

Happy endings

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Happy endings are not all alike. In fact, they're not always happy. People have many strange ideas about Hollywood movies, and it's not always clear what folks mean by the term. "Hollywood" often seems to mean any movie in English, not the product of a certain system in a certain factory town. Also "Hollywood" is often pejorative, a shorthand for whatever criticism one cares to imply without examining it.

But one of the strangest cliches to plague us is that Hollywood movies have happy endings. This idea leads to contempt, derision and satire. I recall one witty article that imagined Hollywood remakes of classic stories, such as having a centurion ride up to Calvary and announce that Jesus has been pardoned. He and Mary embrace.

There are probably more happy endings today than in the past, and it's because studio executives live under the burden of this false idea - that Hollywood purveys happy endings. Let's disprove this notion once and for all.

Of course, there's a minor truth to it – and a major truth, which I'll get to later. For now, let us consider the movies of the classic studio era, roughly from the 1920s to the '50s – that era when, as everybody thinks they know, the Dream Factory turned out happy endings.

The minor truth is that Hollywood turned out films in many genres, and yes, some genres end happily. Comedies, for example, including musicals. More often

than not, these end in marriage, which we shall designate a happy ending by classical definition if nothing else. And certain types of adventures or thrillers, from swashbucklers to westerns, invariably end with the hero defeating the villain and kissing the girl.

But the movies Hollywood was proudest of, the big-budget "A" projects for its high-profile stars, its most "serious" pictures, its award winners, its test of timers, are virtually required to end in death or separation, as are whole genres.

"Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," says Rhett Butler, walking out on Scarlett O'Hara.

"The problems of two little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world," explains Rick to Ilsa on why she'll regret it if she doesn't get on that plane, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of her life.

"Rosebud!"

I've just alluded to three of the most famous Hollywood films, and they aren't exceptions to prove the rule. They are the apotheoses.

To beat "Gone With the Wind" to the punch, Warner Brothers put Bette Davis in "Jezebel," another Antebellum saga. That's the one that allows her to be as wicked and selfish a strumpet as possible for two hours in order to "punish" her in

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the last five minutes by sending her to a leper colony with her sick husband.

Most of Davis' big pictures, yes and Joan Crawford's too, end in death or bittersweet resignation. If Bette doesn't march bravely and blindly to her "Dark Victory," she wonders stoically in "Now Voyager" why they should ask for the moon when they have the stars. About "Mildred Pierce" I'll say nothing.

And now perhaps you recognize another stalwart genre, and an important one, one they literally don't make any more unless it's on TV movies – the woman's picture, also called the melodrama, the tearjerker or the three-hanky movie – every unwed mother, every back street wife, every imitation of life in that penny serenade, that endless parade of Stanwycks and Dunnes and Kay Francises (who recalls Kay Francis?), that suffering sisterhood of sacrifice.

The waterworks flow in male tearjerkers like "The Champ" and "Captains Courageous," too. The difference is that masculine melodramas focus on physical actions while the women's pictures turn on internal choices having to do with careers, marriage and children.

They are essentially more realistic than, say, "Stagecoach" or "Captain Blood" in terms of how their audience lived, but women's films too had their extraordinary fantasias enacted by Garbo and Dietrich, those exotic sirens who, forsaken by their men, trod off into the burning desert or throw themselves under trains or cough their lovely lungs out. Ah, bliss!

Studios understood that just as audiences like to laugh, they also like to cry. A "good cry" was purveyed as aggressively and crafted as consummately as a love song, and both had their place.

We have a revisionist idea that during the Depression, audiences turned to Busby

Berkeley frivolities for "escape." Well, they did, and they also turned to these overheated tearjerkers (aimed at women) and to hard-hitting gangster films (aimed at men) and horror movies (for dates).

Gangster and horror films work in a similar way. They focus on the monster, an anti-hero who tears a bloody swath through the audience's sympathies until ("Mother of mercy!") their climactic, cathartic deaths. This formula made stars of James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Humphrey Bogart, Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff, who intoned "We belong dead" before throwing that switch at the end of "Bride of Frankenstein."

"Twas beauty killed the beast," someone pronounces over King Kong's corpse. No, it was the genre.

This gangster tradition continued in the postwar film noirs, which usually end in the death of suckers and femme fatales: "The Postman Always Rings Twice," "Double Indemnity," "Out of the Past," etc.

Even adventure fare could end in death or separation when Hollywood wanted it to be taken seriously. See such westerns as "The Ox-Bow Incident" and "Shane" ("Come back, Shane, come back!") or the search for "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

Then there was that cavalcade of WWII propaganda films such as "Casablanca." These are the movies where John Wayne might die, as in "Sands of Iwo Jima." They don't end in exultation, but in determination. The deaths of the heroes signal a renewal, a reminder of what we're fighting for.

And that's the larger truth. Hollywood didn't specialize in happy endings. It specialized in Affirmation. All this tragedy, this thwarted desire, these tears served a purpose--the status quo was

restored, suffering was redeemed, tragedy transcended.

That's why "The Grapes of Wrath" ends not with the hopeless doom of the Joads but with Henry Fonda's Christlike transformation into Every-Okie, trading his private tragedy for the immortality of the poor who are always with us. "Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there."

Unhappy endings are in fact very common to Hollywood, but bleak endings are rarer. Even "Citizen Kane" can be reduced to a bromide about how the simple things bring more happiness than power and greed, so there. And yet hopeless endings can also be found, from "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang" to "High Noon," which has a happy ending but feels like it doesn't.

Today, people harbor a delusion of Hollywood "happy endings," but what they actually remember isn't the superficial arc of a storyline that ends with people happy. Rather, they remember how good the movies made them feel, even if they walked out dabbing their tears. They remember affirmation.

For the most part, the audience was left with a sense that somehow all was right with the world if the gentle monster dies, if justice and order are restored, if Stella Dallas could smile at the marriage of the daughter she sacrificed for, if Madame X finds a peaceful death in the arms of her son, if Jezebel could beam in triumph on her way to a redemptive fate, if this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship – If, after all, tomorrow is another day.