due book-length examination of the Hollywood happy ending.

Taking on this monolithic topic, James MacDowell’s text does well to muscle its way between the giants of film studies. Through unexpected pairings and meticulously detailed analyses of films, MacDowell dismantles this “agreed matter of common sense” (3).

MacDowell focuses specifically on films that deal with romantic love which end with the “one especially famous feature associated with the ‘happy ending’” (1): “boy gets girl” (Lang, 1948) or the uniting of the romantic couple. The designation MacDowell gives to the happily ever after twosome is ‘the final couple’, a nod to slasher genre theorist Carol Clover’s final girl. MacDowell’s intention is to approach the topic broadly so as to “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” (14) so that, eventually, “individual assessment must replace automatic pronouncements stemming from assumptions about the feature’s inherent homogeneity” (55).

The book’s inaugural chapter, “The ‘Happy Ending’: The Making of a Reputation” works to lay MacDowell’s critical foundation. As mentioned, MacDowell begins with the claim that film studies has largely treated the Hollywood ending like a Platonic Ideal: ‘the’ happy ending, rather than a happy ending. Indeed, these quotation marks are a device upon which MacDowell relies heavily to mark the distinction between a presumed fixed concept and a flexible signifier. MacDowell strategizes to undo the allegations that all Hollywood films end happily, that we know what a happy ending is, that the happy ending is ideologically conservative, and that the happy ending brings closure (an inherently ideologically conservative mode of narration). The book is then divided into four sections that cover homogeneity, closure, unrealism, and ideology.

In “The ‘Happy Ending’ and Homogeneity”, MacDowell’s first task is to trouble the assumption that all Hollywood films end the same way: with ‘the’ happy ending. This simplification, for MacDowell, is due in part to what Hollywood cinema culturally represents: a mass-produced form of escapist entertainment — a prejudice lingering from the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer. In order to trump these critiques, his analysis begins with the romantic melodramas of the Classical Hollywood period (1939-1950), an era that is believed to be the most highly codified period of Hollywood film production due to the restrictions mandated by the Hays Code. Many of these films end with the “culmination of a courtship or a romantic reunion” (MacDowell, 23-24), but their happiness is not untroubled. MacDowell lists films such as *Remember the Night* (1940) and *I’ll be Seeing You* (1944), in which the final couples are separated by the woman’s incarceration, and *The Clock* (1945), in which a couple meets and is married less than 48 hours before the male protagonist is shipped off back to war. The final couple has attained love: a love that is understood to persist even if the couple is not together, and even if their happiness is not troubled. Love, under the sign of marriage and not happiness, is the ultimate triumph of these films.

Having argued for variation in the Hollywood ending, the second chapter, “‘Happy Endings’ and Closure,” works to dismantle the association between the final couple, the happy “ending”, and narrative closure. MacDowell defines closure as the creation of an appropriate sense of finale for the audience. The relative aperture of the narrative determines whether the ending will feel *happy*, and feel like an *ending*. While the final couple is a feature of the ending, “the convention will serve varying closural functions depending upon the varying needs of different films, and that these functions will be dictated not by the final couple’s mere presence, but by its employment” (96). He discusses *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) as an example of a film that builds toward unifying the couple, but remains open rather than offering closure: the ultimate moment of the story is

the beginning of the couple's romance. Similarly, he refers to *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and *The Graduate* (1967) as films that remain 'open'. Thus, Hollywood films do not always end happily, nor do they always completely end.

In Chapter 3, "'Happy Endings' and Unrealism," MacDowell analyzes the Hollywood ending as a sort of wish fulfillment, and argues that Hollywood's presumed optimism need not be tempered with pessimism, but an "inevitable uncertain future" (131). MacDowell cleverly notes that even Hollywood films often refer to the Hollywood 'happy ending' as a way to suggest that reality is tough. "If you want a happy ending," Judah (Martin Landau) says in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), "see a Hollywood movie". What is unreal about the Hollywood happy ending is that "life contains its share of happy moments, but not the overwhelming majority share repeatedly granted by the conclusions of Hollywood films" (100). MacDowell argues that films such as *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) demonstrate a nuanced approach to romance, which includes complications, change, and impermanence. For MacDowell, *Pretty Woman* concludes with a realistic attitude towards its own unrealism, thereby acknowledging that the couple's happiness is neither permanent nor secure, and *Eternal Sunshine's* ending suggest that the couple is satisfied with trying for happiness, despite their already experienced heartbreak.

Having argued for variation, ambiguity, and complication in the Hollywood ending, MacDowell finally examines the socio-cultural meaning of the happy ending in "'Happy Endings' and Ideology". MacDowell draws upon theorists such as Stuart Hall, Anne Swidler and Janice Radway to offer brief commentary on how the romance is read and understood by its audience, and employs what he terms 'romance-focused media theorists' to address the shifting socio-cultural meaning of marriage and love. The cliché of the happy ending carries the ideological import of life-long monogamy in a romantic relationship, values which Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy) in *Before Sunrise* (1995) circumnavigate and engage with before deciding on their own (un)happy ending. MacDowell's reading of the film renders the ending open, yet more deeply pessimistic than I understand it, and dismisses the continuation of Jesse and Celine's navigation of happiness and monogamy in the following two "Before" films: *Before Sunset* (2004) and *Before Midnight* (2013). MacDowell concludes his vindication of the Hollywood happy ending with a reading of the Indiewood film *Shortbus* (2006), and lauds the ending for featuring both narrative closure and a happy ending. *Shortbus's* happy 'subversion' occurs, for MacDowell, when the final couple's happiness is secured not in each other, but through intimacies with strangers, proving the happy ending's "capacity for great ideological flexibility" (187). Despite his reading of *Shortbus*, MacDowell concludes that the happy ending as a "convention itself appears to be so relatively flexible, no 'subversion' is necessarily required in order to create 'happy endings' which are complex, ambiguous, or in some other way simply *distinctive*" (192).

As scholars of the popular romance, it is redundant to argue for the acknowledgement that popular romantic texts are more nuanced, varied, and critical than some might allow. While MacDowell's intention is shake loose the confines attached to the happy ending, at times the text becomes too polemic, and it seems that MacDowell is guilty of indulging in hyperbole in order to get his point across. For example, MacDowell criticizes Lang for his acceptance of the sweet solution, while ignoring Lang's proviso that sugar "is more nourishing and far safer than arsenic" (cited in Bordwell, 1982, 2), and fingers

Bordwell's work as dismissive, yet without noting that Bordwell too takes on the question of closure in Hollywood cinema (see Bordwell, 1982).

While MacDowell attends to unpacking 'the' happy ending and the happy 'ending', little attention is given to the 'happy' ending. Despite the recent affective turn that has inflected various disciplines including film studies, MacDowell has forgone a theoretically engaged discussion of happiness, and the happiness of the happy ending. For example, Sara Ahmed's (2010) work on happiness emphasizes the role that socio-cultural evaluation and judgment take in determining happiness. In order to more fully understand an endings' happiness it is first necessary to attend to whatever the dominant cultural has valued and has assumed as bringing and causing happiness. For example, the happy ending of *The Clock* may be dampened by impending difficulty. However, not only has the final couple had good fortune or 'hap' that has brought them together, but they have also attained a culturally valued status (heterosexual marriage) that, in turn, assures their happiness.

Save for the final chapter, MacDowell holds off on any socio-cultural analysis. Bracketing questions of changing socio-cultural values and meanings has allowed MacDowell to narrow his concerns to the functioning of the narrative. However, in doing so, he has likewise voided the narratives of engaging in more significant meaning-making, and has ignored any development in genre formation. The work of Barry Keith Grant, for example, whom MacDowell references, argues that "genre movies allow for an economy of expression through conventions and iconography" (2007, 8) — a line of inquiry that MacDowell skirts. As Grant (2007) emphasizes, genre conventions undergo change, whether through evolution or development. The happy ending evolves through its relationship to a changing socio-cultural ethos. *The Graduate*, for example, ends not by affirming the married couple but by beginning a new couple as Elaine (Katherine Ross) escapes with Ben (Dustin Hoffman) on a public bus they've managed to flag down. As MacDowell references, a deeply romantic reading of the film, like that by the protagonist of *500 Days of Summer* (2009), believes in Ben's happily ever after, instead of wondering "what the hell now?" (90). MacDowell's emphasis on closure and Ben as the focus of the narrative ignores any discussion of the changing cultural values around marriage and women's agency — Elaine after all has *just* been married to another man and simply ran out midway into her 'I do's'. Similarly, the evolution of the happy ending to be inclusive of other kinds of happiness and romantic formations as evidenced by *Shortbus* could provide an alternate way to discuss the progression of the convention.

Overall, however, MacDowell offers an engaging and critical examination of the Hollywood happy ending — a topic that has been overlooked for too long. The discreet chapters offer clear and focused argumentation, and the introduction does well to situate the clichéd position of the happy ending. This accessible text would make a valuable addition to any course reader on popular romance or Hollywood cinema.

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