

Film Genre for the Screenwriter

Jule Selbo



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Film Genre for the Screenwriter

"Want to write a screenplay that will appeal to your audience? You'd better know the genre you're aiming for—and Jule Selbo's *Film Genre for the Screenwriter* is the best guide out there to all film genres."

—Diane Lake, screenwriter of *Frida*, Emerson College

"Attention Screenwriters: whether you are writing a horror movie, rom-com, or sci-fi epic, Selbo's book will give you a roadmap of how to embrace the conventions of your genre and give them a fresh twist!"

—Pat Verducci, Writer/Director of *True Crime*, Co-producer of *Somewhere Between*, UCLA Extension Screenwriting Instructor

"In *Film Genre for the Screenwriter*, Jule Selbo insightfully reveals how disparate film genres blend into and enrich each other, bringing a gifted screenwriter's clarity and concision to her task and encapsulating the full spectrum of commercial films without becoming reductive. This book is an invaluable tool for film teachers and for working screenwriters, one that enables them to truly see the big picture."

—Guy Nicolucci, Screenwriting Instructor at NYU

"As comprehensive in scope as it is exhaustively researched, Jule Selbo's *Film Genre for the Screenwriter* succeeds in doing what few books of its kind usually can: be as fine a textbook for students as it is a practical instruction manual for working screenwriters. Explicating the ever-elusive aspects of storytelling style and craft with scholarly flair, Selbo has written a book that is every bit as entertaining as it is analytical. Covering every film genre and subgenre in great detail, she deftly synthesizes the thinking of a great many great minds, all the while adding a good deal of penetrating analysis of her own. The result? A smartly organized, easy-to-read, authoritative manual for understanding exactly what 'genre' is—and what it isn't—and why knowing the difference matters. Which is why it belongs as much in the classroom as it does on the bookshelf of the most accomplished screenwriters."

—Jim Jennewein, screenwriter (*The Flintstones*, *Richie Rich*, *Major League II*), novelist and current Chair of Screenwriting at the Burbank campus of The New York Film Academy

"Jule Selbo's book is a must-read for the working professional or even the newcomer contemplating writing their first screenplay. Her clear and concise understanding of the fundamentals of every film genre will not only help everyone tell more satisfying stories, but also allow them to *have fun* while doing it—Selbo literally gives the reader the inside scoop on how to play with the conventions of any particular genre, and even turn them on their head. With an industry that is becoming more and more obsessed and defined by genres, I don't see how anyone can pass this up."

—Keir Pearson, screenwriter of *Hotel Rwanda* and *Cesar Chavez*

"Jule Selbo's text is an unpretentious and practical guide to screenwriting that never loses its sense of history. She successfully draws from her own experience and expertise to make screenwriting relatable and exciting. I highly recommend it."

—Liz Manashil, filmmaker and national film critic for *Just Seen It*

Film Genre for the Screenwriter is a practical study of how classic film genre components can be used in the construction of a screenplay. Based on Jule Selbo's popular course, this accessible guide includes an examination of the historical origins of specific film genres, how and why these genres are received and appreciated by film-going audiences, and how the student and professional screenwriter alike can use the knowledge of film genre components in the ideation and execution of a screenplay.

Explaining the defining elements, characteristics and tropes of genres from romantic comedy to slasher horror, and using examples from classic films like *Casablanca* alongside recent blockbuster franchises like *Harry Potter*, Selbo offers a compelling and readable analysis of film genre in its written form. The book also offers case studies, talking points and exercises to make its content approachable and applicable to readers and writers across the creative field.

Jule Selbo, PhD, heads up the M.F.A. in Screenwriting Program in the Radio-TV-Film Department at California State University, Fullerton. She is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter with work in theatre, feature film, network and cable television and animated series; produced credits include projects for Disney, Columbia Pictures, Paramount and Universal.

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PREFACE

As an American screenwriter working in Hollywood for nearly twenty years I have worked in film and television, writing live action as well as animation projects. I resisted categorization of my capabilities or strengths as a writer; I wrote a romantic comedy for Columbia Pictures, drama/fantasy for Paramount, a bio-pic for Disney, action/adventure/coming-of-age scripts for George Lucas' *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, melodrama for Aaron Spelling's *Melrose Place*, sci-fi for 20th Century Fox, horror and sci-fi for George Romero's *Tales From the Darkside* and *Monsters*, comedy for Comedy Network and adaptations of children's literature for Disney, Fox, PBS and others. I jumped into writing in these genres relying almost entirely on the surface knowledge I had gained over years of reading literature and viewing films. Because I enjoy the analysis of film, even as I worked as a professional screenwriter I continued studying my craft in classes in the area of story structure—mostly because I never came across classes dedicated to the understanding or dissection of film genre for the screenwriter. To my mind, an analysis of genre was a blind spot in the teaching and writing on the craft of screenwriting. This lack of attention to the question of genre became even clearer to me when I began my academic career and it became my task to instruct students in screenwriting. Popular American screenwriting how-to books such as those by Syd Field (1987, 2005), Robert McKee (1997), Christopher Vogler (2007) and Linda Seger (1999, 2003, 2010) and others concentrate on structure (the three-act structure, the steps of the Hero's Journey and more), but do not go deeply into the constructive use of film genre for the screenwriter. In my own screenwriting manual *Rewrite* (Selbo, 2008), I dedicate forty pages to explication of classic film genre components but do not explore the use of genre during the constructive phase of a screenplay. Neill D. Hicks' book, *Writing the Thriller Film: The Terror Within* (2002) and Tamara McDonald's *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (2007) are of use for the screenwriter, but again do not investigate specifics about using film genre in the construction of a screenplay.

My focus in this book is American filmmaking, being a national cinema that has embraced film genre from its early days. As film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson note:

In the late 1940s André Bazin and his contemporaries started to point out that different sorts of films had standardized their forms and styles quite considerably. Bazin attributed the success of Hollywood cinema

to what he called 'the genius of the system.' In (our) view, his phrase referred not to the studio system as a business enterprise but rather to an artistic tradition based on solid genres and a standardized approach to cinematic narration.

(Bordwell and Thompson, 2010: 2)

I will examine what film genre is, the screenwriter's and the audience's reactions to film genre as well as their understandings of various film genres. Most importantly, I will examine how a screenwriter can use film genre in a practical manner in the construction phase of the creation of a screenplay.

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INTRODUCTION

Why is it important for a screenwriter to understand the components and use of film genre and how to use them in the construction of a screenplay?

A few reasons: screenwriters are storytellers. Stories have been told since the beginning of mankind and have not lost their importance or potency in our lives. And stories come in all shapes—inspiring, scary, emotional, factual, tall tales, fairy tales and more. Certain people are drawn to certain stories, meaning they are attracted to different types of story, be it comedy or drama or romance or horror or other types of tales. Therefore it stands to reason that film-going audiences choose the film they are going to view by its marketed type of story—the genre of the story. Executives at studios look for screenplays in particular genres because they know that audiences are drawn to stories told in identifiable genres.

Audiences are attracted to specific kinds of stories that connect with them on an emotional and visceral level—and those stories are, for the most part, identified with certain genres.

One way of viewing film genres, in simplistic terms, is as *types of stories* told in the film medium. Film genres have been examined from many perspectives—originally categorized into groups similar to prose and poetry and other broad literary groupings (romance, western, war and others) and gradually relegated to somewhat arbitrary groupings, which may include literary groups but also non-literary groups such as independent, documentary, low-budget and blockbuster to suit the various needs of film historians, film critics, film scholars or film marketers (Staiger, 1997: 188; Bordwell, 1989: 148; Stam, 2000: 14). Film genre studies, mostly focusing on the Hollywood commercial/studio film,¹ began to emerge in the early 1950s, though genre, as a marketing tool, had existed before that. Over the years there has been a narrowing of the study towards specific perspectives that has expanded the breadth of interest in the field (Altman, 1999: 7–11). However, in my opinion, there are certain limitations to these studies, mostly due to the fact that scholars, out of necessity, concentrate their dissections on a canon of existing films. These limitations raise questions regarding one of the initial sparks of the filmmaking process: what of the film narrative that does not yet exist? What are the constructive elements of film genre—from ideation to polished screenplay—that contribute to the clear communication of the storyteller's intent?

A film genre *promises* a journey that the film-viewer/script-reader wants to experience. Comedy explores the ironic or silly or satiric or comic frailties of the human condition and promises to elicit laughter. Drama seriously examines the human condition of the everyman or everywoman. The horror genre promises plots where *evil* forces or evil characters upset the world order; the audience of a horror film wants to be pulled into the idea that just under the surface of normality there is a world of danger and malevolence that could be pervasively destructive if unleashed. They want to scream, feel anxious, cringe and experience an adrenalin rush due to the fear factor. The classic western genre promises a look into the past (America between the Civil War and 1900) and into a nation and set of characters that are struggling, in most cases, to find justice and/or a sense of personal freedom in wide open spaces. Romance promises an examination into the veracity, strength and/or purpose of strong romantic love connections—there are audience expectations of empathy and sympathy, an invitation to weep for a thwarted love. The disaster genre promises to examine human reactions in the face of outrageous destruction and possible annihilation. The adventure genre promises to set up a seemingly impossible goal and characters that will take on the challenge of reaching it. Each of these film genres and other classic genres promise—to the audience—a certain experience. If the story does not deliver, the disappointed audience feels annoyance, regret and sometimes downright anger. That's a lot of pressure for "genre"—a French-based word that was originally meant to simply denote "type" or "category"—but one that has now taken on a much more important place in the lexicon of film narrative.

Like many writers, I felt I understood the components of various genres by some sort of osmosis process, supported by thousands of hours of film viewing. When I began to seriously investigate and study how an understanding of film genre could be used as a tool in the construction of a screenplay, I conducted a survey of 100 working Hollywood screenwriters. Amazing and surprising results. One hundred percent of those surveyed agreed that the audience chooses the film it wishes to view primarily because of its marketed genre elements, such as movie ads or posters featuring visuals that bring to mind horror or action or romance or another specific genre. Of those screenwriters I surveyed, 50% believed that if the film's genre(s) did not deliver on a conscious level, the audience felt dissatisfaction or disappointment. The remaining 50% believed the audience's dissatisfaction or disappointment was felt on a subconscious level. A large percentage of the screenwriters surveyed (70%) responded that they did take genre into consideration when approaching new work—however, like me, a high percentage (85%) felt the need for a deeper understanding of specific genre criteria (for instance, the eight steps of romance and the various forms of

comedy that we will get into in this book) when tackling new work in a specific genre. They, like me, relied on “sensing” the elements that made up a romantic comedy or a horror or a sci-fi film or other genre and had never actually put aside time to explore a certain genre’s classic components or examine the audience’s reasons for enjoying a particular genre. Only 20% of all screenwriters surveyed felt that in absolutely no situation would they take into consideration classic genre criteria when approaching their creative endeavor because, in doing so, they feared they would endanger their individuality and originality (Selbo, 2011).

It is interesting to note that a small percentage of surveyed screenwriters worry that too much knowledge may endanger originality. It’s important to keep in mind that creativity is often approached from two perspectives. The first is the 18th century Romantic idea of poetic inspiration—creativity is fabricating something absolutely and irrevocably new from a virginal, intuitive wellspring (Bennett, 2007). An alternate approach is the more normative definition: creativity is essentially the synthesis and adjustment of existing elements in ways that bring about a *sense of newness*. It is my belief that this latter definition is better suited to the professional (commercial) screenwriter for a variety of reasons: screenwriters cannot live in vacuums, it is their task not only to know the past and present of film literature, but also to stay up to date with trends, societal shifts and social dilemmas. I agree with screenwriter Budd Schulberg² in his observation, “I believe the (writer) should be an artist-cum-sociologist. I think he should see his characters in social perspective. I think that is one of his obligations” (Harrison, 2005: 10). Commercial film is at its best when it reflects and examines themes and mores relevant to contemporary society. Therefore the screenwriter, in order to create something of interest, must reflect what has come before and be relevant to the present. Margaret A. Boden writes: “Creativity is not a single capacity. Nor it is a special one. It is an aspect of intelligence in general, which involves many different capacities; noticing, remembering, seeing, speaking, classifying, associating, comparing, evaluating, introspecting and the like” (Boden, 2003: 4–5). By embracing the normative approach of creativity, the screenwriter may point to the obvious—that the startling and marvelous moment of inspiration does not, in most cases, leap out of nothingness. It follows that the more one is exposed to information and innovations, the more opportunities one has to cherry-pick elements, to revise, manipulate and deeply examine—go beyond the already created—and use the *known* as a springboard to create the next extrapolation or hypothesis or observation and thus create a *sense of newness*. In a profession where great lip service is paid to the desire for originality but where a marketplace tends to reward the more familiar, a screenwriter’s task often becomes finding ways to make the familiar film narrative (and film genre) feel fresh, novel and original. This may seem paradoxical because the term “genre film” often refers to

a product that has been termed formulaic or imitative. Therefore before examining film genres' uses, it is important to create a common definition/understanding of just what film genre is for the screenwriter.

When I began to teach screenwriting seminars and noticed participants struggling with making their stories "pop"—or struggling to get to the base of the kind of story (themes, point of view) they wanted to write—I realized that sometimes there was no commitment to a *film genre* in the proposed story or draft of a screenplay. The writer was at sea, and so was the reader. I began to see how helpful a deeper understanding of genre could be and how genre could be used as part of the craft of screenwriting (along with story structure and character work). So I spent the last few years examining each film genre and its components, themes and structures separately (western, romantic comedy, disaster, war, buddy, etc.) and how to use them in the construction phase of a screenplay. In using this tool myself and in helping other screenwriters use this tool, I found there was more ease in the writing tasks when the right film genre and right film genre hybrid for a screenplay was embraced. Genre hybrid? Yes—you read that correctly. As we know, most stories do not live and breathe in just one genre, thus most film narratives are film genre hybrids (Neale, 2000: 51).

It's obvious the subject matter of a film can be handled in various ways. Consider four films in the sports genre revolving around the world of soccer: sports/family drama *Gracie* (2007), sports/broad comedy *Kicking and Screaming* (2005), sports/drama/coming-of-age/romance *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) and sports/action/comedy/martial arts film *Shaolin Soccer* (2001). The screenwriters' choices in the use of the overriding film genre³ and their choices of supporting genres set the films apart from the others; they helped present an authorial voice and clearly appealed to different sections of the film-going audience.

How does the screenwriter let the audience know they are in good hands—let them know their chosen film will deliver on its genre and fulfill their expectations? There are various techniques, one of them being *leading with genre*. For example, many horror films benefit from an early introduction of danger or eeriness or a glimpse of the evil nature about to be unleashed. Likewise, a narrative led by the action genre will more quickly connect with its targeted audience when an action sequence is woven in near the opening of the story, just as a comedy that elicits laughter or embraces a specific light tone in its opening sequences will alert the audience to an allowed reception. This nod to the overriding genre in the early stages of the film helps to appease as well as pull in the audience; they are more likely to feel as if their expectations (promised through the marketing of film) are set to be satisfied.⁴ The idea of using film genre as a short circuit (Altman, 1984: 6) to enhance story comprehension is of great value to the screenwriter who has, in a classically constructed commercial film narrative in America, limited

amount of space (90 to 120 script pages) and/or time (90 to 120 minutes of screen time) to create a full story with satisfying plot, complications and character arcs. Using film genre components to help establish story “type” may aid in giving the screenwriter more space/time to explore other elements designed to build a narrative (or even to use film genre elements in new ways to illuminate a narrative) that feels new and fresh and original. These and other ideas and tips will be explored in depth in this book.

In all narratives, knowledgeable use of film genres is very important; genres can do a lot of the heavy lifting of the story. How? They can frame and lead (more on this later in the book) the story. Each of the film genres will give the writer ideas for plot and character arcs and for setting up of a world. Choosing the supporting genres will help the writer flesh out character and plot points, therefore the blank-page challenge of a new project can feel less daunting—more structurally sound—and thus more enjoyable as the construction processes take place. Understanding the audience expectations of each of the genres, their desires for intellectual and visceral experiences will also help.

Sounds simple? In a way it is, as long as you understand the basics—the classic and “new classic” forms of each film genre—and learn to use them as building blocks while creating the scenes and sequences of the film narrative.

The understanding of and the implementation of the components of film genre is an excellent addition to the screenwriter’s craft. The conventions and historical provenance of each specific genre are of importance to the screenwriter who is intent on pushing film stories into new territories.

This book will examine the most recognized film genres: comedy, drama, romance and romantic comedy, horror, science fiction and fantasy, western, adventure, crime, thriller, film noir, action, war, disaster, coming of age and more. It will also examine how these genres can work together, why specific audiences are attracted to specific genres and how a screenwriter can meet the expectations of their targeted audience by creating a mental space composed of framing techniques, an understanding of the audience and taking into account how perception and reception of the audience shifts over time.

Film genre, as it pertains to the screenwriter, refers to *an active component in the creation of a screenplay*. There are three areas to consider:

- film genre’s role in the creation of a **short course** of comprehension of narrative for the audience;
- a film genre’s **appeal to a particular audience** and how the screenwriter can benefit from understanding the reasons for specific audience preferences;
- film genre as a tool in the craft of screenwriting to be used by the screenwriter to **reach a targeted audience**.

But first, an exploration of the terms often used (and mis-used) in the film industry when talking about genre. In Chapter 1 we will explore the terms and then concentrate on a working definition of film genre for the screenwriter.

NOTES

- 1 "Genre has always been the prime seedbed of American films. The neo-realists and the European school in general . . . have usually treated the individual film as a work situated in the history of art, or in the eternity of nature, while (in consideration of) even the most ambitious as well as the most perfunctory American films, it is the pressure of the history of film displayed in genre form that has been the most crucial factor" (Braudy, 1986: 18).
- 2 Budd Schulberg, novelist and screenwriter: *On the Waterfront* (1954), *What Makes Sammy Run* (1959), *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) and more.
- 3 Overriding genre refers to the dominant film genre evident in a specific film narrative. Although most films are genre hybrids, generally one genre will be dominant, the other genres will be supporting the dominant genre, therefore can be termed "supporting genres." It benefits the screenwriter to identify the overriding genre as the dominant frame of the film (more on this later in the book).
- 4 This brings up a question—what about films that are not married to a specific film genre? I would like to posit that all narratives embrace genre in some way, some more avariciously than others, some through choice of tone and point of view (such as comedy or drama), some with story elements (such as mystery or crime) and themes (such as horror and romance).

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CHAPTER 1

Film Genre for the Screenwriter

Terms to understand: film genre, genre film, mode, classic, revisionist, deconstructed

The clock has struck thirteen; we had best call in the theoreticians. The more genre criticism I read, the more uncertainty I note in the choice or extent of essential critical terms.

(Altman, 1984: 27)

FILM GENRE VS. GENRE FILM

To be able to use film genre as an active element in the craft of screenwriting, it is important to identify a practical definition *for the screenwriter*.

Let's look at a prevalent misunderstanding of the word "genre" in the film industry; this misunderstanding is mostly due to negligence of taking into account the vast difference between the term "film genre" and the often-negative term "genre film."

The use of the word "genre" in literature refers to the division of work according to style, shape, subject matter and content. There is the poetry genre, within the poetry genre there is the Romantic genre, the epic genre, free verse, narrative poetry and many more. In books there is the non-fiction genre, historical fiction, detective fiction, mythology and many more. Genre, in regards to literature, refers to a type or style of artistic work.

The film industry uses the term genre in two ways: "film genre" refers to the type of story and "genre film" refers to imitative works of lesser quality and little originality.

Barry Keith Grant's *Film Genre Reader IV* (1986) appeared just when the university academics' interest in the study of film genre began to grow. Grant featured this observation: "Genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations" (Grant, 1986: xv). Film theorist Steve Neale identifies Grant's definition (which clearly, in my opinion, leans towards the examination of genre films) as the one that, unfortunately, most film critics, film marketers and those that categorized films began to use—sometimes interchangeably—with the term *film genre* (Neale, 2000: 9).