The Hollywood ‘happy ending’ has long been considered among the most famous and standardised features in the whole of narrative filmmaking. Yet, while ceaselessly invoked, this notorious device has received barely any detailed attention from the field of film studies. This book is the first in-depth examination of one of the most overused and under-analysed concepts in discussions of popular cinema. What exactly is the ‘happy ending’? Is it simply a cliché, as commonly supposed? Why has it earned such an unenviable reputation? What does it, or can it, mean? Concentrating especially on conclusions featuring an ultimate romantic union – the final couple – this wide-ranging investigation probes traditional associations between the ‘happy ending’ and homogeneity, closure, ‘unrealism’, and ideological conservatism, testing widespread assumptions against the evidence offered by a range of classical and contemporary films.

The ‘happy ending’ and homogeneity
James MacDowell

in Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple

The most basic assumption about the ‘happy ending’ is that it represents a homogenous cliché that is repeated again and again across Hollywood cinema. This chapter addresses this notion by trying to construct a definition for the ‘happy ending’. Is it an ending at which characters or audience are left ‘happy’? Is it a particular narrative motif, such as the final couple? Is it a ‘morally satisfying’ outcome? Or is it created
when a film seems to uphold particular values? Chapter 1 confines itself to examining endings produced in one demarcated period and one sub-genre: the romantic melodrama between 1939 and 1950. A central aim of this discussion is to cast reasonable doubt upon the existence of the ‘happy ending’, thus allowing the remainder of the book to analyse individual happy endings relatively free from suspicions about the convention's innate homogeneity. However, almost as important as the many variations unearthed are the traits that this chapter's happy endings seem to share, which prove useful as the book proceeds on to other central assumptions surrounding the convention.

Happy endings and ideology
James MacDowell

in Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple

The Hollywood ‘happy ending’ is almost universally taken to be inherently ideological conservative, in part because of traditions in literary and film theory that portray narrative closure itself as ideologically pernicious. This chapter approaches the issue of ideology from three angles. Firstly addressing the broad question of popular art's ideological influence itself, it discusses (with particular reference to Before Sunrise [1995]) what potential the concept of the final couple might be said to have for structuring viewers’ real-life romantic relationships. Secondly, it takes up the question of the ideological effects of closure, particularly as they relate to the model of the self-consciously artificial ‘happy ending’ made especially famous by much critical work on the films of Douglas Sirk. The chapter concludes by addressing several historically-distinct endings taken from what is often considered an innately ‘conservative’ genre, the romantic comedy. The chapter concludes by arguing that the ideological significance of the final couple will tend to rest less on the convention's mere presence than in the particulars of its presentation.
Introduction: The ‘happy ending’: the making of a reputation
James MacDowell

This introduction traces the negative reputation of the ‘happy ending’ in film studies’ discourses on Hollywood cinema, analyses the distinction between a cliché and a convention, establishes some of the concepts most frequently associated with this convention (e.g.: homogeneity, closure, ideological conservatism, ‘unrealism’), and lays out the ways in which the book will interrogate its subject's critical reputation.

Conclusion Provisions for the future
James MacDowell

The conclusion reiterates the importance of distinguishing between the Hollywood convention of happy endings and the Platonic ideal of the Hollywood ‘happy ending’, and suggests some directions in which future research on the subject might profitably develop.

Happy endings and unrealism
James MacDowell

The assumption that the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ is inherently ‘unrealistic’ is extremely prevalent. Chapter 3 examines the association of happy endings with ‘unrealism’ in two main ways. Firstly, it treats...
‘unrealism’ as an effect of an artistic convention's excessive familiarity, and considers the traditionally close conceptual relationship between the final couple happy ending and fictional narrative in general, suggesting that this persistent association has often motivated films (such as Pretty Woman [1990]) to cast doubt upon the authenticity of their own happy endings. Secondly, partly via a discussion of Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), the chapter asks whether there is something innately ‘unrealistic’ in the convention of the romantic happy ending itself, probing the issue of the relationship between the disordered, ‘open’ nature of life and the necessarily finite and ‘closed’ nature of narrative – particularly as this matter informs the basic tension between ending and beginning that lies at the heart of the final couple.

Happy endings and closure
James MacDowell

in Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple

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It is very common for scholars to treat the ‘happy ending’ as inseparable from definitive narrative closure. Chapter 2 looks in detail at this association by examining the degrees of closure which seem to be offered by different final couple happy endings. A discussion of Sleepless in Seattle (1993) prompts reflections upon the act of ending a film with a romantic beginning - ultimately what the convention of the final couple amounts to. While it is argued that this film succeeds (against what seem considerable odds) in making such an ending feel emphatically ‘closed’, other films (texts covered in detail include The Best Years of Our Lives [1946] and The Graduate [1967]) use different strategies to render the same convention comparatively ‘open’. By examining factors not always accounted for in discussions of closure (for example, point of view, genre, implied continuation, etc.), this chapter also attempts to move the matter of closure and happy endings beyond a simple ‘open’/‘closed’ dichotomy and towards a consideration of the different kinds and means of closure available to final couples.