

GENRE NOTES AND QUESTIONNAIRE

SUBTEXT, GENRE, AND ARCHETYPES

These notes on Genre are intended to work with and augment PART 4: AUTHORSHIP AND AESTHETICS.

The fiction film, the documentary, and the short story all are consumed at a sitting, and thus continue the tradition of oral storytelling. In former times, this constituted, along with religion, most of the common person's education. Today, the cinema's preeminence is arguably due to its unparalleled power to make us see and feel from another's point of view. Through the screen, we can temporarily become braver, funnier, stronger, angrier, more beautiful, more vulnerable, or more beset with danger and tragedy. A good movie sends us out energized and refreshed in spirit.

This cathartic contact with the trials of the human spirit is a need as fundamental as eating, breathing, or making love. Art, of which the cinema is but the youngest form, nourishes our spirit by engaging us in surrogate emotional experience and implying underlying patterns.

All art grows out of what went before it, so any film you care to make will veer toward a particular type and aesthetic area, have a prevailing mood, and draw on available language through which to speak to its audience.

SUBTEXT: MAKING THE VISIBLE SIGNIFICANT

Film art is expensive and complex, and its meanings surprisingly difficult to control. Robert Richardson defines the heart of cinema's problem: "Literature often has the problem of making the significant somehow visible, while film often finds itself trying to make the visible significant."¹ Those surfaces rendered so minutely and attractively by the camera actually distract us from seeing *subtexts*, the underlying messages and meanings so fundamental to drama. Put another way: if you don't use film language astutely, your underlying discourse will be swamped and pass unnoticed. One of the aids to communication is working in a *genre*.

GENRE OPTIONS

In French, the word *genre* simply means kind or sort, and it describes films that belong to a type that the audience recognizes. Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush list 16 standard genres in their book *Alternative Screenwriting*, 4th ed. (Focal Press, 2006):

The Western	The War Film
The Gangster Film	The Adventure Film
The Thriller	The Film Noir
The Melodrama	The Musical
The Screwball Comedy	The Epic Film
The Situation Comedy	The Sports Film
The Horror Film	The Biographical Film

¹ *Literature and Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 68.

Each category contains familiar types of character, role, and situation that are mostly older than the cinema. Each genre promises a world running under familiar rules and limitations. The gangster film, the sci-fi film, the Western, and the screwball comedy all embody subjects and approaches that function dependably within preordained limits. Horror and fantasy have been staples throughout cinema's short history because audiences have always craved alternatives to the realistic. They are cinema's continuation of folktales and folk drama, forms through which humankind can indulge its appetite for demons, ogres, wizards, and phantom carriages. Under the guise of futurism, Franklin Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and George Lucas' *Star Wars* episodes (1977–2005) are really traditional morality plays.

Comedy offers its own delightful worlds and constants. Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Mae West, W.C. Fields, Red Skelton, and Laurel and Hardy—as well as Jacques Tati, Lucille Ball, Woody Allen, John Cleese, and Steve Martin—each play character types from film to film. Each new situation and dilemma puts a new set of comic stresses on a constructed personality. Recent sex comedies in which women take over male preserves, homosexual couples take on parenthood, or men take over women's identities also confirm that comedy functions as a safety valve for anxieties about social change.

Through genres like the War Film, fiction cinema allows vicarious experience of most imaginable types, but until recently there has been a conspicuous silence on nuclear attack and the Holocaust. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994) focuses on one of the few uplifting stories to emerge from that period of brutality and shame. Roberto Benigni's weirdly saccharine *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) tackles deportation through humor and nostalgia. Real horror is perhaps nothing we really care to look in the eye.

Bertolt Brecht's question remains: Is art a mirror to society, or a hammer working on it? Does art reflect actuality, or does it change and therefore create it? The answers will vary with the age and the artist, but we can say with confidence that in every period and in every part of the world, art has supplied a surrogate experience to exercise hearts and minds.

ARCHETYPES

Archetypal characters such as the hero, villain, strongman, demon, avenger, clown, angel, Earth Mother, witch, and wizard appear and reappear in archetypal plots that stretch back to the beginning of recorded history. They are character types that are deeply ingrained in the culture and they often carry out specific functions even in modern drama, where a human force (such as hostility, mercy, justice) is required rather than a complex and fully realized character. Archetypes distill human roles, and appear in Greek plays, European Fairy Tales, Japanese Kabuki and Noh traditions, Italian commedia dell'arte, Peking Opera, African Griot tales, Indian Folk Tales, and other early storytelling forms.

GENRE AND POINT OF VIEW

A good movie, like any effective artwork, can lead us to experience new conditions and to expand in mind and heart. Because our strong desire is to break out of the imprisoning self and to experience, if only temporarily, the worlds of others, films often project us into a main character's predicament. In a love triangle such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, multiple worlds are available, because each character sees differently. With the husband, we could view Anna's liaison as a betrayal; with her lover, Vronsky, it's a romantic adventure gone sour; and with Anna, night turns into brightest day and then changes into a long, bloody sunset. Each viewpoint calls for a different story and suggests a different possible genre.

Then again, a story has dimensions beyond those understood by its protagonists. In any Tolstoy novel, we sense Tolstoy the Storyteller sympathetically watching his characters suffer. Alternative Storyteller viewpoints are always possible. A new dramatic interpretation need make no change in the novel's action—all it needs is a new slant, or an altered set of moods, convictions, or motivations. Any of these can propel the basic story into new areas of meaning. For this, you must know your chosen genre and be able to build a convincing world around the characters' new subjectivities. Your audience then decides whether you have succeeded: certainly their will is to believe, because we need stories to help us find new meanings in life. How else could a Shakespeare play set in recent times still resonate in contemporary India?

GENRE AND DRAMATIC ARCHETYPES

How does the poor filmmaker, surrounded by the paraphernalia of scripts, budgets, and technical support, know when to push beyond the realism so generic to photography? I wish there were guidelines to put individual perception into a manageable frame. Instead, we must talk about dialectical worlds animated by oppositions. This tension is usually organized around moral imperatives; that is, the polarity between right and wrong, good and evil. Every film contains a range of oppositions between which its authors are as ambiguously suspended as the main characters. Examining where your work lies should help clarify its genre and even how the film should look. Here are a few sample oppositions, to which you can add those that arise in your own work.

Either

Auteur (personal, authorial stamp)
Subjective (character's) POV
Naturalistic (realism)
Duality requires audience judgment
Conflicts are interpersonal
Conflicts are divergent and unresolved
Outcome uncertain
Subject is an individual hero
Past
Emotion
Humor
Fast
Dark

Or

Genre (film archetype)
Objective (Storyteller's) POV
Nonrealistic and stylized
Conflicts are generic and not analyzed
Conflicts are large-scale and societal
Conflicts are convergent and resolved
Outcome reached via struggle
Subject is a group
Present
Intellect
Tragedy
Slow
Light

No film falls into predominantly one column or the other, and the columns are not prescriptions for good or bad films. They are dialectical oppositions, each gaining strength from the existence of the other. How you decide which to invoke in your particular piece of storytelling is decided by the story itself. Analyze your screenplay, and tease out all the dialectical oppositions you can find. Some are lying there unnoticed, but as soon as you set about magnifying them all, the characters begin to play for higher stakes in a world with greater contrasts and dangers. Keep in mind that *everything or everybody interesting always has contradictions at the center*, and that every story can be routed through one or more of the conflicted intelligences that are experiencing the unfolding events.

A book that demonstrates how useful myth and legend can be to filmmakers is Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, 2nd ed. (Michael Wiese Productions, 1998). It shows how the story principles that Joseph Campbell uncovered in world folk stories also apply to innumerable films. A word of warning: use it not as a starting point, but to expand existing ideas during the development of a screenplay.

Also, the book mentioned above, *Alternative Scriptwriting* 4th ed., by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush offers many chapters designed to define traditional genres and develop ways a filmmaker can work both with and against genre expectations to tell effective stories.

GENRE QUESTIONNAIRE

Here are some questions to help confirm your screenplay's subtexts and genre:

Genre:

- What genre am I calling on, and what are the traditional themes, characters and conflicts associated with it?
- What are the tonal and aesthetic approaches associated with this genre?

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- How do I fulfill or subvert all these genre conventions?
- What are the origins in other arts of my film's genre, and can I get help from them for my film?
- If a genre permits framing an area of life and seeing it through a particular prism of concerns or values, what predominates in my film?
- How strongly do I use subjectivity in my film's genre?

Subtexts:

- Does my story declare its intentions early enough so the audience knows what to look for?
- How much in my characters requires interpretation and judgment? Could there be more?
- How much in my film carries moral implications, which interest audiences so much?
- Am I juxtaposing events to create irony or humor, events that signify an underlying set of values?
- Is my Storyteller making full use of allegory, analogy, metaphor, or symbol to signify meanings?