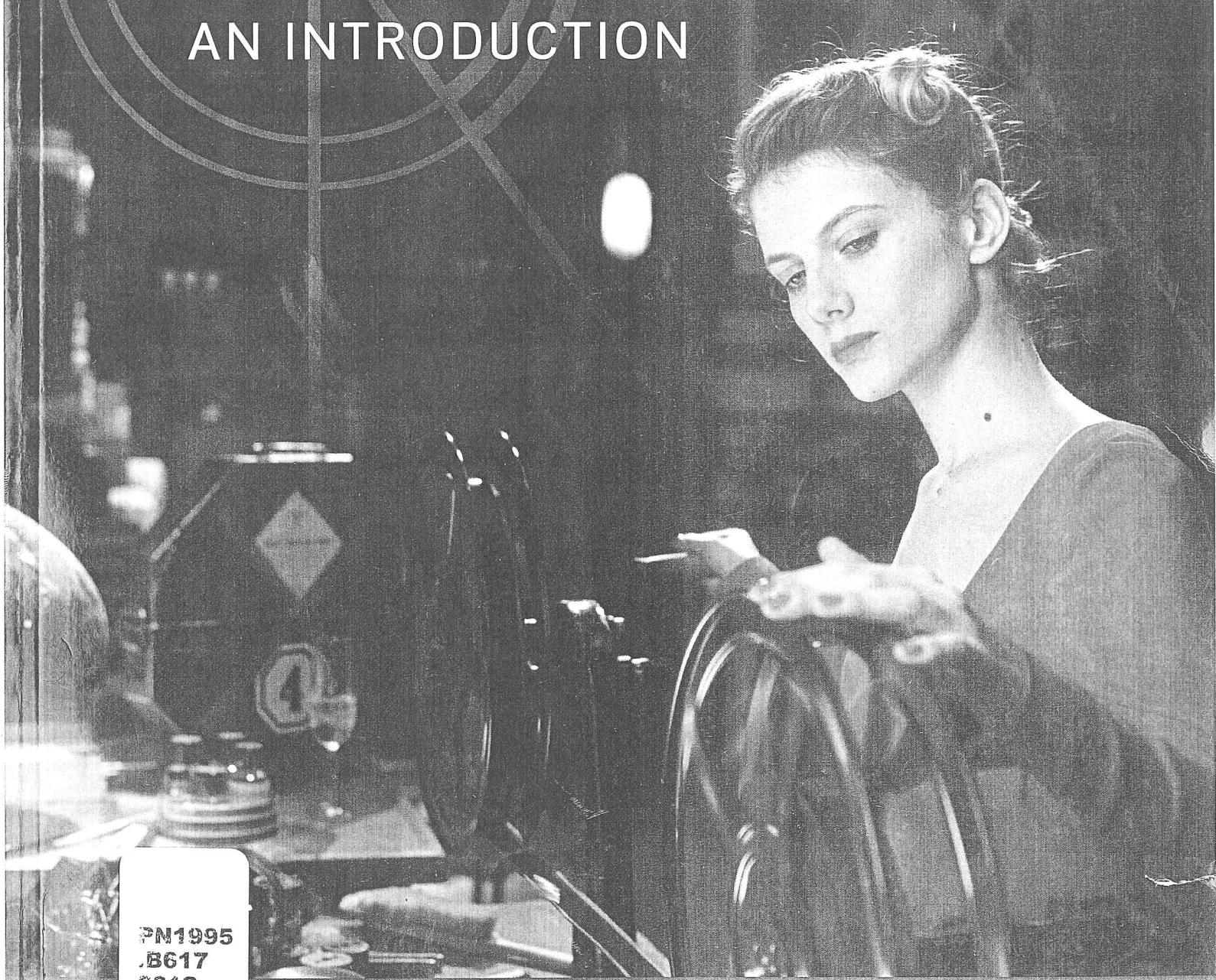


TENTH EDITION

FILM ART

AN INTRODUCTION



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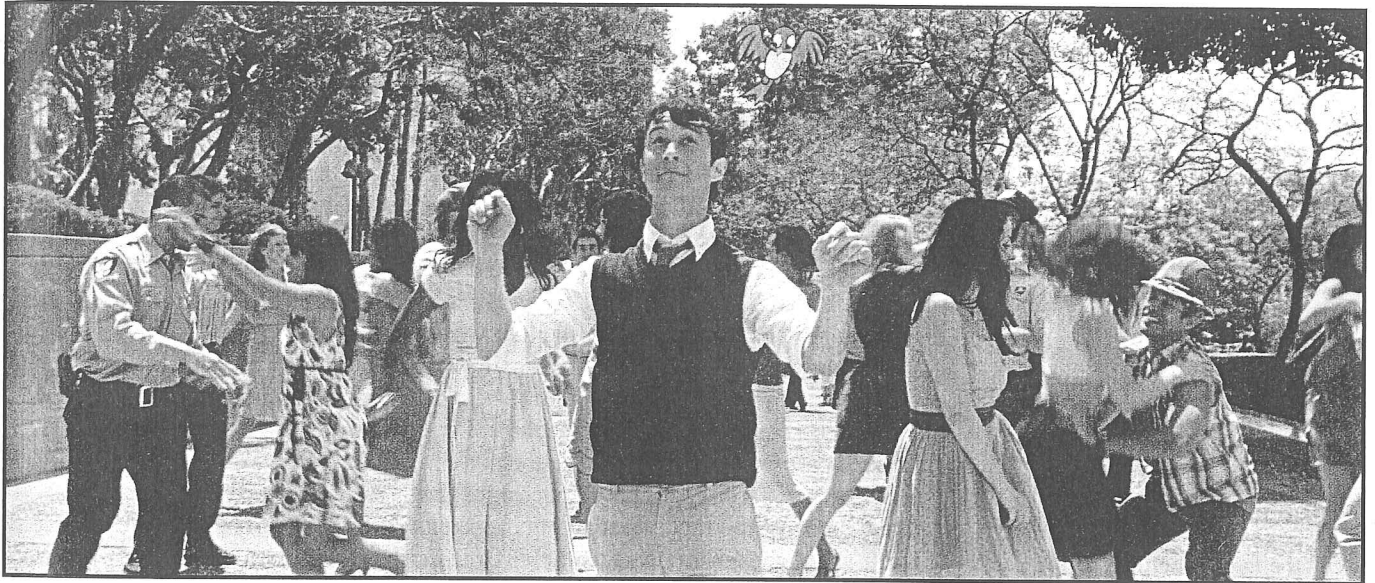


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9.1

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

the man from one day to the next. *Love Actually* innovates by intertwining many 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 belong to 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 Western is usually about life on some frontier (not necessarily the American West, as *North to Alaska* and *Drums Along the Mohawk* suggest).

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, core 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 gory film such as *The Silence of the Lambs* probably exemplifies the thriller, whereas for audiences of the 1950s, a prime example would have been an urbane Hitchcock exercise such as *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 on the Romeo-and-Juliet model.

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 *Gattaca* 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 *Lethal Weapon* 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. Science-fiction and action films are currently popular, and executives would be likelier to green-light projects perceived to fit into those genres. The massive success of young-adult fantasy fiction, crystallized in the Harry Potter franchise, led many studios to finance expensive ventures into the same territory (*Inkheart*, *The Golden Compass*). By contrast, 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. "Vampires. Werewolves. Humans," proclaims the poster for *Twilight: Eclipse*. "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 still 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.



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).

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. 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 *Ray* or *J. Edgar* 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, unyielding 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 nightclubs, the space-travel film in starships and on distant planets. 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 Carrell and Seth Rogan for comedy, Meg Ryan 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 intrigue 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 Carroll Oates, novelist

Genre History

Because filmmakers frequently play with conventions, genres and subgenres change constantly. The broader, blanket genres such as thrillers, romances, and comedies may stay popular for decades, but a comedy from the 1920s is likely to be very different from one in the 1960s. Genres change over history. Their conventions 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, and the development of color processes favored genres of spectacle, for example, Westerns, musicals, and historical dramas. Most recently, computer-generated imagery has made it easy to conjure up unreal creatures and imaginary landscapes. Digital special effects have encouraged the expansion of the fantasy and science-fiction genres, as well as films based on animated cartoons (such as *Speed Racer*) and on 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 short 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*), but 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 fakes his own death in order to run off with his mistress. His wife is found guilty of his murder, but in prison, she discovers that her husband is alive under a new identity. 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 subgenre. At some point, the victim usually realizes that he or she cannot react passively and must fight back, as in *Duel*, *The Fugitive*, *The Net*, *Breakdown*, and *Panic Room* (9.5). 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 free-lance 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 vio-

lence. *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. *Nick of Time*, *The Bodyguard*, and *In the Line of Fire* 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 maker 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.

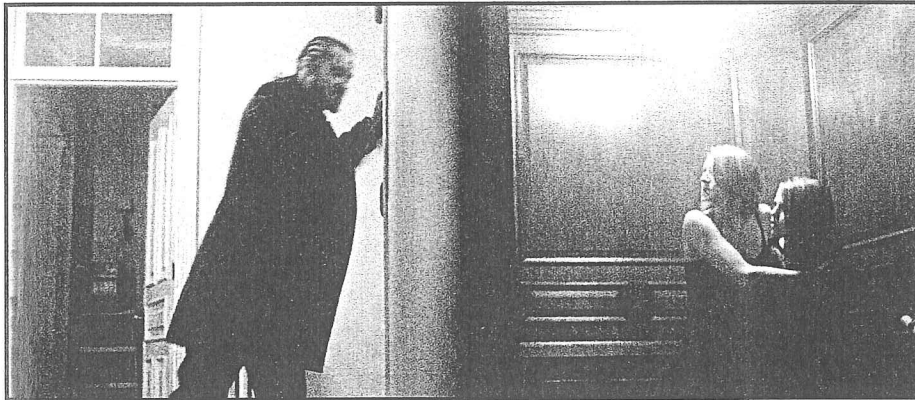
Narration's Effects Thrillers obviously aim to thrill us—that is, to startle, shock, and maintain suspense. How do we distinguish them from horror films, which seek similar effects? Horror aims to disgust as well as frighten, but the thriller need not involve disgust. The central character of

a horror film is a monster that is both fearsome and repellent, but a thriller villain may be quite attractive (the suave men in *Red Eye* and *Primal Fear*; the enticing women in *Red Rock West* and *The Last Seduction*). 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.

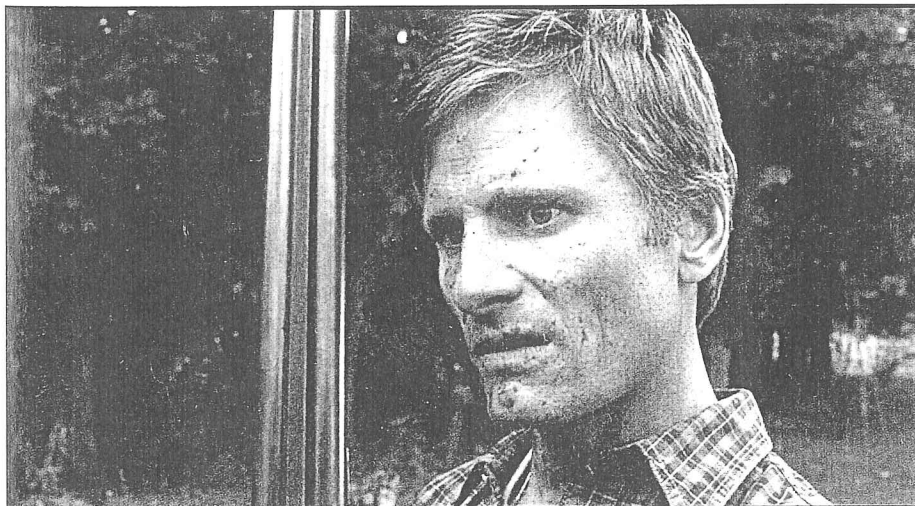
More specifically, the thriller's effects depend on which characters are highlighted by the plot and narration. If the protagonist is a victim or a bystander, the suspense we feel comes from the likelihood that he or she will be harmed. If the hero is a figure of justice, we become concerned that she or he will not be able to save 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. 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, and 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 (9.6).

Innovations in the Thriller Like any genre or sub-genre, the crime thriller can mix with others. It blends with



9.5



9.6

9.5–9.6 Crime thriller: Victims and victimizer. Innocents in jeopardy: an unusual camera position for a classic thriller situation in *Panic Room* (9.5). In *A History of Violence*, Tom Stall, quiet owner of a small-town diner, is revealed to have a killer's instincts (9.6).



the horror film in *From Dusk Till Dawn* and with 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*). *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 by Johnnie To Kei-fung, 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. 415–420) and of *Chungking Express* (pp. 425–429), focus on non-Hollywood films that imaginatively shift the expectations we bring to the crime thriller.

Cycles typically occur when a successful film produces a burst of imitations. *The Godfather* triggered a brief spate of gangster movies. During the 1970s, there was a cycle of disaster movies (*Earthquake*, *The Poseidon Adventure*), followed by a cycle of monster movies derived from *Jaws*. 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).

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*, *Hellboy*, 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*. Even the Western, probably the classic genre most unpopular today, can be occasionally revisited, as the success of *True Grit* (2010) suggests.

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 *Yeni* 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” (9.7). 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.” *Cowboys & Aliens* combined the Western and the science-fiction film. Instead of adding comedy, the filmmakers tried to create a thriller that would merge the genres. Looking for models, they watched John Ford Westerns and *Alien*. According to cinematographer Matthew Labatque: “The question became, ‘How to we create the tension within the Western to graduate into the science-fiction thriller?’”

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, however, 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.



9.7 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 of the contract between filmmaker and audience, the promise of something new based on something familiar, genres 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 (9.8, 9.9). 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.



9.8



9.9

9.8–9.9 Genre and gender roles: Warrior and mother. In *Aliens*, Ripley learns how to use a weapon (9.8), but she can also comfort the orphaned girl the soldiers find (9.9).

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 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.

Three 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 three 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 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 (9.10).