Movie Genres 4

Still from Zack and Miri Make a Porno *(2008). ©Weinstein Company/Courtesy Everett Collection*

I am a typed director. If I made Cinderella, the audience would immediately be looking for a body in the coach.

—Alfred Hitchcock

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Explain the difficulty in defining genre, and contrast the advantages and disadvantages that genres offer film studios, filmmakers, and audiences.
- Describe the popular film genres of westerns, gangster, mystery, and film noir.
- Describe the popular film genres of horror, fantasy, and science fiction.
- Describe the popular film genres of romantic comedy, musicals, and documentaries.
- Categorize films into genres, recognize when films cross genres, and analyze films using genres.
- Trace the history of popular sentiments and social issues through the evolution of films inside genres, recognize various social functions of genres, and use film genres to analyze movies on a number of levels.

4.1 What Are Movie Genres?

A **genre** is a type, or category, and **genre films** are usually easily recognizable as part of a certain genre. This is because they tend to use familiar story formulas, character types, settings, and **iconography** (visual imagery with symbolic implications), all of which lead viewers to have certain expectations about what the movie will be like before actually watching it. For various reasons, which we shall note, genre films are prime candidates for analysis to reveal significance far deeper than the surface stories. Many genres also have a variety of related **subgenres** with more narrowly defined formulas and expectations. For example, any film in the horror genre can be expected to produce fear or anxiety in the viewer; some of the many subgenres of horror films include the vampire film, the zombie film, the monster movie, the mad doctor movie, the insane slasher-killer movie, and the psychological horror film, among others.

In *Evil Dead II*, a freewheeling horror film directed by Sam Raimi, Ash, the protagonist, played by Bruce Campbell, experiences some genuine terror, including (but not limited to) cutting off his own possessed hand with a chainsaw. Audiences and critics alike found it intense and scary. They also found it hilarious. How can a movie that includes the following exchange not be?

> **Ash (talking to mirror):** I'm fine . . . I'm fine . . . (Mirror Ash jumps out of the mirror and grabs Ash.)
>
> **Mirror Ash:** I don't think so. We just cut up our girlfriend with a chainsaw. Does that sound "fine"?

With its violence, gore, and shocks, there is no question that *Evil Dead II*, considered a cult classic, is a horror movie. With lines like the foregoing, there is also no debating that it's a comedy. So is it a horror film or a comedy? Why can't it be both? *Evil Dead II* is an example of a movie that crosses genres. The word "genre" comes from the Latin *genus*, which refers to birth, family, race, or class, and by extension to any sort of categorization. However, as we will see, there is much debate over just what the term genre implies and encompasses, or whether the definition really exists at all with movies.

There is little debate that American movie studios in particular often make use of the cultural shorthand that accompanies various genres—the western, the action-adventure film, the sex comedy—to market their films, and that audiences use it to decide what movies they want to see. In this chapter, we will examine various types of genres and examples of each—once

we nail down that pesky definition. For example, is comedy a genre? Could drama be considered a genre? Is the epic generally thought to be a genre? Some people and video stores like to think so. But such categories as comedy, drama, and epic are broader than what the term *genre* typically refers to. There are western dramas, western comedies, western epics, western romances, western adventures, western mysteries, western crime melodramas, and more. Comedy and drama might more suitably be termed modes of storytelling that can be applied to any of the more specific genres. An epic is a story that is large in scale and scope (covering many years and numerous characters) and can be found within multiple genres.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Little Big Man* is a revisionist western. It takes the genre's conventions and reverses them. The Indians are the heroes and General Custer is the villain.

What Else Do Genre Labels Mean?

A word first, however, about what a genre is not: It is not a preordained measure of quality, despite the way some film theorists and critics might dismiss a "genre" movie as too formulaic for serious dramatic analysis. If one wished to argue the point, one might include *Citizen Kane*, according to some critics the greatest movie ever made, in the genre category of newspaper movie. There it would find happy company with *All the President's Men* and *His Girl Friday*. These, too, are considered by most critics among the greatest films in history. Yet they are also genre films, or films that fit neatly into a standard formula, in some regard. It is far too easy to dismiss a genre film out of hand. Certainly, there are enough by-the-numbers knock-offs of *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* (including some of their own sequels) to give the action-adventure genre a bad name. Likewise with the horror genre, from the original *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to *Halloween*, among others, and all their countless sequels and rip-offs. But there are also plenty of other entries in these categories, even many of the sequels and remakes, to prevent them from being looked down upon simply by definition.

So are genres important? Yes, they are extremely important, because they are, in varying degrees, how studios categorize the films they make—and how audiences categorize the films they want to see. Labeling a film with any given genre immediately creates certain expectations in viewers, making them more or less likely to want to see that film. This is behavior ingrained over more than a century of filmmaking. Genres also offer a convenient way to examine films—what makes them good, what makes them great (and what makes them fall short). Not only that, many genre films can be analyzed far beyond their surface formulas and stereotypes. As noted in Chapter 3's section on "Metaphor and Allegory," genre films can be the vehicle for contemporary social-political commentary disguised within the context of a popular plot formula. These may often be set in the distant past or future (such as westerns, historical war films, or science fiction) or may be present-day stories with familiar generic elements (like horror, action-adventure, disaster films, or romantic comedies). Even when intended primarily as escapist entertainment, genre films tend to treat any number of themes and issues that are topical, and whatever the genre, the films' attitudes reflect common public sentiment and concerns at the time they're created. Genres, in some respects, tell the story of movies and of the audiences that watch them.

The Impact of Genres on Audiences

Even though some films cross genres, and may even fit into three or four different genres, most can be filed into categories that are easily recognizable to audiences. This is important because, in addition to their artistic side, movies are a business as well. There is a segment of the audience that is, for instance, interested in any romantic comedy that is released. This type of interest extends to individual actors and actresses as well; for some, just knowing that Adam Sandler is starring in a movie is enough to justify the cost of a ticket. Sandler and other "personality actors" such as Charlie Chaplin, Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, or Sylvester Stallone have such a consistently recognizable screen character in similar plots that their names alone might almost be considered film genres, or at least subgenres.

Breaking films down into genres is far more than an academic exercise. It is a way of looking at movies—and a way that movies look at us, their audience. John Truby, founder of a studio that offers information and tools to screenwriters, is blunt when describing the importance of genre. He claims that the entire Hollywood entertainment industry is based upon the concepts of genre and formula, as it finds formulaic films more reliably profitable than the less predictable artistic visions, which tend to be valued more highly in other countries. He says:

> Hollywood realized a long time ago that it is not in the business of selling original artistic vision (though it sometimes happens anyway). It is in the business of buying and selling story forms. Genres tell the audience up front what to expect from the product they are buying. If they like a particular kind of story, chances are they will like this particular film, especially if the writer and director give the expectations a little twist. (Truby, 2010)

Films like *Evil Dead II* and other films that combine two or more genres such as, say, *Westworld* or *Cowboys and Aliens*, provide that twist. And a film such as *Snow White and the Huntsman* expands its traditional fairy tale genre into a more elaborate medieval action-adventure. What's interesting about this cross-pollination of genres is that it assumes knowledge on the part of the audience, who must recognize what is expected of the horror film and the comedy, the western and the science fiction, or the romantic fantasy and historical-action film, so that when such combinations are presented, there is no confusion. No shortcuts are needed. The audience, trained in genre over decades of immersing itself in it (knowingly or not), is comfortable with the mix.

However, some theorists debate even the existence of genres, believing the pool of categories is too muddied to the point that the definitions are fluid at best, meaningless at worst. New York University film professor and author Robert Stam writes,

> While some genres are based on story content (the war film), others are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), location (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). (Stam, 2000)

Stam makes a good point, but his designations could also easily fall into the category of subgenres, or genres within genres. One could break things down even further, but eventually such division becomes distracting and pointless. The fact remains that people tend to like convenient categories for things, and that's exactly what genres are, even if the criteria for defining different genres may be unrelated and many films blend several genres.

Popular Genres

Instead of focusing on theoretical debates that may surround the categorization of genres in film, it is far easier, and also more instructive, to simply divide genres into more traditional categories. While doing this, it is important to recognize that there is plenty of crossover between them, and many of them may contain subcategories within them. A look at some of the major genres (see Table 4.1) will also reveal much about how the making of movies has evolved over the last century, even as the genres have stayed largely the same. Entire books could be (and have been) devoted to film genre in general and to individual genres themselves, examining specific visual tropes or iconography, character types, and plot conventions, as well as variations and subversions of genre expectations explored by certain films. We can't possibly go into the same detailed analysis here, but in the next three sections, we will briefly discuss the most popular and lasting film genres. Students intrigued by the topic of genres (or who may be fans of specific genres) are certainly encouraged to seek out any number of more thorough genre studies for deeper analysis and insight into the wealth of information and meaning communicated by "genre films."

Table 4.1 Film genres

Westerns	Films set in the American West, usually between 1850 and 1900, and typically depicting the settling of the frontier, with its conflicts between the freedoms of a lawless adventurism and the safer restrictions of encroaching civilization; often allegories for modern issues	*Hell's Hinges*, *The Covered Wagon*, *The Big Trail*, *Stagecoach*, *Jesse James*, *Dodge City*, *High Noon*, *The Searchers*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Little Big Man*, *The Shootist*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Dances With Wolves*, *Unforgiven*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Terribly Happy*, *Appaloosa*, *3:10 to Yuma*, *Django Unchained*
Gangster	Films that deal with organized crime, often with mob families; originally timely topical crime dramas inspired by recent headlines, now almost as often nostalgic recreations of past eras	*The Racket*, *The Lights of New York*, *The Public Enemy*, *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, The *Godfather* trilogy, *Goodfellas*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Gomorrah*, *A History of Violence*
Mysteries	Films in which characters must solve a mystery (typically a murder); may overlap with crime, horror, noir, or various other genres	*The Cat and the Canary*, *The Maltese Falcon*, Philo Vance series, *The Thin Man* series, Charlie Chan series, Mr. Moto series, *The Lady Vanishes*, *The Trouble With Harry*, *North by Northwest*
Film noir	Crime drama marked by dark themes, a cynical outlook, anti-heroes, often with a scheming femme fatale, nighttime actions, expressionistic visual style, and voice-over narration	*Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, *The Big Sleep*, *Murder My Sweet*, *Lady in the Lake*, *Affair in Trinidad*, *Out of the Past*, *The Big Heat*, *Touch of Evil*, *Chinatown*, *Body Heat*, *Last Man Standing*, *Red Rock West*, *U-Turn*, *Payback*, *Sin City*
Horror	Films designed to elicit fear and shock in a cathartically entertaining manner; often the next step beyond a suspense-thriller, fantasy, or science-fiction film with horror elements	*Dracula*, *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, *Doctor X*, *The Mummy*, *The Wolf Man*, *The Seventh Victim*, *Psycho*, *Paranoiac*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Shining*, *Halloween*, *The Evil Dead*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield*, *Saw*, *Deadline*, *Let Me In*, *Insidious*, *The Woman in Black*

(continued)

Fantasy	Any film with obviously unreal, magical, or impossible situations, characters, or settings, often overlapping with various other genres, especially science fiction, but sometimes historical dramas	*The Lost World*, *King Kong*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, *What Dreams May Come*, *Night at the Museum*, *Enchanted*, *Stranger Than Fiction*, *Inkheart*, *Up*, *Iron Man*, *Inglourious Basterds*, *Watchmen*, the *Harry Potter* series
Science fiction	Films dealing with realistically reasoned speculation about future events or scientific theories, often set in outer space or alternative realities or dealing with time travel	*Metropolis*, *Woman in the Moon*, *Just Imagine*, *Frankenstein*, *Things to Come*, *The Thing From Another World*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Godzilla*, *Mothra*, *Forbidden Planet*, *Them!*, *The Time Machine*, *First Men in the Moon*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Star Wars*, *Alien*, *Back to the Future*, *The Matrix*, *Moon*, *District 9*, *Avatar*, *Super 8*, *Prometheus*
Romantic comedy	Light-hearted, humorous story involving people in love, sometimes overlapping with subgenres such as screwball comedy, teen comedy, or gross-out comedy	*Young Romance*, *City Lights*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, *Annie Hall*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *While You Were Sleeping*, *Knocked Up*, *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin*, *Juno*, *To Rome With Love*, *Much Ado About Nothing*
Musicals	Films that focus on songs as a major element, whether sung by characters in a realistic context such as a nightclub, or sung in lieu of dialogue to further the plot and express emotions; there are also musical documentaries and concert films	*The Jazz Singer*, *Broadway Melody*, *The King of Jazz*, *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Top Hat*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Easter Parade*, *An American in Paris*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *South Pacific*, *Gigi*, *West Side Story*, *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music*, *Woodstock*, *Cabaret*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Chicago*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Across the Universe*, *Hairspray*, *Dreamgirls*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Les Miserables*

4.2 Westerns, Gangster Films, Mysteries, and Film Noir

The popularity of westerns and crime dramas—which include gangster and mystery films—dates back to the early days of film. While arguably formulaic, their often-traditional presentations of the world as a conflict between good and evil continue to resonate with silver-screen audiences.

Westerns

At its simplest, a **western** is a man and his horse, taking on the struggles of nature and his fellow man. The American Film Institute (AFI) defines it more fully as "a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle, and the demise of the new frontier" (AFI, 2008). Usually, westerns are set in a time period between the mid-1800s and the early 1900s, but there are a few westerns set in modern times. Film writer Tim Dirks goes so far as to call the western "the major defining genre of the American film industry, a nostalgic eulogy to the early days of the expansive, untamed American frontier (the borderline between civilization

and the wilderness). They are one of the oldest, most enduring and flexible genres and one of the most characteristically American genres in their mythic origins" (Dirks, 2010b).

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In this late John Ford western (1962), the director telegraphs his awareness of the way in which westerns have shaped our views. "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."—Journalist speaking to the man who shot Liberty Valance.

Studios have been making westerns since the inception of filmmaking, when **oaters**, or cheap, quick westerns, were churned out in large numbers. An immensely popular genre ever since *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, westerns have nevertheless risen and fallen in popularity, especially major studio efforts at the genre. Low-budget formula westerns always had their audience. However, "prestige" westerns with major stars became popular with *The Covered Wagon*, a 1923 epic of pioneer settlers, and disappeared after the failure of the similar 1930 sound film *The Big Trail*. In 1939, the success of *Stagecoach*, *Jesse James*, *Dodge City*, and others once more revived serious westerns for the next few decades.

Another factor that likely affected the popularity of westerns was public sentiment about the treatment of Native Americans in films. In numerous sound-era westerns, Native Americans were typically depicted as evil savages. Because of this, traditional "cowboy and Indian" westerns had largely faded by the late 1960s, as society's thoughts on this topic matured. By the time of Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990), Native Americans would be depicted as enlightened and wise; the U.S. military was instead shown as savage in its behavior and treatment of native people. This characterization continues in westerns today, although in 2013 there was some controversy over having non-Native American actor Johnny Depp play the character of Tonto in Gore Verbinski's revisionist version of *The Lone Ranger*. It is important to note that although westerns (and other films) may be set in the distant past (or future), the films themselves often closely reflect social attitudes, issues, and concerns dominating public thought at the time they were created instead of the time period they depict.

Typical westerns deal with maintaining law and order on the frontier, and their conflict derives from easily defined opposites of good vs. evil. Remember our discussion in the last chapter of white and black symbolism used to tell the audience which side is good and which side is evil? That is very common in westerns. There are lawmen vs. bandits and gunslingers, settlers vs. Native Americans, legal procedure vs. vigilantism, upstanding law-abiding settlers vs. saloon prostitutes and gamblers, refined and civilized Easterners vs. crude and wild Westerners, and many more. In westerns, as in many films, the hero and the villain may often be parallel opposites, two sides of the same coin, so to speak, and representative of the conflicting tendencies within any individual. It may well be the usually clear depiction of good and evil that caused this distinctly American genre to become very popular overseas, resulting in numerous westerns being produced in Italy, Spain, and Germany at the same time the genre was fading from American screens during the 1960s–70s. Some of these, such as *A Fistful of Dollars* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*, even found popularity in the United States. The western formula has become so ingrained in moviegoers that it is frequently used for non-westerns, especially modern crime stories (with a detective replacing the sheriff or marshal), and genres from the samurai film to science fiction. The following films are a few examples of the genre.

My Darling Clementine (1946)

Director John Ford's iconic westerns include *Stagecoach*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Rio Grande*, and *The Searchers*, in addition to this classic retelling of the shootout at the OK Corral. Obviously, *My Darling Clementine* contains many of the classic elements of the western—good vs. evil, taming the wild western town, standing bravely against danger and despair. What makes the film something more than just another genre film is what all this represents, and how Ford brings it to bear. The Earps represent the coming civilization that would eventually overtake the lawless frontier. The Clantons are the last, ugly end of an era. Their livelihood depends on absolute control, so that nothing stands in the way of their evil plans. This theme plays out in countless other westerns, and in television series such as *Deadwood*, which was even more specific in its representation of the coming law, order, and civilization. But Ford's film, aided by the performances of Henry Fonda and Walter Brennan, is the definitive expression of the change that occurred in the United States by the early 20th century, when what was once a wilderness in the United States started to turn into the civilization we know today.

The Shootist (1976)

The western has produced many stars, from William S. Hart and Tom Mix in the silent days to Henry Fonda, James Stewart, and Clint Eastwood. But no actor is identified with the genre as strongly as John Wayne. Though hardly a cowboy in real life, Wayne played one in numerous films, notably *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956). *The Shootist* is a film that depends heavily on the audience's familiarity with Wayne's career—so much so that it begins with scenes from his earlier westerns.

In this film, Wayne plays J. B. Books, a legendary gunfighter—a "shootist"—dying of cancer. The West is changing, as well; it is becoming more civilized. The shootist is something of a throwback, especially to the widow who rents him a room, but her son idolizes him. Enemies arrive in town with scores to settle with the famous gunman. Knowing that he is dying, Books arranges for one final shootout, which will end in violence, death, and betrayal. What places *The Shootist* beyond routine genre pictures is how Wayne and director Don Siegel so eagerly play upon the audience's knowledge of and love for Wayne's career. In this respect, it could be considered a *meta-western*, in that it is self-referential (actor Jimmy Stewart also shows up as the grumpy doctor who gives the fatal diagnosis, providing another link to westerns from days gone by, particularly *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, which starred both actors and had similar themes). We enjoy it more because we know that Wayne—in his last role—is playing a sort of compilation of many of his previous characters, a sort of actor's greatest hits. It is indeed a western, but it's more than that—it's a statement on stardom, as well.

A History of Violence (2005) and *Terribly Happy* (2008)

These films, at first glance, are not westerns at all. They're set in modern small towns, the second in Denmark. The characters don't ride horses; they drive cars. The former film might better fall into the gangster genre, the latter into the crime thriller genre. However, the ways in which directors David Cronenberg and Henrik Ruben Genz construct the films conform very much to the western genre. In *A History of Violence*, a former mob hit man has settled in a small town to start a new life and raise a family. Viggo Mortensen stars as Tom, who has become a peaceful, respected citizen running a café with no one suspecting his past. When he instinctively intervenes in a robbery and kills the criminals, media coverage of his heroic deed alerts the mob he's abandoned, which eventually leads to a showdown. The plot has similarities to the classic western *Shane* (1953), which has a weary former gunfighter trying to live peacefully among some settlers until a ruthless cattle baron hires a gunslinger to drive them off their land. In *Terribly Happy*, Jakob Cedergren stars as Robert, the new town marshal of a dismal little place lorded over by the

town bully, Jorgen (Kim Bodnia). The townspeople know that Jorgen is a vile person, but they cower in his presence and do nothing to stop him. Robert alone is willing to stand up to Jorgen, though instead of a gunfight, the two stage an epic drinking competition.

If we step back, we see all of the elements of the classic western here—the lone ex-gunfighter or lawman arrives in a remote place controlled by an evil, powerful character. No one else will stand up against him, so the brave symbol of righteousness will have to handle things himself. It shows just how flexible the form can be, for the western, like any genre film, can branch out beyond its traditional trappings while remaining true to the spirit of the genre. With several notable exceptions, the once-ubiquitous movie western may have virtually disappeared from modern cinema, but most of its formulas have simply been transferred to other, more contemporary genres, especially the gangster and crime thriller.

▲ *Terribly Happy*, a story set in peaceful Denmark, replaces the western shoot-out with a drinking bout. In genre terms, the dramatic question is identical: "Who is the first to go down?"

Gangster Films

Like the western, the crime drama has been popular almost since film began. It, too, is rooted in the basic fight between good and evil. However, particularly with later gangster films, the audience is sometimes asked to identify and sympathize not with the forces of good, but with the forces of evil. The charisma, material wealth, and power enjoyed by the bad guys make them far more attractive than the good guys, who are often depicted as plodding, clueless characters with none of the charm of their adversaries.

The **gangster film** is really a subgenre of the broader genre of crime film. Many westerns might also be classified as crime dramas, including what is sometimes called the first western, 1903's *The Great Train Robbery*. Quite a few westerns deal with organized crime and political corruption, just like the gangster film. Indeed, the American Film Institute defines the gangster-film genre as centering on "organized crime or maverick criminals in a twentieth-century setting" (AFI, 2008). It is much like the western in that regard, except that many gangster films have been set during the times they were created, rather than some historical period. Even Shakespeare's romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* is a film about vengeance-obsessed crime families, and adaptations such as Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and Andrej Bartkowiak's *Romeo Must Die* (2000), not to mention *West Side Story* (1961), emphasize the story's gangster elements explicitly. Gangster films are certainly not limited to stories of the Italian, Jewish, or Irish-American mafia in the 1929s–30s or even the present. There are a large number of French and Japanese gangster films of the 1950s–1970s, and in recent years any number of British mob films or films depicting inner-city African-American or Mexican gangs. A variation on the formula of family-centered violent revenge can be found in Joshua Marson's *The Forgiveness of Blood* (2011), set in modern Albania. In general, formulas tend to deal with a character's thirst for and rise to power, a character's betrayal of gang protocol or another character, and various gang or family rivalries. Unlike

crime films with police protagonists or traditional westerns, in gangster films we often find ourselves sympathizing with the man in the black hat.

Early on, the gangster film was more traditional in its depiction of morality. But the height of the original gangster films occurred in the 1930s, in the wake of the Great Depression, and things changed considerably. Gangsters had their own moral codes, and some appeared to be a greater threat to other gangsters than to law-abiding citizens. The coming of national Prohibition effectively turned most of the nation into lawbreakers, with bootlegging gangsters seen as providing a public service by selling illegal alcohol. And with all the devastating bank foreclosures after the stock market crash of 1929, some audience members may well have cheered for bank-robbing movie gangsters. Many gangster characters then had a certain mystique that made them appealing, almost heroic, in their ability to overcome youthful poverty and oppression to rise in power and wealth—even if it was by criminal means, and even if the criminal activities were condemned and the criminals ultimately punished. This would prove to be the case in later films as well, particularly in the *Godfather* series. The following three films are illustrative of the gangster genre.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ James Cagney (right) is a notorious heavy—the unlikeable villain. In *The Public Enemy*, he mashes a grapefruit into his girlfriend's face.

James Cagney plays archetypal gangster Tom Powers, who rises from small-time criminal to powerful gangster. Violent and hotheaded, Tom mistreats women, with the exception of his mother, to whom he is devoted. Far from being discreet about his work or his lifestyle, Tom instead flaunts it, to the chagrin of his brother. Tom is eventually taken down by the end of the film by a rival gang, not by police officers. Some saw this as unflattering commentary on the deterioration of law enforcement and the government, so the studio tagged on a printed title at the end: "The end of Tom Powers is the end of every hoodlum. The Public Enemy is not a man, it is not a character, it is a problem we must all face." Studios were so concerned that their films were seen by public watchdog groups as glorifying criminals' lifestyles that they often inserted in the films' credits warnings about how their movies were not meant to glamorize these hoodlums' lives, sometimes with a biblical quotation such as "those who live by the sword, shall perish by the sword."

The brief run of outstanding gangster films in the early 1930s wouldn't last. The original *Scarface*, released in 1932, was especially violent. This helped lead to greater enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code, censorship guidelines that dictated what was and was not acceptable on film. Filmmakers were no longer able to depict gangster life as realistically (or as romantically), and the genre faded for a period of time, although organized crime was frequently at the root of the conflict in 1940s and '50s film noir thrillers.

The Godfather (1972) and *The Godfather: Part II* (1974)

If ever there were films that rose above their genre roots, these are the two clearest examples. They graphically depict the extreme violence that is routine in the world of organized crime, as

well as various other gang-related criminal activities. However, the *Godfather* saga is equally an epic family soap opera. Director Francis Ford Coppola's epic gangster story is told clearly from the point of view of the Mafia family. They are the ones with whom we relate, whom we watch, whom we even root for. It's the story of Michael Corleone, played by a then little-known Al Pacino, as he moves from the one son who was meant for something outside the family business to gradually taking over the mob family, becoming a ruthless, heartless gangster himself. By the film's end, he is slaying his enemies while serving as godfather to his nephew.

By the second film, Michael is fully entrenched as a Mafia chieftain. But Coppola goes a step further: He takes us back in history, to Don Corleone's entry into America, an immigrant who rises from petty thief to mob boss, giving the story epic stature. Yet Coppola tells the story as if Corleone were any kind of hard-working immigrant fighting to make his fortune in a new country. A 1990 third installment in the series completed the epic trilogy with more intrigue leading to the ironic, almost poetic fate of the now-remorseful Michael, but it was not as successful critically or commercially.

The success of the *Godfather* films led naturally to other gangster films in which gangsters' lives were examined and in some cases glorified. The 1983 remake of *Scarface* and 1990's *Goodfellas* are two examples. While both end with the defeat of the protagonist, they spare nothing in showing the trappings of wealth that the main characters' illicit work has secured. This is also true of the popular television show *The Sopranos*, which ran for seven seasons beginning in 1999 and told the story of Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), the boss of a mob family who struggles with nuclear family problems as well. While creator David Chase and Gandolfini have stressed that Tony is supposed to be a monster, not a hero, he is nevertheless depicted as a sympathetic character.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Martin Scorsese's ironically titled *Goodfellas* uses voice-over narration, encouraging audiences to identify with the trials and tribulations of an ordinary thug's life.

This aspect of many modern gangster films, like those in the early 1930s, once again may be a symptom of widespread lack of public respect for a legal and political system that allows organized crime to flourish and may become corrupted by it. Effective gangster films, like any other, reflect the attitudes of both their creators and their audiences. They dramatize a social statement on a need for change, or demonstrate the destructiveness of a lifestyle in a way intended to discourage others from imitating it, although some may not recognize that point if the characters are appealing.

Gomorrah (2008)

Gomorrah, an Italian film directed by Matteo Garrone, takes the opposite approach. It tells the interrelated, swirling stories of low-level mobsters working for Italy's Camorra, which exists in real life (the title is a reference to the mob and to the biblical city destroyed by God because of its many sins). Instead of glorifying the lifestyle, the violence, and the crime, *Gomorrah* shows us the brutal banality. Some of these men simply treat their work as a sort of dead-end job. Two

young would-be gangsters like to play-act scenes from the 1983 *Scarface*—with real guns. They are both pathetic and lethal. *Gomorrah*, in ways far more effective than any censorship by the Motion Picture Production Code ever could be, illustrates the age-old adage that crime doesn't pay—for most people, that is.

Mysteries and Film Noir

A distant cousin to the gangster film and another subgenre of the crime drama, the **mystery film** typically involves a detective, private investigator, or regular person trying to solve a crime. Often he or she must not only figure out who committed the crime but also fight against corrupt or incompetent law enforcement along the way. Sometimes there may be gangsters involved. Along with the western, the mystery is a flexible genre, allowing for adaptations in horror, comedy, and science fiction. It also lends itself to many subgenres that blend with other genres. The "old dark house" subgenre of mystery (mystery stories that, exactly as the label implies, take place at night in an old house) may often be equally a horror film.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Barbara Stanwyck (left) plays the femme fatale in Billy Wilder's classic film noir, *Double Indemnity*.

Other mysteries may be more specifically news reporter stories, crime thrillers, or detective stories. Perhaps the most notable of these is **film noir**, in which cynical, hard-boiled detectives, often tempted or betrayed by a femme fatale (a desirable but scheming "fatal woman"), solve crimes in a manner reminiscent of pulp detective novels. While gangs and organized crime may be involved, unlike the gangster film the film noir tends to center on individuals caught up in a dangerous world beyond their control, instead of the group or individuals who are trying to control that world. Some noir films, rather than focusing on detectives investigating a mystery, depict people trying to plan or commit crimes, or having general underworld dealings and double-dealings. Film noir literally means "black film" in French, and it applies to stories treating dark themes, shady characters, and, more often than not, physically dark settings with much of the action occurring at night. Low-key, high-contrast lighting and strong use of diagonal, expressionistic patterns and odd camera angles are common in noir films.

Many critics have interpreted noir genre as reflecting a new sense of alienation, unease, and cynical world outlook that seemed to be a post–World War II view of the world. The frequent presence of strong and usually dangerous femme fatale characters was seen by some to reflect the threat to a safer pre–World War II masculine order, for women had assumed much power and control during the war years as men left to fight overseas, forcing men to become more aggressive merely to survive and to live according to their personal code of rules.

Indeed, the noir protagonist can probably best be described as gritty, simply pressing forward in the face of all manner of obstacles. He (the detective is almost always male in these films) does not solve the crime for fame or wealth but simply because it is the right thing to do. Yet a noir protagonist himself is morally flawed and knows it, more of an anti-hero than the typical admirable

heroic figure who would defeat the villains in a more traditional Hollywood mystery. A familiar narrative technique in a film noir is first-person point of view, often in the form of voice-over narration by the main character. This idea was taken to the extreme in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947), in which virtually the entire film is shot through the eyes of detective Philip Marlowe.

Movies now generally termed film noir are a certain style of mystery that critics recognized as starting to show up during and especially right after World War II; they were popular through the mid-1950s and faded out around the time of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). Movies such as Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* in 1974 and Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* in 1981 helped revive the genre so that by the 1990s what is now often called neo-noir has again become a popular if sometimes more self-conscious genre, as seen, for instance, in *Sin City* in 2005.

Part of the satisfaction of a successful mystery movie, much as with a mystery novel, is in solving the crime along with the on-screen detective. It makes the mystery a more participatory genre than others, at least when done well. Just as the protagonist attempts to stay a step ahead of the femme fatale or the crooked cop, so do we, and some directors make this easier for us than others. The following films offer an instructive look at the genre, how it can blend with other genres, and how it is open to different interpretations.

The Thin Man (1934)

While this film offers a genuine mystery, it's also a first-rate example of another genre, the 1930s screwball comedy, which incorporated a strong female character and playful battles between the sexes. The banter between husband-and-wife amateur detectives Nick and Nora Charles (played by William Powell and Myrna Loy) would inspire similar back-and-forth rapid-fire conversations for generations.

The Thin Man is an important example of a genre film in another way as well: It inspired five **sequels**. Genre films, when financially successful, often spawn more films following the same characters, known as sequels, though few are as successful as the original (*The Godfather: Part II* being a notable exception, critically and commercially).

North by Northwest (1959)

Though he would later venture into horror with such films as *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963), for much of his career Alfred Hitchcock was an acknowledged master of the film mystery, though he himself denied it. "The mystery form has no particular appeal to me because it is merely a fact of mystifying an audience, which I don't think is enough," Hitchcock says (as cited in Stevens, 2006, p. 258). And indeed, if that were all his films did, it would not be enough. But through the performances, the direction, and some iconic set pieces, or stand-alone scenes, *North by Northwest* transcends the genre. It doesn't just mystify the audience; it engages them. It contains the classic elements of a mystery—mistaken identity, an innocent man wrongly accused, a man trying to learn why others are out to kill him, secret agents, and elaborate charades—but it also rises above its genre trappings.

Cary Grant stars as Roger Thornhill, an advertising executive who is mistaken for another man and then kidnapped. Things fall apart from there, with thugs trying to kill Thornhill, Thornhill being accused of murder (at the United Nations, no less), a series of double-crosses going down, and more. In an iconic scene, Thornhill, in the middle of nowhere, sees a mysterious plane in the distance, as a man says, "Dusting crops where there ain't no crops." The plane then begins chasing and shooting at Thornhill, instantly turning the mystery into a life-and-death suspense thriller.

▲ In *Pulp Fiction*, the briefcase functions as a MacGuffin. It's the object everyone is after.

Another famous scene involves a struggle atop Mount Rushmore, Hitchcock slyly poking fun at the iconic American monument as his characters try to kill each other on its face. The film also contains, in the form of the microfilm that everyone is after, a **MacGuffin**—any object, Hitchcock has explained, that is vitally important to the characters in the film but that may be all but meaningless to the viewing audience. In many ways, this is the classic mystery film, incorporating the many elements of the mystery film genre, yet using them in such a way that it becomes something more. Typical of Hitchcock, it crosses genres and may be termed both a romantic comedy and a suspense spy thriller in addition to a mystery.

Chinatown (1974)

Here the genre film is used to tell a larger story, one beyond what is simply there on the screen. It contains the usual elements of a film mystery—a missing person, disguised identity, and murder—and adds more: incest and a huge conspiracy. Jack Nicholson plays J. J. Gittes, a private investigator investigating a case of adultery (or so he thinks). The case leads to much, much more, eventually enmeshing Gittes in a theft of water rights from citrus farmers that would eventually help establish Los Angeles as a major American city. He will also uncover secrets about the woman who hired him and her father, the man behind the water grab. In the classic noir mystery sense, Gittes is a man in way over his head. Yet like many private investigators in film mysteries, he is also a fighter, someone who plods along, collecting evidence, sometimes at great risk to himself, until he solves the case.

Screenwriter Robert Towne (who won an Oscar for the film) provides layer after layer of intrigue, forcing Gittes—and the audience—to burrow deeper into the corruption and immorality that drive the film. *Chinatown* serves as a metaphor for the corruption of cities, of the costs of progress, and not just for Los Angeles. Broken down into its individual parts, *Chinatown* can be viewed as a noir-inspired mystery of the classic form. But seen as a whole, it works to become much more. At the end of the movie, a character utters the famous line "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." It is. But we're supposed to see that it's everywhere else, as well. Again, it is social commentary disguised as a genre film.

4.3 Horror, Fantasy, and Science Fiction

Films in the horror, fantasy, and science fiction categories are among the most likely to cross genres, both with one another and with other genres. These films may focus on the unreal, but they also often convey certain social or psychological truths about humanity and society.

Horror

Film critic Tim Dirks describes **horror films** as

> unsettling films designed to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time in a cathartic experience. Horror films effectively center on the dark side of life, the forbidden, and strange and alarming events. They deal with our most primal nature and its fears: our nightmares, our vulnerability, our alienation, our revulsions, our terror of the unknown, our fear of death and dismemberment, loss of identity, or fear of sexuality. (2010a)

Alfred Hitchcock explains it more succinctly: "Horror is really an extreme of fear. It's as far as you can go" (as cited in Stevens, 2006, p. 276). Horror films would eventually go much farther than anything Hitchcock had in mind, inspired in no small part by Hitchcock's own *Psycho* (1960). The story of the horror film evolves from melodramatic to suggestive to explicit, more so than any other genre. It is a development that in some ways seems inevitable. Filmmakers push for realism and audiences demand it. In a romantic comedy, that might simply mean more realistic dialogue. In a western, it might mean shooting on location instead of a soundstage. But in a horror film, it often means the depiction of more graphic violence on screen, to the extent that a subgenre has been created: *torture porn*, in which stomach-wrenching violence and mayhem are shown simply for their own sake, to titillate the audience and not necessarily to advance the story.

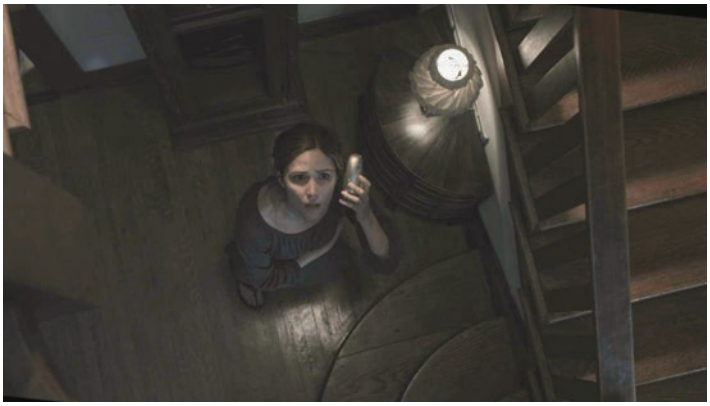
This excessive depiction of graphic violence is by no means true of every horror film, some of which, like the 2007 Spanish-language film *El Orfanato*, or *The Orphanage*, rely on the suggestion of horror more than the explicit depiction of it, yet they manage to be scary in their own right. There is no question, however, that the evolution of horror films has moved toward more explicit bloodshed. This proves true even in remakes of horror films, such as the 2009 remake of *The Last House on the Left*. The 1972 original is considered by some as a reaction by writer-director Wes Craven to the increasing number of soldiers killed in Vietnam:

©New Line Cinema/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Friday the 13th* has risen from the dead in innumerable sequels and spin-offs.

> It's a very, very old story…and not only is it about delicious irony, it turns out to be about people who are straight and proper and descend into their own sort of darkness. I just found that very interesting at the time of Vietnam. (Anderson, 2009)

Whether this was in fact Craven's intention, whatever social commentary existed in the original is absent completely in the remake, with its scenes of one brutal murder after another. However, the irony in the increase in gratuitous violence in modern horror movies is that, in many ways, the horror films that show less and suggest more are actually more frightening, and certainly more satisfying. Understated classics like the 1940s films produced by Val Lewton (notably *The Seventh Victim* and *The Curse of the Cat People*), and Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961) or Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963) can still creep out and thrill viewers today. Productions such as *Insidious* (2010), *The Woman in Black* (2012), and *The Conjuring* (2013) are recent examples of this approach.



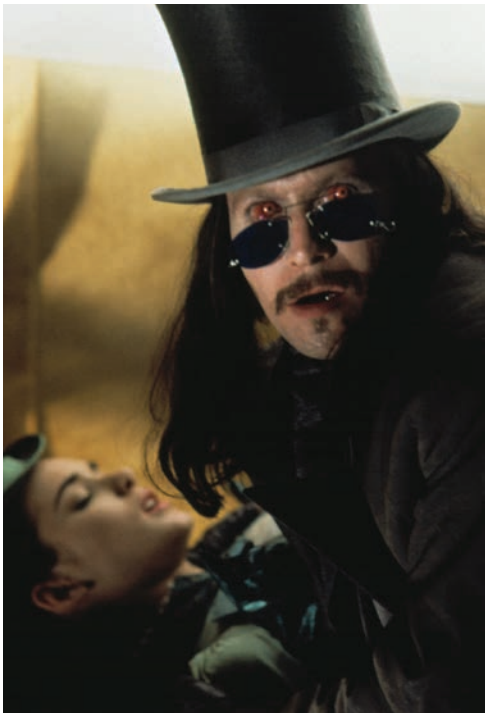
©FilmDistrict/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ In a film like *Insidious*, the horror is created psychologically rather than by gore.

The following three films trace the path of horror films and the genre's many variations. The numerous subgenres of horror, including the ghost story, the vampire film, the monster movie, the slasher-thriller, and the zombie picture, can each be analyzed for its effectiveness at telling a gripping story and producing fear, yet also for deeper levels of significance—psychological or social. Horror films may be spooky entertainment designed to purge audience emotions, but below the surface they are particularly revealing about the inner concerns and attitudes of the people they were made for.

Dracula (1931)

Dracula was by no means the first horror film—the 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* had already proven hugely influential, not just in horror but in all of film. It wasn't even the first vampire movie. The 1922 film *Nosferatu* is so obviously influenced by Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* that Stoker's widow won a copyright-infringement suit against the studio that produced it. But *Dracula* was the first horror blockbuster. Based both on Stoker's novel and a stage version, the film became both financially successful and hugely influential, paving the way for *Frankenstein* later that year and—in what would become a hallmark of the horror genre—countless sequels, remakes, and variations. The film tells the story of Count Dracula, a vampire played in an iconic performance by the Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi (who had originated the role on stage). To a modern audience, the film may at times appear slow, almost plodding. Whatever scares it provides today are more of the atmospheric variety.



Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, directed by Francis Coppola, is one of more than two dozen remakes of this ever-popular vampire tale.

Contemporary audiences, however, were terrified—and thrilled by its supernatural evil overcome by the powers of good. Most films before *Dracula* that included horrifying elements often balanced them with scenes of broad comedy relief so as not to alienate moviegoers. *Dracula* proved that audiences were willing to watch a full-length horror film; in effect, it kick-started a genre that hasn't waned in popularity since.

Rosemary's Baby (1968)

Director Roman Polanski's film is scary both as a horror film and as psychological terror. Although there are a few frightening scenes, the real horror here is the realization of Rosemary (Mia Farrow) that her safe, happy life is an illusion, that it is in fact a sham, that she is a tool in a much larger, sinister plan. This character's realization could in fact serve as a metaphor for the disillusionment many felt with government, particularly during the 1960s, with the Vietnam War and authority at the time.

Rosemary dreams that she is raped by a demon and later finds out that she is pregnant. Friends learn that neighbors Minnie and Roman are Satanists, and Rosemary grows alarmed. While the rape scene is shown, it is filmed in dreamlike fashion (Rosemary has been drugged by Minnie beforehand), and the audience sees the baby's eyes. However, beyond that, the horror in *Rosemary's Baby* is much more psychological—the realization that something you fear is actually true. Later films involving Satan and demonic possession, including 1973's *The Exorcist*, would be much more explicit. Yet *Rosemary's Baby* remains uncomfortable in part because its lack of special effects prevent a dated look, and because the acting, writing, and direction combine to make a supernatural story play as realistically as possible, making it all the more terrifying.

Saw (2004)

Saw is an influential film that helped change the shape of the genre, pushing its boundaries toward something much less subtle and much more explicit. And while the subgenre of gory horror films goes back at least to the late 1960s, this film and its sequels have proved wildly popular with a much wider audience base.

The film opens with two men waking up to learn that they have been kidnapped and chained to the pipes in a bathroom. Between them is a dead body with a gun and a tape recorder. They also have bags with hacksaws. They learn that they are part of a game, the object of which is to escape alive, which may involve murder, self-mutilation, and dismemberment. The story leads to other twists and turns, and plenty of realistically displayed violence. Ostensibly a lesson in teaching ungrateful people to appreciate life, *Saw* might be more accurately termed an endurance exercise.

The focus of the filmmakers in a movie like *Saw* becomes less about telling a story or creating a satisfying experience for the audience (something *The Exorcist*, even with its extreme gore and violence, accomplishes) and more about topping what came before it, a game of one-upmanship that films such as the *Hostel* series have tried to emulate. And yet, for their lack of storytelling finesse and subtlety, the films are enormously popular. Is this an example of simply giving the audience what it wants? Or is it a matter of filmmakers not trusting the audience to do the work it is asked to do in films such as *Rosemary's Baby*, where the horror is not a visceral, physical reaction but a deeper one? This is a question that the audience alone can answer, but it is worth noting that audiences often prove themselves capable of much more than what filmmakers give them credit for, particularly in the horror genre.

The success of films like *Saw* may nevertheless indicate something about the mindset of contemporary society—a theme worth exploring critically in a more detailed psychological and sociological analysis. Other horror films are frequently seen by critics as reflecting fears, subconscious or conscious, in a metaphoric, often supernatural framework that somehow makes them more palatable and actually less horrifying than a literal enactment. Vampires are stalkers, sexual predators, who literally suck the life from their victims. Werewolves, like drug addicts or alcoholics, may normally be very nice people, but they are unable to control or even remember the violent deeds they commit whenever they're under the power of their curse. Psychological thrillers might represent widespread mistrust of authority figures or increasingly dysfunctional families. Gigantic monsters are often inadvertent creations of toxic industrial waste or atomic experiments, dramatizing in fantasy form a worst-case scenario inspired by the latest news stories. Still other horror and science-fiction movies depict computers and smart machines that gain enough intelligence of their own to become threats to the human race. And how many space invaders are really metaphors for various foreign powers and America's military preparedness? As with any genre films, careful analysis of horror films in the context of the time in which they were created can provide the student or film critic much to contemplate, and numerous essay topics.

Fantasy

Fantasy is a fluid genre that allows crossover with horror, science fiction, comedy, holiday films, and more. The **fantasy film** is, on its face, pure escapism, where characters may live in imaginary settings or experience situations that break the limitations of the real world. This makes them particularly popular with younger audiences, and many, like the *Harry Potter* and *Chronicles of Narnia* films, are aimed specifically at children or adolescents. But the best fantasy films also speak to larger issues, offering commentary that adults will recognize as important beyond mere entertainment. A film like the original *King Kong* (1933) or its 2005 remake can reference serious topical issues such as economic depression, satirize the excesses of the entertainment industry and moviemaking, and still deliver first-rate fantasy-adventure with a touch of romance. Movies like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy dramatize archetypal quests and show off spectacular visual effects. Certainly, when the country has struggled through turbulent times, fantasy films, among others, have provided the entertainment that, even if it did not solve problems, at least allowed audiences to forget about them for a time. Yet as often as not, deeper analysis may reveal a subtext.

▲ *Alice in Wonderland* is a perpetual favorite, first made into a film in 1903. What could be more magical than going down the rabbit hole to discover a fantastic world where Humpty Dumpty proclaims, "When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less"?

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Surely one of the most famous and best-loved films ever made, *The Wizard of Oz* tells the story of a restless teenage girl's desire to escape her dreary world and the apparent fulfillment of that wish when a storm transports her to a mystical and colorful fantasy land. The film is notable in many respects. It contains well-loved songs, uses numerous special effects, and, most dramatically, shifts from black and white to color when the protagonist Dorothy wakes up in Oz and reverts to black and white when she returns home. Beyond its technical skill, the film also offers viewers an engaging, entertaining life lesson to learn along with Dorothy during her often-harrowing adventures. It reinforces their own sense of safety and understanding that they may actually already have what they think they want—that, indeed, as Dorothy says, with friends and family there really is "no place like home." *The Wizard of Oz* is a film ripe for deeper analysis on a variety of levels, as an archetypal quest, a coming-of-age story, a sociopolitical allegory, and more.

It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* is very much a Christmas film, but it is also more complex, as even the most cursory viewing proves. On Christmas Eve, George Bailey, a well-loved man in the community of Bedford Falls, is on the verge of suicide. His finances have crumbled, he has taken out his troubles on his family, he has drunkenly driven his car into a tree, and he is about to jump off a bridge into the icy river below, when someone beats him to it. This turns out to be Clarence (Henry Travers), George's guardian angel. Flashbacks show how selfless George has been throughout his life, always putting others before himself, but the despondent George eventually wishes he had never been born.

In an extended fantasy sequence, Clarence shows George what life would be like without him. Bedford Falls is now Pottersville, named after the dictatorial banker who has ruined George's life. His friends and loved ones are bitter, unhappy criminals or, worse, dead, all because he wasn't there to affect and influence their lives. George eventually begs for his old life back and gets it. Friends and family arrive at his home on Christmas Eve, all having pooled their resources to give him the money he needs. Bells on the Christmas tree ring, a sign that Clarence has earned his wings for redeeming George.

Capra uses the fantasy sequence to brilliant effect, holding nothing back, making Pottersville a truly miserable place. The film is occasionally criticized for being too sentimental, overlooking the fact that it begins with a near-suicide attempt and descends into the much darker world. Here fantasy is used not in the traditional manner—to escape a dismal world for a while—but instead to bring the audience into such a world. Once again, the film may be analyzed for its insight into universal human nature, and good and evil, as well as its vivid reflection of the contemporary society at the time it was made.

Inglourious Basterds (2009)

This film, at first glance, seems to be nothing like a fantasy film. It is a gritty war movie, in which a team of Jewish-American soldiers goes behind enemy lines and kills Nazis in brutal fashion. Meanwhile, Shoshana (Melanie Laurent), the lone survivor of one of the "Jew hunts" by Nazi Col. Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz), now runs a movie theater where Hitler and his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels will be attending a film. American plans to kill them are thwarted. Shoshana devises a plan to kill everyone inside (including herself) by burning highly flammable movie film. She even arranges to appear on screen during the movie that is playing, telling the audience that they are being killed by a Jew. So far, it plays like a traditional war film, though with Quentin Tarantino as director, it has many of his signature touches (violence leavened by quick-witted repartee).

Then the film shifts into fantasy. To the shock of the audience—the real audience, not just the one in the film—Shoshana's plan works. Hitler and Goebbels are killed, and the war is almost assuredly over. Tarantino has used fantasy in an unconventional yet powerful way—wish fulfillment to actually change the course of history. What's more, he uses his love of film to make it the weapon that would save the world from Hitler. The bravado on Tarantino's part blends the war genre with the revenge formula and "what if?" historical fantasy.

Science Fiction

Of the subgenres of fantasy films, science fiction is popular and important enough to merit individual discussion. Broadly defined as a film about the future or alternate realities, often but not always set in space, and frequently incorporating horror elements, science-fiction movies are wildly popular among fans. The best of these films offer not just an escape from our reality—something that any good film offers—but an examination of our own world filtered through a different, sometimes exotic, perspective. They typically rely heavily on metaphor to tell the larger story but should be able to be enjoyed and understood on their own terms, as well.

The 1982 film *Blade Runner*, for instance, directed by Ridley Scott, is, on the surface, the futuristic story of a police officer named Deckard, played by Harrison Ford, whose job is to hunt down "replicants." They are amazingly lifelike robots that cannot be distinguished from humans with the naked eye; elaborate equipment must be used to identify them. They are used on "off-world" colonies (on other planets) and are illegal on Earth. Officers like Decker hunt them and "retire"

them, a euphemism for destroying them. He is called in to find members of a particularly dangerous group of replicants running loose in Los Angeles.

The film includes a lot of action and adventure, and in many ways is essentially a film noir detective film set in the future, but to the careful observer clear themes emerge. Chief among these is the idea of identity, and what it means. Who is real? Who is not? Is Decker himself a replicant? Scott revisits this question throughout the course of the film, which also looks at the role technology plays in our lives. Of course, one not need recognize these themes to enjoy the movie (which divided critics when it was released but has since become recognized as a classic not just of the genre but of all film), but Scott provides them for those seeking a fuller experience. This is true of many science-fiction films, including *The War of the Worlds*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Alien*, among many, many others.

4.4 Romantic Comedy, Musicals, and Documentaries

A discussion of popular film genres would not be complete without examining romantic comedies, musicals, and documentaries. While there is perhaps less crossover between these genres, all have played an important role in the history of film.

Romantic Comedy

Perhaps the least flexible of all the genres, the **romantic comedy** is somewhat limited by the scope of what it attempts to accomplish—bringing two people together. There are many ways for this to happen, and many comedic obstacles to be placed before them, but the goal remains the same. The rest is just window dressing. At its most basic, the romantic comedy plot involves a romance that leads to comic situations, although lately the term has come to mean almost exclusively a film in which a hapless female protagonist finds love despite all manner of kooky odds against it. These frequently have initial popularity with audiences but fade rather quickly and are marketed almost exclusively toward female audiences. Often these films are best described as "cute." Modern audiences may think of the latest Sandra Bullock or Jennifer Aniston film as typical of the *romcom*, as the genre is often abbreviated, but there are other examples to sample for study. The romantic comedy has spawned subgenres, such as the sex comedy (with its own subgenre, the teen sex comedy) and the screwball comedy, popular in the 1930s and 1940s, in which madcap hijinks happen to couples falling in love.

▲ Nora Ephron's *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) is a romantic comedy that captured the battle of the sexes at the time. As in all classic romantic comedies, unlikely couples discover that in fact they are soul mates. "All's well that ends well."

However one describes the genre, it is crucial that the successful film have both parts in equal measure—romance and comedy. When that is the case, the romantic comedy can be much more

than a lark and become a more satisfying film on a deeper level. As film critic David Denby writes in *The New Yorker*:

> Romantic comedy civilizes desire, transforms lust into play and ritual—the celebration of union in marriage. The lovers are fated by temperament and physical attraction to join together, or stay together, and the audience longs for that ending with an urgency that is as much moral as sentimental. (Denby, 2007)

Rare indeed is the romantic comedy in which we don't get that ending, that resolution that we so want—namely that the man and woman live happily ever after. Whether this is realistic is beside the point. (Some suggest it's not even healthy. A 2009 study found that people who watched romantic comedies tended to have unrealistic expectations and ideas about romantic relationships [Alleyne, 2008].) The point is to get the couple together and see them ride off into the sunset. There are exceptions. Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* is a popular romantic comedy in which the protagonist doesn't ultimately get the girl, thanks in large part to a mountain of neuroses. However, typically in romantic comedies audiences expect a happy ending, no matter how it is achieved.

Young Romance (1915)

Like most genres, romantic comedy dates back to the beginnings of cinema, and its roots extend back to ancient theater. The early feature *Young Romance* (1915) has a basic plot that is just as appropriate to life a century later. A young working-class man and woman unknowingly work in different departments of the same store, splurging their savings on an expensive vacation at the same resort. Of course they meet and fall in love, each thinking the other is rich. The mistaken identity formula takes a twist when the girl is kidnapped for ransom and the boy saves her, but both are uncomfortable pursuing their relationship after their holiday is over because of their perceived differences in social status. Back at work the next week, they eventually discover they are workmates and all ends happily. In addition to being a comedy of romance and embarrassment, the film can be viewed as a documentary record of 1915 attitudes about social classes and a timeless observation of human nature.

City Lights (1931)

Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), often regarded by critics and audiences as one of the greatest films of all time, has many elements of the romantic comedy. Again, it is one based on a case of mistaken identity. Chaplin's famous Little Tramp character befriends a young blind woman (Virginia Cherrill) selling flowers in the street. After a variety of comic misadventures, including preventing a drunken millionaire from committing suicide, the Tramp is able to get money from this newfound friend and pays for an operation to restore the woman's sight. She of course does not recognize the homeless man as her benefactor, but when she hands him a flower and coin, their hands touch and she recognizes him. The final scene, unlike that of many comedies, is not overplayed for laughs. Instead, as the film ends the audience is unsure whether the woman feels pity for the rumpled tramp or loves him. This shows what the romantic comedy form is capable of, if done with restraint. And emblematic of its time, the beginning of the Depression, it is an explicit presentation of the economic gap between rich and poor.

Bringing Up Baby (1938) and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944)

These two films are classic examples of the screwball comedy, a genre that had some precedent in the liberated women of the 1920s but blossomed during the 1930s and 1940s after the coming of sound. Men and women became equal adversaries, battling out their conflicting romantic

feelings verbally and even physically. Situations were often exaggerated to an extreme that could only result in such comic byplay, cleverly written to conform to the dictates of the Production Code yet conveying much deeper sexual implications.

In Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby*, Cary Grant, a paleontologist engaged to a humorless woman, meets a free-spirited woman of opposite personality (Katharine Hepburn), which complicates things. The story from there involves a dog, a dinosaur bone, a million-dollar donation, arrest, mistaken identity, a leopard, and more. In Preston Sturges's *Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, things get even more outrageous when a vivacious small-town girl (Betty Hutton) discovers she's pregnant but can't remember who the father is, as she'd spent the night partying with soldiers getting ready to ship overseas. Her meek boyfriend (Eddie Bracken) agrees to marry her, but things get out of hand before it's over. These films use classic screwball setups, piling one unlikely situation atop another with no real attempt to make one situation any more realistic than the last, driven by the wit and banter between the leads.

Knocked Up (2007) and *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008)

By the 21st century, romantic comedies had taken many turns. Classic screwball comedies would fade after World War II, but in the latter part of the 20th century wacky lighter fare would again prove popular. *Annie Hall* would inspire films such as *When Harry Met Sally*, in its own way an update of the classic opposites-attract, screwball formula. With changing audience tastes, sex that was merely hinted at in years past became a topic to be dealt with more explicitly. *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008) are in many ways the culmination of that evolution. They also demonstrate another trend of more recent romantic-comedy storytelling: The schlubby guy gets the pretty girl. Whether this is wish fulfillment on the part of the writers or the audience, it has proved popular—yet another example of films capitalizing on common stereotypes while reflecting something their creators sense is a common social attitude or desire.

▲ *Clerks* is the epitome of the "slacker film"—a portrait of Gen X.

In Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up*, Seth Rogen plays a pot-smoking, aimless man who spends his days working on a website that indexes nude scenes in movies. He meets a high-strung, ambitious television producer (Katherine Heigl) at a nightclub, and after getting drunk, they have sex. She learns she is pregnant, and they decide to try to establish a relationship together. Due to their different lifestyles and outlooks, they split up, but they eventually reunite in time for the birth of their daughter. Kevin Smith's *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* also stars Seth Rogen, this time as an aimless man who decides an ideal way to make money would be to make a pornographic movie with the help of his best friend (Elizabeth Banks). Although they have never been a romantic couple, each becomes jealous of the other during the process, and they wind up together by the end.

Apatow became popular directing and producing a number of like-minded comedies, including *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin*, *Superbad*, and *Pineapple Express*, and Smith rose to fame with *Clerks*, *Chasing Amy*, and *Dogma*, among others. All their films share certain similarities—they are considered raunchy, profane, and hilarious. But they also contain an underlying sweetness that makes them more palatable to a mainstream audience. While audiences of the 1940s would surely be aghast

by their discussion of sex and profanity, films like these are well suited for today's movie audiences; the edgy tone makes them seem more realistic to younger people, at whom the films are aimed. In this regard, they are as much a depiction of their era as *Young Romance*, *City Lights*, *Bringing Up Baby*, or *Miracle of Morgan's Creek* were.

Musicals

Ever since *The Jazz Singer* (1927), in which Al Jolson performs six songs, vocal music has played an important part in film—so much so that it spawned its own genre: the **musical**. From *The Jazz Singer* to *Mamma Mia!*, the musical has been a well-loved type of film. Sometimes musicals touch on darker material: *The Jazz Singer* was a backstage ethnic drama about the younger generation abandoning its traditional religious and cultural values in a materialist and entertainment-driven society, *The Sound of Music* includes the rise of the Nazi party among its delightful songs. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* tells the story of a serial killer, and *Les Miserables* is a relentless epic story of crime and punishment encompassing the French Revolution. Typically, however, musicals depict lighter fare, and indeed, in each case mentioned they make what might have been more difficult material easier for the audience to relate to.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Little Shop of Horrors* is among those musicals that address darker subjects—in this case a plant that thrives on human blood.

Numerous subgenres exist within the musical genre, from musical comedy to musical drama to animated musicals to music documentaries and concert films like *Woodstock* and *It Might Get Loud*. Famous musicals include *Top Hat*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *The Sound of Music*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Easter Parade*, *West Side Story*, *The Music Man*, and *Mary Poppins*. All are films beloved by many. Some produced classic songs of their own, and others were screen adaptations of Broadway stage musicals. Perhaps because of their often stronger focus on entertainment rather than dramatizations of social issues, musicals sometimes tend not to be taken as seriously as dramas or even comedies. For example, only nine musicals have won the Academy Award for Best Picture; until *Chicago* won in 2002, the last musical to do so was *Oliver!* in 1968. Like westerns, horror, and other genres, musicals have come and gone in terms of popularity. With a few exceptions, until the success of *Chicago*, the genre was largely dormant after the 1960s, except in the form of animated cartoon musicals. In India, on the other hand, the "Bollywood" musical remains a consistent audience favorite.

What makes the musical a genre in itself is that the songs do not just accompany the action shown on screen as they do in most other genres but are actually a part of it. Instead of strictly dialogue, the narrative may from time to time be advanced by characters breaking out into song. In the case of *Les Miserables* (2012), virtually the entire story is sung, as in an opera. Early musicals, such as *42nd Street* (1933) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), proved immensely popular with audiences, with lavish production numbers providing escapist entertainment for a nation struggling through the Great Depression. Yet both of those backstage stories are heavily rooted in the contemporary economic difficulties of their era. Their snappy comedy and elaborate musical

numbers are mere diversions from their characters' own struggles to make ends meet in a tough world. Even though both films, as expected, let audiences see their tangled romantic subplots resolve happily by the end after some spectacular musical numbers, they remained just as much a reminder of the world outside the movie house as they were an escape from that world. Despite their association with simple escapism and entertainment, musicals, like any genre films, lend themselves to analysis that can provide much insight into the psyche of their times and the personalities of their creators.

The Sound of Music (1965)

The film, directed by Robert Wise, is based on the stage play, with music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. The story of the von Trapp family, which in the movie escapes Austria and the Nazis during World War II, was considered by most critics to be too sweet, too shallow. Yet it won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. It follows Maria (Julie Andrews), a young nun who is sent to work as a governess for a widowed navy captain, Georg von Trapp (Christopher Plummer), to care for his seven children. A free spirit, she at first rankles the strict von Trapp, but eventually they fall in love and marry, to the delight of the children. However, when the Nazis annex Austria, the family must flee, and does so after performing at the Salzburg Music Festival.

It is true that the story is a somewhat glossed-over version of the complexities of the time period. However, the film is an excellent example of what makes a successful musical, as its songs make up for its simplistic, rather predictable story. "Edelweiss," "Do-Re-Mi," "Sixteen Going on Seventeen," and "My Favorite Things" are just some of the songs from the film that have become established in popular culture. And, for the most part, they fit in the film, doing the job that songs in musicals must: entertain but also help to advance the plot. ("So Long, Farewell" even helps them escape.) The film made Andrews a star and still enjoys great popularity. It may not enjoy wide critical acclaim, but it is an example of how the varied elements of musicals can come together to elevate a movie far above what it might have been had it not had such strong songs to fall back on.

Across the Universe (2007)

Whereas most musical films are stories (very often adapted from stage plays) with songs written especially for them, and some are stories written merely to showcase various existing songs to be performed by the characters (for example, *Singin' in the Rain* or the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*), this film takes an unusual approach. Its story of social turmoil, political protest, and personal heartbreak during the Vietnam War era was carefully designed around a selection of songs written by the Beatles, some actually sung by characters in the film and others merely inspiring various characters and plot situations. The result is genuinely operatic historical drama, but utilizing the actual songs from the era, it depicts the time in a way that makes it seem as if the songs were written for the plot instead of the other way around.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Before *Across the Universe*, there was the Beatles-propelled *Yellow Submarine*, an animated musical.

The Beatles' songs and the plot are entwined throughout, as evidenced by the names of the lead characters—Jude (Jim Sturgess) and Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood), as in "Hey

Jude" and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." When a merchant sailor leaves his girlfriend, we get "All My Loving." When an Uncle Sam recruiting poster becomes animated, we get "I Want You (She's So Heavy)." Sexy Sadie sings "Helter Skelter." There's also Rita ("Lovely Rita"), Max ("Maxwell's Silver Hammer"), Jo Jo (from "Get Back") and even a Mr. Kite ("Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite"). Without the songs, there is no plot, and vice versa.

The film received mixed reviews, but its ambition is never in question. Any time a genre's conventions can be subverted or overturned, it bears watching. *Across the Universe* is especially notable because, for all of the creativity they require, musicals can be especially rigid in form. *Across the Universe* is as untraditional as *The Sound of Music* is traditional; together they give some idea of the breadth possible in the musical genre.

Documentaries

A **documentary** is a non-fiction film that typically studies an event, person, trend, or other subject in depth. While this may sound by definition dry and boring, the best documentaries are anything but. Skilled filmmakers such as Erroll Morris use the same tools that directors employ in fictional films: writing (mostly narration in this case), editing, cinematography, and structure. Everyone has heard the old saying that truth is stranger than fiction. In the case of a good documentary, this is proved true.

Some documentaries are meant to entertain, or to shine a light on a person or subject that has gone unnoticed. Other documentaries adopt a point of view in an effort to force action, whether it be to free the wrongly convicted or shine a light on political corruption or human-rights violations. In the hands of a good documentarian, anything can be made interesting, as the following examples illustrate.

The Thin Blue Line (1988)

On November 29, 1976, police officer Robert W. Wood was killed during a traffic stop. The case went unsolved until police got a tip from a 16-year-old boy from Vidor, Texas, which led to the arrest of a 28-year-old man named Randall Dale Adams. In this documentary, Erroll Morris used techniques that would prove influential in arguing that the case against Adams, who was convicted of the murder, was flawed. These techniques include staging reenactments of important events leading to the murder and differing versions of the murder itself. These scenes can be jarring at first, but once the viewer becomes accustomed to them, they are effective in illustrating the story beyond just the interviews that Morris conducted.

Morris explained his use of reenactment in a *New York Times* piece he wrote:

> Critics don't like re-enactments in documentary films—perhaps because they think that documentary images should come from the present, that the director should be hands-off. But a story *in the past* has to be re-enacted. Here's my method. I reconstruct the past through interviews (retrospective accounts), documents and other scraps of evidence. I tell a story about how the police and the newspapers got it wrong. I try to explain (1) what I believe is the *real* story and (2) why they got it wrong. I take the pieces of the false narrative, rearrange them, emphasize new details, and construct a new narrative. (Morris, 2008)

Morris also used an innovative technique for the interviews: having the subject look directly into the camera while he or she spoke. The effect is one of greater immediacy; the audience is made to feel as if the interview subject is talking to them. At times unsettling but ultimately powerful, this technique would lead Morris to invent a special camera to facilitate these kinds of interviews. The film and the publicity around it helped lead to Adams's conviction being overturned.

American Movie (1999)

Shooting over a period of several years, director Chris Smith set out to chronicle the efforts of Mark Borchardt, a passionate but impoverished independent filmmaker from Wisconsin, to make his first feature-length film, and ultimately his decision instead to complete the short horror film he had abandoned years before. What emerged from many hundreds of hours of footage was not merely how to make a low-budget movie, but a portrait of one man's personal obsession against overwhelming odds, including his own problems with alcohol, gambling, ne'er-do-well friends, and a severely dysfunctional family. What also became obvious was the intense love and support that came through from his family and friends, despite their frequent skepticism, disagreements, and opposition. Mark and most of the people surrounding him have such quirky, off-the-wall personalities and life experiences (especially his burnt-out former drug addict best friend) that many people seeing *American Movie* unprepared believe it must be a scripted "mockumentary," but these are real people in real situations. This mistake is encouraged somewhat by the film's narrative approach to organization. Although like many documentaries it uses interviews with its subjects and clips from Mark's previous short movies, it focuses on cause-effect relationships, personalities, and human confrontations, even building suspense as to whether or not he will finish this latest project, rather than merely documenting step by step how a movie is made. By the time it was completed, *American Movie* had become a documentary in which the techniques and tribulations of making a film with next to no money are an interesting side story, while the real story is the struggle of the human spirit to accomplish something, and how close a bond the members of even a dysfunctional family can have.

Jiro Dreams of Sushi (2012)

Director David Gelb's film would appear on the surface to be simple: He chronicles the life and work (which are really the same thing) of Jiro Ono, who owns a small restaurant in a Tokyo subway station that is widely reputed to have the best sushi in the world. As one would expect in such a film, we learn much about Jiro's technique and skill (though he keeps some secrets to himself). The film is photographed in such a way to make the food look beautiful and delicious (which, by accounts from the people who eat it, including food critics, it is). Jiro is portrayed as a kind of food magician, a true master of his craft. If this were as far as Gelb took the film, it would still be an entertaining look at a man who is great at what he does.

But Gelb goes deeper, and his film ultimately becomes a chronicle of family and obsession. Jiro's sons are drawn into the family business, perhaps not completely willingly. While they are not bitter, Gelb captures a poignancy when they talk about what they might have done had they not been the sons of the great Jiro. We also learn, simply by observation, that sushi is Jiro's life. He detests holidays and days off. He dreams of creating the perfect sushi (thus the title). By patiently letting the story unfold, Gelb allows the film to become more complex. In this regard, it could be about anything, about any type of obsession: cars, chess, stamps, whatever. Gelb makes the story more universal, in other words. One need not be a fan of sushi to find value in the film.

These are but a few examples of the nearly endless possibilities that documentaries offer filmmakers. The basic tenet of these non-fiction films remains the same as it does for any other movie: Tell a good story. The rest will follow. There are indeed cases where a documentary filmmaker is more interested in telling an entertaining story than in presenting verifiable facts. Some of these are heavily biased propaganda films passing themselves off as objective truth (from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* to the films of Michael Moore), whereas others are "mockumentary" satires that merely use documentary techniques to tell a scripted or improvised fictional story (such as *This Is Spinal Tap*, *The Blair Witch Project*, or *TrollHunter*).

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

A genre is a type or category of film (or other work of art) that can be easily identified by specific elements of its plot, setting, mise en scène, character types, or style. Though sometimes derided as overly formulaic or downright lazy, genre films and film genres actually serve as a useful tool for the study of movies. While it is a mistake to try to categorize every film, most fit at least somewhat comfortably into one genre or another, and sometimes they fit more than one. Theorists and critics argue over classifications and sometimes even the existence of genres, but most audiences can agree that there are at least loosely defined ones that serve several functions. For one, they offer audiences a shortcut, a hint of what kind of film they will see and, at least in a general way, what to expect. They also offer studios an easy way to market a film, taking advantage of the audience's assumed knowledge of individual genres.

Genres are not stagnant categories. The study of their evolution is nothing short of the study of film and the filmgoing public itself. When we break down types of film into categories, we can then observe how they have changed over the years to reflect the tastes of the audience while retaining the elements that put them into that genre in the first place. Moreover, many directors use genres to explore their pet themes, disguising social commentary within familiar formulas they know will attract more viewers than outright "message" films (just look at sci-fi hits such as *Avatar* and *District 9* for recent examples or classic westerns such as *The Oxbow Incident*, *High Noon*, and *The Searchers*). Because genre films are such an intimate blend of popular entertainment subjects with pervasive sociopolitical subtext and documentary-like records of widely held attitudes, genre criticism can be a rich field for film study.

Questions to Ask Yourself About Genre When Viewing a Film

- Which of the genres discussed does the film fit most closely with? (western, gangster, mysteries, film noir, horror, romantic comedy, fantasy, musical)
- Does the film fall into the category of genre film? Why or why not?
- How can the typical elements of a relevant genre help you understand the film better?
- How does the film deviate from the genre it is most closely related to?

You Try It

1. Think of one film you have seen that could be considered a genre film. How well does the film fit into the description of the genre in this chapter? Does it rise above the genre, or is it limited to it? Go to www.movieclips.com and search "The Shining" to view the following clip from the film, in which Danny sees the ghosts of young girls:

   "Come Play With Us"

2. Think of one film you have seen that you believe crosses genres. What are the genres the film fits in, and how well does the film fit into each category? For example, Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* blends the classic Frankenstein story with humor. Go to www.movieclips.com and search "Young Frankenstein" to view the trailer for the film:

   "Trailer #1"

3. What do you see as the advantages of categorizing films into genres or subgenres? What are the disadvantages?
4. With an eye toward marketing, which is what trailers are used for, search for and view the trailers for the following films on iTunes (https://www.apple.com/itunes/):

   Season of the Witch

   Let Me In

   Due Date

   See whether you can tell to which genre each film belongs. Explain why you chose your answer, and whether the studio properly advertises the film in this way (does it reveal too much, too little?).
5. Choose a genre and list the elements that you expect from a film that fits into it.

Key Terms

documentary A non-fiction film that typically studies an event, person, trend, or other subject in depth; one of the major genres.

fantasy film A film with obviously unreal, imaginative elements; one of the major genres.

film noir A type of mystery thriller marked by dark themes, shady and unsavory characters, an often pessimistic outlook, and physically dark settings; one of the major genres; French for "black film."

gangster film Technically a subgenre of crime film, the gangster film deals with mobsters and organized criminal activity.

genre A category or type of something (in this case, film) that is recognizable by shared characteristics with others of its type.

genre films Films with easily identifiable formulas, character types, and iconography.

horror film A film intended to produce fear or anxiety in the viewer; one of the major genres.

iconography The use of images symbolically in art and film, especially picture composition, props, settings, lighting styles; an icon is literally an image.

MacGuffin Director Alfred Hitchcock's term for a plot element that is of critical importance to the main characters in a film but may be all but meaningless to the viewing audience. It simply serves as the catalyst to move the characters into action (e.g., the secret microfilm they're trying to obtain, the body they're trying to hide).

musical A film incorporating songs as a primary element; one of the major genres.

mystery film A film in which the viewer typically tries to solve some mystery, often a crime story, along with its characters; one of the major genres.

oater A slang term for a western film, because westerns typically have horses, which eat oats; usually used for low-budget, very formulaic westerns. Another slang term for westerns is horse opera.

romantic comedy A film whose primary focus is balanced between the romantic relationship of a couple and the comic circumstances surrounding it.

sequel A movie or book whose plot follows the same character(s) as another movie or book (usually a very popular one), but at a later period in time, often employing similar events, actions, and story elements that had proved successful in the previous installment.

subgenre A more narrowly defined category that also fits within a broader category.

western A film set in the American West, typically during the nation's period of expansion from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s, often dealing with good people's struggles against the lawlessness of the frontier; one of the major genres.