

9

Film Genres

In Chapter 2 (p. 50), we offered you a choice about how to begin a film. Do you start with an abrupt plunge into action? Or do you try to draw the viewer in slowly? But we didn't say much about what kind of film you were making. If you're making a horror film like *Jurassic Park*, maybe you want an initial scare to galvanize your audience. If you're making more of a science fiction adventure like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, hints at a time-traveling mystery may work better as an opening.

At the start of Chapter 3, we speculated on how you might tell a love-and-marriage story by arranging the events in various patterns. Our purpose was to get you thinking about how the same basic story could be presented in different plots (p. 74). We reflected that starting with an impending wedding and then flashing back to the partners' initial meeting could make the viewer curious about how the people fell in love, or how the couple's first quarrels were smoothed over.

In all these cases, we were assuming that some creative choices about film form depended on the *kind* of film you were making. Take the romantic comedy we asked you to design. To fill out our plot, the two main characters have to meet for the first time. How? One convention of romantic comedy is the "Cute Meet." The characters should first encounter each other in a way that is amusing, perhaps embarrassing. In *Trouble in Paradise*, two sophisticated thieves go on a date, and at one point they realize that they've robbed each other. A man and a woman in *Love Actually* meet when they are both performing in a pornographic film.

Similarly, you need to create some obstacles to the lovers' union. One convention is sometimes called the Big Misunderstanding. In *The Wedding Singer*, the heroine tries on a wedding dress while imagining she's marrying the hero. But when he glimpses her trying it on, he assumes she's preparing to marry someone else. An extreme example is *Tootsie*, in which Michael is disguised as a woman, so that he is forced to lie to Julie about his feelings. The Big Misunderstanding can be multiplied, as it is in *Tootsie*, when men become attracted to Michael-as-Dorothy.

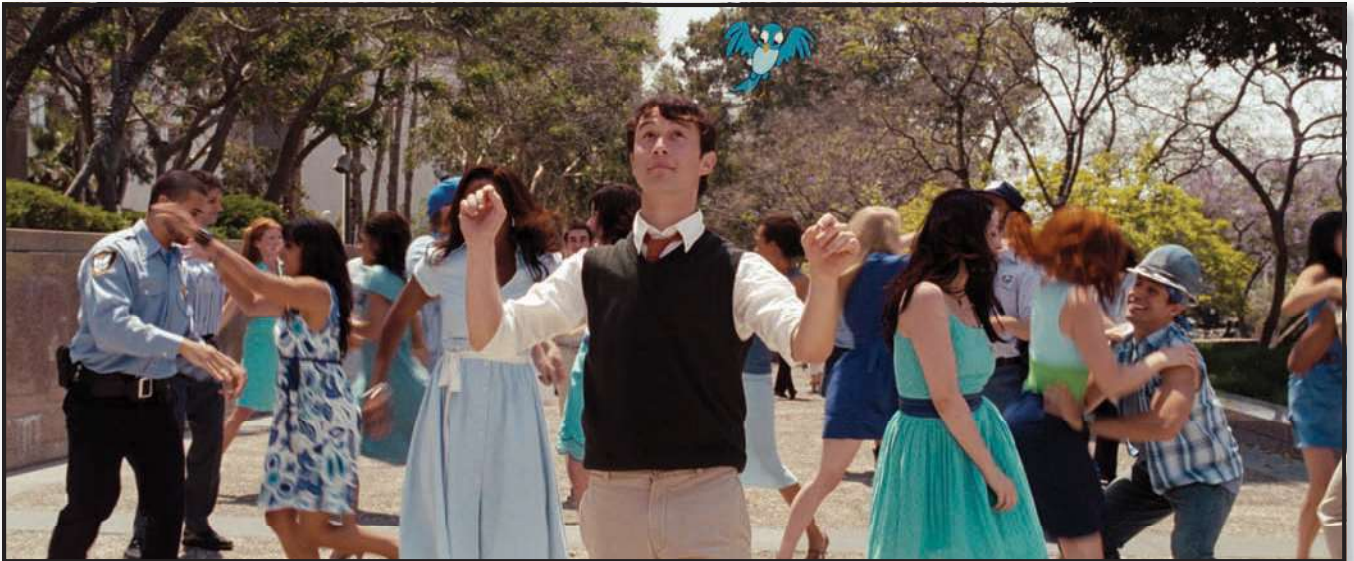
Another way to create an obstacle is to separate the couple physically, either by decision or accident (9.1). To pile on the obstacles to true love, we could add rivals, unreliable friends (handy for bungled messages), advice-giving confidants, or authority figures such as parents and bosses. In plotting the rest of the movie, we'd try to come up with particular scenes that touch some familiar bases (9.2).

But if the film touched every base, it could sink into stale repetition. So we might try to tweak romantic-comedy formulas. Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* delays the Cute Meet until very late in the story. The Big Misunderstanding that divides the couple in *50 First Dates* involves amnesia, so the woman never recognizes the man from one day to the next. *Love Actually* innovates by intertwining many



9.1

9.1–9.2 Romantic comedy conventions. Accidents of timing, with lovers just missing appointments, are frequent in romantic comedies. In *Serendipity*, a fluke of timing and a mischievous kid in an elevator keep Jonathan and Sara from reuniting (9.1). *(500) Days of Summer* uses another convention, the montage sequence with a pop song conveying a lover's mood. The film innovates by treating the hero's daffy elation as contagious, leading to a dance number in a park and a touch of fantasy with the animated blue bird (9.2).



9.2

romances, some of which go nowhere. *Bridesmaids* innovates by incorporating elements of male-centered comedy into romantic plotlines centering on women.

In short, in planning our film we would remember that it falls into a *genre* and that the genre has specific conventions. If we were ambitious, we'd also be trying to come up with some original ways to handle those conventions.

Understanding Genre

The word *genre* is originally French, and it simply means “kind” or “type.” It’s related to another word, *genus*, which is used in the biological sciences to classify groups of plants and animals. When we speak of film genres, we’re indicating certain types of movies. The science fiction film, the action picture, the comedy, the musical, the Western—these are some genres of fictional storytelling cinema.

Scientists can usually place plants or animals within a single genus with confidence, but film genres lack that sort of scientific precision. Instead, genres are convenient terms that develop informally. Filmmakers, industry decision makers, critics, and viewers all share the sense that certain films resemble one another in significant ways. Genres also change over time, as filmmakers invent new twists on old formulas. Although we have solid intuitions about what genre a film falls into, defining the precise boundaries between genres can be tricky, as we’ll see.

When we think about genre, the examples that come to mind are usually those of fictional live-action films. We'll see in the next chapter that there can be genres of other basic sorts of cinema. There are genres of documentary, such as the compilation film and the concert movie. Experimental films and animated films contain genres as well.

Defining a Genre

Popular, mass-market cinema rests on genre filmmaking. Most countries have versions of romance stories, action sagas, supernatural tales, and comedies. Some genres are more local in flavor. Germany has its *Heimatfilm*, the tale of small-town life. The Hindi cinema of India has produced *devotionals*, films centering on the lives of saints and religious figures, as well as *mythologicals*, derived from legend and literary classics. Mexican filmmakers developed the *cabaretera*, a type of melodrama centering on prostitutes.

Sometimes reviewers dismiss genre films as shallow and trivial, assuming them to be simply formulaic: It's only a Western; it's just a horror film. Undoubtedly, many films in all genres are cheaply and unimaginatively made. Yet, because genres are central to most filmmaking, a genre picture can be excellent. *Singin' in the Rain* is a musical, as well as one of the best American films. *Grand Illusion* is a war film. *Psycho* is a thriller. *The Godfather* is a gangster film. On the whole, genre is a category best used to describe and analyze films, not to evaluate them.

Audiences know the genres of their culture very well—so well that genres may structure people's ways of seeing the world. Children may grow up pretending to be superheroes or fairy-tale princesses. Patton Oswalt reports that his high school friends categorized themselves along genre lines: They were Zombies (fans of Goth culture and metal rock), Spaceships (high-tech gadgets, futuristic utopias), or Wastelands (punk rock, apocalyptic fiction). Since the Internet allows everyone to learn as much as they want about anything in popular culture, everyone can be a genre connoisseur, a passionate and knowledgeable fan.

“I've got news for you—pop culture is nerd culture.”
—Patton Oswalt, comedian and actor

What Makes a Genre? Everyone seems reasonably agreed on what genres exist and what films fall into them, but it's not clear how we arrive at that consensus. What makes us think that dozens or hundreds of films belong to the same category?

Most scholars agree that no genre can be defined in a single hard-and-fast way. In some genres the films share subjects or themes. A gangster film centers on urban organized crime. A science fiction film features a technology beyond the reach of contemporary science. A fantasy film typically involves magical powers and supernatural creatures.

Subject matter or theme isn't so central to defining other genres. Musicals are recognizable chiefly by their manner of presentation: singing, dancing, or both. The detective film is partly defined by the plot pattern of an investigation. And some genres are defined by the distinctive emotional effect they aim for: amusement in comedies, tension in suspense films.

Even when we have a firm sense of what a particular genre is, we may find films that fit the category to different degrees. Typically, we think of a genre as consisting of clear cases and fuzzier examples. *Singin' in the Rain* is a prime example of a musical, but David Byrne's *True Stories*, with its ironic presentation of musical numbers, is more of a borderline case. And an audience's sense of the core cases can change over history. For modern audiences, a core example of the thriller would be *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, whereas for audiences of the 1950s, a prime example would have been something less gory, like Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

Sometimes a film seems to straddle two genres. Is *Groundhog Day* a romantic comedy or a fantasy? Is *Psycho* a slasher film or a mystery thriller? Steven Spielberg's

War of the Worlds combines horror, science fiction, and family melodrama. As we'll see, mixing genres is one important source of change in film history.

Subgenres You've probably noticed that some genre labels are very broad. The comedy category includes slapstick comedies such as *Animal House*, romantic comedies such as *The Proposal*, parodies such as the Austin Powers series, and raunchy male-oriented comedies such as *The Hangover*. Similarly, melodrama, as thought of today, encompasses stories of crises in marriage (*In the Bedroom*), dysfunctional families (*Magnolia*), and doomed love affairs (*The Fault in Our Stars*).

For this reason, it's useful to have the idea of *subgenres* to refer to distinct and fairly long-lasting types within a genre. There are science fiction films involving interplanetary travel (sometimes mockingly called "space opera"), alien invasions of earth, biological experiments (like *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*), or future societies, like the worlds of *Elysium* and *THX-1138*. These subgenres will have distinct conventions of their own and perhaps appeal to different viewers. Again, sometimes critics call our attention to subgenres. Reviewers have popularized terms like "dystopias" for bleak science fiction futures and "buddy films" for action movies like *21 Jump Street* that display male bonding.

The Usefulness of Genre Categories Everyone who comes into contact with cinema relies on ideas of genre. Genre concepts help producers decide what films to make. When science fiction and fantasy films are popular, executives are likelier to green-light projects in those genres. The massive success of young-adult fantasy fiction, crystallized in the Harry Potter franchise, led many studios to finance costly but unprofitable ventures into the same territory (*Inkheart*, *The Golden Compass*). During the 1960s studios backed *The Sound of Music* and other big-budget musicals because they attracted a wide audience. Such lavish projects are risky today, and many have failed, even when they were based on acclaimed Broadway shows (such as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Rent*). Contemporary musicals tend to be lower-budget items such as *Mamma Mia!* and the *Step Up* series.

Advertising tends to pinpoint a film's genre. The poster for *Twilight: Eclipse* proclaims: "Vampires. Werewolves. Humans. It's time to choose a side." Coming-attractions trailers and the film's poster design usually leave no doubt about what genre the film is in, the better to target fans. Critics and entertainment reporters play a role in this promotional process. To call *(500) Days of Summer* "a romantic comedy that remembers that the best romances have a touch of the bittersweet" not only announces what genre the film belongs to but also expresses an evaluation of how well it fulfills certain conventions.

For viewers, genre categories are a part of their tastes. Every moviegoer likes some genres, tolerates others, and loathes others. Fans may try to see everything in a genre they love and to learn as much as possible about their favorites. They may exchange information via magazines, websites, or conventions. Peter Jackson and Guillermo del Toro started out as passionate genre geeks, and their intimate knowledge of horror and fantasy traditions pervades the films they direct.

Analyzing a Genre

Both filmmakers and film viewers, then, share some general notions about the types of films that compete for our attention. We largely agree on the genre's conventions, the kinds of recurring elements we picked out in romantic comedies. For the filmmaker, the conventions are materials they work with. For the viewer, conventions shape our expectations about what we're likely to see and hear.

Conventions of Story and Style Genre conventions often center on plot patterns. We anticipate an investigation in a mystery film; revenge plotlines are common in Westerns; a musical finds ways to provide song-and-dance situations.



9.3



9.4

9.3–9.4 Genre-specific techniques. An aggressive depth composition would usually be out of place in a musical or romantic comedy, but it suits the tension developing in a police interrogation in *The Secret in Their Eyes* (9.3). In *The Exorcist*, a single streetlight picks out the priest as he arrives at night, while light streams from the room where the possessed girl is confined (9.4).



9.5 Hollywood conventions elsewhere. Hineer Saleem's *My Sweet Pepper Land* shows a Kurdish lawman trying to bring peace to a war-torn border town. The film draws on classic Western iconography—threatening outlaws on horses, the hero poised to draw his pistol—to depict a showdown.

The gangster film usually centers on the gangster's rise and fall as he struggles against police and rival gangs. We expect a biographical film (“biopic”) such as *Lincoln* or *The Theory of Everything* to trace significant episodes in an actual person's life. In a cop thriller, certain characters are conventional: the shifty informer, the comic sidekick, the exasperated captain who despairs of getting the squad to follow procedure.

Other genre conventions are more thematic, involving broad meanings that are summoned again and again. The Hong Kong martial-arts film commonly celebrates loyalty and obedience to one's teacher. A standard theme of the gangster film has been the price of criminal success, with the gangster's rise to power portrayed as a hardening into egotism and brutality. The screwball comedy traditionally sets up a thematic opposition between a stiff, snobbish social milieu and characters' urges for freedom and innocent zaniness. A melodrama such as *One Day* suggests the cost of failing to recognize your true love.

Still other genre conventions involve stylistic patterns. Techniques that would be jarring in one genre may become common in another (9.3). Low-key and high-contrast lighting is rare in a musical or romantic comedy but it's standard in the horror film and the thriller (9.4). In an action picture, we expect rapid cutting and slow-motion violence. In the melodrama, an emotional twist may be underscored by a sudden burst of poignant music. That sort of music would be out of place in a horror film, which might instead offer us a grating burst of sound effects.

Genre Iconography As a visual medium, cinema can also define genres through conventional *iconography*. A genre's iconography consists of recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film.

Objects and settings often furnish iconography for a genre. A close-up of a tommy gun lifted out of a 1920s Ford would probably be enough to identify a scene as being from a gangster movie, while a shot of a long, curved sword hanging from a kimono would place us in the world of the samurai. The war film takes place in battle-scarred landscapes, the backstage musical in theaters and clubs, the space-travel film in starships and on distant planets.

Film industries outside America can draw on Hollywood iconography (9.5). Certain film stars can become iconographic as well—Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand for the musical, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood for the Western, Arnold Schwarzenegger for the action picture, Steve Carell and Seth Rogen for comedy, Amy Adams and Sandra Bullock for romantic drama and comedy.

By knowing conventions, viewers have a clear pathway into the film. Our expectations are set, and the film can communicate information economically. When we meet the weak sheriff, we strongly suspect that he will not stand up to the outlaw gang. We can then focus attention on the cowboy hero as he is slowly drawn into helping the townspeople defend themselves.

Audiences expect the genre film to offer something familiar, but they demand something new as well. So a film can revise or even reject the conventions associated with its genre. *Bugsy Malone* is a gangster musical in which children play all

the traditional adult roles. *2001: A Space Odyssey* violated several conventions of the science fiction genre: beginning with a lengthy sequence set in prehistoric times, synchronizing classical music to outer-space action, and ending with an enigmatically symbolic fetus drifting through space. Some reviewers objected to the Tesla machine in *The Prestige*, claiming that it violated the conventions of a historical mystery film. But what one critic called “a sudden, desperate leap into fantasy” can be seen as an effort to update traditional backstage conflicts for an audience fascinated by fantasy and science fiction.

By blending or varying or even rejecting genre conventions, filmmakers force viewers to reset their expectations and engage with the film in fresh ways. (See “Creative Decisions in a Contemporary Genre.”) The interplay of convention and innovation, familiarity and novelty, is central to the genre film.

“Fixed forms can yield infinite, ingenious variations.”
—Joyce Carol Oates, novelist

Genre History

Because filmmakers frequently play with conventions, genres change constantly. A comedy from the 1920s is likely to be very different from one in the 1960s. Across history, the conventions of genres and subgenres get recast, and by mixing conventions from different genres, filmmakers create new possibilities surprisingly often.

Origins Many film genres begin by borrowing conventions from other media. The melodrama has clear antecedents in stage plays and novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Types of comedy can be traced back to stage farces or comic novels. Musicals draw on both musical comedies and variety shows.

Yet the film medium always reshapes an adopted genre. For example, Western novels were already popular in the 19th century when cinema was invented. Yet Westerns did not become a film genre until after 1908. Why the delay? Westerns need outdoor landscapes. As films got longer (up to roughly 15 minutes) and studios hired actors on contract, filmmakers may have been encouraged to shoot more on location. Using rural American landscapes in turn fostered stories involving the frontier, and the Western quickly became a tremendously popular genre. It was also a uniquely American genre, giving U.S. films a way to compete in the growing international market. In such ways film genres acquire their own history, combining borrowings from other arts and distinctive innovations.

One important pressure on genres is technology. The musical film crystallized with the arrival of synchronized sound. Fantasy and science fiction became popular partly because filmmakers had digital tools that could conjure up unreal creatures and imaginary landscapes. Digital special effects have also enabled filmmakers to build photorealistic worlds for comic-book superheroes (1.33, 1.34).

Genres and Cycles Once a genre and its subgenres are launched, there seems to be no predictable trajectory. We might expect that the earliest films in the genre are the purest instances, with genre mixing coming at a late stage. But genre mixing can take place very soon. *Whoopie!* (1930), a musical from the beginning of talking pictures, is also a Western. *Just Imagine* (1930), one of the first sound science fiction films, contains a comic song. Some historians have also speculated that a genre inevitably passes from a phase of maturity to one of parody, when it begins to mock its own conventions. Yet an early Western, *The Great K & A Train Robbery* (1926), is an all-out parody of its own genre. Early slapstick comedies often take moviemaking as their subject and ruthlessly poke fun at comic conventions, as in Charlie Chaplin’s farcical *His New Job* (1915).

Over history, genres rise and fall in prestige and popularity. The result is the phenomenon known as *cycles*. A cycle is a batch of related genre films that enjoys intense popularity and influence over a fairly brief period.



A CLOSER LOOK

Creative Decisions in a Contemporary Genre

The Crime Thriller as Subgenre

The thriller, like the comedy, is a very broad category, with many subgenres. There are supernatural thrillers (*The Sixth Sense*), political thrillers (*Munich*), and spy thrillers (*The Bourne Ultimatum*). Many others revolve around crime—planned, committed, or thwarted.

Using few special effects and set in contemporary urban locations, crime thrillers can be comparatively cheap to produce. They offer showy roles to actors, and they allow writers and directors to display their ingenuity in playing with the audience's expectations. Although the genre has fuzzy edges, we can chart some core cases by considering the ways in which filmmakers have exploited narrative conventions of the genre.

Four Character Roles A crime is at the center of the thriller plot, and usually four sorts of characters are involved. There are the victims, the more or less innocent bystanders, the forces of justice, and the lawbreakers. Typically, the filmmaker decides to organize the film's narration around one or two of these character roles.

In *Double Jeopardy*, a husband disappears and his wife is found guilty of his murder. In prison, she discovers that he is alive and hiding out with his mistress. Released on parole, she sets out to find her son, but she is pursued by her hard-bitten parole officer. Suspense arises from the double chase and the cat-and-mouse game played by the desperate husband and his embittered “widow,” who can now murder him with impunity. The plot action and narration are organized around the victimized wife. Her vengeful pursuit propels the action forward, and the narration favors her, restricting us largely to what she believes and eventually learns.

Double Jeopardy concentrates on an innocent person who is the target of the crime, and this is one common pattern in the person-in-peril subgenre. At some point, the victim usually realizes that he or she cannot react passively and must fight back, as in *Duel*, *The Fugitive*, *Breakdown*, and *Panic Room* (9.6). In *Ransom*, the father of a kidnapped boy refuses to pay the ransom, offering it as a bounty on the gang holding his son.

Alternatively, the filmmaker can center the plot on an innocent bystander dropped into a struggle between the criminal, the victims, and the forces of justice. In *Die Hard*, an off-duty detective is accidentally trapped in a hostage crisis, so he must fight both police and thieves to rescue the hostages. *The Ghost Writer* thrusts a freelance biographer into a murderous political conspiracy. In *Cellular*, through an accidental phone call, a beach idler must locate a woman who's been kidnapped.

Thematically, this innocent-bystander plot pattern often emphasizes characters discovering resources within

themselves—courage, cleverness, even a capacity for violence. *Collateral* centers on a taxi driver forced to chauffeur a paid killer from target to target. In the course of the night, Max must abandon his fantasy of a desert island and face the sordid reality of the city he lives in (p. 5).

Instead of spotlighting the victim or an innocent bystander, the filmmaker may build the plot around the forces of justice. The action then typically becomes an investigation, in which police or private detectives seek to capture the criminal or prevent a crime. A classic example is *The Big Heat*, in which a rogue cop seeks to avenge the death of his wife by capturing the mobsters responsible. *The Bodyguard*, *In the Line of Fire*, and *Non-Stop* present protagonists seeking to forestall a threatened murder. The contemporary serial-killer plot tends to emphasize police pursuit, offering only glimpses of the criminal. *Se7en* follows two policemen in their efforts to untangle a string of murders emblematic of the seven deadly sins. When a plot highlights the investigators, themes of the fallibility of justice tend to come to the fore. In *L.A. Confidential*, three ill-matched detectives join forces to reveal how official corruption has led to the murders of prostitutes.

Alternatively, the plot of a crime thriller can put the criminal center stage. Perhaps the protagonist is a mild-mannered murderer, as in *The Suspect*, or a paid killer, as in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai*. Another variant is the heist or caper film, showcasing a tightly orchestrated robbery. This subgenre became a mainstay in the 1950s, with *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Bob Le Flambeur*, and *Rififi*, and it made a comeback in recent years with the *Ocean's Eleven* series. There is also the avenging outlaw, as in *Payback* and *Drive*, but there's also the dishonor-among-thieves variant, in which criminals betray one another. *A Simple Plan* portrays nervous amateur thieves, whereas *Jackie Brown* traces an expanding web of double-crosses.

Sometimes the filmmaker will devote equal time to the police and the criminal, a strategy which can build up thematic parallels. In John Woo's *The Killer*, a hit man tries to quit the business, aided by his weak mentor. At the same time, we follow the investigation conducted by a police detective, who's also under the sway of an older colleague. Michael Mann's *Heat* creates strong parallels between cop and robber, each having problems with the women in their lives. In both *The Killer* and *Heat*, the opposing characters recognize their kinship. In contrast, *Fargo* plays on the sharp differences between the sunny common sense of the policewoman and an almost pitifully blundering kidnapper.

Narration's Effects Thrillers obviously aim to thrill us—that is, to startle, shock, and maintain suspense. How do we distinguish them from horror films, which

seek similar effects? Horror aims to disgust as well. The central character of a horror film is a monster that is both fearsome and repellent. By contrast, a thriller need not involve disgust. The villain may be quite attractive (the suave men in *Red Eye* and *Primal Fear*, the enticing women in *Red Rock West* and *Gone Girl*). While suspense and surprise are important in all cinematic storytelling, these responses dominate the crime thriller. The plots highlight clever plans, still more clever blocking moves, and sudden coincidences that upset carefully timed schemes. Tracing out a plan or following an investigation can yield suspense (Will the criminal succeed? How?), while unexpected twists trigger surprise, forcing us to reconsider the odds of the criminal's success.

More specifically, the thriller's effects depend on which characters are highlighted by the plot and narration. If the protagonist is a victim or a bystander, the suspense we feel comes from the likelihood that he or she will be harmed. If the hero is a figure of justice, we become concerned that she or he will not be able to protect the innocents. When the investigator doesn't have the police force as backup, anxiety can intensify: the unauthorized detectives of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* must fight on their own.

When the narration centers on the criminal, how can the filmmaker arouse the viewer's sympathy for him or her? One way is to rank the lawbreakers on a scale of immorality. The most sympathetic criminals will be ones who are trying to give up their crime career (*The Killer*) or ones who oppose even more immoral figures. The heroes of *Out of Sight* are easy-going, good-humored thieves ripping off a white-collar embezzler and a band of crazed killers. Sometimes criminal protagonists can stretch our sympathies in challenging directions to frighten. We might admire the bravado of the *Ocean's Eleven* gang, but we aren't so comfortable with the ingratiating psychopath of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In *A Simple Plan*, basically good people turn crooked after a momentary weakness. Even though they have done wrong, we may find ourselves hoping that they succeed in their crime. As Dostoevsky showed in *Crime and Punishment*, a crime tale can make us think about what forces drive people to murder (9.7).

Innovations in the Thriller Like any genre or subgenre, the crime thriller can mix with others. It blends with the horror film in *From Dusk Till Dawn* and with



9.6

9.6, 9.7 Crime thriller: Victims and victimizer. Innocents in jeopardy: an unusual camera position for a classic thriller situation in *Panic Room* (9.6). In *A History of Violence*, Tom Stall, quiet owner of a small-town diner, is revealed to have a killer's instincts (9.7).



9.7



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Continued

science fiction in *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report*. *Rush Hour* and *The Other Guys* push the police investigation toward farce, while *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* piles up absurd coincidences around a quartet of petty crooks who steal ganja and money from a cutthroat gang.

The thriller's emphasis on suspense and surprise encourages the filmmaker to mislead the audience, and this invites experiments with narrative form. Hitchcock pioneered this tendency by suddenly switching protagonists in *Psycho* and by letting two couples' lives intertwine in *Family Plot*. Many films whose plots play with story time (see pp. 82–84) are crime thrillers. A crime in the story may be replayed in the plot, showing different clues each time (*Snake Eyes*) or presenting different points of view (*The Killing*, *Jackie Brown*; see pp. 287–290). *Memento* tells its investigation story in reverse order. *The Usual Suspects* creates an unreliable flashback narration, at the end turning a minor character into a major player. *Bound* consists largely of flashbacks launched from a cryptic present-time situation—a woman tied and gagged in a closet. As the crime story is revealed, we have reason to suspect that at some phase the robbery scheme she and her partner have devised will fail.

Independent filmmakers have found that audiences will accept storytelling experiments when packaged in a crime thriller. For other independents, the subgenre offers a structure on which they can hang their personal concerns. David Mamet's interest in how people conceal

their true motives surfaces in *House of Games* and *The Spanish Prisoner*. Joel and Ethan Coen set *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* in bleak, small-town locales populated with losers lusting for one big chance. David Lynch uses the conventions of suspense and surprise to summon up a dread-filled atmosphere that may never receive rational explanation. In *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*, the crimes are ominous but obscure, the criminals nightmarish grotesques, and the innocents not wholly innocent.

Because crime thrillers can be shot fairly cheaply, the subgenre has offered Hollywood's rivals a path to international distribution. Hong Kong has exported many such items, notably *Infernal Affairs* (the source for *The Departed*) and more experimental entries such as *The Mission* and *PTU*. Comparable films have come from France (*La Femme Nikita*, *Polisse*), Germany (*Dreileben*), Britain (*Snatch*, *Sexy Beast*), Spain (*Live Flesh*), Japan (*Sonatine*), Argentina (*The Secret in Their Eyes*), Korea (*Nowhere to Hide*, *Chaser*), and Thailand (*Bangkok Dangerous*). Audiences worldwide share similar expectations about thrillers, and filmmakers can innovate by injecting local cultural traditions into the narrative and thematic conventions. Two of our sample analyses, of *Breathless* (pp. 418–422) and of *Chungking Express* (pp. 428–432), focus on non-Hollywood films that imaginatively shift the expectations we bring to the crime thriller.

Cycles typically occur when a successful film triggers a burst of imitations. *The Godfather* unleashed a brief spate of gangster movies. During the 1970s, there was a cycle of disaster movies (*Earthquake*, *The Poseidon Adventure*). A cycle of fantasy adventures including the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the *Harry Potter* series, and the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise, emerged in the early 2000s. Later there developed a cycle of romantic vampire films spearheaded by *Twilight* (2008), then another cycle of dystopian fantasies like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*.

Often what seems a short-term cycle has persisted so long that it becomes a well-entrenched subgenre. Few observers would have predicted that the horror cycle that emerged with *Halloween* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* would have lasted past the 1980s, but it earned the label of “slasher film” and was frequently revived, notably in the *Scream* series. Action movies centering on comic-book superheroes formed a small cycle in the 1980s but became a flourishing subgenre in the 2000s with *Batman Begins*, *Spider-Man*, *Iron Man*, the X-Men series, and many other entries.

Because cycles and subgenres can emerge at any time, we should expect that no genre ever really dies. A genre may pass out of fashion for a time, only to return in updated garb. The sword-and-sandal epic set in ancient times was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. It virtually disappeared until Ridley Scott revived it to considerable acclaim in 2000 with *Gladiator*, inspiring a cycle that included *Troy*, *Alexander*, and *300*.

Genre Mixing A genre may also change by mixing its conventions with those of another genre. In 1979, *Alien* proved innovative because it fused science fiction conventions with those of the contemporary horror film, centering on a monster stalking its victims one by one. The rusting spaceship became the futuristic equivalent of the old dark house full of unseen dangers. By the 2000s, the science fiction/horror blend had become conventional, as in *Pitch Black* and *Doom*.

The musical blends easily with other genres. There have been musical melodramas, such as *Yentl* and two versions of *A Star Is Born*. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* created the musical horror movie. During the 1930s and 1940s, singing cowboys such as Gene Autry were popular, and the Western musical was revived in the 1960s with *Cat Ballou*. Likewise, comedy can merge with any other genre. Mel Brooks and Woody Allen have created comedies out of the conventions of science fiction (*Spaceballs*, *Sleeper*), Westerns (*Blazing Saddles*), outlaw films (*Take the Money and Run*), thrillers and detective stories (*High Anxiety*, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*), even historical epics (*History of the World Part I*, *Love and Death*). Comic touches can lighten dramas, and if the proportions are somewhat equal, we have what some call a “dramedy” or a “seriocomedy” (9.8). The combinations seem almost limitless. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, bumbling escaped prisoners accidentally become country singing stars, and the result is at once an outlaw movie, a social protest film, a slapstick comedy, and a musical.

Filmmakers understand that mixing genres is a good way to innovate. The romantic comedy is typically associated with female audiences, but in the late 2000s some producers believed that adding some elements of raunchy comedy would attract men. The result was such films as *The Wedding Crashers* and *Knocked Up*. According to one producer: “Fundamentally, they’re romantic comedies, but the concepts are very male-appropriate.” *Guardians of the Galaxy* found success by treating save-the-universe space opera as a comic premise.

Filmmakers may borrow from other cultures too. The Japanese swordplay film, based on virtuoso combat and themes of honor and revenge, has blended well with the Western. Sergio Leone based his Italian Western *For a Fistful of Dollars* loosely on the plot of Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo*, and the same Japanese director’s *Seven Samurai* provided the basis for the Hollywood Western *The Magnificent Seven*. Similarly, widespread fan interest in Hong Kong movies during the 1980s and 1990s led the Wachowski brothers to mix high-tech science fiction effects with martial-arts choreography in *The Matrix*.

The fact that genres can intermingle doesn’t mean that there are no distinctions among them. *The Matrix* is a hybrid, but we can still differentiate standard Hong Kong martial-arts films from standard Hollywood science fiction tales. Although we can’t pin down a single description of a genre that will apply for all time, we can recognize that at any moment in film history, filmmakers, critics, and audiences agree closely on the genres in play. Again, there are usually core examples, ones that makers and viewers agree are clear-cut instances, as well as more peripheral or mixed cases.



9.8 Drama plus comedy. The serious drama at the core of *Barbershop*—whether a son should sustain his father’s business for the good of the community—is lightened by sight gags, inventive insults, and scabrous monologues, like Eddie’s rants about Rosa Parks and other African-American icons.

“So it’s kind of a psychic political thriller comedy with a heart.” “With a heart. And not unlike *Ghost* meets *Manchurian Candidate*.”
—Producer and screenwriter in the opening scene of Robert Altman’s *The Player*

The Social Functions of Genres

The fact that every genre has fluctuated in popularity reminds us that genres are tightly bound to cultural factors. Why do audiences enjoy seeing the same conventions over and over?

Rituals and Ambivalence Many film scholars believe that genres are ritualized dramas resembling holiday celebrations—ceremonies that are satisfying because they reaffirm cultural values in a predictable way. At the end of *Saving Private Ryan* or *You’ve Got Mail*, who can resist a surge of reassuring satisfaction that cherished values—self-sacrificing heroism, the desirability of romantic love—have been validated? And just as one can see these ceremonies as helping us forget the more disturbing aspects of the world, the familiar characters and plots of genres may also serve to distract the audience from real social problems.

Some scholars would argue that genres go further and actually exploit ambivalent social values and attitudes. The gangster film, for instance, makes it possible for audiences to relish the mobster’s swagger while still feeling satisfied when he receives his punishment. Seen from this standpoint, genre conventions arouse emotion by touching on deep social uncertainties but then channel those emotions into approved attitudes.

Because genre films promise something new based on something familiar, they may also respond quickly to broad social trends. During the economic depression of the 1930s, for instance, the Warner Bros. musical films introduced social commentary into stage numbers. In *Gold Diggers of 1933*, a singer asks the Depression-era audience to remember “my forgotten man,” the unemployed war veteran. More recently, Hollywood producers have tried to suit romantic comedies to the tastes of career women with the *Sex and the City* films and Sandra Bullock vehicles such as *The Proposal* and *Two Weeks Notice*. In Chapter 11, we consider how another musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, seems tailored to the home-front audience of World War II.

Genres as Social Reflection It’s one thing to suggest that filmmakers deliberately address their films to current concerns or tastes. But some scholars suggest that at different points in history, the stories, themes, values, or imagery of the genre harmonize with public attitudes in a more involuntary fashion. For instance, don’t the science fiction films of the 1950s, with hydrogen bombs creating Godzilla and other monsters, reveal fears of nuclear technology run amok? Even if the filmmakers didn’t knowingly put such messages in their work, perhaps the success of the films reflected what the audiences felt. The hypothesis is that genre conventions, repeated from film to film, reflected the audience’s pervasive doubts or anxieties. Many film scholars would argue that this approach helps explain why genres vary in popularity. As the public anxieties change, new genres will reflect more up-to-date concerns.

Social processes can be reflected in genre innovations as well. Ripley, the female protagonist of *Aliens*, is a courageous, even aggressive, warrior who also has a warm, maternal side (9.9, 9.10). This was something of a novelty in the science fiction genre. Many commentators saw Ripley as a product of attitudes derived from the women’s movement of the 1970s. Feminist groups argued that women could be seen as active and competent without losing positive qualities associated with feminine behavior, such as gentleness and sympathy. As these ideas spread through mainstream media and social opinion, films such as *Aliens* could turn traditionally masculine roles over to female characters. Perhaps the filmmakers didn’t intend to send this message, but the attitudes in the films could be seen as harmonizing with new conceptions of gender roles.

Such ways of looking at genre are usually called *reflectionist*, because they assume that genres reflect social attitudes, as if in a mirror. Some critics would object that reflectionist readings can become oversimplified. If we look closely at a genre film, we usually discover complexities that nuance a reflectionist account. For instance, if we look beyond Ripley, the protagonist of *Aliens*, we find that all the characters lie along a continuum running between “masculine” and “feminine” values, and the survivors of the adventure, male or female, seem to blend the best of



9.9



9.10

9.9–9.10 Genre and gender roles: Warrior and mother. In *Aliens*, Ripley learns how to use a weapon (9.9), but she can also comfort the orphaned girl the soldiers find (9.10).

both gender identities. Moreover, often what seems to be social reflection is simply the film industry's effort to exploit the day's headlines. A genre film may reflect not the audience's hopes and fears but the filmmakers' guess about what might sell.

Four Genres

Whether we study a genre's history, its cultural functions, or its representations of social trends, conventions remain our best point of departure. To illustrate how we might analyze conventions and their change across history, we look at four significant genres of American filmmaking.

The Western

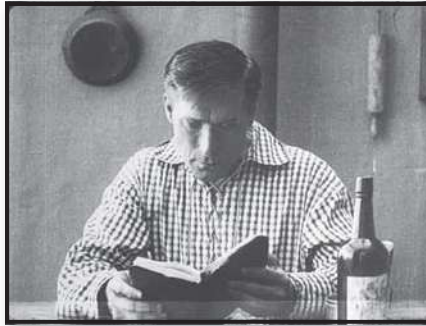
The Western is one of the earliest film genres, having become established in the 1910s. It is partly based on historical reality, since in the American West there were cowboys, outlaws, settlers, and tribes of Native Americans. Films also derived their portrayal of the frontier from songs, popular fiction, and Wild West shows. Early actors sometimes mirrored this blend of realism and myth: Cowboy star Tom Mix had been a Texas Ranger, a Wild West performer, and a champion rodeo rider.

Quite early, the central theme of the genre became the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier. From the East and the city come the settlers who want to raise families, the schoolteachers who aim to spread learning, and the bankers and government officials. In the vast natural spaces, by contrast, people outside Eastern civilization thrive—not only the Native Americans but also outlaws, trappers and traders, and greedy cattle barons.

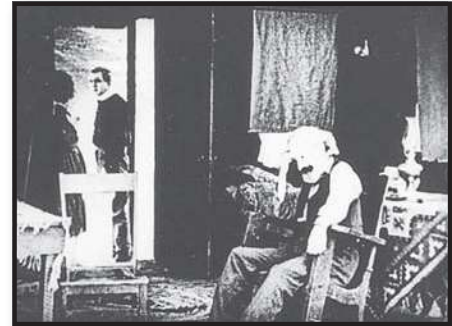
Iconography reinforces this basic duality. The covered wagon and the railroad are set against the horse and canoe; the schoolhouse and church contrast with the lonely campfire in the hills. As in most genres, costume is iconographically significant too. The settlers' starched dresses and Sunday suits stand out against American Indians' tribal garb and the cowboys' jeans and Stetsons.

Interestingly, the typical Western hero stands between the two thematic poles. At home in the wilderness but naturally inclined toward justice and kindness, the cowboy is often poised between savagery and civilization. William S. Hart, one of the most popular early Western stars, crystallized the character of the "good bad man" as a common protagonist. In *Hell's Hinges* (1916), a minister's sister tries to reform him; one shot represents the pull between two ways of life (9.11).

9.11–9.12 Hero in between. The “good bad” hero of *Hell’s Hinges* reads the Bible, a bottle of whiskey at his elbow (9.11). In *Straight Shooting*, the hero stands framed in the farmhouse doorway, halfway between the lure of civilization and the call of the wilderness (9.12).



9.11



9.12

The in-between position of the hero affects common Western plots. The protagonist may start out on the side of the lawless, or he may simply stand apart from the conflict. In either case, he becomes uneasily attracted to the life offered by the newcomers to the frontier. Eventually, the hero decides to join the forces of order, helping them fight hired gunmen, bandits, or whatever the film presents as a threat to stability and progress.

As the genre developed, a social ideology governed its conventions. White populations’ progress westward was considered a historic mission, while the conquered indigenous cultures were usually treated as primitive and savage. Western films are full of racist stereotypes of Native Americans and Hispanics. On a few occasions, filmmakers treated Native American characters as tragic figures, ennobled by their closeness to nature but facing the extinction of their way of life. The best early example is probably *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920).

Nor was the genre always optimistic about taming the wilderness. The hero’s eventual commitment to civilization’s values was often tinged with regret for his loss of freedom. In John Ford’s *Straight Shooting* (1917), Cheyenne Harry (played by Harry Carey) is hired by a villainous rancher to evict a farmer, but he falls in love with the farmer’s daughter and vows to reform. Rallying the farmers, Harry helps defeat the rancher. Still, he is reluctant to settle down with Molly (9.12).

Within this set of values, a great many conventional scenes became standardized—the Indians’ attack on forts or wagon trains, the shy courting of a woman by the rough-hewn hero, the hero’s discovery of a burned settler’s shack, the outlaws’ robbery of a bank or stagecoach, the climactic gunfight on dusty town streets. Writers and directors could distinguish their films by novel handlings of these elements. In Sergio Leone’s flamboyant Italian Westerns, conventions are stretched out in minute detail and amplified to a huge scale (9.13).

“I knew Wyatt Earp. In the very early silent days, a couple of times a year he would come up to visit pals, cowboys he knew in Tombstone; a lot of them were in my company. I think I was an assistant prop boy then and I used to give him a chair and a cup of coffee, and he told me about the fight at the O.K. Corral. So in *My Darling Clementine*, we did it exactly the way it had been. They didn’t just walk up the street and start banging away at each other; it was a clever military manoeuvre.”

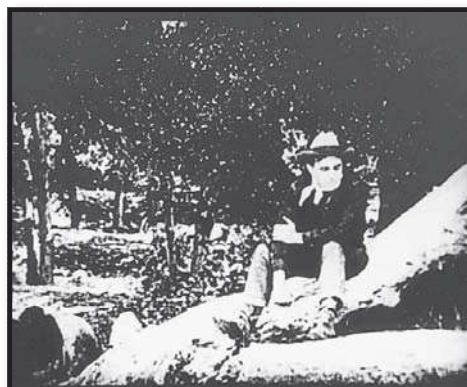
—John Ford, director, *Stagecoach*



9.13 Showdown in an arena. The three-way shootout at the climax of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) is filmed to resemble a bullfight.



9.14



9.15

9.14–9.15 The solitary hero. During the closing shot of *The Searchers* (9.14), John Wayne repeats Harry Carey's characteristic gripping of his forearm in *Straight Shooting* (9.15).

There were narrative and thematic innovations as well. After such liberal Westerns of the 1950s as *Broken Arrow* (1950), indigenous cultures began to be treated with more respect. In *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), the conventional thematic values were reversed, depicting Indian life as civilized and white society as marauding. Some films played up the hero's uncivilized side, showing him perilously out of control (*Winchester 73*, 1950), or even psychopathic (*The Left-Handed Gun*, 1958). The heroes of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) would have been considered unvarnished villains in early Westerns.

The new complexity of the protagonist is evident in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). After a Comanche raid on his brother's homestead, Ethan Edwards sets out to find his kidnapped niece Debbie. He is driven primarily by family loyalty but also by his secret love for his brother's wife, who has been raped and killed by the raiders. Ethan's sidekick, a young man who is part Cherokee, realizes that Ethan plans not to rescue Debbie but to kill her for becoming a Comanche wife. Ethan's fierce racism and raging vengeance culminate in a raid on the Comanche village. At the film's close, Ethan returns to civilization but pauses on the cabin's threshold before turning back to the desert (9.14).

The shot eerily recalls the doorway compositions of Ford's *Straight Shooting* (9.12); John Wayne even repeats Harry Carey's characteristic gripping of his forearm (9.15). Now, however, it seems that the drifting cowboy is condemned to live outside civilization because he cannot tame his grief and hatred. More savage than citizen, he seems condemned, as he says of the souls of dead Comanches, "to wander forever between the winds." This bitter treatment of a perennial theme illustrates how drastically a genre's conventions can change across history.

The Horror Film

Whereas the Western is most clearly defined by subject, theme, and iconography, the horror genre is most recognizable by the emotional effect it tries to arouse. The horror film aims to shock, disgust, repel—in short, to horrify. This impulse is what shapes the genre's other conventions.

What can horrify us? Typically, a monster. In the horror film, the monster is a dangerous breach of nature, a violation of our normal sense of what's possible. The monster might be unnaturally large, as King Kong is. The monster might violate the boundary between the dead and the living, as ghosts, vampires, and zombies do. The monster might be an ordinary human who is transformed, as when Dr. Jekyll drinks his potion and becomes the evil Mr. Hyde. Or the monster might be something wholly unknown to science, as with the creature in the *Alien* films.



9.16

9.16–9.17 Horror implied, not shown. A shadow and a character's reaction suggest an offscreen menace in *Cat People* (9.16). Video surveillance in *Paranormal Activity*: The readout indicates that the heroine, who has mysteriously risen from her sleep, stands transfixed for nearly two hours (9.17).



9.17

The genre's horrifying emotional effect, then, is usually created by a character convention: a menacing, unnatural monster.

Other conventions follow from this one. Our reaction to the monster may be guided by other characters who react to it in the properly horrified way. In *Cat People* (1942), a mysterious woman can, apparently, turn into a panther. Our revulsion and fear are confirmed by the reaction of the woman's husband and his coworker (9.16). By contrast, we know that *E.T.* is not a horror film because, although the alien is unnatural, he isn't threatening, and the children don't react to him as if he is.

The horror plot will often start with the monster's attack on normal life. In response, the other characters must discover that the monster is at large and try to destroy it. This plot can be developed in various ways: by having the monster launch a series of attacks, by having people in authority resist believing that the monster exists, or by blocking the characters' efforts to destroy it. In *The Exorcist*, the characters only gradually discover that Regan is possessed; after they realize this, they still must struggle to drive the demon out.

The genre's characteristic themes also stem from the response the filmmakers aim to arouse. If the monster horrifies us because it violates the laws of nature that we know, the genre is well suited to suggest the limits of human knowledge. It's probably significant that the skeptical authorities who must be convinced of the monster's existence are often scientists. In other cases, the scientists themselves unintentionally unleash monsters through their risky experiments. A common convention of this type of plot has the characters concluding that there are some things that humans are not meant to know. Another thematic pattern of the horror film plays on fears about the environment, as when nuclear accidents and other human-made disasters create mutant monsters like the giant ants in *Them!*

Not surprisingly, the iconography of the horror film includes settings where monsters might lurk. The old dark house in which a group of potential victims gather was popularized by *The Cat and the Canary* in 1927 and was reused for *The Haunting* (1999) and *The Others* (2001). A more modern version of the haunted house is seen in *Paranormal Activity* (2008; 9.17). Cemeteries can yield the walking dead; scientists' laboratories, an artificial human (as in *Frankenstein*). Filmmakers have played off these conventions cleverly, as when Hitchcock juxtaposed a mundane motel with a decaying mansion in *Psycho*, or when George Romero set humans battling zombies in a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead*. The slasher subgenre has made superhuman killers invade everyday settings such as summer camps and suburban neighborhoods.



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We analyze the *Paranormal Activity* series in "Return to paranormalcy."



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Director Joe Dante specializes in comic horror films. We discuss his work in "Dante's cheerful purgatorio."

Heavy makeup is very prominent in the iconography of horror. A furry face and hands can signal transformation into a werewolf, while shriveled skin indicates a mummy. Some actors have specialized in transforming themselves into frightening figures. Lon Chaney, who played the original Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), was known as “the man of a thousand faces.” Boris Karloff’s makeup as Frankenstein’s monster in *Frankenstein* (1930) rendered him so unrecognizable that the credits of his next film informed viewers that it featured the same actor. More recently, computer special effects and motion capture have supplemented makeup in transforming actors into beastly creatures.

Like the Western, the horror film emerged in the era of silent moviemaking. Some of the most important early works in the genre were German, notably *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), the first adaptation of the novel *Dracula*. The angular performances, heavy makeup, and distorted settings characteristic of German Expressionist cinema conveyed an ominous, supernatural atmosphere (9.18).

Because a horror film can create its emotional impact with grisly makeup and other low-technology special effects, the horror genre has been favored by filmmakers on tight budgets. During the 1930s, a second-rank Hollywood studio, Universal, launched a cycle of horror films. The popularity of *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932; 9.19) helped the studio become a major company. A decade later, RKO’s B-picture unit under Val Lewton produced a cycle of literate, somber films on minuscule budgets. Lewton’s directors proceeded by hints, keeping the monster offscreen and cloaking the sets in darkness. In *Cat People*, for instance, we never see the heroine transform herself into a panther, and we only glimpse the creature in certain scenes. The film achieves its effects through shadows, offscreen sound, and character reaction (9.16).

In later decades, horror became a staple of 1960s low-budget independent production, with many American entries targeted at the youth market. George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was budgeted at only \$114,000, but it found wide success on college campuses. At the other end of the budgetary scale, the genre acquired a new respectability, chiefly because of the prestige of *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). These films innovated by presenting violent and disgusting actions with unprecedented explicitness. When the possessed Regan vomited in the face of the priest bending over her, a new standard for horrific imagery was set. Decades later, the *Saw* series raised the gore quotient even higher.

The horror film entered into a period of popularity that has not yet ended. Many major Hollywood directors have worked in the genre, and several horror films—from *Jaws* (1975) and *Carrie* (1976) to installments in the *Twilight* saga (2008 on)—have become huge hits. Low-budget horror has flourished as well. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), shot for a reputed \$35,000, found a huge audience internationally. A decade later, *Paranormal Activity*, shot for \$11,000, earned a spectacular \$200 million at worldwide box offices.

More broadly, the genre’s iconography pervades contemporary culture, decorating lunch boxes and theme park rides. Horror novels by Stephen King and Stephenie Meyer have been adapted for films and TV series, while genre classics such as *The Mummy* and *Frankenstein* have been remade for



9.18 German Expressionist horror. In *Nosferatu*, Max Schreck’s makeup and acting make his Count Orlok eerily resemble a rat or a bat.

“Our formula is simple. A love story, three scenes of suggested horror and one of actual violence. Fade-out. It’s all over in less than 70 minutes.”

—Val Lewton, producer, *Cat People*



9.19 Subtle horror on a low budget. A tiny gleam reflected in Boris Karloff’s eye signals the moment when the monster revives in *The Mummy*.

modern audiences. The interest in producing horror films is global, with Europe and Asia adding to the repertory with *Anatomy* (Germany), *28 Days Later* (UK), *Nightwatch* (Russia), *The Host* (South Korea), *The Ring* (Japan), *The Devil's Backbone* (Spain), *Let the Right One In* (Sweden), and many more titles.

The centrality of horror to modern American cinema has set scholars looking for cultural explanations. Many critics suggest that the 1970s subgenre of family horror films, such as *The Exorcist* and *Poltergeist*, reflects social concerns about the breakup of American families. Others propose that the genre's questioning of traditional categories of normality is in tune with both the post-Vietnam and the post-Cold War eras: Viewers may be uncertain of their fundamental beliefs about the world and their identity. Fans are also drawn by the imaginative special effects and makeup, so filmmakers compete to show ever gorier and more grotesque imagery. For all these reasons, horror-film conventions grew so familiar that parodies such as the *Scary Movie* franchise and *Shaun of the Dead* became as popular as the films they mocked. Through genre mixing and the give-and-take between audience tastes and filmmakers' ambitions, the horror film has displayed the interplay of convention and innovation that's basic to any genre.

The Musical

“[Producer Arthur Freed] came to me and said, ‘What are you going to do with it?’ I said, ‘Well, Arthur, I don’t know yet. But I do know I’ve gotta be singing and it’s gotta be raining.’ There was no rain in that picture up to then.”

—Gene Kelly, actor/choreographer, on *Singin’ in the Rain*

The Western is largely based on the subject matter of the American frontier, and the horror film is characterized by the emotional effect it wants to arouse. By contrast, the musical came into being in response to a technological innovation. Although there had been attempts to synchronize music and song with moving images during the silent era, the notion of basing a feature-length film on a series of musical numbers did not emerge until the late 1920s with the successful introduction of recorded sound tracks. One of the earliest features to include the human voice extensively was *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which contained almost no recorded dialogue but had several songs.

At first, many musicals were *revues*, programs of numbers with little or no narrative linkage between them. Such revue musicals aided in selling these early sound films in foreign-language markets, where spectators could enjoy the performances even if they could not understand the dialogue and lyrics. When subtitles and dubbing solved the problem of the language barrier, musicals featured more complicated storylines. Filmmakers devised plots that could motivate the introduction of musical numbers.

Two major subgenres of the musical emerged during the 1930s and are still with us. One of these was the *backstage musical*, with the action centering on singers and dancers who perform for an audience within the story world. Warner Bros. successful early musical, *42nd Street* (1933), set the classic pattern for backstage musicals by casting dancer Ruby Keeler as the understudy for a star who breaks her leg just before the big opening. The director tells Keeler, “You’re going out a youngster, but you’ve got to come back a star!” and indeed she wins the audience’s cheers (9.20). During the decade, Warner’s elaborately choreographed Busby Berkeley musicals, MGM’s pairing of the youthful Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in a series of “Let’s put on a show!” plots, and RKO’s elegant cycle of films starring the dance team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers established the conventions of the backstage musical. Later examples included musicals in which the characters are film performers, as in *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). More recent backstage musicals are *The Commitments*, *Music and Lyrics*, *Jersey Boys*, and *Dreamgirls*. In some cases, dance competitions become the equivalent of stage shows, as in *You Got Served* and *Stomp the Yard*.

Not all musicals take place in a show-business situation, however. There is also the *straight musical*, where people may sing and dance in situations of everyday life. Even in backstage musicals, the characters occasionally break into song in an everyday setting. Straight musicals tend to be romantic comedies as well, so that



9.20



9.21

9.20–9.21 Backstage musical vs. straight musical. Ruby Keeler hoofs her way to stardom in *42nd Street*'s title number (9.20). The citizens of a whole town are drawn into the dance in Jaques Demy's *Young Girls of Rochefort* (9.21).

songs and dances express the characters' fears, longings, and joys. We analyze one straight musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, in Chapter 11. In 1968, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* took the romantic musical to extremes by having its characters sing most of the dialogue in the film, with dozens of passersby joining in dance numbers in the town's streets (9.21). Straight musicals are rare today, but Julie Taymor made an effort to revive the subgenre in *Across the Universe*, basing the score entirely on Beatles songs and adding social commentary in the spirit of the 1960s (9.22).

In both backstage and straight musicals, the numbers often reflect a couple's courtship. Often the hero and heroine realize that they are an ideal couple because they perform beautifully together. In *Top Hat* the Ginger Rogers character sheds her original annoyance with Fred Astaire during the "Isn't It a Wonderful Day" number, and by the end, they have clearly fallen in love. This plot device has remained a staple of the genre. Astaire again charms his reluctant partner, this time Cyd Charisse, in the "Dancing in the Dark" number in *The Band Wagon* (1953), and John Travolta meets his romantic match on the disco dance floor in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). In *Moulin Rouge!* the lovers serenade each other, both onstage and off, with classic pop and rock songs (9.23), and the dance interludes in the *House Party* and *Step Up* films become courtship rituals.

Musicals have long been associated with children's stories, from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Frozen*. Many animated features contain musical numbers, a practice going back to Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. But adult-oriented



9.22 A musical evoking 1960s counterculture. In *Across the Universe*, a young man taking his army draft physical is greeted by the Beatles song "I Want You." The film was released at the height of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.



9.23 Performance as courtship. A flamboyant onstage musical number in *Moulin Rouge!* centers on the rapturous lovers.



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Big musicals may be rare these days, but small ones thrive online as mash-ups and lipdubs. See our “2-4-6-8, whose lipdub do we appreciate?”

musicals have taken on more serious material. *West Side Story* portrays a romance that tragically crosses ethnic lines, and *Pennies from Heaven* evokes the bleak atmosphere of the Depression through characters who lip-synch to recordings from that era. Biopics of troubled performers, such as *Control*, *Get on Up*, and *Walk the Line*, become somber backstage musicals.

Still, while the Western and the horror film may explore the darker side of human nature, Hollywood musicals tend to accentuate the positive. High ambitions are rewarded when the show is a hit, and lovers are united in song and dance. In *The Pajama Game*, a strike is averted when the leaders of the union and management become a romantic couple. Some of these conventions persist today. *The School of Rock* and today’s hip-hop and stepping musicals rework the backstage musical’s theme that talent and hard work will eventually win out. Even the grittier *8 Mile* follows the traditional plot pattern of showing a gifted young performer overcoming disadvantages and finding success.

The range of subject matter in musicals is so broad that it may be hard to pin down specific iconography associated with the genre. The backstage musical has its characteristic settings: the dressing rooms and wings of a theater, the flats and backdrops of the stage (as in 9.20), and the nightclub with orchestra and dance floor. Similarly, performers in these musicals are often recognizable by their distinctive stage costumes. During the 1930s, Fred Astaire wore the most famous top hat in the cinema, a hat so closely associated with his musicals that the beginning of *The Band Wagon*—where Astaire plays a washed-up movie actor—could make a joke about it. Similarly, Travolta’s white suit in *Saturday Night Fever* became an icon of the disco era. Opportunities for novelty have always been present in the musical, however, as the musical numbers set in a factory (*The Pajama Game*) or on the prairie (*Oklahoma!*) indicate.

The characteristic techniques of the musical are similarly diverse. Musical tend to be brightly lit, to set off the cheerful costumes and sets and to keep the choreography of the dance numbers clearly visible. For similar reasons, color film stock was applied quite early to musicals, including Eddie Cantor’s *Whoopie!* and, as we saw in Chapter 2, *The Wizard of Oz*. While classic musicals tend to rely on long takes, contemporary musicals tend to be cut very quickly, partly because of the influence of MTV videos. Still, to show off the patterns formed by the dancers in musical numbers, crane shots and high angles remain common (9.24). One technique widely used in the musical is not usually evident to viewers: lip-synching to prerecorded songs. On the set, performers move their lips in synchronization to a playback of the recording. This technique allows the singers to move about freely and to concentrate on their acting.



9.24 Genre motivation for stylistic choices. Swooping crane shots emphasize the geometry and coordination of an ensemble in *Stomp the Yard*.

The 1935 RKO Astaire–Rogers musical *Swing Time* is one of the exemplary backstage musicals. Early in the film, the hero, a gambler and tap dancer nicknamed Lucky, is trying to quit his stage act and get married. At once, we sense that his fiancée is not right for him. She isn't a dancer, and she isn't even seen during the early scenes in which his colleagues try to trick him into missing the wedding. The opening scenes take place in the conventional settings of the stage, wings, and dressing room of a theater. Later, when Lucky goes to the city and meets the heroine, Penny (a name that echoes Lucky's precious lucky quarter), she quickly takes a strong dislike to him. An amusing scene in the dance school where she works shows Lucky pretending to be hopelessly clumsy. Yet when the school's owner fires Penny, Lucky saves her job by suddenly launching into a graceful, unrehearsed dance with her. By the end, her animosity has disappeared, and the school owner arranges for the couple to audition at a fashionable club.

Obstacles ensue, primarily in the form of a romantic rivalry between Lucky and the orchestra leader at the club. Further complications result from the sort of Big Misunderstanding characteristic of romantic comedies: Penny thinks that Lucky intends to return to his fiancée. Near the end, Penny seems ready to marry the conductor. She and Lucky meet, apparently for the last time, and their talk at cross-purposes reveals the link between performance and romance:

PENNY: "Does she dance very beautifully?"

LUCKY: "Who?"

PENNY: "The girl you're in love with?"

LUCKY: "Yes—very."

PENNY: "The girl you're going to marry."

LUCKY: "Oh, I don't know. I've danced with you. I'm never going to dance again."

That Fred Astaire will never dance again is the ultimate threat, and his song "Never Gonna Dance" leads into a duet that reconfirms that they are meant for each other. In the end, Lucky and Penny reconcile.

The film calls on the newly established conventions of the genre. Lucky wears Astaire's classic top hat and formal clothes (9.25). Astaire and Rogers dance in the Art Deco-style sets that were typical of musical design in the 1930s (9.26). The film departs from convention, however, in a remarkable number, "Bojangles of Harlem," where Astaire pays tribute to the great



9.25



9.26

9.25–9.26 *Swing Time* as musical. After losing his suit in a card game, Lucky still wears Astaire's signature top hat (9.25). Penny and Lucky dance in the Art Deco nightclub set (9.26).



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We discuss other genres on our blog. For the relationship between fantasy and sci-fi films in recent years, see “Swords vs. lightsabers,” and for movies based on superhero comic books, see “Superheroes for sale.” We analyze spy-thriller conventions in “*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*: A guide for the perplexed” and our entries on the *Bourne* franchise. We consider as well how *Safe Haven*, *Side Effects*, and *Gone Girl* draw on strategies of narration typical of the domestic thriller.

African-American dancers who had influenced him during his New York stage career in the 1920s. When he appears in blackface here, it is not to exploit a demeaning stereotype but to impersonate Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the most famous black tap dancer of the era. (The tribute is all the more unusual because Robinson was then costarring in Shirley Temple musicals for a rival studio, Twentieth Century Fox.)

Despite its backstage settings and show business plot, *Swing Time* sets some numbers in an everyday environment. When Lucky visits Penny’s apartment, he sings “The Way You Look Tonight” as she shampoos her hair—using a convenient piano in her apartment to accompany himself (though a nondiegetic orchestra plays along as well). When the couple visits the snowy countryside and sings “A Fine Romance,” there is no diegetic accompaniment at all, only an unseen orchestra. The world of the musical makes it possible for people, at any time and in any place, to express their feelings through song and dance.

The Sports Film

You could argue that sports movies don’t form a genre in the way Westerns, horror films, and musicals do. Perhaps basketball, baseball, prizefighting, and other sports are simply subject matter for more traditional genres—dramas like *Friday Night Lights*, romantic comedies like *Wimbledon*. But sports films have been a staple of film history since boxing matches drew audiences to Edison Kinetoscope parlors. And just as there are fans of science fiction movies and gross-out comedies, there is a distinct audience for sports films.

Sports films display their own plot patterns, iconography, and themes. Competition and tournaments provide conflict, while a climactic win-or-lose big game can resolve the action and provide closure. Suspense and surprise are built into sporting events. Just as important, films about sports can raise larger ideological issues. Succeeding in amateur sports can emphasize either individual achievement or group accomplishment. Professional sports give athletes access to money and power, and so the genre can develop themes of social mobility. And to a surprising extent, sports films explore themes of racial and gender roles.

One common plot pattern is the Cinderella story, showing how an underdog overcomes long odds to make it in the big leagues or to compete for a championship. The film may have a central protagonist, as in *Rocky* and *The Rookie*. Or the plot may focus on a group, usually a ragtag bunch that learns to overcome personal differences and work as a team. This plot pattern shapes *The Bad News Bears* (1976), *Major League*, and *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*. Other Cinderella plots, such as those in *Slap Shot* and *Any Given Sunday*, match grizzled veterans with rising young stars in ways that highlight their differences in age, expertise, values, and styles of play.

Critics may call the Cinderella pattern a cliché, but any sport contains real-life examples of underdogs beating the odds. Actual success stories were the basis of *Miracle* (2004), about the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team, and *The World’s Fastest Indian* (9.27). Cinderella stories appeal to the audience because the hero or heroes are unlikely to succeed, and we sympathize with characters who risk everything for a dream.

A second plot type in sports movies depicts athletes in the prime of their careers who are felled by disease or injury. Examples are *Pride of the Yankees*, *Bang the Drum Slowly*, and *Million Dollar Baby*. These movies show how easily the conventions of sports films can mix with other genres, such as the medical drama or the melodrama. In *Eight Men Out* and *The Hurricane* (1999), the athlete’s career is cut short by social factors, such as scandal or a biased judicial system. Like the Cinderella story, the prime-of-life storyline is made more plausible by being based on actual events.



9.27 Underdog stories. Burt Munro, an elderly New Zealander, seems an especially unlikely racing champion in *The World’s Fastest Indian*. At age 67, though, Munro set land speed records at Utah’s Bonneville salt flats on a self-modified 1920 Indian motorcycle. Director Roger Donaldson had already filmed Munro’s story in a short documentary, *Burt Munro: Offerings to the God of Speed*.

Then there are films like *Fear Strikes Out*, *The Color of Money*, and *Seabiscuit*. Their plots resemble the Cinderella story in depicting battles against big odds, and they depend on the interrupted-career situation. But these films center on the athlete's comeback, a return to glory after battling personal demons. Comeback stories present the sport as a meritocracy: You can overcome almost any mistake if you have powerful skills and enduring passion.

Along with these plot types come character conventions: the tough coach, the dedicated but flawed athlete, the unscrupulous adversary, and the mate—male or female—who resents the partner's obsession with winning at all costs. A few films focus on figures more peripheral to the actual sporting event. *The Scout* and *Million Dollar Arm* dramatize efforts to nurture raw baseball talent. In *Jerry McGuire*, a cocky sports agent tries to build a company around the career of a temperamental wide receiver. *Moneyball* and *Draft Day* concentrate on maverick general managers who take risks to field a contender.

Some sports films deviate sharply from these conventions of plot and character. Normally we are emotionally invested in the athlete's quest for a championship, but *Raging Bull* complicates our sympathy. Its hero, Jake La Motta, seems fueled by an almost pathological jealousy and by his acceptance of boxing as a brutal bloodsport. (For more on *Raging Bull*, see Chapter 11.)

Similarly, in *Cobb*, a warts-and-all biography of Detroit Tiger great Ty Cobb, writer-director Ron Shelton probes the dark side of the baseball legend. Cobb was a fierce competitor, willing to hurt an opponent if he could gain an edge. He was an expert base stealer, who slid into the bag “spikes up,” hoping to use his cleats to gash any player in his path. Off the field, Cobb was a racist, a woman-hater, and a bully. Instead of presenting an admirable athlete, *Cobb* reminds us that some competitors channel their personal demons into their performance.

In another departure from sports film conventions, a few movies concentrate on fans. *Fever Pitch* tells the story of Ben, whose obsessive passion for the Red Sox impedes his romance with his girlfriend, Lindsay. Initially, Lindsay treats Ben's fixation as an amusing personality quirk. But Lindsay realizes that Ben is unwilling to consider their future together; he won't even make vacation plans without consulting the Sox's schedule.

In making Ben a Red Sox fan, directors Peter and Bobby Farrelly shrewdly capitalized on the folklore surrounding the “lovable losers” of the baseball world. The Red Sox had not won a world championship since 1918, but in 2004 they wound up winning the world series. By sheer luck, the Sox's championship season gave the Farrellys an unexpected ending that combined the Cinderella story and the comeback story (9.28).



9.28 Sports movies about fans. After the unlikely Red Sox World Series victory in 2004, the Farrellys took advantage of the moment to surreptitiously film *Fever Pitch*'s Ben and Lindsay celebrating the team's clinching victory on the field of Busch Stadium in St. Louis.

The Iranian film *Offside* adds a fresh thematic twist to sports film conventions. Using the 2005 match between Bahrain and Iran as a backdrop, *Offside* focuses on a group of female fans of the Iranian team who disguise themselves as men and try to sneak into Azadi Stadium. The plot of *Offside* initially centers on a girl paying her first surreptitious visit to a game. (We later learn that the girl's scheme is a tribute to her friend, a die-hard soccer fan killed in riots after the 2005 Iran-Japan World Cup match.) Security policemen see through the girl's disguise and take her to an improvised detention area. The bulk of the film's plot takes place around this holding pen. As we come to know the other female fans held there, we hear the match's progress offscreen; like the women, we will never see the actual game.

By keeping the main event out of sight, *Offside* highlights the religious, cultural, and gender issues that affect an entire community. As the match progresses, the soldiers and the girls gradually develop trust with one another. Yet their friendly relations are sometimes overshadowed by social taboos on women's roles. The situation leads to somewhat absurd complications. Only men are allowed in Azadi Stadium, so there are no women's restrooms. When one of the detainees needs to use the toilet, the soldier accompanying her takes several steps to preserve her virtue. First, the soldier makes the girl wait as he shoos men out of the lavatory. Then, when the soldier sees graffiti written on the restroom's walls, he instructs the girl to wear a poster over her face to shield her eyes (9.29).



9.29 Gender and religious taboo in *Offside*. Because the makeshift mask obstructs her vision, the woman must grope her way to a toilet stall, a situation that provides a comic and poignant comment on how traditions make even ordinary activities difficult.



9.30 Sports and social bonding in *Offside*. The female soccer fans join the crowds celebrating Iran's victory over Bahrain. The girl shown at the start of the film waves seven sparklers, one for each of the victims killed in the riots that occurred after the Iran-Japan match.

In scenes like this, director Jafar Panahi blends implicit commentary on social ideology with a concern for flesh-and-blood individuals. *Offside* is filled with small vignettes showing soldiers and detainees' growing awareness that they are mutually constrained by Iran's larger social structures. The soldiers must confront the fact that women can have deep love and knowledge of this apparently men's-only sport. Similarly, the female fans resent being shut out, but they come to understand that the soldiers are doing their duty as defined by Islamic law.

In the film's final scenes, the bus carrying the soldiers and detainees gets stuck in traffic. Masses of people have taken to the streets in hope of Iran's victory over the Bahrain team. While the men go to get snacks, the camera stays with the women on the bus. A shop window shows them a TV broadcast of the final seconds. Iran wins, the crowd goes wild, and the soldiers are swept up in the street celebration. With no one to guard them, the women join the cheering, singing, and dancing crowds. The final image is a long tracking shot that follows these female fans parading through the streets of Tehran (9.30). An Iranian national anthem plays nondiegetically over this final shot, showing that women are not only loyal fans but loyal citizens.

Like many genre films, *Offside* ritualistically resolves the drama's social problems. The conclusion dissolves the gender differences under Islamic law and absorbs everyone into the larger community. On this triumphant night, sports becomes the glue that holds the nation together.

Although the sports film might seem to be a masculine genre, women's concerns also surface in *A League of Their Own* and *Bend It Like Beckham*. Other films, like *Remember the Titans*, *Glory Road*, and *42*, explore cultural attitudes toward race. *Offside* has used the genre to present a modest and sympathetic portrait of female fans as a cross section

of Iranian society. In this respect, it reminds us that the sports film can merge a concern for social issues with engaging dramas of suspenseful competition.

In studying film, we often need to make explicit some things we ordinarily take for granted—those assumptions so fundamental that we no longer even notice them. Genres are examples of such taken-for-granted categories. At the back of our minds whenever we watch a film, these categories govern what we expect to see and hear. They guide our reactions. They press us to make sense of a movie in certain ways. Shared by filmmakers and viewers alike, genre categories shape film art as we most often experience it.

Still other kinds of categories guide our assumptions about the films we see. If we look beyond live-action fictional features, we find alternative modes of filmmaking. These depend on ways in which the films are made and the intentions of the filmmakers, and they often have distinctive approaches to form and style. The most common modes are documentary, experimental, and animated cinema. We examine these in the next chapter.



SUMMARY

One of the most common ways in which we approach films is by type, or genre. Genres are categories that are largely shared across society, by filmmakers, critics, and viewers. Films are most commonly grouped into genres by virtue of similar plot patterns, similar thematic implications, characteristic filmic techniques, and recognizable iconography.

When trying to characterize a film genre, you can ask such questions as these:

1. Before you saw the film, did you know what genre or subgenre it belonged to? What factors in advance publicity or conversation gave you hints?
2. What conventions in the film signal its genre? How do those conventions function? Do they allow storytelling to be more rapid and economical? Do they aim to arouse strong emotional responses?
3. What genre innovations can you find in the film? A good way to determine these is to ask if your expectations were thrown off at certain points.
4. Does this film seem to be combining conventions from more than one genre? If so, how does it make the genre elements compatible? Do innovative aspects of the film depend on the genre mixing, and if so, how?