FILM ART

AN INTRODUCTION

EIGHTH EDITION

David Bordwell **Kristin Thompson**

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To our parents
Marjorie and Jay Bordwell
and Jean and Roger Thompson

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Bordwell is Jacques Ledoux Professor Emeritus of Film Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He holds a master's degree and a doctorate in film from the University of Iowa. His books include *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (University of California Press, 1981), *Narration in the Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 1988), *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Harvard University Press, 1989), *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Harvard University Press, 1993), *On the History of Film Style* (Harvard University Press, 1997), and *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Harvard University Press, 2000), *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (University of California Press, 2005), and *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (University of California Press, 2006). He has won a University Distinguished Teaching Award and was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Copenhagen.

Kristin Thompson is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She holds a master's degree in film from the University of Iowa and a doctorate in film from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She has published *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 1981), *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907–1934* (British Film Institute, 1985), *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 1988), *Wooster Proposes, Jeeves Disposes, or, Le Mot Juste* (James H. Heineman, 1992), *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Harvard University Press, 1999), *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Harvard University Press, 2003), *Herr Lubitsch Goes To Hollywood: German and American Film after World War I* (Amsterdam University Press, 2005), and *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (University of California Press, forthcoming 2007). In her spare time she studies Egyptology.

The authors have also collaborated on *Film History: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 2nd. ed., 2003) and, with Janet Staiger, on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Columbia University Press, 1985).

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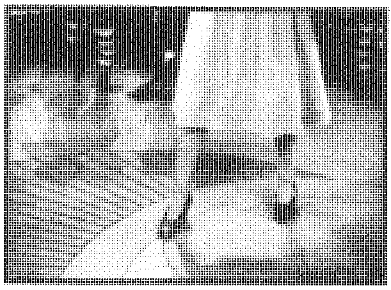

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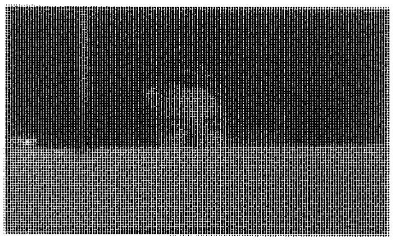

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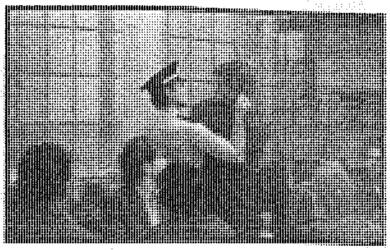

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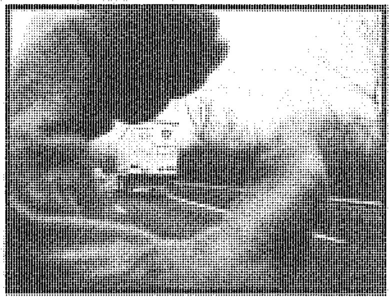

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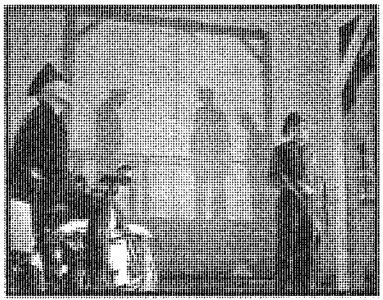

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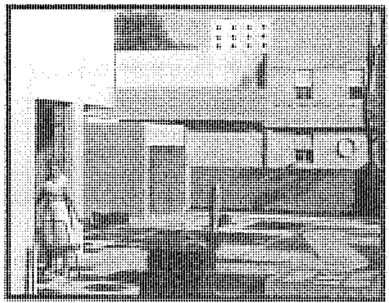

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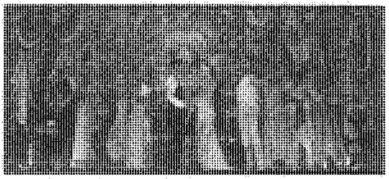

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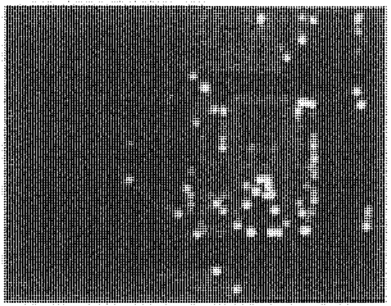

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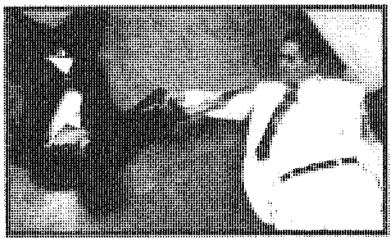

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9

Film Genres

All moviegoers are familiar with the idea of genre, even if they don't know the term. 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 romance, 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 contribute to the formation of a shared sense that certain films seem to resemble one another in significant ways. Genres also change over time, as filmmakers invent new twists on old formulas. Thus defining the precise boundaries between genres can be tricky.

The popular cinema of most countries rests on genre filmmaking. Germany has its *Heimatfilm,* the tale of small-town life. The Hindi cinema of India produces *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.

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, too. There are genres of documentary, such as the compilation film and the concert movie. Experimental films and animated films have genres as well.

Understanding Genre

Defining a Genre

Audiences know the genres of their culture very well, and so do filmmakers. The intriguing problem comes in defining just what a genre is. What places a group of films in a genre?

Most scholars now agree that no genre can be defined in a single hard-and-fast way. Some genres stand out by their subjects or themes. A gangster film centers on large-scale urban 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 West, as *North to Alaska* and *Drums Along the Mohawk* suggest).

Yet subject matter or theme is not 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 that solves a mystery. And some genres are defined by the distinctive emotional effect they aim for: amusement in comedies, tension in suspense films.

The question is complicated by the fact that genres can be more or less broad. There are large, blanket genre categories that fit many films. We refer commonly to thrillers, yet that term may encompass horror films, detective stories, hostage films such as *Die Hard* or *Speed,* and many others. "Comedy" is a similarly broad term that includes slapstick comedies such as *Liar Liar,* romantic comedies such as *Groundhog Day,* parodies such as the *Austin Powers* series, and gross-out comedy such as *There's Something About Mary.* Thus *subgenres* can be devised by critics, viewers, or filmmakers to try to describe more precisely what films are like.

Still, there are limits to the precision with which the concept of genre can be applied. Any category contains both undeniable instances and fuzzy cases. *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.*

In other cases, films may seem to straddle two genre classifications. Is *Groundhog Day* a romantic comedy or a fantasy? Is *Psycho* a slasher film or a detective thriller? *War of the Worlds* combines horror, science fiction, and family melodrama. (As we'll see, mixing formulas like this is one important source of innovation and change in genres.) And, further, some films are so distinctive that critics and audiences have trouble assigning them to a category. When *Being John Malkovich* appeared in 1999, TV interviewers joked with the cast and crew about how impossible the film was to describe—hinting that they simply could not place it in a genre.

How are genre categories used? They certainly affect industry officials' decisions about what films to make. While big-budget musicals such as *The Sound of Music* were commonly produced in the 1960s, they are out of fashion now, and more recent musicals such as *Chicago* and *Rent* cost under $50 million. On the other hand, horror and action films are currently popular, and executives would be likelier to green-light projects perceived to fit into those genres.

For the vast publicity system that exists around filmmaking, genres are a simple way to characterize film. In fact, reviewers are often central in gathering and crystallizing notions about genres. In television coverage of entertainment, reporters refer to genres, because they know that most members of the public will easily grasp what they mean.

You may also find that some reviewers tend to 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 some of the greatest films also fall into genres. *Singin' in the Rain* is a musical, but it is arguably also 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.

For viewers, genre often provides a way of finding a film they want to see. If a group plans an evening at the movies, members may express their preferences for a science fiction film, or a thriller, or a romance and then negotiate from there. Some filmgoers are fans of a specific genre and may seek out and exchange information via magazines, Internet sites, or conventions. Science-fiction aficionados are one example of such a group, with subgroups pledging allegiance to the *Star Wars* or the *Star Trek* series.

At all levels of the filmmaking and film-viewing processes, then, genres help assure that most members of a society share at least some general notions about the types of films that compete for our attention.

Analyzing a Genre

As we have seen, genres are based on a tacit agreement among filmmakers, reviewers, and audiences. What gives films of a type some common identity are shared *genre conventions* that reappear in film after film.

Certain plot elements may be conventional. We anticipate an investigation in a mystery film; revenge plotlines are common in Westerns; a musical will find 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") to trace major episodes in the main character's life. In a cop thriller, certain characters are conventional: the shifty informer, the comic sidekick, the impatient captain who despairs of getting the squad detectives to follow procedure.

Other genre conventions are more thematic, involving general 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.

Still other genre conventions involve characteristic film techniques. Somber lighting is standard in the horror film and the thriller (**9.1**). The action picture often relies on rapid cutting and slow-motion violence. In the melodrama, an emotional twist may be underscored by a sudden burst of poignant music.

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 film as 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. Even stars can become iconographic—Judy Garland for the musical, John Wayne for the Western, Arnold Schwarzenegger for the action picture, Jim Carrey for comedy.

9.1 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.

By knowing conventions, the viewer has a pathway into the film. Such landmarks allow the genre movie to communicate information quickly and economically. When we see the weak sheriff, we strongly suspect that he will not stand up to the gunslinger. We can then focus attention on the cowboy hero as he is slowly drawn into helping the townspeople defend themselves.

Alternatively, a film can revise or 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. Filmmakers may seek to surprise or shock viewers by breaking their expectations that a certain convention will be followed. (See "A Closer Look.")

Audiences expect the genre film to offer something familiar, but they also demand fresh variations on it. The filmmaker may devise something mildly or radically different, but it will still be based on tradition. The interplay of convention and innovation, familiarity and novelty, is central to the genre film.

Genre History

Because filmmakers frequently play with conventions and iconography, genres seldom remain unchanged for very long. 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 every now and then.

Many film genres become established by borrowing existing 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 drew on both musical comedies and variety reviews.

Yet the film medium always imposes its own distinctive qualities and circumstances on an adopted genre. For example, Western novels were already popular in the 19th century. Yet, although the cinema became commercially successful in 1895, Westerns did not become a film genre until after 1908. Why the delay? It may well have been that the greater length of films around that era (up to roughly 15 minutes), plus the rise of film studios with companies of actors under contract, encouraged more shooting on location. Using unspoiled 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. Thus film genres have their own history, combining borrowings from other arts and distinctive innovations.

Most cinema genres and subgenres become established when one film achieves success and is widely imitated. After several films that resemble one another appear, people begin to compare them. For example, in the late 1990s, the term *gross-out* came to be commonly applied to a group of films, including *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective; There's Something about Mary;* and *American Pie.* But critics then traced this "new" subgenre back to such influential comedies as *Animal House* (1978) and *Porky's* (1981).

Similarly, when the television-related fantasy *Pleasantville* appeared in 1998, some critics linked it to comparable films: *Big* (1988), *Splash* (1984), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), *Groundhog Day* (1993), *The Truman Show* (1998), and *Sliding Doors* (1998). Reviewer Richard Corliss suggested a new term for the subgenre, *fantasies of displacement.* Lisa Schwartzbaum called such films *magical comedies.* Whether these or other phrases ever become common parlance, many viewers might recognize that these films share traits that set them apart. Such comments by reviewers are one way in which new subgenres come to be recognized.

A CONTEMPORARY GENRE: The Crime Thriller

The thriller, like the comedy, is a very broad category, virtually an umbrella genre. There are supernatural thrillers (*The Sixth Sense*), political thrillers (*Munich*), and spy thrillers (*The Bourne Identity*), but many revolve around crime—planned, committed, or thwarted.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, many filmmaking countries have turned to making crime thrillers. Using few special effects and set in contemporary urban locations, they are 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 narrative conventions and the effects that filmmakers try to arouse.

A crime is at the center of the thriller plot, and usually three sorts of characters are involved. There are the lawbreakers, the forces of law, and the innocent victims or bystanders. Typically, the narration concentrates on one of these characters or groups.

In *Double Jeopardy*, a husband fakes his own murder in order to run off with his mistress. His wife is found guilty, but in prison, she discovers that her husband is alive under a new identity. Released on parole, she flees 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 wife: her 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 genre. At some point, the victim will usually realize that he or she cannot react passively and must fight the criminal, as in *Duel, The Fugitive, The Net, Breakdown,* and *Panic Room* **(9.2)**. In *Ransom,* the father of a kidnapped boy spurns police advice and refuses to pay the ransom, offering it as a bounty on the criminals.

Alternatively, the plot may center on an innocent bystander dropped unexpectedly into a struggle between the criminal and the police. Most of Alfred Hitchcock's films are built around an ordinary person who stumbles into a dangerous situation (*The 39 Steps, North by Northwest, Rear Window*). 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 other innocents. *Collateral* centers on a taxi driver forced to chauffeur a paid killer from target to target. Thematically, this innocent-centered plot pattern often emphasizes characters discovering resources within themselves—courage, cleverness, even a capacity for violence.

Instead of spotlighting the innocents, the plot may concentrate on 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 family 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 may 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.

Or the crime thriller can put the criminal center stage, as in *The Talented Mr. Ripley.* The plot may center on the adventures of a paid killer; Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* is a classic example. There's also the heist or caper film,

9.2 Innocents in jeopardy: an unusual camera position for a classic thriller situation in *Panic Room*.

showcasing a tightly orchestrated robbery. This subgenre became a mainstay in the 1950s, with *The Asphalt Jungle, Bob Le Flambeur,* and *Rififi,* and it's made a comeback in recent years with *Heist, Ronin,* and *Ocean's 11.* There's also what we might call the dishonor-among-thieves variant, in which criminals betray one another. *A Simple Plan* portrays nervous and clumsy thieves, whereas *Jackie Brown* traces an expanding web of double-crosses.

Sometimes the thriller will balance its plot and narration between the police and the criminal. Often this tactic draws thematic parallels between the two. In John Woo's *The Killer,* the plot alternates between showing the efforts of a hit man to quit the business, aided by his weak mentor, and showing his cop adversary, who is 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 characters themselves recognize their affinities. In contrast, *Fargo* plays on the sharp differences between the sunny common sense of the policewoman and an almost pitiably blundering kidnapper.

Thrillers obviously aim to thrill us—that is, to startle, shock, and scare. 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 who is both fearsome and repellent, but a thriller villain may be quite attractive (the deceptively kind men in *The Minus Man* and *Primal Fear,* the treacherous women in *Red Rock West* and *The Last Seduction*). While suspense and surprise are important in most 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 an innocent, the suspense we feel comes from the prospect that the crime will harm him or her. If the hero is a figure of justice, we become concerned that she or he will not be able to protect the innocents.

When the protagonist is the criminal, one way to achieve some sympathy is to rank the lawbreakers on a scale of immorality. The most sympathetic criminals will be ones who are trying to get out of the business (*The Killer*) or those who oppose even more immoral figures. The heroes of *Out of Sight* are easygoing, good-humored thieves ripping off a white-collar embezzler and a band of sociopathic killers. Sometimes criminal protagonists can stretch our sympathies in complicated ways. 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. *A History of Vio-*

9.3 In *A History of Violence,* Tom Stall, quiet owner of a small-town diner, is revealed to have a killer's instincts.

lence provokes us to speculate on the mysterious forces that can make someone a killer **(9.3)**.

Like any genre, the crime thriller can mix with others. It blends with the horror film in *From Dusk Till Dawn* and with science fiction in *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report. Rush Hour* pushes 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 gang (who stole the goods from another gang).

The thriller's emphasis on suspense and surprise encourages filmmakers to mislead the audience, and this can lead to experiments with narrative form. Hitchcock pioneered this tendency by suddenly switching protagonists in *Psycho* and by letting two couples' lives intertwine in *The Family Plot.* Many films whose plots play with story time (see pp. 83–85) 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 **(9.4)**. *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.

9.4 The aftermath of the mysterious dockyard explosion that triggers the investigation in *The Usual Suspects.*

Independent filmmakers have found that general audiences will accept narrational experiments when packaged in this genre. For other independents, the genre 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 genre's tactics 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 genre has offered Hollywood's rivals a path to international distribution. Hong Kong has exported many such films, as has France (*La Femme Nikita*), Britain (*Snatch, Sexy Beast*), Japan (*Fireworks, Cure*), Korea (*Tell Me Something, Nowhere to Hide*), and Thailand (*Bangkok Dangerous*). Audiences worldwide share similar expectations about crime thrillers, and filmmakers can innovate by injecting local cultural traditions into the genre's conventions of plot, character, and theme. Two of our sample analyses, of *Breathless* (pp. 397–401) and of *Chungking Express* (pp. 405–410), focus on non-Hollywood films that imaginatively shift the expectations we bring to the crime thriller.

Once a genre is launched, there seems to be no fixed pattern of development. We might expect that the earliest films in the genre are the purest, with genre mixing coming at a late stage. But genre mixing can take place very soon. *Whoopee!* (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 themselves, as in Charlie Chaplin's farcical *His New Job* (1915).

Typically, genres do not remain constantly successful. Rather, they rise and fall in popularity. The result is the phenomenon known as *cycles.*

A cycle is a batch of genre films that enjoy intense popularity and influence over a distinct period. Cycles can 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*). There have been cycles of comedies centering on spaced-out teenagers (*Wayne's World, Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure,* and *Dude, Where's My Car?*), buddy-cop movies (*Lethal Weapon* and its successors), movies adapted from comic books (*Batman, Spider-Man*), romantic thrillers aimed at a female audience (*Dead Again, Double Jeopardy*), and dramas describing coming of age in African-American neighborhoods (*Boyz N the Hood, Menace II Society*). Few observers would have predicted that science-fiction movies would return in the 1970s, but *Star Wars* created a long-lasting cycle. A cycle of fantasy adventures emerged in the early 2000s.

It seems likely that a genre never dies. It 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, then virtually disappeared until Ridley Scott revived it to considerable acclaim in 2000 with *Gladiator*—inspiring other filmmakers to undertake similar subjects.

A genre may also change by mixing its conventions with those of another genre. In 1979, *Alien* proved innovative because it blended 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 early 2000s, the science-fiction/horror blend was itself quite conventional, as in *Pitch Black* and *Doom.*

The musical and the comedy mix easily with other genres. 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.* There have been musical melodramas, such as *Yentl* and two versions of *A Star Is Born. The Rocky Horror Picture Show* created the musical horror movie. Comedy as well can blend with any other genre. The dramatic issue 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 (**9.5**). 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*). The combinations seem almost limitless. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* bumbling prison escapees accidentally become country singing stars, and the result is at once an outlaw movie, a social protest film, a slapstick comedy, and a musical.

In some cases, genres influence and mix with one another across cultures. The Japanese samurai genre, with its conventions of swordplay and revenge, has blended well with a parallel genre, 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

> *"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*

9.5 *Barbershop:* Eddie's rants offer a comically skeptical attitude toward Rosa Parks and other African-American icons.

during the 1980s and 1990s led the Wachowski brothers to mix high-tech science-fiction effects with Hong Kong martial-arts choreography in *The Matrix.*

Such mixtures are often consciously recognized by filmmakers and audiences alike. Filmmakers may take elements of two or more successful films, blend them, and spin off an entirely new concept. Similarly, spectators are used to comparing new films with existing ones. If someone who has not seen *Pleasantville* asks a friend what it is like, the reply might be "It's sort of a combination of *The Truman Show* and *Back to the Future.*" That is, it's a fantasy film dealing with television, but it also has a science-fiction element of a time machine.

The fact that genres can intermingle does not, however, mean that there are no distinctions among them. *The Matrix* does not prevent us from differentiating standard Hong Kong martial-arts films from standard Hollywood science-fiction tales. Although we cannot pin down a single description of a genre that will apply for all time, we can recognize that at a given period of film history, filmmakers, reviewers, and audiences manage to distinguish one sort of movie from another.

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? Many film scholars believe that genres are ritualized dramas resembling holiday celebrations—ceremonies that are satisfying because they reaffirm cultural values with little variation. 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—are validated? And just as one can see these ceremonies as helping us forget the more disturbing aspects of the world, the familiar characterizations 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 tailor romantic comedies to the tastes of twenty-somethings, as in *50 First Dates, Along Came Polly,* and *The Wedding Crashers.* In Chapter 11, we'll consider how another musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis,* bears traces of concerns of the U.S. home front during World War II.

It is common to suggest that at different points in history, the stories, themes, values, or imagery of the genre harmonize with public attitudes. For instance, do the science-fiction films of the 1950s, with hydrogen bombs creating Godzilla and other monsters, reveal fears of technology run amok? The hypothesis is that genre conventions, repeated from film to film, reflect the audience's pervasive doubts or anxieties. Many film scholars would argue that this reflectionist approach helps explain why genres vary in popularity.

Social processes can also be reflected in genre innovations. Ripley, the female protagonist of *Aliens,* is a courageous, even aggressive, warrior who also has a warm, maternal side (**9.6, 9.7**). This is 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.

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

The argument over whether genre conventions directly reflect social circumstances came to the fore in a particularly explicit way in the late 1990s. Over the previous decades, there had been a gradual increase in the violent content of some action films. Such violence seemed to be popular with a broad segment of the audience—and particularly with the young people who made up much of the filmgoing public. When a series of multiple killings at schools occurred within a short stretch of time, the popular media came under scrutiny as a possible cause. In 1999, for the first time, the film industry (along with the music, television, and video game industries) began voluntarily to monitor its projects with an eye to reducing violence. Was this an industry reacting to a real revulsion on the part of its audience? Or did the media and the government condemn depictions of violence in

9.6 In *Aliens,* Ripley learns how to use a weapon . . .

9.7 . . . but can also comfort the orphaned girl the group of soldiers find.

order to avoid confronting such causes of violence as poverty and the wide availability of guns? The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, initially intensified public reactions against violence, yet soon there was an increased interest in war films. Did such patriotic themes help justify the United States' ambitions to invade Iraq? Such questions have long been raised in relation to popular genres, since they seem so familiar and closely related to society as a whole.

Whether we study a genre's history, its cultural functions, or its representations of social trends, conventions remain our best point of departure. As examples, we look briefly at three significant genres of American fictional filmmaking.

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

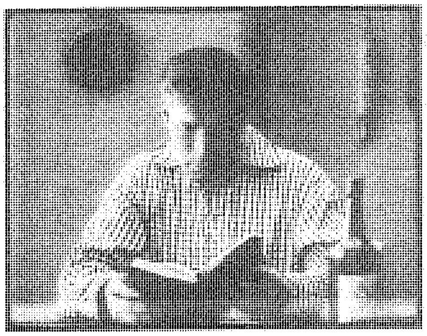
Three Genres

The Western

The Western emerged early in the history of cinema, becoming well established by the early 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 based their portrayal of the frontier on 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, thrive those outside civilization—not only the American Indians 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 Indians' tribal garb and the cowboys' jeans and Stetsons.

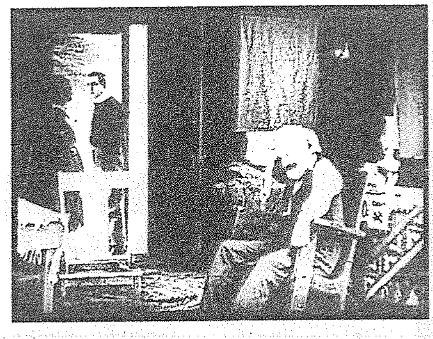


9.8 The "good bad" hero of *Hell's Hinges* reads the Bible, a bottle of whiskey at his elbow.

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 (**9.8**).

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

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



9.9 In *Straight Shooting*, the hero stands framed in the farmhouse doorway, halfway between the lure of civilization and the call of the wilderness.

Moreover, the genre was not wholly optimistic about taming the wilderness. The hero's eventual commitment to civilization's values was often tinged with regret for his loss of freedom. In John Ford's *Straight Shooting* (1917), Cheyenne Harry (played by Harry Carey) is hired by a villainous rancher to evict a farmer, but he falls in love with the farmer's daughter and vows to reform. Rallying the farmers, Harry helps defeat the rancher. Still, he is reluctant to settle down with Molly (**9.9**).

Within this set of values, a great many conventional scenes became standardized—the Indians' attack on forts or wagon trains, the shy courting of a woman by the rough-hewn hero, the hero's discovery of a burned settler's shack, the outlaws' robbery of bank or stagecoach, the climactic gunfight on dusty town streets. Writers and directors could distinguish their films by novel handlings of these elements. In Sergio Leone's flamboyant Italian Westerns, every convention is stretched out in minute detail or amplified to a huge scale, as when the climactic shootout in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) is filmed to resemble a bullfight **(9.10)**.

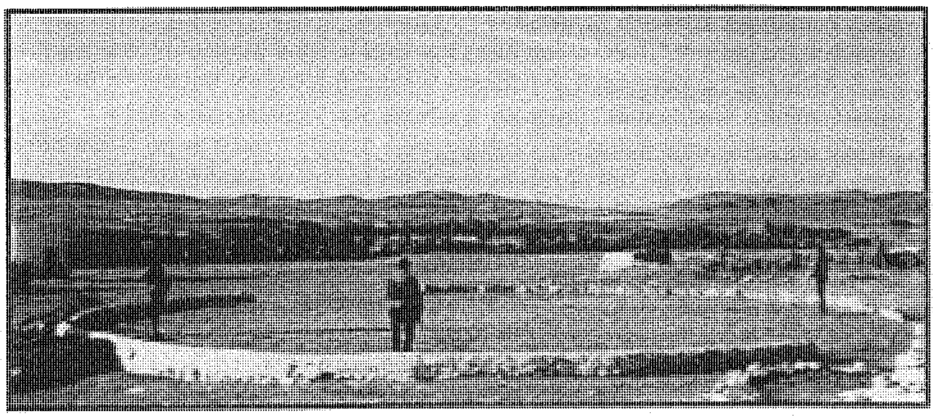
There were narrative and thematic innovations as well. After such liberal Westerns of the 1950s as *Broken Arrow* (1950), native cultures began to be treated with more respect. In *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), the conventional thematic values were reversed, depicting Indian life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

The new complexity of the protagonist is evident in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). After a Comanche raid on his brother's homestead, Ethan Edwards sets out to find his kidnapped niece Debbie. He is driven primarily by family loyalty but also by his secret love for his brother's wife, who has been raped and killed by the raiders. Ethan's sidekick, a young man who is part Cherokee, realizes that Ethan plans not to rescue Debbie but to kill her for becoming a Comanche wife. Ethan's fierce racism and raging vengeance culminate in a raid on the Comanche village. At the film's close, Ethan returns to civilization but pauses on the cabin's threshold **(9.11)** before turning back to the desert.

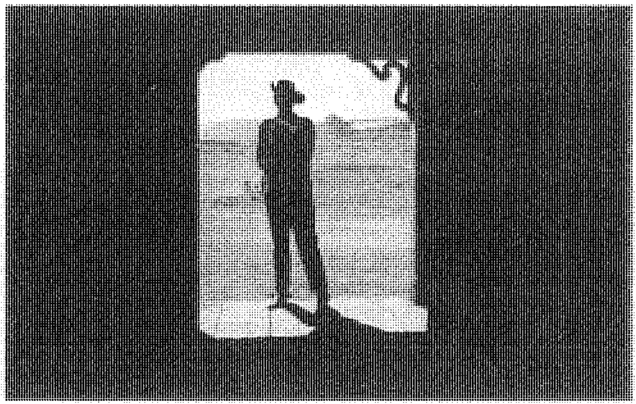
The shot eerily recalls Ford's *Straight Shooting* (9.9); John Wayne even repeats Harry Carey's characteristic gripping of his forearm **(9.12)**. Now, however, it seems that the drifting cowboy is condemned to live outside civilization because he cannot tame his grief and hatred. More savage than citizen, he seems condemned, as he says of the souls of dead Comanches, "to wander forever between the winds." This bitter treatment of a perennial theme illustrates how drastically a genre's conventions can change across history.

The Horror Film

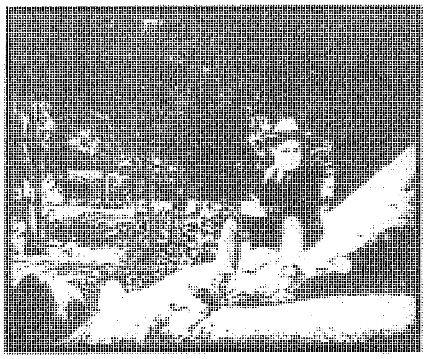
While the Western is most clearly defined by subject, theme, and iconography, the horror genre is most recognizable by its intended emotional effect on the audience. The horror film aims to shock, disgust, repel—in short, to horrify. This impulse is what shapes the genre's other conventions.



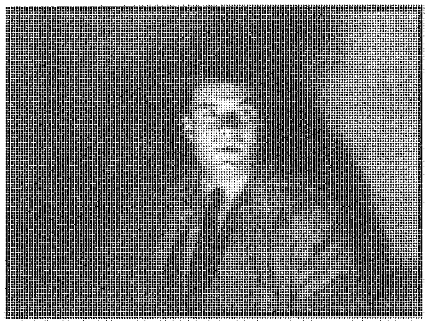
9.10 A low wall creates an arena in which the three-way shoot-out can occur at the end of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.



9.11 The closing shot of *The Searchers.*



9.12 Harry Carey's gesture in *Straight Shooting.*



9.13 A shadow and a character's reaction suggest an offscreen menace in *Cat People.*

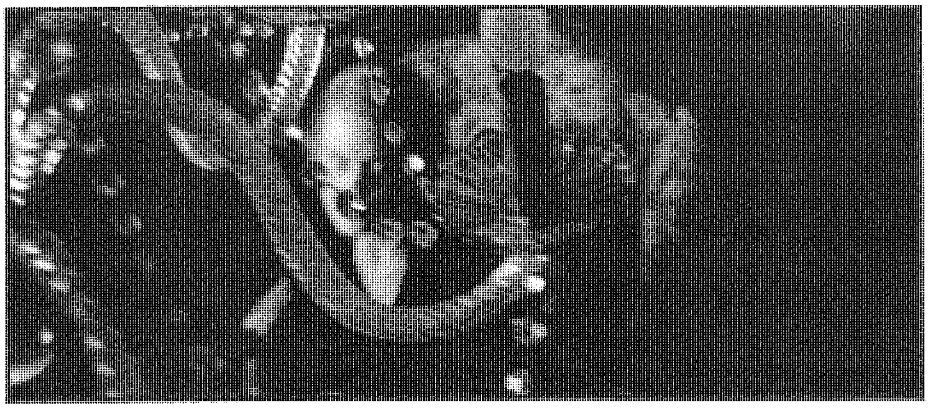
What can horrify us? Typically, a monster. In the horror film, the monster is a dangerous breach of nature, a violation of our normal sense of what is possible. The monster might be unnaturally large, as King Kong is. The monster might violate the boundary between the dead and the living, as vampires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

Other conventions follow from this one. Our reaction to the monster may be guided by other characters who react to it in the properly horrified way. In *Cat People* (1942), a mysterious woman can, apparently, turn into a panther. Our revulsion and fear are confirmed by the reaction of the woman's husband and his coworker (**9.13**). In contrast, we know that *E.T.* is not a horror film because, although the alien is unnatural, he is not threatening, and the children do not react to him as if he is.

The horror plot will often start with the monster's attack on normal life. In response, the other characters must discover that the monster is at large and try to destroy it. (In some cases, as when a character is possessed by demons, others may seek to rescue him or her.) This plot can be developed in various ways—by having the monster launch a series of attacks, by having people in authority resist believing that the monster exists, or by blocking the characters' efforts to destroy it. In *The Exorcist,* for example, the characters only gradually discover that Regan is possessed; after they realize this, they still must struggle to drive the demon out.

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

Not surprisingly, the iconography of the horror film includes settings where monsters might be expected to lurk. The old dark house where a group of potential victims gather was popularized by *The Cat and the Canary* in 1927 and has been used recently for *The Haunting* (1999) and *The Others* (2001; **9.14**). Cemeteries can yield the walking dead; scientists' laboratories, the artificial human (as in *Frankenstein*). Filmmakers have played off these conventions cleverly, as when Hitchcock juxtaposed a mundane motel with a sinister, decaying mansion in *Psycho,* or when George Romero had humans battle zombies in a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead.* The slasher subgenre has made superhuman killers invade everyday settings such as summer camps and suburban neighborhoods.

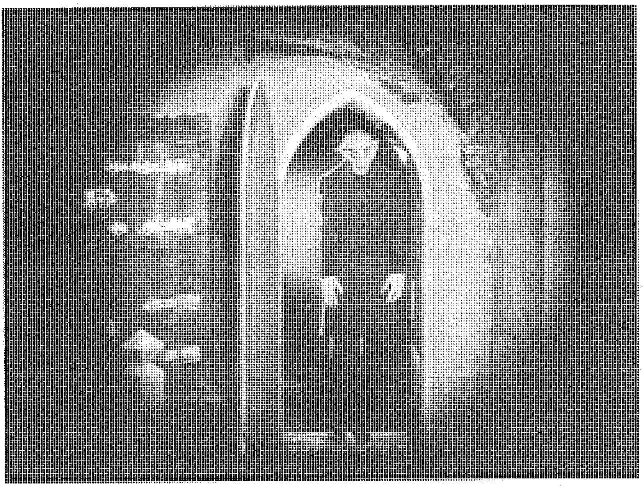


9.14 An ominous high-angle framing in *The Others*, as the heroine hears a mysterious sound in the room above.

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

Like the Western, the horror film emerged in the era of silent moviemaking. Some of the most important early works in the genre were German—notably, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), the first adaptation of the novel *Dracula*. The angular performances, heavy makeup, and distorted settings characteristic of German Expressionist cinema conveyed an ominous, supernatural atmosphere (**9.15**).

Because a horror film can create its emotional impact with makeup and other low-technology special effects, the horror genre has long been favored by low-budget filmmakers. During the 1930s, a secondary Hollywood studio, Universal, launched a cycle of horror films. *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932; **9.16**) proved enormously popular and helped the studio become a



9.15 In *Nosferatu*, Max Schreck's makeup and acting make his Count Orlock eerily like a rat or a bat.

9.16 A tiny gleam reflected in Boris Karloff's eye signals the moment when the monster revives in *The Mummy*.

major company. A decade later, RKO's B-picture unit under Val Lewton produced a cycle of literate, somber films on minuscule budgets. Lewton's directors proceeded by hints, keeping the monster offscreen and cloaking the sets in darkness. In *Cat People*, for instance, we never see the heroine transform herself into a panther, and we only glimpse the creature in certain scenes. The film achieves its effects through shadows, offscreen sound, and character reaction (9.13).

"Our formula is simple. A love story, three scenes of suggested horror and one of actual violence. Fadeout. It's all over in less than 70 minutes."

— Val Lewton, producer, *Cat People*

In later decades, other low-budget filmmakers were drawn to the genre. Horror became a staple of 1960s U.S. independent production, with many films targeted at the teenage market. Similarly, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was budgeted at only $114,000, but its success on college campuses made it hugely profitable. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), shot for a reputed $35,000, found an even bigger audience internationally. Low-budget horror remains a profitable genre, with *Cabin Fever, Saw,* and *Hostel* drawing large audiences in theaters and on DVD.

During the 1970s, the genre acquired a new respectability, chiefly because of the prestige of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). These films innovated by presenting violent and disgusting actions with unprecedented explicitness. When the possessed Regan vomited in the face of the priest bending over her, a new standard for horrific imagery was set.

The big-budget horror film entered on a period of popularity that has not yet ended. Many major Hollywood directors have worked in the genre, and several horror films—from *Jaws* (1975) and *Carrie* (1976) to *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Mummy* (1999)—have become huge hits. The genre's iconography pervades contemporary culture, decorating lunch boxes and theme park rides. Horror classics have been remade (*Cat People, Dracula*), and the genre conventions have been parodied (*Young Frankenstein, Beetlejuice*).

While the Western declined in popularity during the 1970s, the horror film has sustained an audience for over 30 years. Its longevity has set scholars looking for cultural explanations. Many critics suggest that the 1970s subgenre of family horror films, such as *The Exorcist* and *Poltergeist,* reflects social concerns about the breakup of American families. Others suggest that the genre's questioning of normality and traditional categories is in tune with both the post-Vietnam and the post–Cold War eras: Viewers may be uncertain of their fundamental beliefs about the world and their place in it. The continuing popularity of the teen-oriented slasher series from the 1980s to the present might reflect young people's fascination with and simultaneous anxieties about sexuality and violence. Fans are also drawn by the sophisticated special effects and makeup, so filmmakers compete to show ever gorier and more grotesque imagery. For all these reasons, horror-film conventions grew so pervasive that parodies such as the *Scary Movie* franchise and *Shaun of the Dead* became as popular as the films they mocked. Through genre mixing and the give-and-take between audience tastes and filmmakers' ambitions, the horror film has displayed that balance of convention and innovation basic to any genre.

The Musical

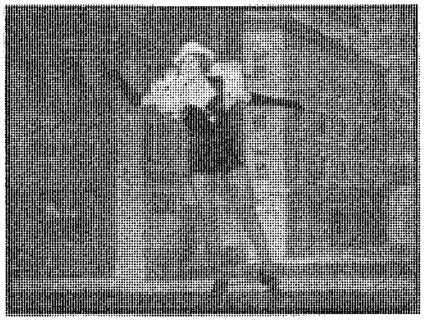
"[Producer Arthur Freed] came to me and said, 'What are you going to do with it?' I said, 'Well, Arthur, I don't know yet. But I do know I've gotta be singing and it's gotta be raining.' There was no rain in that picture up to then."

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

If the Western was largely based on the subject matter of the American frontier and the horror film on the emotional effect on the spectator, the musical came into being in response to a technical innovation. Though there had been occasional attempts to synchronize live vocal and musical accompaniment to scenes of singing and dancing during the silent era, the notion of basing a film on a series of musical numbers did not emerge until the late 1920s with the successful introduction of recorded sound tracks. One of the earliest features to include the human voice extensively was *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which contained almost no recorded dialogue but had several songs.

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

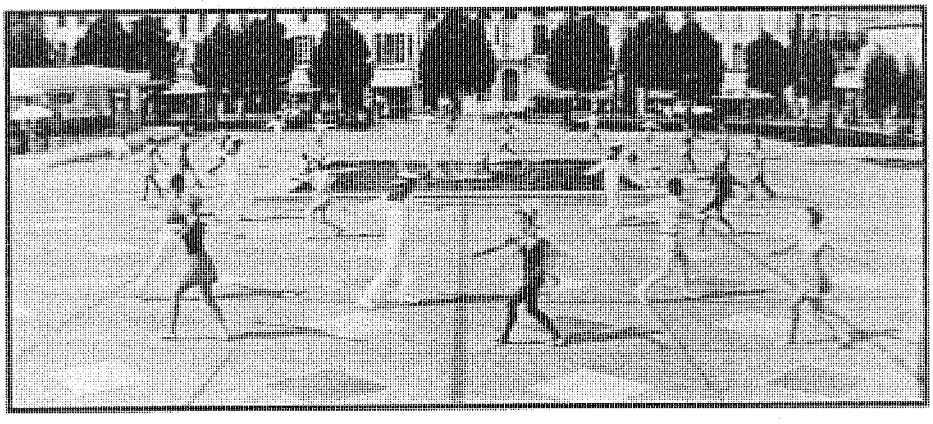
Two typical plot patterns of the musical emerged during the 1930s. One of these was the *backstage musical,* with the action centering on singers and dancers who perform for an audience within the story world. Warner Bros.'s successful early musical, *42nd Street* (1933), set the classic pattern for backstage musicals by casting dancer Ruby Keeler as the understudy for a big musical star who breaks her leg just before the big opening. The director tells Keeler, "You're going out a youngster, but you've *got* to come back a star!" and indeed she wins the audience's cheers (**9.17**). During the decade, Warner's elaborately choreographed Busby Berkeley musicals, MGM's pairing of the youthful Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in a series of "Let's put on a show!" plots, and RKO's elegant cycle of films starring the dance team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers all established the conventions of the backstage musical. Later examples included musicals where the characters are film performers, as in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). More recent backstage musicals are *The Commitments, That Thing You Do!, What's Love Got to Do with It,* and the 2005 version of *The Producers.*



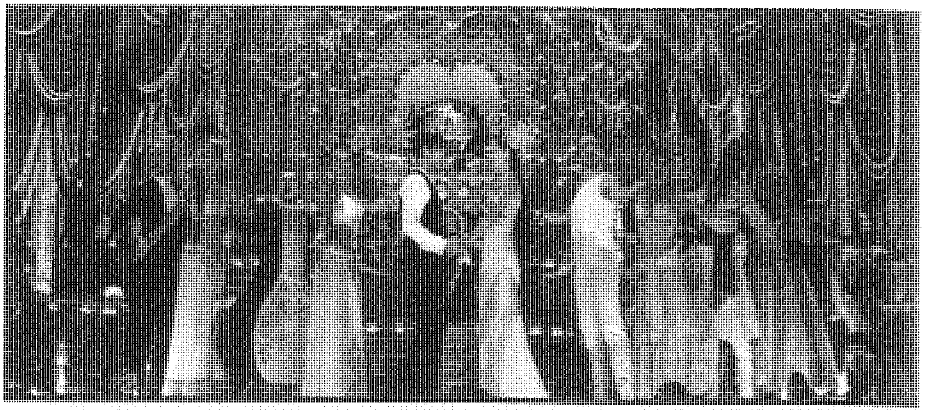
9.17 Ruby Keeler hoofs her way to stardom in *42nd Street*'s title number.

Not all musicals take place in a show business situation, however. There is also the *straight musical,* where people may sing and dance in situations of everyday life. Even in backstage musicals, the characters occasionally break into song in an everyday setting. Straight musicals are often romantic comedies, in which characters typically trace the progress of their courtship by breaking into song to express their fears, longings, and joys. We analyze one such film, *Meet Me in St. Louis,* in Chapter 11. In 1968, a French director took the romantic musical to extremes by having his characters in *The Young Girls of Rochefort* sing most of the dialogue in the film, with dozens of passersby joining in dance numbers staged in the town's streets (**9.18**).

In both backstage and straight musicals, the numbers are often associated with romance. Often the hero and heroine realize that they form the perfect romantic couple because they perform beautifully together. This happens in *Top Hat* when the Ginger Rogers character sheds her original annoyance with Fred Astaire during the "Isn't It a Wonderful Day" number, and by the end, they have clearly fallen in love. This plot device has remained a staple of the genre. Astaire again charms his reluctant partner, this time Cyd Charisse, in the "Dancing in the Dark" number in *The Band Wagon* (1953), and John Travolta meets his romantic match on the disco dance floor in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). In *Moulin Rouge!* the lovers serenade each other, both onstage and off, with classic pop and rock songs (**9.19**), and the dance interludes in the *House Party* series often become courtship rituals.



9.18 The citizens of a whole town are drawn into the dance in *The Young Girls of Rochefort.*



9.19 A flamboyant onstage musical number in *Moulin Rouge!* centers on the rapturous lovers.

Musicals have long been associated with children's stories, from *The Wizard of Oz* to recent films such as *Lilo and Stitch.* Many animated features contain musical numbers, a practice going back to Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.* But adult-oriented musicals have taken on somber, even tragic, material. *West Side Story* portrays a romance that tragically crosses ethnic lines, and *Pennies from Heaven* evokes the bleak atmosphere of the Depression through characters who lip-synch to recordings from that era. Biopics of performers, such as *Lady Sings the Blues, Ray,* and *Walk the Line,* become somber backstage musicals.

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

The range of subject matter in musicals is so broad that it may be hard to pin down specific iconography associated with the genre. Yet the backstage musical at least had its characteristic settings: the dressing rooms and wings of a theater, the flats and backdrops of the stage (as in 9.17), the nightclub with orchestra and dance floor. Similarly, performers in these musicals are often recognizable by their distinctive stage costumes. During the 1930s, Fred Astaire wore the most famous top hat in the cinema, a hat so closely associated with his musicals that the beginning of *The Band Wagon*—where Astaire plays a washed-up movie actor—could make a joke about it. Similarly, Travolta's white suit in *Saturday Night Fever* became an icon of the disco era. Opportunities for novelty have always been present in the musical, however, as the musical numbers set in a factory (*The Pajama Game*) or in the prairie (*Oklahoma*) indicate.

The characteristic techniques of the musical are similarly diverse. Musicals tend to be brightly lit, to set off the cheerful costumes and sets and to keep the choreography of the dance numbers clearly visible. For similar reasons, color film stock was applied quite early to musicals, including Eddie Cantor's *Whoopee!* and, as we saw in Chapter 2, *The Wizard of Oz.* In order to show off the patterns formed by the dancers in musical numbers, crane shots and high angles are common. One technique widely used in the musical is not usually evident to viewers: lip-synching to prerecorded songs. On the set, they move their lips in synchronization to a playback of the recording. This technique allows the singers to move about freely and to concentrate on their acting.

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

Obstacles ensue, primarily in the form of a romantic rivalry between Lucky and the orchestra leader at the club. Further complications result when Penny believes mistakenly that Lucky intends to return to his fiancée. Near the end, Penny seems about to abandon Lucky to marry the conductor. She and Lucky meet, apparently for the last time, and their talk at cross-purposes reveals the link between performance and romance:

PENNY: "Does she dance very beautifully?"

LUCKY: "Who?"

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

LUCKY: "Yes—very."

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

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

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

The film calls on the newly established conventions of the genre. Lucky wears Astaire's classic top hat and formal clothes in scene after scene (**9.20**). Astaire and Rogers dance in the beautiful art deco–style sets that were typical of musical design in the 1930s (**9.21**). The film departs from convention, however, in a remarkable number, "Bojangles of Harlem," where Astaire pays tribute to the great African American dancers who had influenced him during his New York stage career in the 1920s. When he appears in blackface here, it is not to exploit a demeaning stereotype but to impersonate Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the most famous black tap dancer of the era. (The tribute is all the more unusual because Robinson was then costarring in Shirley Temple musicals for a rival studio, Twentieth Century Fox.)

9.20 After losing his suit in a card game, Lucky still wears his top hat in *Swing Time.*

Despite its backstage settings and show business plot, *Swing Time* sets some numbers in an everyday environment. When Lucky visits Penny's apartment, he sings "The Way You Look Tonight" as she shampoos her hair—using a convenient piano in her apartment to accompany himself (though a nondiegetic orchestra plays along as well). When the couple visits the snowy countryside, however, there is no diegetic accompaniment at all within the locale as they sing "A Fine Romance"—only an unseen orchestra. As we are reminded over and over in musicals, this world makes it possible for people, at any time and in any place, to express themselves through song and dance.

9.21 Astaire and Rogers dance in the art deco nightclub set.

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

Yet there are other kinds of films than live-action fictional features. There are other modes of filmmaking, that, as we saw in Chapter 1, depend on ways in which the films are made and the intentions of the filmmakers. The most common are documentary, experimental, and animated cinema, and we'll examine these in the next chapter.

Summary

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

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

1. Had the publicity surrounding this film already cued me to link it to a certain genre even before I watched it?
2. Have its stars appeared in other films like this over and over?
3. Did I recognize some of the costumes, settings, and other elements as similar to others I had previously seen in other films?
4. If I were to describe this film to a friend, would I find it easy to compare to other films? If so, which ones? If not, how *would* I describe it?
5. Does this film fit into a genre that I typically like or one that I don't? How has that fact affected what I thought of the film?
6. Does this film seem to be combining conventions from more than one genre? If so, how does it make them compatible with each other?

Where to Go from Here

Genres and Society

The conception of a genre's social function as ritual (p. 326) derives from the anthropological theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss. One version of the ritual model is Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981). See also Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: British Film Institute, 1982), and Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Altman has recently refined and elaborated on his views in his *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), which examines many issues relating to genre theory.

Another conception of a genre's social function holds that genre films are centrally concerned with social groups—particularly women and racial minorities—that are oppressed and feared by many in a society. The genre's stories and iconography portray those groups as threatening the majority's way of life. The film's action will then work to contain and defeat these elements. One argument for this approach can be found in Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods,* vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 195–220. For a criticism of this otherness theory, see Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 168–206.

For a survey of approaches to genre, as well as an analysis of several Hollywood genres, see Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000). A variety of approaches is represented in Wheeler Winston Dixon, ed., *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

Specific Genres

The vast array of conventions in the Western genre have been codified, along with major films and figures, in two useful reference books: Phil Hardy, ed., *The Western* (London: Aurum, 1991), and Edward Buscombe, ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Atheneum, 1988). Our discussion of the conventions of the Western has been shaped by John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1975). Howard Hughes summarizes one subgenre of the

Western in *Spaghetti Westerns* (Harpenden, England: Pocket Essentials, 2001.)

Noël Carroll explores the affective aesthetics of the horror film in *The Philosophy of Horror,* cited above. Carroll's analysis, which has guided our discussion of the genre, is complemented by Cynthia A. Freeland's *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) and by the social account offered by Andrew Tudor's *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). Phil Hardy, ed., *Horror* (London: Aurum, 1985), is a comprehensive reference book.

For a general history of the American musical, see Ethan Mordden, *The Hollywood Musical* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). Essays on specific topics are included in Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

A survey of early Hollywood musicals that deals with the revue musicals and the more narratively oriented films of the 1930s is Richard Barrios's *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). One of the most important production units concentrating on musicals, run by Arthur Freed, is discussed in Hugh Fordin, *The World of Entertainment: The Freed Unit at MGM* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

Websites

www.filmsite.org/genres.html	A wide-ranging discussion of a great many genres, including historical summaries and key examples.
www.lewestern.com/US/1PresentationUS.htm	A database devoted to the Western, with information in both French and English.
www.carfax-abbey.com	A database of classic and contemporary horror films, with over 150 links to other sites.
www.musicals101.com/index.html	A reference site for musical theater and cinema.

Recommended DVD Supplements

Westerns

"The Making of *Silverado*" is in some ways a conventional "making-of" documentary, with sections on rehearsal, storyboards, editing, cinematography, set design, and so on. Yet the overall emphasis is on the film as a Western. Director Lawrence Kasdan tried to revive the classic Western and to pay homage to it at the same time. Interviews with cast and crew reveal the film's techniques, but they often discuss how film form and style worked in service of the old-fashioned Western's conventions. "The Making of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*" contains an amount of footage unusual for a late 1960s film. It also avoids the mutually congratulatory tone of many supplement interviews, with director George Roy Hill giving a warts-and-all account of the production of this classic Western.

"A Turning of the Earth: John Ford, John Wayne, and *The Searchers*" combines accounts by the participants, contemporary footage of the production, and expert analysis of the film. A biographical overview of one of the major directors of Westerns is "Budd Boetticher—an American Original," on the DVD of one of his classic films, *Seven Men from Now.* Other interesting discussions of Westerns include "Sir Christopher Frayling on *The Magnificent Seven*" and "Leone's West" (*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*).

Horror Films

"Inside the Labyrinth," though primarily a making-of for *The Silence of the Lambs,* includes considerable discussion of it as a horror or thriller film. Similarly, the making-of "Behind the Scream," on *Scream,* discusses horror-film conventions.

A brief making-of featurette on *Rosemary's Baby* discusses it as "the great horror film without any horror in it," stressing its lack of special effects and its dependence on suggestion rather than explicit displays of the film's monstrous elements.

Quite possibly the most extensive DVD supplement dealing with a horror film is "The Making of *The Frighteners,*" a 4½-hour documentary directed by Peter Jackson that deals with every aspect of the production—including a tour of the tiny Weta Digital facility that would later expand exponentially for *The Lord of the Rings.*

Musicals

"Musicals Great Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit at MGM," included on the *Singin' in the Rain* DVD, chronicles the golden era of musical production at the studio that also made *The Wizard of Oz, The Band Wagon, Meet Me in St. Louis,* and other classics. Excerpts from MGM musicals made in the early years of sound make this an exemplary historical survey. The DVD also includes a charming supplement, "What a Glorious Feeling," on the making of *Singin' in the Rain.*

"More Loverly Than Ever: *My Fair Lady* Then and Now," a 1994 documentary dealing not only with the film's history but with its restoration, points out that the film came at the end of a cycle of big-budget adaptations of Broadway musicals.

The "Behind the Music" supplement for *Saturday Night Fever* discusses that enormously popular film's innovations, including central characters who dance but don't sing. It traces how a musical subgenre, in this case arising from the short-lived disco fad of the 1970s, can experience a cycle of sudden success and equally sudden decline.

In "The Nightclub of Your Dreams: The Making of *Moulin Rouge!*" Nicole Kidman talks about singing live during filming rather than the usual lip-synching to a song's playback. There is also a segment on the choreography.