THE FILM GENRES

Through tens of thousands of years of tales told at fireside, four millennia of the written word, twenty-five hundred years of theatre, a century of film, and eight decades of broadcasting, countless generations of storytellers have spun story into an astonishing diversity of patterns. To make sense of this outpouring, various systems have been devised to sort stories according to shared elements, classifying them by genre. No two systems, however, have ever agreed on which story elements to use in the sorting, and, therefore, no two agree on the number and kind of genres.

Aristotle gave us the first genres by dividing dramas according to the value-charge of their ending versus their story design. A story, he noted, could end on either a positive or a negative charge. Then each of these two types could be either a Simple design (ending flat with no turning point or surprise) or a Complex design (climaxing around a major reversal in the protagonist's life). The result is his four basic genres: Simple Tragic, Simple Fortunate, Complex Tragic, Complex Fortunate.

Over the centuries, however, the lucidity of Aristotle was lost as genre systems became more and more blurred and bloated. Goethe listed seven types by subject matter—love, revenge, and so on. Schiller argued that there must be more but couldn't name them. Polti inventoried no less than three dozen different emotions from which he deduced "Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations," but his categories
such as “An Involuntary Crime Committed for Love” or “Self-Sacrifice for an Ideal” are vague beyond use. The semiologist Metz reduced all film edits to eight possibilities he called “syntagmas,” then tried to schematize all of cinema inside “La Gran Syntagma,” but his effort to turn art into science crumbled like the Tower of Babel.

The neo-Aristotelian critic Norman Friedman, on the other hand, developed a system that once again delineates genres by structure and values. We’re indebted to Friedman for distinctions such as the Education Plot, Redemption Plot, and Disillusionment Plot—subtle forms in which story arcs at the level of inner conflict to bring about deep changes within the mind or moral nature of the protagonist.

While scholars dispute definitions and systems, the audience is already a genre expert. It enters each film armed with a complex set of anticipations learned through a lifetime of moviegoing. The genre sophistication of filmgoers presents the writer with this critical challenge: He must not only fulfill audience anticipations, or risk their confusion and disappointment, but he must lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments, or risk boring them. This two-handed trick is impossible without a knowledge of genre that surpasses the audience’s.

Below is the genre and subgenre system used by screenwriters—a system that’s evolved from practice, not theory, and that turns on differences of subject, setting, role, event, and values.

1. LOVE STORY. Its subgenre, Buddy Salvation, substitutes friendship for romantic love: MEAN STREETS, PASSION FISH, ROMY AND MICHELE’S HIGH SCHOOL REUNION.

2. HORROR FILM. This genre divides into three subgenres: the Uncanny, in which the source of horror is astounding but subject to “rational” explanation, such as beings from outer space, science-made monsters, or a maniac; the Supernatural, in which the source of horror is an “irrational” phenomenon from the spirit realm; and the Super-Uncanny, in which the audience is kept guessing between the other two possibilities—THE TENANT, HOUR OF THE WOLF, THE SHINING.
3. **MODERN EPIC** (the individual versus the state): SPASTACUS, MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON, VIVA ZAPATA!, 1984, THE PEOPLE VS. LARRY FLINT.

4. **WESTERN.** The evolution of this genre and its subgenres is brilliantly traced in Will Wright’s *Six Guns and Society*.

5. **WAR GENRE.** Although war is often the setting for another genre, such as the **Love Story**, the **WAR GENRE** is specifically about combat. **Pro-war** versus **Antiwar** are its primary subgenres. Contemporary films generally oppose war, but for decades the majority covertly glorified it, even in its most grisly form.

6. **MATURATION PLOT** or the coming-of-age story: STAND BY ME, SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, RISKY BUSINESS, BIG, BAMBI, MURIEL’S WEDDING.

7. **REDEMPTION PLOT.** Here the film arcs on a moral change within the protagonist from bad to good: THE HUSTLER, LORD JIM, DRUGSTORE COWBOY, SCHINDLER’S LIST, LA PROMESSE.

8. **PUNITIVE PLOT.** In these the good guy turns bad and is punished: GREED, THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE, MEPHISTO, WALL STREET, FALLING DOWN.

9. **TESTING PLOT.** Stories of willpower versus temptation to surrender: THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA, COOL HAND LUKE, FITZCARRALDO, FORREST GUMP.

10. **EDUCATION PLOT.** This genre arcs on a deep change within the protagonist’s view of life, people, or self from the negative (naive, distrustful, fatalistic, self-hating) to the positive (wise, trusting, optimistic, self-possessed): HAROLD AND MAUDE, TENDER MERCIES, WINTER LIGHT, IL POSTINO, GROSS POINTE BLANK, MY BEST FRIEND’S WEDDING, SHALL WE DANCE.

11. **DISILLUSIONMENT PLOT.** A deep change of worldview from the positive to the negative: MRS. PARKER AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE, L’ECLISSE, LE FEU FOLLET, THE GREAT GATSBY, MACBETH.
Some genres are mega-genres, so large and complex that they’re filled with numerous subgenre variations:

12. **COMEDY.** Subgenres range from **Parody** to **Satire** to **Sitcom** to **Romantic** to **Screwball** to **Farce** to **Black Comedy,** all differing by the focus of comic attack (bureaucratic folly, upper-class manners, teenage courtship, etc.) and the degree of ridicule (gentle, caustic, lethal).

13. **CRIME.** Subgenres vary chiefly by the answer to this question: From whose point of view do we regard the crime? **Murder Mystery** (master detective’s POV); **Caper** (master criminal’s POV); **Detective** (cop’s POV); **Gangster** (crook’s POV); **Thriller or Revenge Tale** (victim’s POV); **Courtroom** (lawyer’s POV); **Newspaper** (reporter’s POV); **Espionage** (spy’s POV); **Prison Drama** (inmate’s POV); **Film Noir** (POV of a protagonist who may be part criminal, part detective, part victim of a femme fatale).

14. **SOCIAL DRAMA.** This genre identifies problems in society—poverty, the education system, communicable diseases, the disadvantaged, antisocial rebellion, and the like—then constructs a story demonstrating a cure. It has a number of sharply focused subgenres: **Domestic Drama** (problems within the family), the **Woman’s Film** (dilemmas such as career versus family, lover versus children), **Political Drama** (corruption in politics), **Eco-Drama** (battles to save the environment), **Medical Drama** (struggles with physical illness), and **Psycho-Drama** (struggles with mental illness).

15. **ACTION/ADVENTURE.** This often borrows aspects from other genres such as **War** or **Political Drama** to use as motivation for explosive action and derring-do. If **ACTION/ADVENTURE** incorporates ideas such as destiny, hubris, or the spiritual, it becomes the subgenre **High Adventure:** THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING. If Mother Nature is the source of antagonism, it’s a **Disaster/Survival Film:** ALIVE, THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE.
Taking a still wider view, supra-genres are created out of settings, performance styles, or filmmaking techniques that contain a host of autonomous genres. They are like mansions of many rooms where one of the basic genres, subgenres, or any combination might find a home:

16. **HISTORICAL DRAMA.** History is an inexhaustible source of story material and embraces every type of story imaginable. The treasure chest of history, however, is sealed with this warning: What is past must be present. A screenwriter isn’t a poet hoping to be discovered after he’s dead. He must find an audience today. Therefore, the best use of history, and the only legitimate excuse to set a film in the past and thereby add untold millions to the budget, is anachronism—to use the past as a clear glass through which you show us the present.

Many contemporary antagonisms are so distressing or loaded with controversy that it’s difficult to dramatize them in a present-day setting without alienating the audience. Such dilemmas are often best viewed at a safe distance in time. **HISTORICAL DRAMA** polishes the past into a mirror of the present, making clear and bearable the painful problems of racism in GLORY, religious strife in MICHAEL COLLINS, or violence of all kinds, especially against women, in UNFORGIVEN.

Christopher Hampton’s **DANGEROUS LIAISONS**; Setting a down ending, love/hate story in the France of lace cuffs and piquant repartee seemed like protocol for commercial disaster. But the film found a huge audience by turning a scalding light on a mode of modern hostility too politically sensitive to be addressed directly: courtship as combat. Hampton stepped back two centuries to an age in which sexual politics exploded into a war for sexual supremacy, where the ascendant emotion was not love but fear and suspicion of the opposite sex. Despite the antiquated setting, within minutes the audience felt intimately at home with its corrupted aristocrats—they are us.
17. **BIOGRAPHY.** This cousin to **Historical Drama** focuses on a person rather than an era. **BIOGRAPHY,** however, must never become a simple chronicle. That someone lived, died, and did interesting things in between is of scholarly interest and no more. The biographer must interpret facts as if they were fiction, find the meaning of the subject’s life, and then cast him as the protagonist of his life’s genre: **YOUNG MR. LINCOLN** defends the innocent in a **Courtroom Drama;** **GANDHI** becomes the hero of a **Modern Epic;** **ISADORA** succumbs to a **Disillusionment Plot;** **NIXON** suffers in a **Punitive Plot.**

These caveats apply equally to the subgenre **Autobiography.** This idiom is popular with filmmakers who feel that they should write a film about a subject they know. And rightly so. But autobiographical films often lack the very virtue they promise: self-knowledge. For while it’s true that the unexamined life is not worth living, it’s also the case that the unlived life isn’t worth examining. **BIG WEDNESDAY,** for example.

18. **DOCU-DRAMA.** A second cousin to **Historical Drama,** **DOCU-DRAMA** centers on recent rather than past events. Once invigorated by cinema verité—**BATTLE OF ALGIERS**—it’s become a popular TV genre, sometimes powerful, but often with little documentary value.

19. **MOCUMENTARY.** This genre pretends to be rooted in actuality or memory, behaves like documentary or autobiography, but is utter fiction. It subverts fact-based filmmaking to satirize hypocritical institutions: the backstage world of rock ‘n’ roll in **THIS IS SPINAL TAP;** the Catholic Church in **ROMA;** middle-class mores in **ZELIG;** TV journalism in **MAN BITES DOG;** politics in **BOB ROBERTS;** crass American values in **TO DIE FOR.**

20. **MUSICAL.** Descended from opera, this genre presents a “reality” in which characters sing and dance their stories. It’s often a **Love Story,** but it can be **Film Noir:** the stage adaptation of **SUNSET BOULEVARD;** **Social Drama:**
WEST SIDE STORY; **Punitive Plot:** ALL THAT JAZZ; **Biography:** EVITA. Indeed, any genre can work in musical form and all can be satirized in **Musical Comedy.**

21. **SCIENCE FICTION.** In hypothetical futures that are typically technological dystopias of tyranny and chaos, the **SCIENCE FICTION** writer often marries the man-against-state **Modern Epic** with **Action/Adventure:** the STAR WARS trilogy and TOTAL RECALL. But, like history, the future is a setting in which any genre may play. In SOLARIS, for example, Andrei Tarkovsky used sci-fi to act out the inner conflicts of a **Disillusionment Plot.**

22. **SPORTS GENRE.** Sport is a crucible for character change. This genre is a natural home for the **Maturation Plot:** NORTH DALLAS FORTY; the **Redemption Plot:** SOMEBODY UP THERE LIKES ME; the **Education Plot:** BULL DURHAM; the **Punitive Plot:** RAGING BULL; the **Testing Plot:** CHARIOTS OF FIRE; the **Disillusionment Plot:** THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER; **Buddy Salvation:** WHITE MEN CAN'T JUMP; **Social Drama:** A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN.

23. **FANTASY.** Here the writer plays with time, space, and the physical, bending and mixing the laws of nature and the supernatural. The extra-realities of **FANTASY** attract the Action genres but also welcome others such as the **Love Story:** SOMEWHERE IN TIME; **Political Drama/Allegory:** ANIMAL FARM; **Social Drama:** IF...; **Maturation Plot:** ALICE IN WONDERLAND.

24. **ANIMATION.** Here the law of universal metamorphosis rules: Anything can become something else. Like **Fantasy** and **Science Fiction,** **ANIMATION** leans toward the Action genres of cartoon **Farce:** BUGS BUNNY; or **High Adventure:** THE SWORD IN THE STONE, THE YELLOW SUBMARINE; and because the youth audience is its natural market, many **Maturation Plots:** THE LION KING, THE LITTLE MERMAID; but as the animators of Eastern Europe and Japan have shown, there are no restraints.
Lastly, for those who believe that genres and their conventions are concerns of "commercial" writers only, and that serious art is nongeneric, let me add one last name to the list:

25. **ART FILM.** The avant-garde notion of writing outside the genres is naive. No one writes in a vacuum. After thousands of years of storytelling no story is so different that it has no similarity to anything else ever written. The **ART FILM** has become a traditional genre, divisible into two subgenres, **Minimalism** and **Antistructure**, each with its own complex of formal conventions of structure and cosmology. Like **Historical Drama**, the **ART FILM** is a supra-genre that embraces other basic genres: **Love Story, Political Drama**, and the like.

Although this slate is reasonably comprehensive, no list can ever be definitive or exhaustive because the lines between genres often overlap as they influence and merge with one another. Genres are not static or rigid, but evolving and flexible, yet firm and stable enough to be identified and worked with, much as a composer plays with the malleable movements of musical genres.

Each writer's homework is first to identify his genre, then research its governing practices. And there's no escaping these tasks. We're all genre writers.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND GENRE**

Each genre imposes conventions on story design: conventional value-charges at climax such as the down-ending of the **Disillusionment Plot**; conventional settings such as the **Western**; conventional events such as boy-meets-girl in the **Love Story**; conventional roles such as the criminal in a **Crime Story**. The audience knows these conventions and expects to see them fulfilled. Consequently, the choice of genre sharply determines and limits what's possible within a story, as its design must envision the audience's knowledge and anticipations.
GENRE CONVENTIONS are specific settings, roles, events, and values that define individual genres and their subgenres.

Each genre has unique conventions, but in some these are relatively uncomplicated and pliable. The primary convention of the Disillusionment Plot is a protagonist who opens the story filled with optimism, who holds high ideals or beliefs, whose view of life is positive. Its second convention is a pattern of repeatedly negative story turns that may at first raise his hopes, but ultimately poison his dreams and values, leaving him deeply cynical and disillusioned. The protagonist of THE CONVERSATION, for example, begins with an orderly, secure hold on life and ends in a paranoid nightmare. This simple set of conventions offers uncountable possibilities, for life knows a thousand paths to hopelessness. Among the many memorable films in this genre are THE MISFITS, LA DOLCE VITA, and LENNY.

Other genres are relatively inflexible and filled with a complex of rigid conventions. In the Crime Genre there must be a crime; it must happen early in the telling. There must be a detective character, professional or amateur, who discovers clues and suspects. In the Thriller the criminal must “make it personal.” Although the story may start with a cop who works for a paycheck, to deepen the drama, at some point, the criminal goes over the line. Clichés grow like fungus around this convention: The criminal menaces the family of the cop or turns the cop himself into a suspect; or, cliché of clichés with roots back to THE MALTESE FALCON, he kills the detective’s partner. Ultimately, the cop must identify, apprehend, and punish the criminal.

Comedy contains myriad subgenres as well, each with its own conventions, but one overriding convention unites this mega-genre and distinguishes it from drama: Nobody gets hurt. In Comedy, the audience must feel that no matter how characters bounce off walls, no matter how they scream and writhe under the whips of life, it doesn’t really hurt. Buildings may fall on Laurel and Hardy, but they get up out of the rubble, dust themselves off, mutter, “Now, what a fine mess . . .” and on they go.
In A FISH CALLED WANDA Ken (Michael Palin), a character with an obsessive love of animals, tries to kill an old lady but accidentally kills her pet terriers instead. The last dog dies under a massive construction block with his little paw left sticking out. Charles Crichton, the director, shot two versions of this moment: one showing only the paw, but for the second he sent to a butcher’s shop for a bag of entrails and added a trail of gore draining away from the squashed terrier. When this gory image flashed in front of preview audiences, the theatre fell dead quiet. The blood and guts said: “It hurt.” For general release Crichton switched to the sanitized shot and got his laugh. By genre convention, the comedy writer walks the line between putting characters through the torments of hell while safely reassuring the audience that the flames don’t really burn.

Across that line waits the subgenre of Black Comedy. Here the writer bends comic convention and allows his audience to feel sharp, but not unbearable, pain: THE LOVED ONE; THE WAR OF THE ROSES; PRIZZI’S HONOR—films in which laughter often chokes us.

Art Films are conventionalized by a number of external practices such as the absence of stars (or stars’ salaries), production outside the Hollywood system, generally in a language other than English—all of which become sales points as the marketing team encourages critics to champion the film as an underdog. Its primary internal conventions are, first, a celebration of the cerebral. The Art Film favors the intellect by smothering strong emotion under a blanket of mood, while through enigma, symbolism, or unresolved tensions it invites interpretation and analysis in the postfilm ritual of cafe criticism. Secondly and essentially, the story design of an Art Film depends on one grand convention: unconventionality. Minimalist and/or Antistructure unconventionality is the Art Film’s distinguishing convention.

Success in the Art Film genre usually results in instant, though often temporary, recognition as an artist. On the other hand, the durable Alfred Hitchcock worked solely within the Archplot and genre convention, always aimed for a mass audience, and habitually found it. Yet today he stands atop the pantheon of filmmakers, worshipped worldwide as one of the century’s major artists, a film
poet whose works resonate with sublime images of sexuality, religiosity, and subtleties of point of view. Hitchcock knew that there is no necessary contradiction between art and popular success, nor a necessary connection between art and Art Film.

MASTERY OF GENRE

Each of us owes an enormous debt to the great story traditions. You must not only respect but master your genre and its conventions. Never assume that because you’ve seen films in your genre you know it. This is like assuming you could compose a symphony because you have heard all nine of Beethoven’s. You must study the form. Books of genre criticism may help, but few are current and none is complete. Read everything, nonetheless, for we need all possible help from wherever we can get it. The most valuable insights, however, come from self-discovery; nothing ignites the imagination like the unearthing of buried treasure.

Genre study is best done in this fashion: First, list all those works you feel are like yours, both successes and failures. (The study of failures is illuminating... and humbling.) Next, rent the films on video and purchase the screenplays if possible. Then study the films stop and go, turning pages with the screen, breaking each film down into elements of setting, role, event, and value. Lastly, stack, so to speak, these analyses one atop the other and look down through them all asking: What do the stories in my genre always do? What are its conventions of time, place, character, and action? Until you discover answers, the audience will always be ahead of you.

To anticipate the anticipations of the audience you must master your genre and its conventions.

If a film has been properly promoted, the audience arrives filled with expectancy. In the jargon of marketing pros, it’s been “positioned.” “Positioning the audience” means this: We don’t want people coming to our work cold and vague, not knowing what to expect, forcing us to spend the first twenty minutes of screen-
time clueing them toward the necessary story attitude. We want them to settle into their seats, warm and focused with an appetite we intend to satisfy.

Positioning of the audience is nothing new. Shakespeare didn’t call his play Hamlet; he called it The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. He gave comedies titles such as Much Ado About Nothing and All’s Well That Ends Well, so that each afternoon at the Globe Theatre his Elizabethan audience was psychologically set to cry or laugh.

Skillful marketing creates genre expectation. From the title to the poster through print and TV ads, promotion seeks to fix the type of story in the mind of the audience. Having told our filmgoers to expect a favorite form, we must deliver as promised. If we botch genre by omitting or misusing conventions, the audience knows instantly and badmouths our work.

For example, the marketing of the unfortunately titled MIKE’S MURDER (USA/1984) positioned the audience to a Murder Mystery. The film, however, is in another genre, and for over an hour the audience sat wondering, “Who the hell dies in this movie?” The screenplay is a fresh take on the Maturation Plot as it arcs Debra Winger’s bank teller from dependency and immaturity to self-possession and maturity. But the sour word-of-mouth of a mispositioned and confused audience cut the “legs” out from under an otherwise good film.

**CREATIVE LIMITATIONS**

Robert Frost said that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down, for it’s the self-imposed, indeed artificial demands of poetic conventions that stir the imagination. Let’s say a poet arbitrarily imposes this limit: He decides to write in six-line stanzas, rhyming every other line. After rhyming the fourth line with the second line he reaches the end of a stanza. Backed into this corner, his struggle to rhyme the sixth line with the fourth and second may inspire him to imagine a word that has no relationship to his poem whatsoever—it just happens to rhyme—but this random word then springs loose a phrase that in turn brings an image to mind,
an image that in turn resonates back through the first five lines, triggering a whole new sense and feeling, twisting and driving the poem to a richer meaning and emotion. Thanks to the poet’s Creative Limitation of this rhyme scheme, the poem achieves an intensity it would have lacked had the poet allowed himself the freedom to choose any word he wished.

The principle of Creative Limitation calls for freedom within a circle of obstacles. Talent is like a muscle: without something to push against, it atrophies. So we deliberately put rocks in our path, barriers that inspire. We discipline ourselves as to what to do, while we’re boundless as to how to do it. One of our first steps, therefore, is to identify the genre or combination of genres that govern our work, for the story ground that grows the most fruitful ideas is genre convention.

Genre conventions are the rhyme scheme of a storyteller’s “poem.” They do not inhibit creativity, they inspire it. The challenge is to keep convention but avoid cliché. That boy meets girl in a Love Story is not a cliché but a necessary element of form—a convention. The cliché is that they meet as Love Story lovers have always met: Two dynamic individualists are forced to share an adventure and seem to hate each other on sight; or two shy souls, each carrying the torch for someone who won’t give them the time of day, find themselves shunted to the edge of a party with no one else to talk to, and so on.

Genre convention is a Creative Limitation that forces the writer’s imagination to rise to the occasion. Rather than deny convention and flatten the story, the fine writer calls on conventions like old friends, knowing that in the struggle to fulfill them in a unique way, he may find inspiration for the scene that will lift his story above the ordinary. With mastery of genre we can guide audiences through rich, creative variations on convention to reshape and exceed expectations by giving the audience not only what it had hoped for but, if we’re very good, more than it could have imagined.

Consider Action/Adventure. Often dismissed as mindless fare, it is in fact the single most difficult genre in which to write today . . . simply because it’s been done to death. What is an Action writer
to do that the audience hasn't seen a thousand times before? For example, chief among its many conventions is this scene: *The hero is at the mercy of the villain*. The hero, from a position of helplessness, must turn the tables on the villain. This scene is imperative. It tests and expresses in absolute terms the protagonist's ingenuity, strength of will, and cool under pressure. Without it both the protagonist and his story are diminished; the audience leaves dissatisfied. Clichés grow on this convention like mold on bread, but when its solution is fresh, the telling is much enhanced.

In RAIDIERS OF THE LOST ARK, Indiana Jones comes face to face with an Egyptian giant wielding a massive scimitar. A look of terror, then a shrug and a quick bullet as Jones remembers he is carrying a gun. The behind-the-screen legend is that Harrison Ford suggested this much-loved solution because he was too sick with dysentery to take on the acrobatic fight Lawrence Kasdan had scripted.

DIE HARD climaxes around this graceful execution of the convention: John McClane (Bruce Willis), stripped to the waist, weaponless, his hands in the air, is face to face with the sadistic and well-armed Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman). Slowly, however, as the camera tracks around McClane we discover that he's duct-taped a gun to his naked back. He distracts Gruber with a joke, snatches the gun from his back, and kills him.

Of all the hero-at-the-mercy-of-the-villain clichés, "Look out! There's somebody behind you!" is the most archaic. But in MIDNIGHT RUN screenwriter George Gallo gave it new life and delight by riffing lunatic variations in scene after scene.

**MIXING GENRES**

Genres are frequently combined to resonate with meaning, to enrich character, and to create varieties of mood and emotion. A *Love Story* subplot, for example, finds its way inside almost any *Crime Story*. THE FISHER KING wove five threads—*Redemption Plot, Psycho-Drama, Love Story, Social Drama, Comedy*—into an excellent film. The *Musical Horror Film* was a delicious invention. Given over two dozen principal genres, possibilities for inventive
cross-breeding are endless. In this way the writer in command of
genre may create a type of film the world has never seen.

**REINVENTING GENRES**

Equally, mastery of genre keeps the screenwriter contemporary. For
the genre conventions are not carved in stone; they evolve, grow,
adapt, modify, and break apace with the changes in society. Society
changes slowly, but it does change, and as society enters each new
phase, the genres transform with it. For genres are simply windows
on reality, various ways for the writer to look at life. When the reality
outside the window undergoes change, the genres alter with it. If not,
if a genre becomes inflexible and cannot bend with the changing
world, it petrifies. Below are three examples of genre evolution.

**The Western**

The *Western* began as morality plays set in the “Old West,” a mythical
golden age for allegories of good versus evil. But in the cynical atmos-
phere of the 1970s the genre became dated and stale. When Mel
Brooks’s *BLAZING SADDLES* exposed the *Western*’s fascist heart, the
genre went into virtual hibernation for twenty years before making a
comeback by altering its conventions. In the 1980s the *Western* modu-
lated into quasi-*Social Drama*, a corrective to racism and violence:
*DANCES WITH WOLVES, UNFORGIVEN, POSSE.*

**The Psycho-Drama**

Clinical insanity was first dramatized in the UFA silent *THE CAB-
INET OF DR. CALIGARI* (Germany/1919). As psychoanalysis grew
in reputation, *Psycho-Drama* developed as a kind of a Freudian
detective story. In its first stage, a psychiatrist played “detective” to
investigate a hidden “crime,” a deeply repressed trauma his patient
has suffered in the past. Once the psychiatrist exposed this “crime,”
the victim was either restored to sanity or took a major step toward
it: *SYBIL, THE SNAKE PIT, THE THREE FACES OF EVE, I*
NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN, THE MARK, DAVID AND LISA, EQUUS.

However, as the serial killer began to haunt society's nightmares, genre evolution took Psycho-Drama to its second stage, merging it with the Detective Genre into the subgenre known as the Psycho-Thriller. In these cops became lay psychiatrists to hunt down psychopaths, and apprehension hinged on the detective's psychoanalysis of the madman: THE FIRST DEADLY SIN, MANHUNTER, COP, and, recently, SEVEN.

In the 1980s the Psycho-Thriller evolved a third time. In films such as TIGHTROPE, LETHAL WEAPON, ANGEL HEART, and THE MORNING AFTER, the detective himself became the psycho, suffering from a wide variety of modern maladies—sexual obsession, suicidal impulse, traumatic amnesia, alcoholism. In these films the key to justice became the cop's psychoanalysis of himself. Once the detective came to terms with his inner demons, apprehending the criminal was almost an afterthought.

This evolution was a telling statement about our changing society. Gone was the day when we could comfort ourselves with the notion that all the crazy people were locked up, while we sane people were safely outside the asylum walls. Few of us are so naive today. We know that, given a certain conjunction of events, we too could part company with reality. These Psycho-Thrillers spoke to this threat, to our realization that our toughest task in life is self-analysis as we try to fathom our humanity and bring peace to the wars within.

By 1990 the genre reached its fourth stage by relocating the psychopath once again, now placing him in your spouse, psychiatrist, surgeon, child, nanny, roommate, neighborhood cop. These films tap communal paranoia, as we discover that the people most intimate in our lives, people we must trust, those we hope will protect us, are maniacs: THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE, SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY, FORCED ENTRY, WHISPERS IN THE DARK, SINGLE WHITE FEMALE, and THE GOOD SON. Most telling of all perhaps is DEAD RINGERS, a film about the ultimate fear: the fear of the person closest to you—you-yourself.
What horror will crawl up from your unconscious to steal your sanity?

**The Love Story**

The most important question we ask when writing a *Love Story* is: “What’s to stop them?” For where’s the story in a *Love Story*? Two people meet, fall in love, marry, raise a family, support each other till death do them part . . . what could be more boring than that? So, for over two thousand years, since the Greek dramatist Menander, writers answered the question with “the parents of the girl.” Her parents find the young man unsuitable and become the convention known as Blocking Characters or “the force opposed to love.” Shakespeare expanded it to both sets of parents in *Romeo and Juliet*. From 2300 B.C. this essential convention went unchanged . . . until the twentieth century launched the romantic revolution.

The twentieth century has been an Age of Romance like no other. The idea of romantic love (with sex as its implicit partner) dominates popular music, advertising, and Western culture in general. Over the decades, the automobile, telephone, and a thousand other liberating factors have given young lovers greater and greater freedom from parental control. Meanwhile, parents, thanks to the rampant rise in adultery, divorce, and remarriage, have extended romance from a youthful fling to a lifelong pursuit. It’s always been the case that young people don’t listen to their parents, but today, if a movie Mom and Dad were to object, and the teenage lovers were actually to obey them, the audience would blister the screen with jeers. So, as the-parents-of-the-girl convention faded along with arranged marriages, resourceful writers unearthed a new and amazing array of forces that oppose love.

In *THE GRADUATE* the Blocking Characters were the conventional parents of the girl but for a very unconventional reason. In *WITNESS* the force that opposes love is her culture—she’s Amish, virtually from another world. In *MRS. SOFFEL*, Mel Gibson plays an imprisoned murderer condemned to hang and Diane Keaton is the wife of the prison’s warden. What is to stop them? All mem-
bers of "right-thinking" society. In WHEN HARRY MET SALLY, the lovers suffer from the absurd belief that friendship and love are incompatible. In LONE STAR, the blocking force is racism; in THE CRYING GAME, sexual identity; in GHOST, death.

The enthusiasm for romance that opened this century has turned at its close to deep malaise that brings with it a dark, skeptical attitude toward love. In response, we've seen the rise and surprising popularity of down-endings: DANGEROUS LIAISONS, THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY, THE REMAINS OF THE DAY, HUSBANDS AND WIVES. In LEAVING LAS VEGAS, Ben's a suicidal alcoholic, Sera's a masochistic prostitute, and their love is "star-crossed." These films speak to a growing sense of the hopelessness, if not impossibility, of a lasting love.

To achieve an up-ending some recent films have retooled the genre into the Longing Story. Boy-meets-girl has always been an irreducible convention that occurs early in the telling, to be followed by the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of love. But SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE and RED end on boy-meets-girl. The audience waits to see how the lovers' "fate" will be shaped in the hands of chance. By cleverly delaying the lovers' meeting to climax, these films avoid the prickly issues of modern love by replacing the difficulty of love with the difficulty of meeting. These aren't love stories but stories of longing, as talk about and desire for love fills the scenes, leaving genuine acts of love and their often troubling consequences to happen in an offscreen future. It may be that the twentieth century gave birth to, then buried, the Age of Romance.

The lesson is this: Social attitudes change. The cultural antenna of the writer must be alert to these movements or risk writing an antique. For example: In FALLING IN LOVE the force that opposes love is that the lovers are each married to someone else. The only tears in the audience came from yawning too hard. One could almost hear their thoughts screaming, "What's your problem? You're married to stiffs. Dump them. Does the word 'divorce' mean anything to you people?"

Through the 1950s, however, a love affair across marriages was seen as a painful betrayal. Many poignant films—STRANGERS
WHEN WE MEET, BRIEF ENCOUNTER—drew their energy from society’s antagonism to adultery. But by the 1980s attitudes had shifted, giving rise to the feeling that romance is so precious and life so short, if two married people want to have an affair, let them. Right or wrong, that was the temperament of the time, so that a film with antiquated 1950s values brutally bored the 1980s audience. The audience wants to know how it feels to be alive on the knife edge of the now. What does it mean to be a human being today?

Innovative writers are not only contemporary, they are visionary. They have their ear to the wall of history, and as things change, they can sense the way society is leaning toward the future. They then produce works that break convention and take the genres into their next generation.

This, for example, is one of the many beauties of CHINATOWN. In the climax of all previous Murder Mysteries the detective apprehends and punishes the criminal, but CHINATOWN’s wealthy and politically powerful killer gets away with it, breaking an honored convention. This film could not have been made, however, until the 1970s when the civil rights movement, Watergate, and the Vietnam War woke America up to the depth of its corruption and the nation realized that indeed the rich were getting away with murder . . . and much more. CHINATOWN rewrote the genre, opening the door to down-ending crime stories such as BODY HEAT, CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS, Q & A, BASIC INSTINCT, THE LAST SEDUCTION, and SEVEN.

The finest writers are not only visionary, they create classics. Each genre involves crucial human values: love/hate, peace/war, justice/injustice, achievement/failure, good/evil, and the like. Each of these values is an ageless theme that has inspired great writing since the dawn of story. From year to year these values must be reworked to keep them alive and meaningful for the contemporary audience. Yet the greatest stories are always contemporary. They are classics. A classic is reexperienced with pleasure because it can be reinterpreted through the decades, because in it truth and humanity are so abundant that each new generation finds itself
mirrored in the story. CHINATOWN is such a work. With an absolute command of genre Towne and Polanski took their talents to a height few have reached before or since.

**THE GIFT OF ENDURANCE**

Mastery of genre is essential for yet one more reason: Screenwriting is not for sprinters, but for long-distance runners. No matter what you've heard about scripts dashed off over a weekend at poolside, from first inspiration to last polished draft, a quality screenplay consumes six months, nine months, a year, or more. Writing a film demands the same creative labor in terms of world, character, and story as a four-hundred-page novel. The only substantive difference is the number of words used in the telling. A screenplay's painstaking economy of language demands sweat and time, while the freedom to fill pages with prose often makes the task easier, even faster. All writing is discipline, but screenwriting is a drill sergeant. Ask yourself, therefore, what will keep your desire burning over those many months?

Generally, great writers are not eclectic. Each tightly focuses his oeuvre on one idea, a single subject that ignites his passion, a subject he pursues with beautiful variation through a lifetime of work. Hemingway, for example, was fascinated with the question of how to face death. After he witnessed the suicide of his father, it became the central theme, not only of his writing, but of his life. He chased death in war, in sport, on safari, until finally, putting a shotgun in his mouth, he found it. Charles Dickens, whose father was imprisoned for debt, wrote of the lonely child searching for the lost father over and over in *David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, and Great Expectations*. Molière turned a critical eye on the idiocy and depravity of seventeenth-century France and made a career writing plays whose titles read like a checklist of human vices: *The Miser, The Misanthrope, The Hypochondriac*. Each of these authors found his subject and it sustained him over the long journey of the writer.

What is yours? Do you, like Hemingway and Dickens, work directly from the life you've lived? Or, like Molière, do you write
about your ideas of society and human nature? Whatever your source of inspiration, beware of this: Long before you finish, the love of self will rot and die, the love of ideas sicken and perish. You'll become so tired and bored with writing about yourself or your ideas, you may not finish the race.

So, in addition, ask: What's my favorite genre? Then write in the genre you love. For although the passion for an idea or experience may wither, the love of the movies is forever. Genre should be a constant source of reinspiration. Every time you reread your script, it should excite you, for this is your kind of story, the kind of film you'd stand in line in the rain to see. Do not write something because intellectual friends think it's socially important. Do not write something you think will inspire critical praise in Film Quarterly. Be honest in your choice of genre, for of all the reasons for wanting to write, the only one that nurtures us through time is love of the work itself.