9

Working with Genre I

One of the most observable characteristics of American film is the continuing strength of genres or story forms. Genre is more than formula. More often, it is a type of story that has a visceral appeal to its audience. The scriptwriter who ignores the strength of that appeal does so at considerable cost. The Western, the gangster film, and the musical are forms synonymous with Hollywood. Film noir and the horror film, although originating in Europe, have proved to be enduring in North America. The popularity of genres means that most scriptwriters, during the course of their careers, will have to work with genre. Consequently, the screenwriter should understand genres and how to work with them. They are, in effect, a shorthand to structured types of stories. By knowing this shortcut, the scriptwriter is free to explore aspects of the genre that have more personal relevance.

Genre and the Audience

Film sociologists have long probed the relationship between movies and the audience, but the most insightful views of genres and their relationship to the audience have come from a less scientific perspective. Writers such as Susan Sontag, Paul Schrader, and Robert Warshow have examined particular genres and found complex relationships between the fears and aspirations of audiences and the genres that speak to these feelings. Warshow,[1] for example, examines the hero in the gangster and Western genres and suggests that the gangster is the same as most other citizens. He is a new arrival, an immigrant who wants to succeed in this society. He differs from most of us in the means by which he chooses to succeed—criminality. Warshow suggests that all of us want to succeed, but in the modern milieu of the city, many fail. The gangster's failure leads to the ultimate failure, his death, and therein lies the tragedy.

The more optimistic view of the hero is present in the Western genre. The hero in the Western genre functions on a plane of morality unavailable to the gangster in modern life. In the idealized world of the Western, simpler resolutions to conflict and to ethical aspirations afford an audience the kind of wish fulfillment that is associated with a simpler, pastoral time. Warshow is careful to underline that neither genre is about history. Facts are not as important as are dreams in genres, thus serving as dreamscapes for their audiences.

Dreams and nightmares are the emotional baselines for storytelling in the genre approach. The world of the nightmare is central to the horror film and to film noir. A world where dreams come true is central to the Western, the adventure film, and the musical; and, of course, more recognizable people, situations, and behavior are the bases of the more realistic genres—the documentary, the melodrama, and the situation comedy.

The writer, however, should be aware that just as audiences change over time, so, too, do genres, in order to tell classic stories in a new guise. One could not make a classic Western without taking in the events that have affected audiences' views about Western heroes, villains, Indians, the land, and civilizing forces. With the nuclear age, space has become our new frontier, thus making the Western set the old frontier. In the past 25 years, we have seen at least four Westerns set in space—*Outland*, *Star Wars*, *Aliens*, and *Planet of the Apes* (remake). All these films have many characteristics of the classic Western, thus showing how genres change and adapt to circumstances of the time.

Genres

It is not our intention to tell the history of genres in this chapter, but some sense of both the classic genre and its contemporary equivalent is valuable to the development of genre shorthand. We deal with the following genres in detail:

- The Western
- The gangster film
- The film noir
- The screwball comedy
- The melodrama
- The situation comedy
- The horror film
- The science fiction film
- The war film
- The adventure film
- The epic film
- The sports film
- The biographical film
- The satire film

In terms of understanding genres and using dramatic components in writing genres, it's best to consider particular common features of genres. These features are:

1. The nature of the protagonist
2. The nature of the antagonist
3. The shape of the dramatic action

4. The catalytic event
5. The resolution
6. The narrative style
7. The narrative shape
8. The tone

Each genre has its own distinct characteristics, and those characteristics will differ from one genre to another. For example, the protagonist or main character in the horror film tends to be a victim, whereas the main character in the Western is a hero. By highlighting some of the differences among genres, our goal is to show how the writer can best use these features in writing genre stories and then in working against the genre expectation to make a story seem fresh.

The Nature of the Protagonist

The main character and the character's goal are the primary focus of the story in any genre. Although the main character in the Western is heroic and tends to be romanticized and the main character in the horror film is a victim, the main characters in war films tend to be far more realistic. In the musical, main characters tend to be presented energetically, whereas in film noir, they are typically constricted and desperate. The qualities of the main character within a particular genre tend to be consistent, which makes the shorthand dimensions of that character readily available to the writer.

The Nature of the Antagonist

The importance of the antagonist is constant across genres, but the nature of the antagonist depends on the level of realism associated with particular genres. Where the presentation of the main character exclusive of realism is heroic—the adventure film or the Western—the antagonist becomes more evil, more powerful, and sometimes more than human. Where the genre is nightmarish, as in the horror film and film noir, the antagonist is equally extreme.

Only in the realistic genres, such as the war film, the melodrama, and the gangster film, does the antagonist take on more human rather than superhuman qualities. In these genres, the goal of the main character is more understandable and more realistic; consequently, the antagonist, although still important, takes on a more human dimension.

The Shape of the Dramatic Action

Gangster stories tend to be shaped around the rise and fall of a gangster. Police stories are shaped around the perpetration of a crime, its investigation, and its successful resolution, which is the apprehension of the

perpetrator. All genre films have a very particular dramatic shape. And all begin with the expected opening: A soldier is inducted into the army to fight in a foreign war; a cowboy dreams of acquiring land and a cattle herd; a poor boy from the Midwest wants to improve his life in the industrial Northeast.

In the course of the dramatic action, we will find out whether the soldier survives, what personal sacrifice is necessary for the cowboy to improve himself, and what transgressions are necessary for the young Midwesterner to get ahead. In each case, the fate of the character will differ in accordance with genre expectations. And in each case, the characters' attempts to fulfill their goals will dictate the shape of the dramatic action.

Catalytic Event

Stolen cattle, a friend's death, the end of the Civil War, an Indian raid—all are the catalytic events in different Westerns. Each propels the main character to find and resolve the consequences of the flow of action resulting from the catalytic event. Every genre has its own kind of catalytic event. A crime is the catalytic event of the police story. In a horror film, a young family moves into a reputedly haunted New England home. The critical catalytic event should occur quickly or the dramatic vitality of the genre is dissipated. The audience expects a quick start.

The Resolution

Dramatic action leads us, of course, to the resolution. But not every genre leads us to the same kind of resolution. Although the fate of our Midwesterner in the melodrama tends toward the tragic, this is not the case in the classic Western or in the war film. In the Western, although the main character pays a price for his ambition, he does tend to succeed and become a hero in the effort. That effort requires a ritualized demonstration of heroism—the climactic gunfight. In the war film, although there is a climactic battle, the character's fate is determined not by his individual actions but by the superior forces of the protagonist's side; the resolution may come though superior air power or through a simple, arbitrary act that allows the character to survive the battle. Whatever the reason, resolution does not come from the individual action of the main character; consequently, the sense of the main character as a hero is less apparent than in the Western, where individual action is central to the resolution.

Narrative Style

Every genre has a particular narrative style that the audience expects and enjoys. Westerns, for example, tend to be punctuated by gun fights, deployment of weaponry, expertise in horsemanship, and survival

skills in what is essentially a rural, primitive wilderness. Violence and violent resolution to conflict characterize the genre. This is not the case in melodrama, where relationships, their evolution, and their outcome are central; although there may be a tragic outcome in melodrama, the violence is emotional rather than physical.

Narrative Shape

Different genres exhibit different shapes. Although Westerns such as *High Noon* take place in a single day, this is not at all typical of the Western. In fact, many Westerns have an expansive time frame—years in the case of *Red River* and *The Searchers*. This is unusual, however, in film noir, where the character is running out of time; this is his last chance. Consequently, film noir stories tend to have a far more intense narrative shape. The time frame collapses, as does the accelerated presentation of a desperate relationship for the main character. Time is critical in the adventure film and in the thriller; it is far less important in the situation comedy and the war film. Consequently, the narrative shape in each of these genres differs considerably.

The primary consideration here is the level of intensity the genre requires to be in tune with the goals of the main character. In film noir, the main character is desperate, trying to survive his tragic fate. In the adventure film, the level of threat to the main character has to be constant, so that the audience stays interested in the plot. In the Western and the situation comedy, the relationship with the main character is relatively more relaxed; thus, the narrative shape is also more relaxed.

Tone

Although tone will be discussed in detail in a later chapter, it is important to consider it here as an element of genre. Tone can range from the fantastic in the adventure film and the musical to the realistic in the war film and the melodrama. Tone also ranges from the ironic in the screwball comedy and the satire to the engrossing in the thriller and the horror film.

As with all the elements mentioned in this section, the clarity of these elements offers the writer clear opportunities to alter or challenge these conventions in order to make the story seem different or fresh. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we assume constancy within genres. We turn now to the genres themselves.

The Western

The Western genre has an elaborate, rich history. The central themes of the Western play themselves out in the classic Western, which was

the predominant form until 1950. The central motifs of the classic Western are as follows:

- The hero, a man alone, functions with a worldview that is both moral and decent.
- The hero has a distinct skill with guns and horses.
- The antagonist has mercantile goals—the accumulation of money, land, and cattle—and will recognize no person or ethic that stands in his way.
- The land plays a pastoral, but critical, role. It not only represents freedom, but also primitivism.
- Civilization is represented by those forces that represent an organizing influence on life—the town, the army, married life, and children.
- The struggle between the forces of primitivism (such as the land and the Indians) and those of civilization (such as the army and the town) forms a particular dilemma for the Western hero. In which world will he reside? His heart sides with the forces of primitivism, but his head sides with the forces of civilization. This is the classic conflict for the Western hero.
- The drama plays itself out in a ritualized form—gunfights and cattle drives—and individual conflicts are acted out rather than negotiated.

Having characterized the classic Western, we should also recognize how the Western has changed since 1950. Revisions to the classic Western have been attempted, as their primary goal, to make the Western less innocent. The hero is systematically demystified: in *The Gunfighter*, Gregory Peck, the hero, is a victim of his reputation; in *Winchester '73*, James Stewart portrays a neurotic hero; and in *The Wild Bunch*, William Holden's hero is a killer without a hint of the tenderness of the classic hero. Other Westerns have focused on the issue of civilizing forces. Armies have been presented as more primitive than the primitives (i.e., the Indians)—as in *Apache, The Outlaw Josey Wales*—and towns have been hell rather than heaven—as in *High Plains Drifter*. The nature of the central character's struggle has become much more jaded and much less idealistic. Indeed, both *The Culpepper Cattle Company* and *Heaven's Gate* are about the loss of idealism.

More recently, there has been a resurgence in the Western, and here, too, we see subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the genre. The idealism of the classic Western is again challenged in *Wyatt Earp*. The myth of Wyatt Earp is as much a target of the writers as are the historical events or the dramatic opportunities provided by the gunfight at the OK Corral. *Tombstone*, released the same year (1994), conforms more closely to the typical Western, but again the struggle is less primitivism against civilization than it is about opposing material goals. This theme of the materialism of the main character is particularly notable in *Unforgiven*. In this film, the hero is less a hero and more a man of the 1980s than of the 1880s.

So, the Western has changed, but the dreamscape—a frontier where the struggle between primitivism and civilization unfolds—has not. Western film stories have just moved to another frontier.

The Gangster Film

The classic gangster film, like the Western, concerns itself with a very particular story—the rise and fall of a man who has no patience to progress through the ranks. The gangster is a man in a hurry; his time is running out. The motifs of the classic gangster film are as follows:

- The hero is an immigrant who is low in status but desires higher status.
- The city is the home of the gangster; it establishes his struggle to move up the social order.
- Power comes from the willingness to take power. This means courage, cunning, and a willingness to murder those who object to sharing power. This is the law of the jungle.
- The hero is loyal to his immigrant roots.
- The antagonist is the society that cannot tolerate the law of the jungle. The representatives of the society are the police and the FBI. They are the front line of combat against the law of the jungle.
- The symbols of success are material—such as guns and cars—and women.
- Getting ahead is everything, and the ends justify the means.

The classic gangster film is an ongoing dimension of American film; *The Godfather* and *The Untouchables* are popular examples. However, the genre has been too important a representation of modern life to contain itself solely to the character of the gangster. The gangster has been joined by other central characters—the cop (*Dirty Harry*), the detective (*The Big Sleep*), and, on the international level, the spy (*The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*). All these characters seek to find a way of succeeding in their particular jungles. As with the gangster, the struggle for position in the existing social order involves pushing out the other spy or killer who challenges the existing order. In all cases, the struggle is to the death. Their worlds will be subverted under any other outcome.

Recently, gangster films have added an existential dimension to the struggle. It is as if hope has dimmed and a kind of nihilistic death wish pervades the gangster and his fate. Whether focused on the individual (*The King of New York*) or a gang (*Reservoir Dogs*), betrayal has become the focus for the fate of the gangster. This dramatic shift crosses ethnic barriers, and we see the gangster's fate more tragically magnified in the Puerto Rican ghetto (*Carlito's Way*), in the Black ghetto (*Clockers*), and in the Irish ghetto (*State of Grace*). Whether it is the encroaching effectiveness of the law or the feeling that

there is overpopulation in the urban jungle and Malthus's law of population control has come into effect, these stories portray a less hopeful, more desperate gangster hero—a hero who is less heroic and more violent. His struggle is the last act of a condemned man.

As to the settings, Harry Callahan lives in San Francisco, Phillip Marlowe works in Los Angeles, Elliot Ness lives in Chicago, and Don Corleone lives and works in New York City. These are the distinct battlegrounds of the gangster drama. The identifiable locale gives a particular credibility to the gangster film, but make no mistake, the subject matter of the gangster film is not a documentary on urban life; rather, like the Western, it is a dreamscape and nightmare of urban life. Gangster films are psychodramas, the equivalent of modernized tales of gladiators and Christians. For all these characters in this genre, there is nothing less at stake than their lives.

Because these stories are primal and male, there is little scope in this genre for male–female relationships. The genre does have memorable women— Bonnie in *Bonnie and Clyde*, Cagney's mother in *White Heat*, and Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat*—but in each case, the role of the woman is catalytic to the action of the gangster. In no case is the woman a stand-alone character functioning in an interesting way in her own world. Whether they be sibling, mother, virgin, or whore, women play supporting roles in gangster films.

A final word: If fictional prose foreshadows genre activity in film, in the near future we will soon see detectives who are Indians working on reservations (Tony Hillerman) and Eskimos working in the Arctic (Scott Young). We will see rural cops (Ted Wood) and more international manifestations of the gangster genre (David Thompson). All these authors have portrayed detectives in different or unusual settings that have struck a chord with the public. Hollywood producers have taken note, particularly in telling stories of international gangsters (e.g., *Red Heat, The Russia House*).

The classic gangster film's search for success is taking on an international dimension, and the world is beginning to look like an oversized jungle in which the stakes of human drama grow increasingly dangerous. The gangster genre has never had more material with which to work.

The Film Noir

Beginning in the pessimistic 1920s in Germany, film noir as a genre appealed to the darker fears of an increasingly urbanized population. Film noir could be subtitled "the genre of betrayal"—personal betrayal, national betrayal, and international betrayal. The characteristics of film noir are as follows:

- The desperate central character lives on the edge; he merely exists. We can't call him the hero, as is the case in the gangster and Western genres, because the personal behavior of the central character in the film noir is anything but heroic.

- The central character thinks that his chance at a better, richer, more vital life can only be found in another character—usually a woman. This may be his last chance, and he certainly acts as if it is.
- The relationship between the central character and his savior is a highly charged, sexual relationship.
- The central character will be betrayed in this relationship.
- A by-product of the relationship is violence.
- The key root of the problem with the relationship is the city, the stand-in symbol for modern life. The city saps the generosity out of the relationship. All that is left is deception and betrayal.
- There are no children in film noir. Married couples have no children. Children represent hope, and there is no hope in any relationship or in the future.
- Sexuality and violence coexist and seem to be cause and effect.
- The sense of aloneness in the central character is palpable. It represents an existential state.

Film noir is a genre that symbolizes our nightmares. The classic of the genre is represented by Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, a film of murder for the promise of love and the discovery that there is no love, only more murder. More recent representations of film noir are *Body Heat*, *Chinatown*, *Raging Bull*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Romeo is Bleeding*. For such a pessimistic genre of film, film noir seems to elicit many creative premises. As a genre that depicts the worst in human beings, it brings out the best in writers and directors—an interesting irony.

The Screwball Comedy

The screwball comedy is funny film noir that has a happy ending. The characteristics of this genre are quite similar to those of film noir:

- The central character is an isolated male.
- He looks desperately for a female to overcome his isolation or anxiety.
- The premise of the film is about the struggle in their relationship.
- During the course of the struggle, which is highly sexually charged, the maleness of the central character is challenged. The female is the dominant character in the relationship. This role reversal is central to the screwball comedy.
- Whereas the outcome of film noir is tragic, the outcome of the screwball comedy is happy.
- The urban setting of the genre is as much a jungle in screwball comedy as it is in film noir.
- There are no children but only troubled married couples in the screwball comedy.
- The aggression in this genre is the source of the humor, in contrast to the violence it evokes in film noir.

The screwball comedy is a genre that requires more risk and more aggression than is seen in the situation comedy. Consequently, few screwball comedies are made. *Shampoo* and *Something Wild* are modern examples of this genre, but few writers are developing scripts akin to the 1930s-era *Bringing Up Baby* and *Monkey Business*. Screwball comedies make most male writers very nervous, because the genre threatens masculinity and dominance or desired dominance in relationships. The genre is, however, very lively and energetic.

Both *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* borrow the dynamic from screwball comedies, but neither follows through in the classic screwball comedy sense. Both work with the masculine–feminine side of their main characters, and *Tootsie* particularly characterizes the male side as the antagonist of the story. This New Age approach moves both films into the safer realm of the situation comedy and away from the dangerous shoals of the screwball comedy.

The Melodrama

The melodrama is frequently associated with soap operas. This generalization is unfair, because, as a genre, melodrama is closest to the people, issues, and events of our times. This is not to say that the melodrama is a dramatized documentary of our own lives. Perhaps it is safer to suggest that the melodrama is the dramatized lives of our neighbors. The characteristics of the genre are as follows:

- The central character is more often female than is typical in many other genres. However, the central character can be male.
- The presence of a distinct social order is a barrier to the central character and indicates the power structure in the city, region, town, or country.
- The central character transgresses the power structure. This is usually attempted through a relationship with someone from within the power structure.
- Beauty and intelligence are not equivalent to the traditional symbols of power—money and social or political connections.
- The central character's behavior while transgressing the power structure is as much a threat to her own family as it is to the powerful family of which she would become a part if the new relationship is a success. The central character is unsupported in her goal.
- The conviction of the central character is fueled by the belief that life must be and can be improved. The status quo (such as the original family or unsuccessful marriage) is an insult to her sense of self.
- The vitality of the melodrama is, in part, supported by its modernity. Period melodramas are less successful, because they are too distant from the audience. More successful melodramas reflect the people, lives, and issues of the contemporary audience.
- Idealism, cynicism, sexuality, and aggression reflect the attitudes of the characters and, more important, support the central characteristic

of the melodrama—a story of power and powerlessness set against an inflexible social and political structure.

Perhaps the most important power struggle of the 1980s was the battle of the sexes. The sexual revolution and the rise of feminism, together with rapid economic change, fueled a redefinition of the male–female relationship. Attitudes toward career, childrearing, and marriage were all in flux. Yet, the male–female relationship, as it has been for centuries, is a central dimension of our existence. It is no surprise that *thirtysomething* was one of the most successful television shows of the decade. Some of the most memorable films of the period—*Kramer vs. Kramer, Independence Day, My Beautiful Laundrette, Breaking Away*—are melodramas. Societal change has unleashed a torrent of films about power relationships at all ages and stages. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Crossing Delancey,* and *Beaches* have much in common. They are all melodramas, and each film has a woman as its central character; the only difference is the women's age.

Melodrama can also be examined as a reflection of the political power structure in a society. Within this framework, the male–female dynamic is just one axis of a larger political construct. Another axis is the politics of the family. Here the struggles of fathers and sons are reflected in films such as *East of Eden* and *A River Runs Through It*. The rebellious son was made an archetype of the era in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The daughter who dared to be different was the focus of *Peyton Place*.

The framework of politics itself is the theme of Rossen's famous *All the King's Men* and the not-so-famous but equally interesting John Sayles's take on urban politics, *City of Hope*. Add race and we have Euzhan Palcy and Colin Welland's *A Dry White Season*. In this complex melodrama, it is the liberal white man, portrayed by Donald Sutherland, who challenges the laws of his native South Africa to defend the dignity of his black gardener. His challenge and his punishment, death is the classic consequence for the main character in melodrama.

This fate, death, in *Lorenzo's Oil*, is challenged by Susan Sarandon and Nick Nolte, parents who are told their son has an incurable disease and will die. These parents do not accept the conventional wisdom of the medical power structure. They spend time, money, and energy to find a cure for their son's illness. And they do. This melodrama about the politics of health and medicine is a victory for the parents, but the experience of the screen story highlights the power of the melodrama to realistically take us to the darkness and tragedy that is part of life.

The Situation Comedy

The situation comedy is very similar to the melodrama, although the outcome differs. Often, the outcome in a melodrama is tragic or at least has a dimension of tragedy. The mother leaving the family at the

end of *Ordinary People* is a good example of a tragic melodrama. In situation comedy, the tragic potential dissipates, and a more satisfying outcome results. A good example of the situation comedy is depicted at the end of the film in *Ruthless People* when Bette Midler's character kicks her husband, played by Danny DeVito, into the ocean. Of course, humor is the result of all the character conflict in the situation comedy. The characteristics of this genre are as follows:

- The central character is more often male than female. Examples of male central characters in situation comedies are Dudley Moore in *10* and *Arthur*, John Ritter in *Skin Deep*, Michael Caine in *Blame It On Rio*, Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, and Ben Stiller in *There's Something About Mary*.
- The setting is contemporary.
- The central character transgresses not the power structure but the values of the power structure.
- Money and social connections are not enough; the central character needs to recapture values he feels are lost (such as idealism and vitality).
- As in the melodrama, the central character's transgressions isolate him from everyone—friend and foe.
- The situation comedy readily embraces current issues, uses them to the disadvantage of the central character, and promotes a search for new values. An Unmarried Woman and Moscow on the Hudson are examples of quality situation comedies.

Just as *The Apartment* was the situation comedy that heralded the end of the 1950s, so, too, do the filmic meditations of Woody Allen on urban life in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, which reflects the end of the affluent 1980s. *Forrest Gump* was the quintessential situation comedy of the 1990s. Acknowledging the limits and the cruelty of the surrounding society, this mentally limited character has the emotional capacity to transcend that society. As he did in *Big*, Tom Hanks captures a sensibility at odds with everyone around him, and by doing so teaches them a valuable life lesson. But just as the comedies reflect their time, they also reflect enduring qualities. The characters that surround the main character in *The Apartment* are as self-absorbed and self-serving as are the characters that populate situation comedies such as *Groundhog Day*, *Dave*, and *Bullets Over Broadway*, made 30 years later.

To be more specific, the dissonance between character and society is also the theme of two recent important situation comedies, *Dave* and *Groundhog Day*. *Dave* focuses on the presidency, whereas *Groundhog Day* focuses on the media. In each, the transcendence of the individual characters over their deficiencies affirms a hopefulness in a bleak time. These films differ from the populist comedies of Frank Capra, which fused the transcendence of the individual to the potential for good in American society. These 1990s comedies are less optimistic about society as a whole; their focus is on the individual as

his own salvation. The society itself is portrayed as the source of the problem, whereas for Capra it was the true source of strength for the individual.

Another important theme in the situation comedies of the 1990s is the dysfunctional family. *Mrs. Doubtfire* focuses on a dysfunctional husband. *Home Alone* focuses on one of the children accidentally left at home by the hurried parents. *It Could Happen to You* depicts an unhappily married couple who wins the lottery. The dysfunctional family and dissonant characters are important sources for the situation comedies of the 1990s.

The Horror Film

The horror film, originating from the nineteenth-century literature of Stevenson, Poe, and Shelley, is principally a reaction (as was the literature) to the veneer of civilization that comes with the material successes of modern life. Monsters, unbridled aggression, and sexuality—the inhabitants of our nightmare world—have a continuing popularity, particularly with young people. The world of our unconscious is the central source of material for the horror film. The characteristics of the genre are as follows:

- The central character is a victim, rather than a hero.
- The antagonist is often manifested from a technological aberration (such as Frankenstein's monster) or a social aberration (such as Freddy Krueger).
- Unbridled aggression and sexuality play an important role. Cruelty knows no relative form; this is a genre of absolutes.
- Technology, science, and scientific activity often unleash the antagonist. Fears about the future are as important as are our fears about the past.
- Religion is viewed as an intermediary that can influence the outcome of events. The central conflict is often portrayed as a struggle between God and Satan (such as in The Exorcist, Rosemary's Baby, and The Seventh Sign).
- Children have special powers in this genre. Children exhibit vision, insight, and tolerance; adults exhibit the opposite traits.
- Relationships can't save the central character. Very often, the victimizer is a member of the family.
- The location (such as the house, village, and archaeological find) has a special significance that influences the outcome of events for the central character.
- The supernatural has a significant role in the horror film genre; most events can't be explained rationally. As the genre dwells on the irrational, some form of understanding devolves from a supernatural explanation.
- In the 1990s, the horror film returned to a key dimension of the horror novel: the humanity of the monster. James V. Hart's screenplay of Bram Stoker's Dracula focuses on the historical evolution of Count

Dracula and poignantly suggests that immortal love has created Dracula and that compassion rather than cruelty will do him in. Similarly, Amanda Silver focuses on the creation of a nanny as the monster in The Hand That Rocks the Cradle. These films depict more empathy for and understanding of the monster than do the horror films of the 1970s and 1980s.

The Science Fiction Film

The science fiction film is to society what the horror film is to the person—a tale of catastrophe, a story of our worst nightmares. In the science fiction story, an ecological catastrophe (*The Naked Jungle*), a technological accident (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), or the unwelcome meeting of two worlds (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*) all serve to remind the audience that the inhabitants of Earth don't have enough respect for the environment, for science, or for each other; if this tendency persists, Earth will be destroyed or will destroy itself. In this context, the science fiction film is analogous to the biblical epic—both are morality plays celebrating past moral victories, while warning us to renew our moral fervor or there will be no future. The characteristics of the science fiction genre are as follows:

- The central character is an innocent bystander who is victimized by a technological accident or an unnatural phenomenon of another world.
- The central character may or may not overcome the challenge of the antagonist. The Invasion of the Body Snatchers is a good example of a science fiction film in which the main character begins and ends the story as a victim.
- The existence of relationships promises respite and perhaps an element of hope in light of the daunting scale of the struggle.
- The antagonist may be a scientist or the product of science or nature. The scale of the antagonist is so great (the ants in the Naked Jungle), that the central character is reminded not only of her mortality but also of how very human she is.
- The outcome in the science fiction film story is often more hopeful than are the outcomes in either the film noir or the horror film.
- There is a certain nobility that devolves to the central character based on her attempt to overcome her struggle with the supernatural (Aliens).
- The environment can be urban or rural, earthbound or otherworldly. In any case, the environment is a benign, but necessary, host for the antagonist. The presence of Earth and how the environment (Earth or space) is presented reminds us of our place in the natural order.
- The story line of the science fiction film is often plot intensive and presents a specific threat to the natural order. The plot outlines the central character's response to the threat.

The War Film

The war film genre is a national melodrama; these films are about transgression and power. How does the individual survive intact, physically and mentally? How are we, the audience, to feel about a particular war or about war in general? Many of the greatest films in the brief history of film have concerned themselves with war—*All Quiet on the Western Front, The Big Parade, La Grande Illusion, Kanal, They Were Expendable, Paths of Glory, Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*—and those behind the lines who tried to cope with the war and its aftermath—*Open City, The Best Years of Our Lives, Forbidden Games, Who'll Stop the Rain?* Films such as *Europa Europa* and *Schindler's List* focus on the noncombatants as victims of war.

War, because it threatens all of us, is an important genre. The characteristics of the genre are as follows:

- The central character has one primary goal: survival. This may mean personal survival, national survival, or the survival of the personal or political values he believes in.
- The character's values are tested.
- The polarities of human behavior—altruism and barbarism—coexist and are as much in combat as are the combatants.
- Violence plays a central role in this genre.
- Relationships, male–male and male–female, take on particular importance.
- Each film carries a particular political perspective of war. Many films are critical of war; others suggest that war brings out the best and the worst in the characters.
- There is a primal quality and intensity to personal behavior.
- The antagonist is often never seen. Paths of Glory and Full Metal Jacket are good examples.

The point of view of the war genre ranges from romantic (*Sergeant York*) to cynical (*Too Late the Hero*). Whatever the perspective, the individual character is the focal point of the war genre. War isn't simply a test of character in these films; more often, it is a plea to reflect upon the issues of war. As Jean Renoir said about his great 1937 antiwar film *La Grande Illusion*, "two years later they fought again, but this time a bigger, more violent war."[2] It appears the genre will continue to appeal to audiences.

The Adventure Film

What the situation comedy is to melodrama, the adventure film is to the war film. James Bond and Indiana Jones are positive cartoon heroes who not only survive war but also seem to thrive on it. In their fantastic,

aggressive adventures, there is a reassurance that men may start wars, but boys such as these can stave off the consequences. The characteristics of this genre are as follows:

- The central character, most often a male, rather than trying to survive, plays a messianic character whose role is to save either the nation or the world.
- The main character is thoroughly capable in terms of mastery of the tools and weapons of salvation, whether they be cerebral or physical.
- The main character exhibits a playfulness that can be childlike or childish.
- The challenges to the main character are considerable and numerous. This is a more plot-intensive genre as compared to most other genres.
- The antagonist is very often imbued with almost superhuman intelligence, strength, or other powers. Whether it be the joker or a shark, the more formidable the antagonist, the greater the success of the central character.
- Humor and self-depreciation are often characteristics of the genre.
- Relationships are superficial. There is no time for intimate relationships in this genre.
- Sexuality and violence, although present, are neither sensual nor visceral. Again, there is no time to dwell.
- Ritual and mythology are more important than are realism and complexity. Consequently, the genre readily embraces less realistic actions and modes; farce and technology coexist in this genre.
- Stereotypes abound in the adventure genre. Examples range from the mad scientist in Dr. No to the mindless thugs in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. The racism implicit in the latter film and films such as First Blood are by-products of the stereotyping rampant in the adventure genre.

The adventure film has been a staple for the past decade or so. Indeed, many of the most successful films ever made were adventure films produced in the 1980s. The Indiana Jones series, the Superman series, the Rambo series, and the Batman series are the best examples. So successful has been the genre that characters from other genres (*Dirty Harry* and *Lethal Weapon*) have veered, at least in the sequels, toward adventure film and away from the genre of the original.

Adventure films have also been borrowing the dysfunctional family motif from the situation comedy, evidenced in *The Last Action Hero*, which borrows the alienated teenager from the melodrama. Although the mix does not work well in *The Last Action Hero*, the situation-comedy element in *True Lies* does offset the soft plot of this particular adventure.

The Epic Film

The epic film is very often presented as a serious adventure film. The struggle of the main character is heroic but realistic. The main character

may be a historical figure whose exploits have been memorialized in print (T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) or in literature (Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*). The epic film may be biographical or historical, but its main appeal is the moral or ethical dilemma (the personal issue) tested against a larger panorama—war (*Patton*) or colonialism (*Gandhi*). Inevitably, the interweaving of personal and historical stories makes the epic film one to experience.

Writers who excel in this form are Robert Bolt (*Lawrence of Arabia, A Man for All Seasons*, and *The Bounty*) and Carl Foreman (*Bridge on the River Kwai* and *The Guns of Navarone*). Numerous contemporary writers are interested in this form. Robert Towne wrote *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan and Lord of the Apes*; Paul Schrader wrote *The Last Temptation of Christ*; and Bob Rafaelson wrote *Mountains of the Moon*. The characteristics of the genre are as follows:

- There is a charismatic central character.
- The antagonist is so powerful that the efforts of the central character elevate the central character to a heroic position.
- There is a historical crisis, such as World War I and the Arab Revolt in Lawrence of Arabia, and Henry VIII's desire to remarry, against Catholic canon, leading him to establish his own church, in A Man for All Seasons.
- The moral struggle by the protagonist is so overwhelming that success seems impossible. Colonial India and the struggle for nonviolent freedom by Mahatma Gandhi in Gandhi is an example.
- There is a depiction of the real world, rather than fantasy. Therefore, when violence is displayed, it is all the more shocking. Violence plays an important role in this genre, because it signals the central character's willingness to sacrifice his life for a just cause.
- There is often poetic subtext. In the midst of all the violence of the story, the central character is sufficiently moral that his stand seems romantic, old-fashioned, and poetic. Consequently, the central character in an epic film is often immensely appealing.
- There is a complex central character. Paul Muni as Émile Zola in The Life of Émile Zola and Paul Scofield as Thomas More in A Man For All Seasons are good examples of complex characters. This trait also contributes to the appeal of this character.
- There is a sense of mission in the central character that is rarely exhibited by central characters in other genres. While Harrison Ford is an ambivalent Indiana Jones, Jeremy Irons is anything but ambivalent in The Mission.
- The complex story line blends two stories—the personal story of the central character and the historical incident.
- The central character is tested. As a result of the test, he is challenged to pursue a course of action.
- The central character meets a tragic fate. In this sense, the epic film story is closer to the melodrama than to the adventure film.

The Sports Film

The sports film is a particular sort of adventure film. It can be real (*Champion*), cynical (*Raging Bull*), or fantastic (*Field of Dreams*). Unlike the adventure film, the focal point can be personal (*Bang the Drum Slowly*) rather than apocalyptic. This doesn't mean that the sports genre is less exciting. *Rocky* is as exciting an experience as the best of the adventure films and is more emotionally satisfying than some. The characteristics of the sports film are as follows:

- The central character is a gifted athlete.
- He tests himself within the parameters of a particular sport.
- Only sports that have a broad appeal to society make a good background for this genre. Boxing, football, and baseball have been the sports of choice. The best films have been boxing films in which the character has much at stake, physically and spiritually. No one has made a good film about a tennis player! Only Downhill Racer has succeeded aside from the three main sports (boxing, football, and baseball), although Heart Like a Wheel, Chariots of Fire, and The Hustler were successful.
- The apparent antagonist—the other team, the manager, or the owner—is not as important as is the interior struggle of the central character. He is his own worst enemy, as evidenced in The Hustler.
- Relationships, whether they be male–female or male–male, are crucial to the emotional well-being of the central character.
- A mentor (a father, a coach, or another professional) plays a key role.
- Family is an important component in this genre. Melodramas and gangster films are the only other genres in which family figures so prominently.
- The ritual—in this case, the big game or the big fight—plays a central role in the sports genre.

The Biographical Film

Biography, as in prose, is an important genre. What are our leaders, authority figures, great artists really like? We are fascinated with their greatness and talent. We want to know all about them. Underlying our fascination is our wish for immortality. In their own way, the subjects of biographical films (by their actions, achievements, or character) have achieved immortality. The characteristics of the biographical film are as follows:

- The central character has a particular talent and a nonconformist personality.
- The central character's talent develops in conflict with the conventions of society.
- The drive for actualization is singular.

- The antagonist is not physical; rather, it can be time (The Life of Louis Pasteur), ignorance (The Life of Émile Zola), or conventional thinking (Patton).
- The seminal event is acted out in a public manner.
- The psychological makeup of the central character allows her to overcome the tragedy of life and succeed. Although Van Gogh dies at the end of Lust For Life, his success is evident in his life's work.
- There is a sense of mission that is religious in its overtone. Patton is as zealous, in his way, as Gandhi.
- Personal relationships often fail, but this only adds to the spiritual side of the central character.
- The critical moment, whether it is a discovery or a religious or political conversion, is the most important point in the story, far more important than the public acknowledgement of the character's achievement.
- The tragic aspect of the character's life is also important in this genre. Whether it be Patton's dishonor, Gandhi's assassination, or Zola's death, the reminder of mortality acts as ballast to the mythical subtext of these stories.

The Satire

Satire is a special form of genre. It is not often found, but its strength is such that you should know about the genre. The characteristics of the genre are as follows:

- The central conflict relates to a crucial social or political issue of the day. The environment, health care, the power of television, and nuclear war are all examples of recent satires.
- The film has a distinct point of view about the issue.
- Humor mixes freely with aggression.
- The central character is a vehicle to promote an issue.
- Fantasy and unreality are acceptable in this free-form genre.
- The level of aggression mounts rapidly, escalating to absurd levels before the film ends.
- Relationships can only be transient, given the urgency of the posed social or political threat.
- Random irrationality reminds us of the horror film. The genre succeeds when we see ourselves as victims of the danger and threat of society.
- This is a vigorous, energetic genre and is not at all tied to realism, like the melodrama or the film noir. High energy is rampant in these films.

Satire experienced a resurgence in the 1990s. Two themes stand out: the film industry and urban life in the city of dreams, Los Angeles. Both *The Player* and *Mistress* focus on the loss of humanity in the film industry.

The main character in *The Player*, a studio executive, brutally kills a writer and not only gets away with murder but then advances in the corporate hierarchy of Hollywood. The characters in *Grand Canyon* and *Short Cuts* are ordinary people living in Los Angeles who also seem to have lost their way and, in *Short Cuts*, also their humanity. The result is the need to escape—to the Grand Canyon in *Grand Canyon*—or to have no means of escape, in *Short Cuts*. The nastiness of each of the characters in *Short Cuts* suggests that malice and murder are not the province of the studio executive or of the ghetto—they're everywhere. Whether Robert Altman is criticizing all modern urban life or strictly Los Angeles is unclear, but what seems certain is that his interpretation of Raymond Carver assures that Los Angeles, for so long the city of angels and dreams, is now the city of the nightmare, the modern equivalent of a Hieronymous Bosch painting.

Conclusion

Working with genre is probably the most topical and typical activity of today's screenwriters. Whatever story you choose to write, you're probably working with genre. Consequently, it is critical that you be familiar with the motifs of each genre. To involve the audience more rapidly in your story, use the expected signposts of the genre, which are a shorthand that audiences absorb from their earliest viewing.

References

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