

In Defense of Happy Endings, or, Where Lies the Trap of Never-Ending Stories

Jela Krečič

Abstract: The prevailing form in popular culture has for some time been TV-series. The question is why, at a certain historical moment, we are witnessing works of fiction that renounce their own ending. In this context, one has to take a closer look at film as the narrative with a closure, and especially at the Hollywood happy endings. This production standard was never respected as it was considered artificial, unrealistic, and ideological. However, one can argue that happy endings are more ambiguous and have far more interesting implications. Serial logic, on the other hand, has crept into all the pores of contemporary popular culture: it is imposed on the film industry with franchises and it dictates consumption of video content today, known as binge-watching; especially with the rise of streaming services such as Netflix. This new attitude toward fictional ending demands also an analysis of the current political context which is characterized by the end of endings.

Keywords: TV-series, happy end, the end of endings, Netflix, *Casablanca*, *Game of Thrones*, *Handmaid's Tale*

It seems obvious that we live in an age of series. We call them TV-series although the mode of producing, distributing, and watching them has far less to do with television than with the so-called digital revolution. However, what is really interesting about this dominating cultural form is its logic of endlessly prolonged narrative; of limitless continuation.¹ Moreover, it seems the logic of series is not bound only to popular culture and entertainment business but goes hand in hand with our current political predicament.

One of Gérard Wajcman's latest works, *Les séries, le monde, la crise, les femmes*, suggests just that. He recognizes TV-series as a new form of narration in this century; a form intrinsically linked to political and social symptoms of our era: he exposes the connection between the laws of serial narrative and global political changes in our century.

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 inaugurated a permanent crisis (state of exception, more rigorous state control, the war against terrorism and new permanent wars) that spread from the United States to the entire world.² Series in the 21st century are often dedicated to crises and catastrophes which can happen anywhere. The crisis is serial, so we cannot be surprised that crisis becomes the predominant subject of

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¹ When speaking of TV-series today one is tempted to recall an old joke about socialism as the synthesis of the highest achievements of the whole human history to date: from prehistoric societies it took primitivism; from the Ancient world it took slavery; from medieval society brutal domination; from capitalism exploitation; and from socialism the name. If we proclaim TV-series to be the highest achievement of the entertainment industry to date, we could paraphrase the joke in this way; from feuilleton TV-series took the continuous form; from movies they took all the creative genius; from the digital revolution they took the new modes of distribution, and from television they took the name.

² Wajcman 2018, p. 15–22

many series.³ A key dimension of the critical scenarios that established TV-series as a predominant form of our century (a form of serial crisis) is in Wajcman's view globalization: "The crisis is serial, but the world is serial as well."⁴ Series has become a specific narrative for the serial crisis which became globalized in the 21st century. The globalization of serial crisis at the same time deals with multiplicity (the diversity, fragmentation, and discontinuity). Series is a form of a limitless world—on the one hand, it addresses global audiences, and, on the other hand, it represents the breakdown of a coherent, comprehensible, functioning whole. This is true for its form—which is endless; limitless—as well as for its content that similarly has no constraints when it comes to plots, types of heroes, etc.⁵

While following a similar thread of thought as Wajcman—a series is the prevailing form of this century—I will focus on its limitlessness, the lack of ending, or delegating the ending to eternity. However, I will address the problem of ending (or the lack of it) in quite a different way as Wajcman, which will lead us to a different emphasis and conclusions. Firstly, I will examine the lack of endings, the resistance to conclude (to totalize or to quilt a narrative), with regard to film as an art of ending. In an attempt to defend this aspect of cinema, I will focus on happy endings in classical Hollywood, using some best-known examples. Secondly, I will deal with a question: how can we understand the openness of TV-series as a dominant narrative today? I will try to interpret the palpable aversion to endings detectable on so many levels of popular culture in a wider political context that Alenka Zupančič conceptualized in her new book *The End* as the end of endings.

How Happy Are Happy Endings?

Happy ending was one of the key elements of the Hollywood film industry, especially in its classical period, i.e., from the time of institutionalization of continuity editing in the twenties until the sixties in the previous century. This editing is intrinsically linked to classical Hollywood narrative in which all the plotlines are resolved and combined into a coherent whole.

The classical narrative does not enjoy great respect among film critics and theorists, mostly because of its happy ending. Let's take a look at the Wikipedia definition of happy ending. "A happy ending is an ending of the plot of a work of fiction in which almost everything turns out for the best for the protagonists, their sidekicks, and almost everyone except

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3 Ibid., p.25

4 Ibid., p.27

5 Ibid., p.30

the villains."⁶ A happy ending is therefore synonymous with an idealist resolution of the plot for all involved parties. We can already sense how the ending—understood in this way—may seem unrealistic, artificial, and therefore unconvincing.

Our first naive response to such condemnations of a happy ending is: why shouldn't a happy ending be artificial or fake? After all, a movie is a work of fiction; it is not trying to pass itself as something else or something real. However, it is more productive to continue with the thesis that James McDowell develops in his book *Happy Endings in Hollywood: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple*. He quite convincingly argues that happy ending, understood as a satisfactory resolution of all plotlines with the constitution of a love couple, is a fantasy of film critics and theorists.⁷ A detailed examination of the classic or romantic Hollywood comedies—if we leave out the genre of melodramas—shows that we can rarely find an unambiguously happy ending. What are the criteria for a happy ending? Do we measure it by the happiness of the main protagonist(s) or by the feeling of satisfaction on the side of a viewer? Why do we consider *Casablanca* (1942) a movie with a happy ending although the main film couple remains separated?⁸ The same goes for the ending of one of the most notorious classics, *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

The prevailing notion of Hollywood is that it is obsessed with creating a couple, but MacDowell argues that we have to measure the film's ending and its "happiness" by the movie's own intent: does the movie's end follow what it is striving for as a movie? We must therefore measure the film's ending by the aim of a movie's narrative and its direction. The final couple in the movie is not always where the narrative is leading to.⁹ Almost all films that deal with illicit affairs—at least while *Hays' code* was still enforced in Hollywood—in the end affirm the sanctity of marriage. So the question is: does a return of promiscuous partner to his wife (or husband) necessarily constitute a happy ending?¹⁰

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6 Searching for definitions of "happy ending" on the web proves to be quite insightful: most sites on this term refer to a different kind of happy ending, to an ending connected with sexual gratification. I am tempted to say that Hollywood endings always provide a certain surplus which cannot be unambiguously related to happiness or contentment. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_ending#References

7 Cf. MacDowell 2012. We are referring to the Kindle version of this book, which has a specific enumeration: it is not divided into pages, but has a designation "loc".

8 I will give a more thorough analysis of this film later on.

9 MacDowell for example questions the ending of *The Graduate* (1969): in his view, the final couple in this movie doesn't necessarily constitute a happy couple or bring about a happy ending (MacDowell 2012).

10 MacDowell mentions *Intermezzo* (1939), where the mistress Ingrid Bergman is erased from the movie so that her illicit partner Leslie Howard can return to his family. The return of a cheating husband to his wife in *September Affair* (1950) functions somewhat more ambiguously. Even more subversive is the return of the cheating husband to his estranged wife in *There's Always Tomorrow* (1955) directed by Douglas Sirk. In this last case, the commitment to the rules of *Hays' Code* appears

Happy ending with its promise of “happily ever after” is often subject to severe criticism since it is dismissed as unrealistic and therefore ideological. Happy couple in Hollywood movies is usually perceived as an embodiment of the ideology in which a couple constitutes the core of a family unit, which in consequence legitimizes the predominant order, the *status quo*. The idea of couple as a fusion into a harmonious One is indeed problematic—it is an ideological construction, to be precise: a premodern construction with questionable epistemological implications.¹¹ However, we rarely find such endings in Hollywood. Several classic comedies attest to this. Let’s take a look at some examples which prove that the best products of this genre never simply comply with the notion of a couple as a harmonious One.

The master of classical comedy Ernst Lubitsch very rarely provided a standard happy ending (though after seeing his movies, audiences seem to be satisfied and more than happy). His *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) depicts how, at the beginning of the World War II, a group of Polish actors successfully spoils the plans of Nazi occupiers in Warsaw. As far as the war is concerned, the movie implies that even stupid, conceited and clumsy people can defeat the Nazi machine. It is worth mentioning that Lubitsch’s happy ending at that particular moment appeared unrealistic, but the fiction of a successful resistance against—until then—undefeated German army created a horizon that enabled people to imagine such an outcome of a terrifying war.¹²

However, *To Be or Not to Be* is as much a movie about fighting Nazis as a love story, and it seems that the true aim of the activity of the Polish theatre group is to reassert the unity of the main couple, Joseph (Jack Benny) and Maria Tura (Carol Lombard). In his dealing with this married couple, Lubitsch harbours no fairy-tale illusions. In his view, the life that follows the wedding isn’t an ideal coexistence of the two partners in everlasting happiness. In the context of war, when the group of actors is confronted with great perils of fighting the Nazis, one can acknowledge Maria and Joseph’s devotion to each other, but when they are finally rescued and brought to England, little cracks in their relationship—hinted at the beginning of the movie—become yet again visible. Their less than perfect union is above all comical. For example, while in the last scene Joseph recites Hamlet monologue “To be or not to be” on a British stage,

to be in total contradiction with the main characters’ happiness: the illicit couple (Barbara Stanwyck in Fred MacMurray) seem to be happy together, while their separation and return to family life is considered by both of them as a return to prison. (Ibid, Loc 3667–3985).

11 Here we are aiming at Jacques Lacan thesis, from his seminar *Encore*, that premodern science perceives universe of structured by complementing oppositions (form-matter, light-darkness, active-passive) which all refer to the fantasy of a successful sexual rapport between a man and a woman. Cf. Lacan 1999.

12 The political empowerment arising from Lubitsch’s unyielding fidelity to comic principals was more thoroughly developed by Mladen Dolar. Cf. Dolar 2014, p. 111–131.

a man stands up from his seat and leaves the theatre hall—suggesting Maria found yet another fan and possibly a lover. Here it becomes clear that the love between Maria and Joseph exists and thrives on such little lapses in their relationship. If this kind of ending appears as happy, it is not because we are dealing with a perfect and devoted couple but because this couple is connected exactly by their unwillingness to fuse into a harmonious One.

Design for Living (1933), made before the implementation of *Hay’s Code*, is worth mentioning due to the fact that Lubitsch doesn’t focus on a happy couple but a happy threesome. In this movie, marriage is depicted as a prison for the main protagonist Gilda (Miriam Hopkins), so at the end she gets another chance to try and build a romantic relationship with two young artists. *Ninotchka* (1939) is a story of a Stalinist bureaucrat who comes to Paris to get hold of nationalized jewellery to prevent starvation in her country. But in the process of achieving this, she falls in love with a French gigolo. In the end, he lures her out of the Soviet Union and they reunite. However, in the last scene, Lubitsch shows Ninotchka’s three friends who left Soviet Union and reinvented themselves as small businessmen in Constantinople: their common capitalist endeavour is already decaying under their internal fights and exploitation. The message of this conclusion is that Ninotchka had to sacrifice her country to reunite with her love, but her unspoiled happiness in capitalism isn’t at all guaranteed. A movie about two systems, capitalism and communism, competing for the sympathies of the main character does not univocally turn in favor of capitalism.¹³

There are more examples of this kind of endings. The best screwball comedies also end with the constitution of a happy couple; however, its unity is always already compromised. In Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) Susan (Katherine Hepburn) and David (Cary Grant) become a couple at the end, but their love is constantly threatened by some commotion. The victim of their “happy union” is David’s life project: the skeleton of a big dinosaur, which in the end collapses under the weight of lovers’ kiss.

With regard to happy endings, one cannot overlook the most obvious and notorious one: the ending of Billy Wilder’s *Some Like it Hot* (1959). As many have pointed out,¹⁴ the film concludes with a somewhat unexpected twist. The story juggles with several potential romantic couples. The main characters Jerry (Jack Lemmon) in Joseph (Tony Curtis) —two musicians dressed up as women in order to hide from Chicago mob—form the first couple. They are best friends, but in many ways they function as an old married couple: they live together, share

13 Aaron Schuster convincingly proves that *Ninotchka* never gives up on communism. Cf. Schuster 2019, p. 189–223.

14 Cf. Zupančič 2008.

their resources, take care of each other, but most importantly they quarrel as married people do. On their run from the mafia, they both encounter new love prospects. Joe starts to seduce Sugar (Marilyn Monroe), and Jerry becomes the love object of a millionaire Osgood (Joe E. Brown). The fate of Sugar and Joe comes the closest to conventional Hollywood happy end (although we can already anticipate the fractures in their relationship, as Sugar intelligently predicts in the last scene), but most importantly we get an unexpected pair of Jerry and Osgood.

It's worth to recall the ending of this famous scene. Jerry, still dressed up as Daphne, states reasons why they cannot get married and starts pointing out all his shortcomings: "In the first place, I'm not a natural blonde.", "I smoke. I smoke all the time.", "I have a terrible past. For three years I've been living with a saxophone player." "I can never have children." Osgood doesn't seem to be bothered by any of these flaws. His attitude so far fits the frame of the traditional love paradigm where the idea of fusion with the loved one can overcome all partner's deficiencies.

So the desperate Jerry pulls off his wig and says in a man's voice: "I'm a man!" This disclosure should destroy any prospect of their life as a couple, but Osgood unexpectedly responds: "Nobody's perfect!" This last exchange brings their relationship into the vicinity of the comic paradigm of love: one of the partners reveals all his faults and most significantly the one thing that eradicates the possibility of their rapport, but the other doesn't except this impossibility as impossibility. Incidentally, Osgood's answer is comical on several levels. We can understand it as a response to the fact his partner is not of a "correct gender", at least not at the time movie takes place (at the end of the twenties) and not at the time movie was made in (at the end of the fifties). However, we can also understand this ending as a comment on manhood as an imperfect form of existence. In any case, the ending of this movie functions as a happy end because it promises that the comic love between the two desperately unmatched partners will go on.¹⁵ Hollywood comedy therefore rarely abides by the fantasy of a happy ending. Moreover, if anything this type of comedy redefines the concept of happiness as such—it provides happiness (for the characters and the audience) exactly where something constantly keeps disintegrating and collapsing, or where the pair constantly produces an untamed excess.

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15 Once we start to think of the best Hollywood comedies, it seems they all negate or subvert the idea of a classical happy ending. Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) concludes with the main character's decision to direct comedies for fun, realizing that filming documentaries about the poor is the ultimate fakery. Sturges' romantic comedy *Lady Eve* (1941) is likewise a masterpiece that concludes with a happy couple, although the main character Charles (Henry Fonda) remains oblivious of what happened to him and still doesn't realize he was not seduced by two women, but by one posing as two (Barbara Stanwyck). The final couple in this movie will be happy because he will remain ignorant about the maneuvers of his extraordinary partner.

We should, however, consider a more important point that MacDowell makes in his book: "If anything has the power to make the final couple happy ending appear innately unrealistic, it is not, I think, the fact that it is 'happy', but rather the fact it is an ending." (MacDowell, loc 2640). The mere fact that something ends seems fake and artificial. The problem many critics and theoreticians sense in Hollywood is its incompatibility with so-called real life. In real life the happiness of the union of two people who are madly in love with each other is bound to fade, to succumb to everyday tediousness. The happy ending concludes the story of the couple at the point where—according to a certain perception of realism or authenticity—it should only just begin. This is why a happy end appears as a conspicuously artificial construction: it offers happiness where there should only be misery or at least the monotony of everyday life.

Happy end—by quilting all the missing pieces in the narrative and by delivering a clear concluded story—feels unrealistic. The artifice of classic narration which always seems to aim at a happy ending also affirms a key American ideological agenda. The happy ending appears as artificial because it enables a certain narrative material to conclude, and by concluding, it provides a definite meaning of what we have seen. The ideological function resides in the conception of an ending, of the totalization of narrative material, and in the finality of the story—story as a whole. The ending proves that the narrative was fictitious and therefore necessarily untrue, false: it provides the audience with fantasies instead of pointing to something more real—for example, the impossibility of a smooth functioning of a relationship.

It seems that the psychoanalytic approach to movies as developed by Pascal Bonitzer points to a similar conclusion.¹⁶ Bonitzer argues that film is a distorted material which can only gain significance or meaning through direction and editing. The visual field of a movie is redoubled with a blind field. The basic unit of a film—shot (*cadre*)—is defined by what is in it, but even more by what remains cut out of it. The main feature of a shot is that it reveals as much as it conceals (it is *cadre-cache*). A shot refers to its exterior, it points to a new shot or counter-shot. A shot, the signifying unit of a movie, is defined by a lack, so its meaning can be attained in the next shot or the sequence of shots. Partial vision, as Bonitzer calls it, is inscribed into the basic logic of film and it addresses a subject of desire, always striving to see beyond, always seeking more than the one-frame-shot provides. The blind field is exactly the generator of a movie narrative and at the same time also a generator of (viewer's) desire. The paradox of film fiction lies in the fact that a movie is full of lacks—a film structure is a structure with inherent voids—but a classical movie carefully fills these voids and glues its parts into a coherent whole:

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16 Cf. Bonitzer 1982.

the shot-and-counter-shot structure of a cinematic space shows that this space is a space of lacks which are systematically sutured, 'quilted'. This is why there is such an effort in classical cinema to cover up all the signs of cinematic apparatus (camera, microphones, etc.) which would dismantle its fictional universe.¹⁷

The ultimate example of such careful stitching of the film material is the Hollywood film industry, more precisely, its continuity editing which covers up all the signs of movie-making machines. The ending is, therefore, the point at which all the lacks and voids are fulfilled, and it therefore provides a coherent meaning of the chain of shots. In this sense, the classical happy end should be considered fake since it quilts the shots and provides a coherent meaning where there should be the inherent lack of it. The production of complete, clear and unambiguous symbolization is in contradiction with the film's essential ingredient. In other words, the full coherent meaning contradicts the nature of the film signifier.

A film's artifice therefore lies in the fact that it can retroactively conceal cuts, voids, incoherencies of its fictitious universe. However, Bonitzer's notion of the Hollywood machinery cannot be reduced to this simple critical point: his main point is that movie directing—in documentaries or realistic dramas—is always artificial, and he firmly states that film is not a representation of reality but its creation.

With this digression to Bonitzer's elaboration I wanted to illustrate how the notion of movie structure as lacking, full of voids, may seem to support the thesis that Hollywood movies—aimed at covering this lack and filling the void with a happy ending—form a paradigmatic ideological apparatus.¹⁸ But I must again emphasize how difficult it is to find Hollywood endings that would attest to the fantasy of an unambiguous meaningful ending. If we take the concept of the *point du caption* seriously,¹⁹ i.e., as a point that gives a univocal meaning to the chain of film's shots, then a film's ending affects the narration in such a way that it retroactively stops the fleeing of film signifiers and consolidates their meaning. However, a more precise investigation shows that the ending is not a finalization of meaning but leaves an open space for imagination. Its function is not only to close up a narrative but to point beyond its stable

17 Especially European post-war movies are often aimed at destroying classic Hollywood narration: they try to reveal the conditions of the movie-making and thereby offer a proof that we are witnessing an artificial material. One of the strategies was to break the most sacred Hollywood taboo (the forbidden gaze into the camera)—just recall the ending of Jean-Luc Godard's *Au Bout du souffle* (1960).

18 MacDowell convincingly interprets a series of movies (the classic and the more recent ones) and shows that the endings in Hollywood are somewhat more complex. The conclusions of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1955), or *The Graduate* (1967) are more ambiguous, in many cases more radical, exactly by introducing an alleged happy ending.

19 Jean-Pierre Oudart introduced the concept of suture to film theory in his text »La Suture«. Cf. Oudart 1969.

determinate meaning. Many endings which are considered as happy don't unambiguously assert a definite meaning or understanding nor do they completely erase all lacks and voids inherent to a film universe (as we tried to demonstrate with our examples of Hollywood comedies). This kind of assertion never completely succeeds—a certain ambiguity lingers upon a movie.²⁰

Moreover, it is not at all necessary that an ending which supposedly fills in the lacks and voids univocally functions as a happy end.²¹ Certain endings, although they offer a seemingly univocal symbolization, are more complex, they suggest a logic that is not simply false or artificial.

There is another important dimension of a happy ending that MacDowell emphasizes. Creation of a happy couple is indeed a prevailing intent of a movie narrative; however, the movie is not oriented towards the closure of narrative but gives the audience the promise of a continuation of the couple, the promise of their life together after the end of the movie. Many Hollywood movies conclude with the fairy-tale "happily ever after". The promise of the main characters' life after the movie had ended is crucial for the sense of happiness.²² The ending as a signifier that concludes or quilts the narrative is a signifier that points beyond itself: it signifies also a new beginning, an unknown future. In other words, the suture of meaning is only temporary—it is a point in a narrative that directs the audience to a new story. The promise of a new beginning anticipated by Hollywood happy end deserves a more thorough elaboration.

End of Love and the Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

We should take a look at one of the most famous and most debated Hollywood classics, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*. The movie deserves a careful inspection not only because the main couple Bogart-Bergman has to separate in the end, but because the movie offers an ending which is much more interesting than the romantic cliché it appears to follow.

The story takes place in occupied Europe and North Africa during the World War II. Casablanca is a city under French jurisdiction from

20 Let us just take a quick view of Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) which—contrary to the novel—ends happily. The main character Lina (Joan Fontaine) suspects that her husband Johnnie Aysgarth (Cary Grant) is a killer, but it turns out in the end that all the dark premonitions were only in her head. As Mladen Dolar showed, this Hollywood ending cannot eradicate the suspense that was built up in the movie. If the suspicions of the main character are unfounded, if her paranoia is her own construct, if the husband is indeed innocent, the source of her wariness must be in her alone. In other words, this sort of narrative cannot end happily, the stain of paranoia and suspicion cannot be eliminated. Dolar 1999, p. 143-151.

21 Among the recent works dedicated to psychoanalytic cinema theory, one should mention *Cinematic Cuts: Theorizing Film Ending*, an anthology mostly dedicated to those endings that subvert the logic of fantasy and suture allegedly endorsed by the classic ending. Cf. Kunkle, 2016.

22 MacDowell 2011, loc 1508-1525

where thousands of immigrants try to flee to the USA (via Lisbon). Most of them are stuck in the city, for months waiting for a visa. Rick (Humphrey Bogart) is the owner of a club (Rick's), where the immigrants from different countries meet in the evenings along with French military and police. Louis Renault (Claude Rains) plays a significant role as the man in charge of police and immigrant administration. Also, Nazi officers led by Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) come to Rick's bar: they are trying to solve the murder of two Nazi soldiers who possessed the much desired exit visas. The film thus first takes us to this transition city where different cultures create an interesting exotic mixture, and then it focuses on Rick's bar, a micro-representation of what is going on in the city as a whole, including the tensions between the Nazi officers and the people sympathetic to French resistance. Rick's is the place where the fates of natives, fugitives, and officers play out. We soon find out that the main character is a cynical American who likes to point out: "I stick my neck for no one". When Ugarte (Peter Lorre), an immigrant trafficker who is also a member of the resistance and the one who killed the two soldiers, gets arrested, Rick doesn't intervene—he only promises to hide the visas that Ugarte obviously stole from the killed soldiers. This is as far as Rick goes.

Things get complicated when a key figure of European resistance, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), comes to town. This man escaped from a concentration camp and is now trying to find a transit to the USA. Rick doesn't pay much attention to him until he comes into his club with his wife Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). Rick (who otherwise prefers to avoid contacts with his customers) is in this case lured by a song "As Time Goes By" played by his employee Sam (Dooley Wilson). It turns out that Ilsa recognized Sam and persuaded him to play her beloved song. Rick's aversion to it suggests that the two have met before and didn't part on the best of terms. When the club closes, Rick is drinking whiskey, expecting her to come. He asks Sam to play the song he resented so much until she came ("If she can stand it, I can too", he explains). The melody evokes Rick's memories of the affair he had with Ilsa, and a long flashback takes us to Paris, just before the Nazi invasion, where Rick and Ilsa fell in love. We can see the scenes of the lovers wandering around the city, exchanging kisses and other tenderness. The shots of their romance are interrupted by scarce dialogues from which we learn that they have been meeting only for a short while and are deeply committed to one another although they don't know much about each other. He asks her about other men in her life and she hints at a beloved who is now part of her past. It also becomes clear that Rick, involved in the resistance, is the target of Gestapo, and since the German army is getting closer and closer to the French capital, the two lovers decide to flee the city. Before their departure, Ilsa seems more melancholic than usual. She asks Rick to kiss her as it were the last time—a hint that things will not go as planned. On the day of departure, Rick is waiting for her at the railway station in vain. The train is about to depart when he

receives her letter. In it, she declares her undying love for him but states that they can never see each other again.²³

With main character jumping on a train from Paris the flashback ends and we come back to drunk Rick at the bar. One could argue that Rick's memory, his flashback—differentiated from the other part of movie by the grainy quality of the film's cinematography—can be interpreted as a movie within a movie. The flashback is a Hollywood melodrama of a couple immortally in love but abruptly separated without an explanation. It is obvious that this event crucially affected Rick: the failed romance is the reason why he gave up his heroic endeavors against the Nazis (although he had always fought on the side of the repressed, as Victor will later acknowledge) and retreated into the cynical existence of a club owner in Casablanca.

The main question of the movie from here on is: will an opportunistic, pragmatic Rick transform and help Victor and his wife to escape Casablanca? At first, he is determined that he will remain neutral, not stand out and provoke the Germans, but when Ilsa comes one night to explain what happened in Paris (her presumably dead husband turned up ill on the outskirts of Paris), Rick's attitude changes. He promises Ilsa that he will "think for both of us" and come up with a plan to save all the involved parties. At first, it seems Rick will remain in Casablanca with Ilsa and help Victor to migrate to the USA. Then he reveals another plan to Renault: Rick will run away with Ilsa and incriminate Victor so that Renault—always worried about an impression he makes on the Nazis and major Strasser—will be able to arrest Victor as a criminal. But it turns out that Rick had a third plan in mind: Victor and Ilsa are to flee, while he will remain in Casablanca. So the main protagonist is considering what kind of ending he will provide for the film's story. His juggling between three outcomes is a film's way of suggesting that it could end differently, that there are alternate worlds in which Ilsa and Rick would remain a couple or in which Victor Laszlo would end up in jail. In the background of these potential outcomes, which do not actualize, the film's last scenes gain all their (emotional and political) weight.

The moment where Rick (again) has to leave Ilsa is essential to film's understanding. The notorious sentence "We'll always have Paris" testifies to the fact that Rick always strived to provide his Paris romance a real epilogue. What was missing was his understanding of why Ilsa didn't join him to leave Paris, and this story is successfully concluded when the repentant Ilsa explains to him what had happened. In this way, his Paris romance can remain an ideal, although he has to sacrifice a beloved woman for it.²⁴

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²³ In this famous scene Rick utters the legendary sentence: "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine."

²⁴ With a reference to Lacan, one can say with the separation of lovers enables their love to remain a romantic ideal.

Now, at the end of *Casablanca*, Rick has to explain the conclusion of the film's narrative to all involved parties.²⁵ To Ilsa he gives numerous reasons why she has to depart with Victor: she is crucial for the resistance; if she stayed with Rick, she would regret it and sooner or later start to long for her husband... When Rick speaks to Victor, who suspects that his wife had gotten involved with the American, he defends Ilsa's honor by saying how she tried to seduce Rick only to gain the visas.

But this is not the end of the movie. After Victor and Ilsa board the plane for Lisbon, Major Strasser arrives and tries to stop the plane, which is why Rick shoots him in front of Renault. When a French police unit appears at the airport because of the shooting, Renault tells them to round up "the usual suspects." Renault, who until now was a typical opportunist, a person who declared himself to unscrupulously submit to any authority, goes against his nature. Moreover, now that Strasser is dead and the plane with Victor and Ilsa on board successfully took off, he discusses with Rick what their future holds: they will join the resistance in North Africa. Finally we see the two men in a long shot walking from the airport when Rick utters the most famous sentence of the movie: "This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." We hear the sound of *La Marseillaise* and the title "The End" wraps the movie up.

The end of the movie unfolds in an entirely another atmosphere than the love story with Ilsa. The main agenda is no longer the fate of lovers but the fate of humanity in a dire historical moment—at the beginning of the World War II. The main issue of the movie is how to get the two greatest cynics to join the resistance. The movie hints at this ending all along: from the establishing shot with waves of immigrants coming to Casablanca, to several episodes with the migrants, the singing *La Marseillaise* in Rick's club, and Rick's lamenting about America sleeping in the year of 1941—an obvious call out to the USA to join the fight against Hitler. From the film's structure it is obvious that the main protagonist has to recognize his calling and act accordingly: separation with Ilsa, helping Victor and joining the resistance are therefore a logical conclusion of the story.

Or so it seems—it is more appropriate to posit that *Casablanca* has two endings since it consists of two films: one dedicated to a love story, the other addressing WWII. The first movie (separated also by a distinctive production quality of the flashback) ends with Ilsa explaining why she failed to join Rick in their escape from Paris; the other one ends with a realization that no one can remain a calculating cynic when facing the threat of Nazism. This other ending—accompanied by the sounds of *La Marseillaise*—functions as a propagandistic call to all of us (especially the Americans) to join the allied forces against Nazism. If the ending of *Casablanca* appears to be happy, it is not because it reunites the two lovers or promises their "happily ever after", but because it asserts

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25 It seems the movie has to justify (to the audience) why the hero has chosen just that ending and not another one.

the idea of resistance. "This is a beginning of a beautiful friendship" suggests that after the movie's ending something else, something very different from love, is about to start. The film's ending proposes a friendship of combatants in a united front. The love story that comes to a conclusion is here more or less a diversion that enables the main character and the audience to confront the new challenge (if Bogart gave up Bergman for the brutal combat, then so should we the audience sacrifice our striving for a happy couple).²⁶ Following MacDowell, one can see that the function of a happy ending is not to resolve all the plotlines or totalize the narrative material and present it as a coherent whole, but to anticipate something different, another fight, another scene—the real scene of the war. *Casablanca* has to end for the resistance to start. Today we might consider this ending pathetic, but we can imagine how in given circumstances when Hitler was still undefeated,²⁷ the movie functioned as a significant encouragement to fight Nazi terror.

The end of *Casablanca* deserves attention because of how the main character is engaged in playing with different possible outcomes of his story. This is a moment of film's self-reflexivity—it turns attention to itself and reveals something about its structure and its procedures. It suggests that every story is open to different conclusions and is therefore an artificial creation. The movie implies that every ending is an arbitrary creation, but only until it is actualized: any sort of ending could take place, but when a particular ending materializes, it becomes the necessary one—the one and only. When the end ends there is no way back. The story has evolved as it has and usually (if its conclusion is plausible) it appears as an organic, natural part of the narrative that could not have unfolded in any other manner.

Secondly, the ending is the part of the narrative which refers to everything that comes before it, to the fictional material that leads up to it. It retroactively connects elements of the narrative and delivers it as a whole (story). On the other hand, the ending proposes something else beyond the story it concludes. When the potentiality of a narrative is realized, it opens up the possibility of another story. The ending is a limit that stretches in two directions. Firstly, it completes a story—it closes up its own fictional universe. It is a point toward which the narrative is directed, a point where a story reaches its completion, its full realization. However, secondly, the ending also implies another story after the ending.

We can understand such a status of the ending in two ways. The ending is on the edge of imagining something else, another story; a work of fiction. But at the same time, the ending is a limit between fiction and non-fiction, and it therefore always appears as an element of self-

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26 The usual structure of a Hollywood movie is usually the opposite one: a hero has to take on a political, social or another challenge in order to gain true love.

27 *Casablanca* was made after the USA entered the war, but the story goes on a little bit before that.

referencing or self-reflexivity. When the movie ends, it suggests to the viewer something like this: “I am the end of the story. I stand at the end of the fictional world, now it is time to exit it.” This function of an ending—that always points to the fictional character of a movie we have been watching, and to a reality beyond the fictional dimension—is in classical films marked with the end title: “The End”.

The question is: why do movies which are directed towards their finale need yet another sign of their ending? My thesis would be that the title “The End” is a signifier of the limit that separates the world of cinema or immersion into a movie from the reality outside of it. This is especially interesting given the evolution of the end titles in Hollywood. “The End” was part of a classical movie for a long time.²⁸ With the disintegration of the classical studio system in Hollywood, the convention of beginning and ending changed. The opening titles became shorter and shorter (many movies begin with only discretely inserted title and names of cast members), while end titles got longer and longer. In the last few decades, the end titles became a medium for different experiments. Sometimes directors insert the scenes that were cut from the movie in the end titles, sometimes the story continues after the film has concluded or the end titles provide other ways of prolonging a movie experience. It seems that it gradually became harder and harder to end a movie, although—paradoxically—a movie is an art that presupposes the closure of a narrative.

To sum up, Hollywood’s happy endings are much more ambiguous than the movie historians and theoreticians gave it credit for. The ending is always an artificial construction that completes film material but at the same time aims beyond it. It inaugurates a new beginning; it is a promise of something new or different. It is crucial that the ending is at the same time a declaration that the fictitious material has reached its conclusion; as such, it marks the entrance into reality outside the movie theatre—it lets the viewer know that he or she participated in something made up and artificial.²⁹ This brings us to another thesis: the open narrative, the never-ending stories are no more real or authentic than the classic films with a clear ending.

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²⁸ According to Wikipedia, early exceptions in regard to beginning and ending a movie were the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Mary Poppins* (1964). In both of these cases, the end titles were prolonged and all the contributors of the movie team were named there. *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956) and *The West Side Story* (1961) also began only with the movie’s title, while all the other data was put in the ending titles.

²⁹ Every time we encounter a firm statement that what we witnessed was “only” fiction we should be doubtful. In his *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan claims that fiction is deceiving about its fictitiousness, while its fake strategies can come closer to the truth than any authentic “reality”. (Lacan 1998, p. 112).

An Endless Universe

Let’s begin with a simple question: what happened with endings since the serial form became dominant? First of all, one must recognize how the logic of a serial has indeed entered all the pores of our culture. It is not only that many movie-makers, stars, screenplay-writers, etc., migrated to television, the serial logic also penetrated the movie industry itself: a typical Hollywood movie is today a movie-series. The majority of films are created with the prospect of a possible sequel, of franchising and of maximum capitalization of an idea. This is true for the superhero genre as it is for other big adventure (sci-fi) movies (*Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Hunger Games*), or action thrillers (from *James Bond* to *Jason Bourne*), or even comedies (*Hangover*, *Horrible Bosses*, etc.) and cartoons (*Finding Nemo*, *Shrek*, *Frozen*), to mention just the most notorious box office hits.

Serialization, the possibility of an endless span of episodes, is today a fundamental cultural form. This brings us to the question: what does this attitude towards open narrative bring about, what does it tell us? Why do stories need a serial form, a possibility of continuation? Why do they need an open structure that can go on forever? Why can stories no longer end?

We can approach this problem from different angles. A serial narrative is, first of all, based on a certain economic calculation. Classical television developed its programs according to the ratings: TV series remained on the program if it attracted enough viewers. A series that didn’t have satisfactory ratings got cancelled. This known fact—exterior to the series’ content—is important because it dictated and still dictates the content, and also the fate of different characters and their “survival”.

The shift in the logic of ending can be better explained in relationship to movies. Classical movies in Hollywood were also made with an unmistakable agenda: making money. The existence of genres can be ascribed to shameless business pursuits; however, a film with an ending was always accompanied by a risk. Although the templates for movie hits were known, repetition of the same pattern (of an ending) never guaranteed a film’s success. It is known that Hollywood producers very early on resorted to movie testing in order to figure out which ending would be most popular and therefore more lucrative; however, all that testing couldn’t assure the profits. When the film was concluded, when it was distributed through movie theaters, its story was fixed—there was no way of remaking it. The ending—even if it was carefully calculated—resumed the narrative and it was not possible to change it. At a given moment, a film came before its audiences as a completed product and put to the final test: the box office.³⁰

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³⁰ Of course, there are known movies that got another edition, the so-called director’s cut. A movie can also be re-edited against the will of its director—the best known example is here Orson Welles’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). However, this doesn’t contradict our basic thesis that ending a

Today, the narratives in movies and TV-series are more and more open and also more prone to different narrative interventions introduced by the market conditions or due to rating and testing. The logic of continuation—i.e., of the endlessly prolonged ending—also works when a TV-series is concluded: reboots and remakes of old series are striving today. Think only of the remake of *MacGyver* (2016-) and *Dynasty* (2017-) or the reboots of *Will in Grace* (2017-) and *Fuller House* (2016-). The idea of a reboot of *Friends* (1994-2004) is all the time lingering in the air with thousands of fans cheering for its continuation. Obviously, neither the time distance nor the change of the cast can prevent a story to continue. *Game of Thrones* (2012-2019) indeed ended last year, but the ending of the popular saga is open enough to entail several prequels or sequels or at least spin-offs. There's no doubt that sooner or later a popular series will get some kind of continuation.

The same goes for movies and movie franchises. The final part of *Avengers* (2019), significantly entitled *Endgame*, was supposed to conclude this movie-series. However, it is again clear that particular heroes from the Marvel universe will get (or remain in) their movie franchises and, besides that, we can easily imagine that in a decade or so a new incarnation of *Avengers* with perhaps a different cast will come to life. To sum up, no end today can be considered as final, as a true end. Every ending in popular culture—at least in really popular products—can be seen as provisional, as temporary.

There's yet another way of looking at the aversion towards endings today: with regard to the consumption of popular culture (especially TV-series today). This aspect, also strongly connected to the expectation of profit, became evident with the rise of Netflix. In 2013 this important player from Silicon Valley introduced a new way of distribution and consumption of popular video material (especially series); this new type of viewer experience was soon to be called binge-watching. The first season of the series *House of Cards* (2013-2018) was—immediately and as a whole (of thirteen parts)—made available to Netflix subscribers.³¹ Netflix institutionalized what was already happening in the era of digitalization and downloading—consumers watching their favorite TV products instantly, not waiting for separate episodes from week to week. So Netflix

movie was at least for the time being an irreversible act. Another exception was this year's fiasco of *Cats* (2019): producers pulled the movie out of distribution, made some digital repairs and sent it back; however even this stunning move didn't contribute to improvement in the box office.

31 *The New York Times* put the news of Netflix's new mode of distribution on its first page, which gave even more weight to Netflix. A retroactive look indicates that the editorial decision was in place. With its production and distribution model, Netflix has quite significantly rattled Hollywood establishment, so that today there are many related platforms and libraries of this type. Moreover, a new way of distributing content is becoming a key factor in the Hollywood industry in which the fight between Silicon Valley companies and traditional Hollywood studios even got a dramatic name: the streaming wars. Netflix, Disney +, AppleTV +, Amazon Prime and HBO Max are the most important players in this fight so far.

only adapted to a certain transformation in viewers' experience and developed it into a new business model.

And not only that: Netflix upgraded the already existing viewing patterns. After binge-watching a series the Netflix's algorithm redirects us to another one, the one that is allegedly in sync with our taste or previous choices. TV-series therefore introduce serial watching or watching in a sequence, where the end of a certain content instantly shifts into the beginning of watching another.³² Serial watching involves a specific logic that can (at least theoretically) go on forever. Netflix's universe—if we can use this term—is exactly the universe of never-ending watching where one series opens the door into another and so on and so on. Moreover, Netflix enables its subscribers to watch their shows on different platforms (TV, laptop, smartphone), which means that the consumption of series is not even localized anymore: one can watch it anytime anywhere. Perhaps some of Adorno's and Horkheimer's insights about popular culture, its logic of commodification, as developed in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* become relevant with the never-ending flow of video content and with a possibility of a viewer's immersion into the world of never-ending fiction which quite literally prevents the viewer from reflecting what he or she had been consuming.³³

With its insistent production, with direct distribution to individual subscribers, and with the new type of consumption, Netflix became a true game-changer in Hollywood and radically influenced the industry. Its business model is quite different from classical TV networks or traditional movie studios. Subscription from 169 million entails a different type of production that enables the creators more freedom but also presents them with some traps.³⁴ Netflix selects and produces new series without first making and showing the pilot; binge-watching changed also the series' narrative, no longer adjusting the storylines to the interruption of advertisements, and without vigorously exploiting cliff-hangers. With Netflix, many imperatives that reigned over traditional TV-production became obsolete.³⁵

32 The way of consuming series, the compulsion to repeat in conjunction with the consumer logic, is also addressed by Wajcman who points out that the popular topic of many series is precisely the issue of drugs. The treatment of drug gangs in *The Wire* (2002 - 2008) should thus be seen as a specific reflection of consumption as it is dictated by the series - namely, as a modern form of the drug. (Wajcman 2018, p. 88-98).

33 Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 94-137.

34 Speaking of traps I am most of all aiming at the fact that Netflix' huge production without pre-selection often results in some questionable series, movies and documentaries. If it was bound to the logic of testing a series by shooting a pilot first, some of those shows would never see the light of day.

35 It's worth noting that video on-demand enables Netflix to monitor viewing habits very closely. The Silicon Valley company has seen a lot of protests mainly because it is reluctant to share those numbers with the public - thus again contradicting the foundations of the Hollywood industry which relied on box office sales and TV ratings.

That said, one must point out that the logic of profit does not entirely explain why we leave in an era in which popular narratives cannot end, and why we observe on so many levels the end of endings. The endlessness of series also concerns its structure, that is, its inner nature. David Bordwell dealt with this issue years ago in a blog explaining, among other things, his reservations about the world of (quality) TV series:

Once you're committed, however, there is trouble on the horizon. There are two possible outcomes. The series keeps up its quality and maintains your loyalty and offers you years of enjoyment. Then it is cancelled. This is outrageous. You have lost some friends. Alternatively, the series declines in quality, and this makes you unhappy. You may drift away. Either way, your devotion has been spit upon. There is indeed a third possibility. You might die before the series ends. How comforting is that? With film, you're in and you're out and you go on with your life. The TV is like a long relationship that ends abruptly or wistfully. One way or another, the TV will break your heart. (Bordwell 2010).

This passage points to an inherent impossibility of ending a TV series. It either ends prematurely—when we still love it, when we are emotionally attached to the characters, but in the eyes of the producers it does not achieve expected results so it is cancelled. Or it ends too late—it becomes unconvincing, we are no longer interested in its heroes, the story leaves us disappointed. In other words, there is no right time to end a series. All its essence is lingering between a “not-yet” and “always-already”.³⁶ If we say—following Bordwell—that the production of TV-series is based on the intimate liaison between the viewer and his or her popular material, it is impossible to reach a perfect ending, a satisfactory conclusion. This psychological dimension of television experience is therefore not to be neglected.

The claim that a narrative is defined primarily by the impossibility of ending seems contradicted by the great classics of quality television, from *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *The Wire* (2002–2008) to *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) and *Mad Men* (2008–2015). All these series were made with a clear vision of a finite number of seasons and episodes, including the ending. Most of them left the impression that they really ended and could hardly go on or reboot. How do we explain that the most paradigmatic TV-series have ended? One answer could be that the inaugural quality TV-series were created with a pre-planned ending and that, in this sense, quality television classics echo the logic of the film which offers a completed narrative, so that, in these cases we can speak of movies that are tens of hours long. Furthermore, there is a part of the production of TV that resists the incompleteness—mini-series based on famous novels

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36 As for the hearts that are easily broken by a TV series, Bordwell attributes this to the temporality of the series which allows the viewer to have more lasting and committed relationship with the characters. If the series is a form that addresses emotions, the film, with its limited structure, appeals to human reason.

can be seen in this way.³⁷ On the other hand, however, one is tempted to say that the cult classics fully fit the context of the universe without end: we cannot be sure that they are forever finished, that they may not be the subject of remakes and spin-offs, just as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* was restarted after its first conclusion in 2011.

All these aspects of the rise of TV-series still raise the question of why, at a certain historical moment—since the beginning of the 21st century, to be more precise—endless form became so popular, and why doubts about the appropriateness of endings emerged. The answer may be found in a political and ideological shift already identified by Fredric Jameson in his elaboration of postmodernism, and extensively investigated by Alenka Zupančič's latest work which is dedicated to the concept of the end of endings.

The Ideology of an Open Narrative

At first glance, the postmodern era was the one that announced several endings (or deaths): from Lyotard proclaiming the end of grand narratives to the death of the author (Barthes) and the man (Foucault). One of the most celebrated and debated ends, however, is the one proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama: the end of history. And it is precisely this slogan that may offer the best insight into the nature of the endings that the postmodern era inaugurated. Here, one should turn to the intriguing analysis of Alenka Zupančič in her book *The End*.

With his slogan of the end of history, Fukuyama sought to conceptualize the geopolitical situation after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The collapse of the Communist bloc brought about the global domination of neoliberal capitalism and democracy which was at least in Fukuyama's eyes a culmination of all greatest achievements of human history. While Fukuyama provoked many critics who accused him of too hastily embracing a certain historical moment as an unproblematic accomplishment, many authors recognized the hidden truth of his proclamation, namely, that he recognized the moment when capitalism appeared as the ultimate horizon of a global social order. Capitalism is, from this point of view, a point of incompleteness, of non-historicity. History, of course, goes on, but it is stuck in this moment, in a system that cannot end since it allows only constant perpetuation.³⁸ This perpetuation is grounded in above all the ability of capitalism to “redeem, absorb, neutralize radical ideas, and, on the other hand, the ability to

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37 One of the famous exceptions is certainly *Big Little Lies* (2017–), the mini-series is based on a novel by Liane Moriarty. After the success of the first season, they decided to continue the mini-series, by which it got transformed into TV-series.

38 Zupančič 2019, p.12

revolutionize itself through its crises and in its neuralgic points (...)"³⁹

Zupančič describes this constellation as a bizarre temporality "which modern Western societies are stuck in; (...) the things we do—especially in politics and the arts—have no real consequences or impact, they can't scare anyone and change anything, as if they can't really touch the real, which calmly and indifferently persists on its path." (Ibid.) In other words, this means that we are embedded in a historical structure which is by its logic prehistoric. No breakthrough is possible in it. It is a "(...) structure that is full of events and even demands that something must be happening all the time, but at the same time, nothing can happen in it. Whatever we do (critical, subversive) is quickly assimilated into existing relationships of domination."⁴⁰ The end of history paradoxically means being stuck in the mode of the impossibility of the end or in the mode of endlessly repeating the end. The problem, again, is not that we are at the end, but the end is the precise name for something (capitalism) that cannot end.

And is a similar logic of ending which inaugurates the impossibility of ending also not present in contemporary popular culture? Lyotard's notorious announcement of the end of grand narratives—which proclaimed that there is no longer one (scientific, artistic, philosophical) Truth since there exists a multiplicity of equivalent particular/individual truths—can be taken more literally in the context of our discussion. When a grand narrative dies, when grand stories are understood as just another deception, mystification, an ideology *par excellence*, or at least something that we must question from the standpoint of postmodernist relativization of all truth or hierarchies (of knowledge), the possibility of a real ending also dies. The "classic" story dedicated to producing a certain truth (of time, spirit, *Zeitgeist*) was limited, it was totalized, it was conveyed as a completed whole. The postmodern story (the story of the end of the grand narratives), although prolonged in hundreds of parts of the series (and maybe even greater in scope than previous grand narratives), does not offer this kind of conclusion of a narrative or this kind of totalization any more. The end of the grand narratives must, therefore, be understood primarily as the end of the stories with an ending.

The contemporary openness of narrative is linked to the (postmodern) fear of the falsehood of a closed fictional universe, of determinate meaning and of the totality of the whole as such. The series is not the form of great stories but above all the form of great endless and unfinished stories. Opposing the end, whether on account of external circumstances or inherent to the series' "story" itself, carries a different kind of promise than the one a film gave with its ending. The openness of the series promises above all that the narrative will not be concluded, that

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³⁹ Ibid., p.13

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.14

no meaning will be fixed, or that the meaning of the series may change in every moment. Everything is possible in a series: characters can be reinvented or transformed; the story can evolve in any possible direction. If the series ends, then it is usually due to external circumstances (decreased viewership and the consequent lack of funding), and, of course, this ending rarely appears as the closure of a narrative—it usually works just as a part that is somewhat mechanically attached to the series.

From the perspective of the predominance of TV series, we can observe how the attitude toward endings changed in the new century. Now we retroactively perceive Agatha Christie's novels about Hercule Poirot, comics about (super)heroes, and even the newspaper feuilletons, as series. The 20th century was a century when cultural artifacts were still viewed from the point of their closure. Even though TV-series and serial narratives existed then, the paradigm of the end seemed to prevail, so that the fragmentation of the story into many parts was still perceived as a division of material that could form a whole and was destined to end at some point. In the new millennium, the TV-series inaugurates the opposite logic, the logic of progressing from part to part (from episode to episode) where the end remains some distant limit that can never be fully reached. In the 21st century and with the predominance of serial logic, the end becomes the Kantian transcendental idea—an idea that can only be approached infinitely but can never be attained.

That being said, one must emphasize that there is nothing subversive, bold, or liberating in this openness of narrative. The change in attitude towards the end in our era must be seen in the context of the postmodern turn. Modern fiction or narration tells us that today, within the framework of fiction, everything is possible: different fates of heroes, representation of various identities, impossible twists, all kinds of transgressions (direct depictions of violence and sex, etc.). But the greater the possibilities of developing characters and showing digressions or excesses of all kinds, the more this kind of fiction seems ideologically quilted—much more than the classic Hollywood happy end. Everything is possible, only the impossibility itself is no longer possible—it is not possible to conclude a narrative. The ending which can, after all, hint at a new beginning or suggest an alternate paradigm, a new hope, a new idea, or merely offer the exit from the world of fiction, belongs to the film, and the series belongs to an endless continuation of all things possible—except the impossible.

The fact that TV-series is structurally defined by the impossibility of the end, and also by the inability to exit a certain fictional universe or its political paradigm (late capitalism), goes hand in hand with contemporary stories which rarely present a vision of an alternate world, a world that doesn't end in a great catastrophe or simply embodies a dystopia. One should only look at two maybe most notorious examples of successful and popular series of recent years, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and *Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), especially since the first one is a

fantasy adventure and the other a work of science-fiction.

Game of Thrones takes place in a fantasy medieval-like world ruled by various royal houses. For seven seasons we were able to follow the struggles between aristocratic dynasties and their inner conflicts. The series was famous for its unsentimental attitude towards main characters; it prematurely finishes off key figures (for example, to the surprise of the viewers, Ned, the father of the Stark family played by Sean Bean, dies at the end of the first season); it doesn't spare audience the scenes of violence, sexual abuse of all kinds, outrageous acts and incest, etc. The fantasy frame sustained by a brilliant production (beautifully crafted ambiances, costumes, etc.) and a dark atmosphere, was thus primarily intended to illustrate an extremely cruel, relentless world, on some level far more merciless than (our Western) reality.

It is surprising how this narrative which deals with problems of politics, family, sexuality, etc., concludes. The first episodes of last season depicts the resistance of the Starks and other aristocratic families against a common external enemy: the dead from the Kingdom of the Dead in the North. When they are done with these creatures, they are left to fight with the vicious Cersei Lannister—the ruler of King's Landing who has left the rest of dynasties to perish in the fight with the invincible creatures from the North. She now rules her capital and believes she will win the last battle for world domination. Another powerful queen, Daenerys Targaryen, is at first depicted as an enlightened ruler who envisions the liberation of oppressed peoples, including those who live in King's Landing. However, when Cersei doesn't yield power, Daenerys orders a genocide of Cersei's people and ruthlessly liquidates her opponents. In consequence the other members of world aristocracy kill her as a savage Stalin-like totalitarian ruler who has gone too far.

Once the two extreme queens have been successfully defeated, the rest of the families start to build a new world order, dividing the lands and appointing new rulers, so that, at the end, the old aristocratic regime is restored. The ending of the series could thus be seen as a resounding portrayal of the aristocracy back in power which quickly gets rid of anyone who threatens the "natural order" of its established rights and privileges.

The series indeed hints at such an interpretation when it shows the ruling parties discussing the first measures to be taken to restore order—to rebuild whore houses and the armed forces. But it is precisely such a cynical-ironic ending which should make us think: although we are in a fantasy world where all scenarios are possible, the creators chose to end a seemingly bold story with the restoration of the old order.

Moreover, the screenwriters do everything to portray Daenerys as a bewildered fanatic so they can justify the rule of the Starks. A much more interesting dramatic plot (and also much more political, albeit pessimistic) would be to portray Daenerys as a benevolent ruler with the idea of a new, more just political system, but the rest of the families would plot against her to keep their previous power. Incidentally, it is

symptomatic that in the series the role of the ruler is finally entrusted to the handicapped Bran Stark, while the northern kingdom falls under the reign of his sister. These roles, appointed in the spirit of political correctness, are a way the series' creators try to compensate for the political compromise of their ending; viewers should be pleased that the series has addressed the sensibilities of "minorities" (handicapped, women), overlooking how this solution only legitimizes the continuation of systematic exploitation: aristocratic authority over the (poor) masses. But the final message of the series is clear: even in the fantasy world you cannot imagine a new world order—even in a completely made-up world, there is no possibility for a radical change.

The problem with *The Handmaid's Tale* is similar. This dystopian series, an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's famous novel, takes place in Gilead—a country devastated by a major ecological cataclysm which brought the power to radically conservative fundamentalist forces. The rulers of Gilead base their government on all kinds of humiliation, exploitation, and abuse of women. Handmaids are abused the most: being the only fertile women left, they are systematically raped in order to provide the Gilead's establishment with babies. The series follows the novel to some extent, but already in the first season, most faithful to the literary proposition, the story is interrupted by the main character's (June) flashbacks depicting her life before she was forced to abide to the new totalitarianism.

The depiction of the terrible system in Gilead has been seen by many as an allegory of Donald Trump's reign in USA: conservative with hints of totalitarianism, especially when it comes to women and pro-life politics. Angela Nagle nicely points out (in her article "MarketTheology") that the problem of American women today is not that they are forced to give birth but rather that they cannot afford to have as many children as they want.⁴¹ In Nagle's view, the reason so many liberals were content to recognize in this series a depiction of Trump's rule lies in the fact that it is much easier to see simple struggles in such "reassuring fiction," and much more difficult to deal with the anomalies and antagonism of existing economic system that subordinates everything and everyone to the market logic.

If the series has become, in the eyes of many, an illustration of Donald Trump's reign, then June's flashbacks depict a dreamy liberal society of Western present (before Trump). Gilead—a caricature of the right-wing dictatorship—is here opposed to the world of our age,⁴² providing a kind of idealized image of modern liberal democracies where racially mixed couples coexist in harmony, where women obtain once

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41 Cf. Nagle 2017.

42 In light of a current coronavirus pandemic one should be nevertheless careful here. I am referring to the age before the pandemic and its not yet visible global consequences.

male-dominated professions (for example, in science and medicine), where free love of the LGBTQ+ communities is celebrated, etc. Our era is therefore presented as a kind of paradise of identity politics, as a historical period without serious systemic problems and antagonisms where everyone lives peacefully and freely in accordance with their chosen identity.

From the perspective of main character's memories, Gilead can only be understood as an extremely evil phenomenon, born out of thin air, established by pure evil forces, not because of the previous system was beset by ecological and other structural problems. If we put aside the obvious obscene pleasure provided by the detailed depiction of the horrors of the life in Gilead, what strikes the eye is the phantasmatic representation of our present: Jameson's notion of nostalgia for the present gets an exemplary illustration in *Handmaid's Tale*. From the perspective of Gilead's monstrous rule, the liberal modernity of the last thirty years in the West is represented as an idealized past of the peaceful coexistence of diverse identities. The series uses a dystopian vision to reassure us of the unproblematic present, and is in that sense far more ideological than Gilead with all its religious fundamentalism and cruelty.

The message that the two great narratives of our time, *Game of Thrones* and *Handmaid's Tale*, convey is, above all, that we can imagine major dystopias, catastrophic events in the future, horrific governments, etc., but we always see them against the backdrop of our unproblematic and idealized historical moment. The future serves as a vehicle for the nostalgia for the present.

Fantastic narratives in contemporary popular culture thus confirm Jameson's well-known thesis that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to envision a radical change of the existing economic and political system. A real political project might therefore be simply to replace the nostalgia for the present with imagining an alternate future that is not merely catastrophic and dystopian. However, to do this, one should first find the courage to imagine something like the end of the story. If a story can end, so might a history.

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