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In Defense of (at least some) Happy Endings: a European Perspective

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Abstract

Many people believe that the happy ending is an obligatory element for the success of films. On the other side, there are many film critics (especially European ones) as well as some screenwriters and directors that often consider happy endings a sort of "opium of the people"—a way of fooling the audience by giving them the false consolation that the world is better than it really is. Our purpose is to dissolve these two myths – or at least to analyze them in a more precise context. First, we will see that there have been highly successful movies (both for TV and for theatrical distribution) that did not have a happy ending. Second we will investigate how the happy end meets a universal anthropological need, and is not a dishonest instrument of illusion.

The "law" of the happy ending

Happy endings are approached with suspicion by many Europeans, and sometimes by American filmmakers as well. However, producers (who are not yet acknowledged figures in the European entertainment industry, due to its dependence form the *auteur*

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theory of cinema[1]), especially in the studio system industry, consider the happy ending to be crucial to box office success. But when the happy ending results from a superficial story development, the audience can detect dishonesty and feel artifice. The result of the disappointment of the audience will be an extremely poor box office performance.

We can find many reasons why the marriage between Hollywood movies and the happy ending has been so firmly established during the years. The first that comes to mind is the historical one. American cinema, in fact, was created by successful self-made men: Jewish immigrants coming from Eastern Europe. They built their empires from nothing. They embodied better than any other the essence of the American Dream. They were the first to believe that an individual could make a difference, and realize great dreams[2]. These men[3] teamed up with great artists and creative minds like Frank Capra and John Ford. Together they produced the greatest films of the "Hollywood Golden Age".

Working alongside and learning from Hollywood professionals in script development[4], I have personally experienced that the principle of giving the audience something positive at the end of the movie is so important that it is like a ABC of story development. The happy ending seems to belong to the basic elements of storytelling.

Let us now explore what "something positive" means, since it can assume many shapes and meanings.

The Importance of the Ending in Scriptwriting Theory

[1] To know more about the way the figure of the producer is perceived among Italian (and mostly European) filmmakers and critics, see the second chapter of Armando Fumagalli, *I vestiti nuovi del narratore. L'adattamento da letteratura a cinema*, Il Castoro, Milano 2004.

[2] We refer to the beautiful portraits of the founders of the Hollywood studios in Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own. How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Anchor Books, New York, 1988.

[3] As we know, Hollywood producers have always had a strong creative impact on the contents of their movies. European films, on the other side, can be the result of the vision of one single *auteur*, who is at the same time writer, director, and producer of the movie. To learn more about how about this system has damaged the European cinema, see David Puttnam, *The Underclared War. The Struggle for Control of the World's Film Industry*, HarperCollins, London 1997.

[4] I am referring, for example, to the scripts and treatments that were developed with under the guidance of Bobette Buster, a widely experienced Hollywood story editor and consultant, in screenwriting seminars organized in Italy by my University. Bobette Buster is also a teacher in the Master Program in Movie Production at the University of Southern California.

As it is well known, the ending is the most crucial element of a movie released in the theatres. If the ending is good, the audience will talk about it and recommend the movie to their friends. Positive word-of-mouth is the best marketing campaign a movie can have. For this reason its crucial for a movie to provide an emotionally satisfying ending. A good ending should not be slow, boring or long, but short and convincing. It should give the audience a sense of fulfillment by communicating a single emotion: joy, triumph, compassion or sadness—because even in sadness we can find fulfillment.

The ending is not as crucial for a TV movie because word-of-mouth has no impact upon its success: whether or not the audience is satisfied at the end is irrelevant, they have already watched it[5]. While writing a TV script, it is far more important to have a good beginning: this will ensure that viewers are hooked and will choose to stay on the channel and watch it through.

We will follow mostly Robert McKee, author of what I consider to be probably the best scriptwriting manual ever published till now, who expresses very clearly a vision that is probably shared, in its essentials, by many other writers and script doctors. McKee says that "movies are about the last twenty minutes"[6]. In other words, a good movie is simply a long setup for its finale. This is true of every well-written movie, but among them we find a few outstanding examples that are known for their powerful endings: *The Sixth Sense*, *The Game* (directed in 1997 by David Fincher, starring Michael Douglas and Sean Penn) and *The Truman Show*.

The emotional satisfaction at the end of the movie is usually based upon what McKee calls "Emotional Transitions". While watching the movie, we come to identify with the protagonist, share his journey, understand his goals and take on his values. We care about him and are able to participate in his emotion at the climax when his values suddenly change[7].

We cannot over-emphasize the importance of values in storytelling: only a meaningful change, expressed and experienced in terms of values, is able to create an emotional

[5] In TV miniseries there is time left for word-of-mouth only between the end of the first night of the show and the beginning of the second one. For this reason the ratings of the second night, at least in Italy, of a successful TV miniseries are usually higher than the first night ones.

[6] Robert McKee, *Story: substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting*, HarperCollins, New York 1997, page 107.

[7] *Ibidem*, page 243.

connection with the audience. A merely situational story reversal is not enough to really move the audience.

In the *Sixth Sense*, for example, the ending is extremely shocking: we discover that the character who was the mentor, the child's guide, is revealed to be the person in most need of guidance. Our perception of the world of the movie changes completely, as the values at stake change.

Other movies, instead, can surprise us with unpredictable endings based upon a sequence of mere situational reversals, but these events could leave us indifferent, if we do not experience them in terms of values. This is the case, for example, of *Heist*, written and directed in 2001 by David Mamet, starring Gene Hackman and Danny De Vito.

Mamet is well known for making movies with many twists at the end, but –at least in this movie- he uses this technique just to articulate the story line, but without engaging the audience's emotions.

The ending of *Heist*—which tries to show how greed governs the world—is a sequence of situational reversals that make the audience guess who is going to win the load of gold among the main characters. But since all of them are greedy thieves, it does not make any difference to the audience if at the end the gold goes to the character x or y. The ending is surprising, but the audience does not participate with their emotions because there are no important values at stake.

The roots of these thoughts could be found in the *Poetics* of Aristotle who says, in words of a contemporary scholar, that: "change (*metabole, metabasis*) is the core of any tragedy, the element on which its action and the resolution are based upon. This change is the arc of transformation of the character. Its peak is the moment when the hero changes for good. The most efficient scripts are the ones that combine the moment of the revelation of the character with his ultimate final change. This moment is called "climax" in the theory of screenwriting: it's the scene that most expresses the meaning and the emotions of the movie. If this fails, the movie fails. (…) Aristotle says that the climax is the boundary between the first (action) and the second part (resolution) of the plot. The climax should not be just a situational reversal since many of them normally take place in

a story. It is the moment when the protagonist changes in an absolute, irreversible way. It is the heart of the story, its emotional peak, the moment that contains all its meaning"[8].

Aristotle says that "a complex story should at least express in the moment of change one of its two main ingredients (recognition and reversal), but, if it makes to combine them, this tragedy could be considered a role model. The synergy of recognition and reversal in the climax is an emotional strength that creates incomparable meaning." [9].

Normally close to the ending the main character should face a difficult and compelling dilemma. As every writer knows. the most challenging situations are the ones when the character does not have to choose between good and evil, but between two incompatible goods or two evils (he has to choose the minor one). This crisis should at the same time be a risk and an opportunity. The audience enjoys the moment of this choice because there are values at stake. One of the main assumption of McKee—whose importance I have discovered more and more during the years spent teaching and working as a consultant—is that *meaning produces emotion*. Not money, not sex, not special effects, not movie stars, but *meaning*. And we could define "meaning" by saying that it is "a revolution in values from positive to negative or negative to positive". [10]

Due to the narrative importance of the ending of the story, many writers and story editors in Hollywood suggest —perhaps not while writing the first draft, but for sure the second and following drafts— to conceive the climax first and then create the best set-up for it. The design of the story should be built around the climax. We need to drive the audience to the climax, create and raise their expectations and at the end satisfy them by surprising them. William Goldman brilliantly said that you have to give the audience what it wants, but not the way it expects[11]. In other words we could say to give the audience what they expect, but in an unexpected way. McKee quotes from Aristotle and says that the ending of a story should be inevitable –a result of strict narrative logic— but also unexpected[12].

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[8] Alessandro D'Avenia, *Aristotele va a Hollywood*, in *Atti del Convegno "Mimesi, verita, fiction",* University of the Holy Cross, School of Corporate Communication, Rome, March 29-30, 2006, in print (2008). D'Avenia proves also how the dynamics of reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) still lead the movie writing.

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] Robert McKee, *Story*, page 309.

[11] William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screentrade*, Warner Books, New York 1983.

[12] Robert McKee, *Story*, page 311.

Let us consider for example romantic comedies: in *You've got mail* we know since the first two scenes—when we are introduced to the main characters—that Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan will end up together. The interest of the audience is to see in which funny, original, new, unpredictable, and moving way this is going to happen. Same thing should be said for *Notting Hill* and many other romantic comedies.

Ends that do not end well

The ending should give a sense of emotional and aesthetic satisfaction. But should the ending always be positive to satisfy the expectations of the audience? I do not think so, but if the ending is not positive, it should respect some rules. I think we could name at least a few cases of non-positive endings that are satisfying for the audience.

The first examples come from tragedies like *Richard III, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet* or many other Shakespearean works. These stories do not have the typical Hollywood happy ending but they have always been successful both as plays and as movies.

Where does the satisfaction of the audience come from? I think that it comes from two factors[13]: the awareness of the tragic mistakes made by the characters and the understanding that the negative ending is justified.

We suffer for the negative fate of the characters but at the same time we acquire a deeper knowledge of life. *Richard III* teaches us that unrestrained ambition leads to self-destruction. *Romeo and Juliet* shows us that violence generates only violence and death.

Even if their endings are not positive, we understand that they are reasonable, justified, and unavoidable.

There are also endings that could be perceived as negative in respect to the character in the story, but that are positive if we consider the heritage that the character leaves to his country, friends, and the society he belongs to.

The endings of *Gladiator* (Maximus dies but Rome is free again and —it is still a Hollywood movie— democracy triumphs) or *Braveheart* (William Wallace is tortured to

[13] I'm referring to a PhD thesis written by one of my students, Mario Ruggeri, who is currently working as a screenwriter and story editor. Ruggeri analyzes five Shakespearean works in a precise and detailed way.

death but his action and his message strengthen his country in order to fight for freedom[14]) belong to this category.

It is the case also of one of the most successful Italian TV miniseries released in the past few years: the biopic of Paolo Borsellino[15] (one of the judges murdered by the mafia), a movie structured as a tragedy. And this was a risky choice because the happy ending has always been considered necessary for the success of Italian TV movies or miniseries.

As it happened in real life, the judge dies at the end of the miniseries but his death is not the last scene of the movie. After the explosion of the bomb, we see the judge's daughter that chooses to take without delays an exam at the university, while all the men we have seen dying one after another in the miniseries, murdered by the mafia, are behind her quietly looking at her[16]. The day he died, Paolo Borsellino had told her daughter —who did not want to take the exam since she did not feel ready— that: "It is up to us to do our duty until the very end" and the girl promised him she would have taken the exam. Seeing her keeping the promise is a pay-off with a strong thematic and emotional power for the audience.

The negative ending should always have a deep narrative justification and it should be what the audience is expecting, even if in an unconscious way.

The audience should feel that, even if the ending is painful, it is fair and just. This is the case of the *Godfather II*, *the War of Roses*, *Chinatown*. These movies are very different from each other but they all received universal approval from the audience. Most of all, we must never forget that the top hit of last decades, *Titanic*, has not a happy ending, at least in the classic sense of the word.

McKee says that the best ending is the ironic one, in which something goes well and something does not[17]. Even if these endings are the most difficult to write, McKee says that they are the most believable ones, because they reflect life, in which positive and negative elements are always inextricably mixed.

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[14] I had the chance to personally meet the writer of *Braveheart*, Randall Wallace. He told me that he considered this ending to be positive: "To me it's important that the hero died for his faithfulness to his ideals. This for me is a happy ending".

[15] The biopic of Paolo Borsellino reached an audience of 12 millions of viewers, with more than 40% of share in Italy.

[16] This last scene is very moving and well written. It reminds the last scene of *Places in the Heart*, directed by Robert Benton in 1985.

[17] Robert McKee, *Story*, pages 128-129.

The ending of *Gladiator* could be considered ironic; the hero dies, but many good things come from his death. First of all Maximus is reunited with his wife and sons, then the tyrant dies and the power is returned to the daughter and the grandson of Marcus Aurelius. In some sense, also *Titanic* has a similar ending: Jack/Di Caprio dies, but the heart of Rose "will go on and on". Loves survives. This balance of happiness (of emotional satisfaction) and sorrow is very interesting to reflect upon. As it is very well known, the incredible fortune of *Titanic* is due, in an important part, to the fact that young girls loved to go again and again to see the same movie, and cry and weep every day anew…

Another ironic ending is the one of *Life is Beautiful*: Guido (Roberto Benigni) dies, but his wife and son survive. If we try to imagine alternative endings, we can see why they would not be appropriate to the story as well as this one.

If Guido would have survived, the happy ending would not have been felt as realistic. Or if the wife and the son would have died, then the ending would have been too dark and tragic. This proves what we said before: the viewer understands that the sacrificial death of Guido is necessary and justified, even if it is full of sorrow.

Another interesting example of ironic ending—that it is technically a negative ending, but so well prepared that it leaves the audience satisfied— is the one of *My Best Friend's Wedding*, another worldwide box office hit.

Julianne (Julia Roberts) doesn't reach her goal—clearly explained at the end of the first act: to win her ex-boyfriend back by preventing him to marry Kimmy (Cameron Diaz). But even if Michael marries Kimmy after a sequence of funny events, this negative ending is balanced by the clear journey of maturation that Julianne went through (she doesn't get what she wants, but what she needs).

Julianne, in fact, was too jealous of her freedom and she wasn't mature enough to say "I love you" but at the end of the movie she realizes she is ready to commit to a serious relationship and she finally stops running away from that.

Even if the viewer identifies with Julianne and is sad because she didn't accomplish her initial goal, he understands also that Julianne has been led to an ultimate step of maturation. For this reason the ending is ironic and we share with Julianne this bittersweet moment of resignation and acceptance of her defeat.

The greatest novels of all time often have ironic endings too, in which positive and negative elements find a perfect balance.

Let us consider the two masterpieces written by Tolstoy. In *Anna Karenina* Anna commits suicide but her tragic fate is balanced by the growing relationship between Levin and Kitty, the other two main characters of the novel. Levin is the alter ego of the writer, the character who embodies the philosophy and the values of Tolstoy. For this reason his happy ending well balances the tragedy of Anna's death.

We could find the same polyphony of happiness and sorrow in *War and Peace*. Both the first love of Natasha, Andrey, and her youngest brother died during the war. Helene, the cynical wife of Pierre, dies too. But the happiness coming from the formation of two new families (Natasha and Pierre, Marja and Nikolay) contrasts these grieves.

Perhaps the reason why ironic endings are the most rewarding ones is because the happy ending probably answers the expectations of the viewers (their needs of justice and retribution) when they are watching the movie for the first time. They are so deeply involved into the story -and they greatly desire that the hero would reach his goals- that they want with all their heart a happy ending that satisfies their desire.

An ironic ending, instead, mirrors reality in its balance of positive and negative elements. So it has a stronger effect on the audience when the emotions due to the first viewing of the movie are replaced (during a second or during repeated viewings) by a deeper appreciation of a story that reflects the complexity of life with its more subtle and nuanced ending.

The end gives meaning

Done with these remarks, which can somehow be considered a sort of phenomenology of storytelling and of the audience's reactions, let us take a further step and let us focus again on some issues mentioned above. What do readers or audiences really expect from the ending of a story? They expect it to be emotionally satisfying and able to reveal the meaning of the story. In this case as well as in many others, the emotional elements are not separated from the intellectual ones. Emotions rise from the perception and

understanding of something and, in return, the emotion itself gives rise to a deeper attention and understanding of the contents which are being learnt[18].

To speak of meaning implies to speak of something general or universal. Actually, this is where the happy end lays itself more open to criticism. The happy ending is accused of being treacherous because it describes a happy and positive situation in which conflicts are solved, whereas reality appears to be much more complex, dark and cruel. In my opinion, however, such accusation is based on a wrong assumption. Do the audiences really consider the "prepared" and "ready-made" plot (of a short story, a movie or a television fiction program) a truthful description of reality? I daresay they don't. Whenever I go to the movies, watch a television program, or read a book, I'm always – consciously or unconsciously- aware that *someone is telling me* a story, and he is doing that because the story is worthy of telling. It is not a mere description of reality. It's a reality that has been filtered, selected, structured because it was worth someone's time, energy and efforts, in order to create a work of art and show it to an audience.

When I read a novel or I watch a show, I always –maybe unconsciously- expect the story to be somehow exemplary. It must be worthy of telling; otherwise both the author and the audience would waste their time. The awareness of the exemplary nature of the story is connected to the audience's need for some justice, a particular type of justice that we can call "poetic justice"[19], quoting the title of one of Martha Nussbaum's most important works. The reason why someone is telling me a story is its perfection, its inner completeness and balance: and the first element of this completeness is justice.

This justice is mainly based on the fact that my hero, being good and having endured all he could endure, undergone the hardest tests the authors could come up with, perhaps even risked death and/or having symbolically died, deserves to accomplish his desire. I expect it. It is not useless to insist that the hero must *deserve* the happy ending, otherwise the resolution is perceived as corny, banal and too trivial. The true reason why some happy endings are rejected is not for their being happy, but for their being clichéd and superficial. When Erin Brockovic breaks up with the man she loves, risks neglecting her

[18] See Gianfranco Bettetini – Armando Fumagalli, *Quel che resta dei media*, Angeli, Milano 1998, from page 91.

[19] See Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Beacon Press, Boston 1995.

children, resorts to trickery and searches for solutions, always treating ill people with great delicacy and considerateness, in order to help them be compensated by the "evil" *Pacific Gas and Electric;* when the lawyer who supports her risks to lose all his money, the audience longs for Erin and her boss to win the case. And so both the movie and the real story ended.

When Billy Elliot defies prejudice against the ballet until he almost breaks up with his father and brother, only comforted by the memory of his dead mother; and when Billy's father gives up the all-out strike and the brotherly relationships with his colleagues for his son's sake, risking to be banished by his companions, only to try to earn the money that Billy needs to go to London and to audition for the Royal Academy, we deeply desire that Billy be admitted. We feel it's right. The character has given up all he cared for; nothing more could be done. For this reason, we feel strongly that he deserves a reward.

Incidentally I must add that, as it is well known, one of the archetypes of this narrative structure is Frank Capra. I have to admit my discomfort when, very frequently, nowadays movies are said to be in "Frank Capra's style" when they are extremely corny and filled with "good feelings", lacking depth and conflict. Capra's movies[20], however – or at least his masterpieces – were not like this. Let's consider one of his most famous films, *Mr. Smith goes to Washington*, produced in 1939; it describes the corruption of the political world and the connected connivance and dishonesty of the journalists in a cruel and ruthless way. When released, in fact, the movie raised the protest both of politics and journalists, all but positively portrayed. The audience clearly understands that the hero of the story is a frail little man who, like David, fights against far bigger giants. It's easy to loose the battle and two minutes before the end our Jefferson Smith seems doomed to be defeated. Then, a sort of (moral) "miracle" happens. The bad guy breaks down and confesses his faults. Smith is safe. But the audience, while rejoicing over the happy ending of the story, is perfectly aware that our protagonist, a common man, could have easily lost. Moreover, the audience sees a corrupted and hypocritical world being unveiled. Becoming aware of the corruption of this world is not of little importance. The last emotion of the movie, anyway, is positive and rises mostly from sharing the

[20] Let's not forget his scriptwriters, especially Robert Riskin: in this case, as well as in many others (Fellini, Hitchcock), the issue of credits sharing between writer/s and director is a *vexata questio* that already exists or would be worth discussing.

protagonist's values and rejoicing over his well-deserved reward. But, as I just said, in this case, the audiences also learned something interesting about the risks of corruption of a world that was not so familiar to them.

What we said about *Mr. Smith* can be also referred to many other Capra's movies: the hero is at the mercy of evil forces, which could easily overcome him. His life is hanging by a thread and what saves him is a miracle. In such endings we can find this sense of "poetic justice" (I'm telling you this story because it is fair: the hero got the reward he deserved) as well as the awareness that if things went this way, it is because there was a "grace".

These remarks lead us to an interesting passage written by J.R.R. Tolkien on the meaning of the fairytale that is, as we know, a narrative form very close to cinema. It's quite long but worth quoting:

> But the "consolation" of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite — I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairytale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairytale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive." In its fairytale – or otherworld – setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far it is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief[21].

[21] John R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 1938. As we all know, this is also the ending of *The Lord of the Rings*: Frodo is weak and it looks like he can't make it, but then an *eucatastrophe*, an unexpected grace, resolves the situation. In this case, too, there's a very interesting and original balance of positive and negative elements.

As we said elsewhere[22], the segmentation of our studies leads us to forget the crucial exchanges and contaminations existing between different media, like literature and cinema. In this case, I believe it's possible and perhaps even very likely that, when writing this passage, Tolkien had Frank Capra's movies in mind, which, especially in that period, were extremely popular all over the world.

After all, every story is equivalent to what in Jewish was called *mashal*, parable, the explanatory and exemplary tale. The ending is not just the last step of a journey, but also the unraveling, the resolution, the answer that pays off the premises arising from the logic of the story. If the ending is even slightly different, the changing that might follow is drastic. In another work I have tried to explain how, in a recent adaptation of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, directed by Jane Campion, starring Nicole Kidman, the choice of omitting the last half page of the novel drastically changes the entire structure of the plot and therefore the global meaning of the story[23].

But the problem, as we said before, is making the happy ending sound "fair" to the audience, a well-deserved reward for the protagonist who has seriously and completely committed himself until the very end of his journey. What happens in some Italian television series, which agree to use the happy ending for editorial and economical reasons, is that this positive ending comes too easily. If the writers are not brave enough to put the protagonist truly in danger and make him try hard and sacrifice everything to reach his goal, the happy ending will fairly be seen as deluding, corny and "consoling". A drug-addicted, for example, gets away with a good talking-to; crime problems are readily and easily solved with the criminal's sudden repentance, and so on. Differently from television, Italian cinema does not like the positive ending, neither in dramas nor in love stories: it's wrongly considered a sort of "opium of the people". Consequently, the exemplary value of the story is often neglected and, furthermore, the audience is emotionally depressed and it is not encouraged to watch the movie, which is an extremely relevant damage for the entire industry .

Obviously, American cinema is not free of faults, but they occur less frequently. A clear example of a wrong ending can be found, in my opinion, in *The Departed*, directed by

[22] Armando Fumagalli, *I vestiti nuovi…*

[23] Ibidem, pages 239-268. As we explained in the quoted text, such changes are not unusual in adaptations of novels, especially when dealing with not so recent books.

Martin Scorsese. The movie won the Academy Award in 2007, but I think that the reason for finally giving Scorsese the award he had been yearned for a long time is maybe that everybody expected the Italo-American director to win an Oscar. Both *Gangs of New York* and *The Aviator*, however, were so weak from a narrative point of view that they had to wait for *The Departed* to have an eligible candidate.

The problem of this movie is that the ending literally throws the story away. Throughout the movie, the two main characters – brilliantly played by Leonardo Di Caprio and Matt Damon – become more and more aware of having to choose between good and evil. Will they finally refuse to be conditioned by their environment and family and make a radical choice that can really change their life? Neither of them is allowed to make this choice in the movie.

There is an unmistakable sign that the ending is out of tune: I noticed myself and I was told that, in more than a theatre, in a potentially highly dramatic moment – that is, and I apologize to those who haven't seen the movie for giving these details, when the two protagonists are suddenly and unexpectedly killed – part of the audience was laughing. Could there be a clearer sign that the audience is not emotionally accepting this ending? The emotional detachment of such reaction proves that the audience in this crucial moment *is no more in the story*. Isn't it a really weird reaction, after having followed all the protagonist's adventures, to laugh exactly when he's murdered?

Again, the ending should not be clichéd. A positive ending is hackneyed and corny only when our protagonist does not deserve it, when he hasn't sweated blood to get to it. It doesn't work, when the solution to all the problems comes in talking (as it happens in many Italian Tv fictions). On the contrary, when the protagonist has fought to the very end, and given everything he could, the happy ending responds to our expectations of a justice in the story and a meaning in the world.

As we said, a negative ending can also be possible, if it's well prepared: the hero is defeated, either for making a mistake or for being overcome by the antagonist. A meaning must be found, however, either in the hero's fidelity to his principles (*Braveheart*, *The Gladiator*) or in the understanding of the protagonist's tragic fault

(Shakespearian tragedies): these negative endings leave us emotionally wealthier and satisfied.

You might have noticed that, in this view of the story, I implicitly express the belief that reality has a meaning and I refuse to think that we have been thrown into chaos and, consequently, the story structure is a mystification or, more simply, the imposition of arbitrary rules to the shapeless magma we live in. This theoretical position might seem radical or absurd, especially in the US, where the Aristotelian tradition is very strong, but it is familiar to many European theorists (French in particular) who have strongly influenced the studies on film narrative, which are drifting into a radically conventionalist and therefore even nihilistic direction[24]. Ultimately, then, the division is between those who believe that reality has a meaning and those who think we live in chaos.

To give meaning to the stories can either be a gift to the audience or a mystification, depending on our world view. It is not a coincidence that, later in the book quoted above, Tolkien connected the joy of eucatastrophe to the awareness that human history had its eucatastrophe in the Resurrection.

In my opinion, we are also getting to touch a peculiarity of Catholicism in comparison with other Christian creeds, like –as far as I know– Lutheranism. One of the great theological differences between Catholicism and Lutheranism as far as justification is concerned, regards the value of grace. The Catholic believe that the saving grace is *sanans*: it doesn't save us by hiding or covering our faults, but it regenerates us from inside, making us really *good* and able to do good in spite of our past sins, which are erased. I think that the Lutheran tradition, on the other hand, says that grace *covers up* our sins: we remain evil inside, we are saved by a free act of Christ, who gives us Paradise even if we do not deserve it. Consequently, the narrative tradition inspired by Lutheranism stresses the paradox of grace saving even the worst sinners, if they trust in God. But in this way, people can tend to forget that a man can also do good – with God's help, this is crucial – not just because he can do exterior good things around him, but also and especially because God's grace makes him really *good*. This is what us Catholics recognize in the lives of saints: in spite of all their human weaknesses and limits, God's grace made them able to overcome human fragility and become true – and nevertheless

[24] See our remarks in Bettetini-Fumagalli, *Quel che resta*…, pages 59-65.

deeply human – heroes. As a great catholic saint of the 20th century wrote, speaking about Mary as a sign of our salvation: "God calls us his friends; his grace acts in us, winning us from sin, enabling us to reflect in some way the features of Christ, even though we are still wretched dirt. We are not stranded people whom God has promised to save. His salvation is already at work in us. In our relationship to God, we are not blind men yearning for light and crying in anguished darkness. We are children who know our father loves us. Mary tells us about this warmth and security"[18].

With regard to these questions, I believe that great Hollywood films, such as Capra's, are more or less implicitly, or more or less explicitly, Catholic: they acknowledge that human beings can resist to the allurements of evil and remain *good* even faced with temptations and enormous pressures. Instead, many European "christian" movies of the second half of the century – the spiritual cinema of Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson and Eric Rohmer – seem to be closer to Lutheran, more than Catholic culture and inspiration.

Having said all this, it remains undeniable that, if you choose a protagonist who remains good, the story will be interesting only if the stake is high, if difficulties are real and big, and if we show that even *good* men must go through crisis and face dilemmas… As you may know, in the last few years there have been successful tv miniseries in Italy (the *most* successful television programs in Italian television) which are biographies of saints, or of the latest Popes (who are saints too, even though they have not been proclaimed yet, like John Paul II). The challenge, carried out with different results, was to tell these characters' stories showing also the difficult situations they had to face, and trying to go deeper into their human dilemmas, desires, and fears. Anyway, it's important to point out that the Italian audience, which is absolutely no more religious than the American one, has responded with great enthusiasm to these movies and miniseries, with record audience results of 50% of share, that means 25 rating points.

Let us now move back from the problem of grace to more familiar issues. Even today's secularist cinema (think of *Gladiator*) acknowledges the need to believe at least in some human values: honesty, justice, sincerity, self sacrifice. And the audiences all over the world like to see these values rewarded. Still, nobody expects that these values will

[18] Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, n.142.

always win; nobody mistakes an exemplary story for a sociological portrait of reality. What the audiences expect of a two-hour movie or the several episodes of a television series is the sense of "narrative justice", which they recognize themselves in. As Chesterton said: "for every story, yes, even a penny dreadful or a cheap novelette, has something in it that belongs to our universe (…). Every short story does truly begin with creation and end with a last judgment"[25].

This "justice" can justify well-built happy endings as well as ironic endings -which offer a wider view of reality because they often embrace more characters or an entire society- and those sad yet inevitable endings, which are ultimately satisfying. Even though the hero has been defeated or has brought about his own ruin, those endings work for the audience, if they are based on a narrative logic that makes them be accepted as "fair", as we already briefly explained.

The audience's favor all over the world has always been and, in my opinion, will *always* be for those who give a meaning to the characters' journey; audiences may not be conscious of that, but ultimately they reward those who offer metaphors which can illuminate their own life.

[25] Gilbert K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 1925, part II, chapter 5.