

FILM GENRE AND SUBGENRE SYSTEM

Adapted from *Story* by Robert McKee, pp. 80-86

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

1. **LOVE STORY.** Its subgenre, **Buddy Salvation**, substitutes friendship for romantic love: MEAN STREETS, PASSION FISH, ROMY AND MICHELLE'S HIGH SCHOOL REUNION.
2. **HORROR FILM.** This genre divides into three subgenres: the **Uncanny**, in which the source of horror is astounding but subject to "rational" explanation, such as beings from outer space, science-made monsters, or a maniac; the **Supernatural**, in which the source of horror is an "irrational" phenomenon from the spirit realm; and the **Super-Uncanny**, in which the audience is kept guessing between the other two possibilities - THE TENANT, HOUR OF THE WOLF, THE SHINING.
3. **MODERN EPIC** (the individual versus the state): SPARTACUS, MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON, VIVA ZAPATA!, 1984, THE PEOPLE VS. LARRY FLINT.
4. **WESTERN.** The evolution of this genre and its subgenres is brilliantly traced in Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society*.
5. **WAR GENRE.** Although war is often the setting for another genre, such as the **Love Story**, the WAR GENRE is specifically about combat. **Pro-war** versus **Antiwar** are its primary subgenres. Contemporary films generally oppose war; but for decades the majority covertly glorified it, even in its most grisly form.
6. **MATURATION PLOT** or the coming-of-age story: STAND BY ME, SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, RISKY BUSINESS, BIG, BAMBI, MURIEL'S WEDDING.
7. **REDEMPTION PLOT.** Here the film arcs on a moral change within the protagonist from bad to good: THE HUSTLER, LORD JIM, DRUGSTORE COWBOY, SCHINDLER'S LIST, LA PROMESSE.
8. **PUNITIVE PLOT.** In these the good guy turns bad and is punished: GREED, THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE, MEPHISTO, WALL STREET, FALLING DOWN.
9. **TESTING PLOT.** Stories of willpower versus temptation to surrender: THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA, COOL HAND LUKE, FITZCARRALDO, FORREST GUMP.
10. **EDUCATION PLOT.** This genre arcs on a deep change within the protagonist's view of life, people, or self from the negative (naive, distrustful, fatalistic, self-hating) to the positive (wise, trusting, optimistic, self-possessed): HAROLD AND MAUDE, TENDER MERCIES, WINTER LIGHT, IL POSTINO, GROSS POINTE BLANK, MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, SHALL WE DANCE.
11. **DISILLUSIONMENT PLOT.** A deep change of worldview from the positive to the negative: MRS. PARKER AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE, L'ECLISSE, LE FEU FOLLET, THE GREAT GATSBY, MACBETH.
12. **COMEDY.** Subgenres range from **Parody** to **Satire** to **Sitcom** to **Romantic Screwball** to **Farce** to **Black Comedy**, all differing by the focus of comic attack (bureaucratic folly, upper-class manners, teenage courtship, etc.) and the degree of ridicule (gentle, caustic, lethal).
13. **CRIME.** Subgenres vary chiefly by the answer to this question: From whose point of view do we regard the crime? **Murder Mystery** (master detective's POV); **Caper** (master criminal's POV); **Detective** (cop's POV); **Gangster** (crook's POV); **Thriller** or **Revenge Tale** (victim's POV); **Courtroom** (lawyer's POV); **Newspaper** (reporter's POV); **Espionage**

(spy's POV); **Prison Drama** (inmate's POV); **Film Noir** (POV of a protagonist who may be part criminal, part detective, part victim of a femme fatale).

14. **SOCIAL DRAMA.** This genre identifies problems in society - poverty, the education system, communicable diseases, the disadvantaged, antisocial rebellion, and the like - then constructs a story demonstrating cure. It has a number of sharply focused subgenres: **Domestic Drama** (problems within the family), the **Woman's Film** (dilemmas such as career versus family, lover versus children), **Political Drama** (corruption in politics), **Eco-Drama** (battles to save the environment), **Medical Drama** (struggles with physical illness), and **Psycho-Drama** (struggles with mental illness).
15. **ACTION/ADVENTURE** incorporates ideas such as destiny, hubris, or the spiritual, it becomes the subgenre **High Adventure**: THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING. If Mother Nature is the source of antagonism, it's a **Disaster/Survival Film**: ALIVE, THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE.
16. **HISTORICAL DRAMA** embraces every type of story imaginable, and polishes the past into a mirror of the present, making clear and bearable the painful problems of racism in GLORY, religious strife in MICHAEL COLLINS, or violence of all kinds, especially against women, in UNFORGIVEN.
17. **BIOGRAPHY.** This cousin to **Historical Drama** focuses on a person rather than an era. **BIOGRAPHY**, however, must never become a simple chronicle. That someone lived, died, and did interesting things in between is of scholarly interest and no more. The biographer must interpret facts as if they were fiction, find the meaning of the subject's life, and then cast him as the protagonist of his life's genre: YOUNG MR. LINCOLN defends the innocent in a **Courtroom Drama**; GHANDI becomes the hero of a **Modern Epic**; ISADORA succumbs to a **Disillusionment Plot**; NIXON suffers in a **Punitive Plot**. These caveats equally apply to the subgenre **Autobiography**.
18. **DOCU-DRAMA.** A second cousin to **Historical Drama**, **DOCU-DRAMA** centers on recent rather than past events. Once invigorated by cinema verité - BATTLE OF ALGIERS - it's become a popular TV genre, sometimes powerful, but often with little documentary value.
19. **MOCKUMENTARY.** This genre pretends to be rooted in actuality or memory, behaves like documentary or autobiography, but is utter fiction. It subverts fact-based filmmaking to satirize hypocritical institutions: the backstage world of rock 'n' roll in THIS IS SPINAL TAP; the Catholic Church in ROMA; middle-class mores in ZELIG; TV journalism in MAN BITES DOG; politics in BOB ROBERTS; crass American values in TO DIE FOR.
20. **MUSICAL.** Descended from opera, this genre presents a "reality" in which characters sing and dance their stories. It's often a **Love Story**, but it can be a **Film Noir**: the stage adaptation of SUNSET BOULEVARD; **Social Drama**: WEST SIDE STORY; **Punitive Plot**: ALL THAT JAZZ; **Biography**: EVITA. Indeed, any genre can work in musical form and all can be satirized in **Musical Comedy**.
21. **SCIENCE FICTION.** In hypothetical futures that are typically technological dystopias of tyranny and chaos, the **SCIENCE FICTION** writer often marries the man-against-state **Modern Epic** with **Action/Adventure**: the STAR WARS trilogy and TOTAL RECALL. But, like history, the future is a setting in which any genre may play. In SOLARIS, for example, Andrei Tarkovsky used sci-fi to act out the inner conflicts of a **Disillusionment Plot**.
22. **SPORTS GENRE.** Sports is a crucible for character change. This genre is a natural home for the **Maturation Plot**: NORTH DALLAS FORTY; the **Redemption Plot**: SOMEBODY UP THERE LIKES ME; the **Education Plot**: BULL DURHAM; the **Punitive Plot**: RAGING

BULL; the **Testing Plot**: CHARIOTS OF FIRE; the **Disillusionment Plot**: THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER; **Buddy Salvation**: WHITE MEN CAN'T JUMP; **Social Drama**: A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN.

23. **FANTASY**. Here the writer plays with time, space, and the physical, bending and mixing the laws of nature and the supernatural. The extra-realities of **FANTASY** attract the **Action** genres but also welcome others such as the **Love Story**: SOMEWHERE IN TIME; **Political Drama/Allegory**: ANIMAL FARM; **Social Drama**: IF...; **Maturation Plot**: ALICE IN WONDERLAND.
24. **ANIMATION**. Here the law of universal metamorphism rules: Anything can become something else. Like **Fantasy** and **Science Fiction**, **ANIMATION** leans toward the **Action** genres of cartoon **Farce**: BUGS BUNNY; or **High Adventure**: THE SWORD IN THE STONE, THE YELLOW SUBMARINE; and because the youth audience is its natural market, many **Maturation Plots**: THE LION KING, THE LITTLE MERMAID; but as the animators of Eastern Europe and Japan have shown, there are no restraints.
25. **ART FILM**. The avant-garde notion of writing outside the genres is naive. No one writes in a vacuum. After thousands of years of storytelling no story is so different that it has no similarity to anything else ever written. The **ART FILM** has become a traditional genre, divisible into two subgenres, **Minimalism** and **Antistructure**, each with its own complex of formal conventions of structure and cosmology. Like **Historical Drama**, the **ART FILM** is a supra-genre that embraces other basic genres: **Love Story**, **Political Drama**, and the like.

