in a bowling alley!" The ones that combine two or more movies are especially irksome. You sit there, trying to imagine how "It's *Heathers* meets *M*A*S*H*" really works. What is that? Spoiled teenage girls join the Army? A medical team is airlifted to a high school to save kids who are shooting each other? What? And odds are all the pitcher is doing is grabbing two hit movies and hoping there's some element in there that someone will like.

(PLEASE NOTE: You never use bombs to describe these mad doctor experiments; it's never "*Ishtar* meets *Howard the Duck*" — an example which tells you exactly how bad a technique this is.)

And yet... I admit I do it.

The reason categorizing your movie is a good idea is that it's important for you, the screenwriter, to know what type of movie you're writing. Of the many ways to get lost while in the middle of writing a screenplay, this is the most common. When I am writing a movie, when *Steven Spielberg* is writing a movie, referencing other movies, looking for clues of plotting and character within the genre, is commonplace. And thus, when you are stuck in your story or when you're preparing to write, you will "screen" a dozen movies that are like the one you're working on to get clues about why certain plot elements are important, why they work or don't, and where you can change the cliché into something fresh.

There are 10 movie genres that have proven to be good places to start this process. That's all they are, a place to start — we'll get into how to move past them next.

As I search for matches in this game of genre gin rummy — do I look for runs or pairs? — I'm interested in creating categories of movies that I can add more movies to every year. And I think within these 10 story types, you can stick just about every motion picture ever

made. You can make up your own categories, you can add others to this list, but I hope you won't need to. You will also note that nowhere in this list do I have standard genre types, such as Romantic Comedy, Epic, or Biography — because those names don't really tell me anything about what the story is. And that's what I need to know.

The 10 types of movies I have categorized here are:

Monster in the House — Of which *Jaws*, *Tremors*, *Alien*, *The Exorcist*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Panic Room* are examples.

Golden Fleece — This is the category of movie best exemplified by *Star Wars*; *The Wizard of Oz*; *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*; *Back To The Future*; and most "heist movies."

Out of the Bottle — This incorporates films like *Liar, Liar*; *Bruce Almighty*; *Love Potion #9*; *Freaky Friday*; *Flubber*; and even my own little kid hit from Disney, *Blank Check*.

Dude with a Problem — This is a genre that ranges in style, tone, and emotional substance from *Breakdown* and *Die Hard* to *Titanic* and *Schindler's List*.

Rites Of Passage — Every change-of-life story from *10* to *Ordinary People* to *Days of Wine and Roses* makes this category.

Buddy Love — This genre is about more than the buddy movie dynamic as seen in cop buddy pictures, *Dumb & Dumber*, and *Rain Man* — but also every love story ever made!

Whydunit — Who cares *who*, it's *why* that counts. Includes *Chinatown*, *China Syndrome*, *JFK*, and *The Insider*.

The Fool Triumphant – One of the oldest story types, this category includes *Being There*, *Forrest Gump*, *Dave*, *The Jerk*, *Amadeus*, and the work of silent clowns like Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd.

Institutionalized – Just like it sounds, this is about groups: *Animal House*, *M*A*S*H*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and "family" sagas such as *American Beauty* and *The Godfather*.

Superhero – This isn't just about the obvious tales you'd think of, like *Superman* and *Batman*, but also includes *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, even *Gladiator* and *A Beautiful Mind*.

Are you thoroughly confused? Do you doubt my sanity when I tell you that *Schindler's List* and *Die Hard* are in the same category? Are you looking at me kinda funny when I tell you that buddy movies are just love stories in disguise? Good! Then let's dig further into the wonderful world of genre.

MONSTER IN THE HOUSE

What do *Jaws*, *The Exorcist*, and *Alien* have in common? They're examples of the genre I call "Monster in the House." This genre has a long track record and was probably the first tale Man ever told. It has two working parts: A monster. A house. And when you add people into that house, desperate to kill the monster, you've got a movie type so primal that it translates to everyone, everywhere. It's the type of movie that I like to say, "You can pitch to a caveman." It's not about being dumb, it's about being **primal**. And *everyone* understands the simple, primal commandment: Don't... Get... Eaten!

That's why this genre is responsible for so many worldwide hits and franchises. You can probably run most of these films without the soundtrack and still "get it." *Jurassic Park*; the *Nightmare On Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Scream* series; *Tremors* and its sequels; and every haunted house and ghost story ever told are all examples of this genre. Even films without supernatural elements, like *Fatal Attraction* (starring Glenn Close as the "Monster"), fall into this category. And it's clear from such movies as *Arachnophobia*, *Lake Placid*, and *Deep Blue Sea*, if you don't know the rules of Monster in the House – you fail.

The rules, to me, are simple. The "house" must be a confined space: a beach town, a spaceship, a futuristic Disneyland with dinosaurs, a family unit. There must be sin committed – usually greed (monetary or carnal) – prompting the creation of a supernatural monster that comes like an avenging angel to kill those who have committed that sin and spare those who realize what that sin is. The rest is "run and hide." And putting a new twist on both the monster, the monster's powers, and the way we say "Boo!" is the job of the screenwriter who wants to add to the illustrious limb of this family tree of movies.

We can see a bad example of this category in *Arachnophobia*, the film starring Jeff Daniels and John Goodman. Bad monster: a little spider. Not much supernatural there. Not all that scary either – you step on it and it dies. Also: No house! At any given moment, the residents of *Arachnophobia* can say "Check please" and be on the next Greyhound out of town.

Where is the tension there?

Because the filmmakers behind *Arachnophobia* violated the rules of Monster in the House, they wound up with a mishmash. Is it a comedy or a drama? Are we really supposed to be *scared*-scared? I could write a whole book on the rules of Monster in the House, but you don't need me to have a MITH film festival in your own home and discover these nuances for yourself. And if you're writing a screenplay that falls into this genre, I suggest you do just that.

I want to make clear that, as with all the genres to be discussed here, this is a category that has not, repeat *not*, been exhausted. There is always a way to do a new one. But you must give it a fresh twist to be successful. You must break from cliché. You must "Give us the same thing... only different." Anyone who thinks there isn't new territory to mine in the Monster in the House genre, should think of the myth of the Minotaur. Great Monster: a half-man/half-bull. Great house: a maze where the condemned are sent to die. But the ancient Greek hack who eyed this successful story and said: "It's over. Genre's dead. I can't top that!" never envisioned Glenn Close with a bad perm and a boiled rabbit.

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

The quest myth has been one of the more winning tales told around the campfire since, well, forever. And if your screenplay can in any way be categorized as a "Road Movie," then you must know the rules of a genre I call "The Golden Fleece." The name comes from the myth of Jason and the Argonauts and yet it's always about the same thing: A hero goes "on the road" in search of one thing and winds up discovering something else — himself. Thus *Wizard Of Oz*; *Planes, Train and Automobiles*; *Star Wars*; *Road Trip*; and *Back to the Future* are all basically the same movie.

Scary, huh?

Like the twists of any story, the milestones of The Golden Fleece are the people and incidents that our hero or heroes encounter along the way. Because it's episodic it seems to not be connected, but it must be. The theme of every Golden Fleece movie is internal growth; how the incidents affect the hero is, in fact, the plot. It is the way we know that we are truly making forward progress — it's not the mileage we're racking up that makes a good Golden Fleece, it's the way the hero changes as he goes. And forcing those milestones to mean something to the hero is your job.

As it turns out, I have been working on a Golden Fleece with my current writing partner, the amazingly successful and talented Sheldon Bull. And we have been discussing Golden Fleece movies a lot — naturally. Since our film is a comedy, we've looked at *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, and discussed the character dynamics of *Rain Man*, *Road Trip*, and even *Animal House*, believe it or not, in an effort to get a handle on what is basically the story of a kid who heads home after being unjustly kicked out of military school and discovers... *that his parents have moved without telling him!* It's basically "*Home Alone* on the road." (Sorry! It's a bad habit). The adjustments we are making aren't about the adventure — which I find hilarious — but about what each incident means to our kid hero. In many ways what these adventures are is irrelevant. Whatever fun **set pieces** our hero encounters must be shaded to deliver milestones of growth for our kid lead. We always come back to that Golden Fleece truism that can be found in *The Odyssey*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and any number of successful road stories through the ages: It's not the incidents, it's what the hero learns about himself from those incidents that makes the story work.

This genre is also where all heist movies are found. Any quest, mission, or "treasure locked in a castle" that is to be approached by an individual or a group falls into the Golden Fleece category and has the same rules. Very often the mission becomes secondary to other, more personal, discoveries; the twists and turns of the plot are suddenly less important than the meaning derived from the heist, as *Ocean's Eleven*, *The Dirty Dozen*, and *The Magnificent Seven* prove.

OUT OF THE BOTTLE

"I wish I had my own money!" This is what our character Preston Waters states in the movie Colby Carr and I wrote and sold to Disney that became a kid's mini hit called *Blank Check*. And

Preston will, in fact, soon get his own money — a million dollars to be exact — with which he will happily run amok. This type of wish-fulfillment is so common because it's a big part of the human psyche. "I wish I had a______" is probably the single most frequently spoken prayer since Adam. And stories that tell a good "what if" tale that exploits these wish fulfillment fantasies are good, primal, easy-for-a-caveman-to-understand stories — which is why they're so many of them. And why they're so successful.

The comedy hit *Bruce Almighty* is an example of this genre. In fact, the flexible Jim Carrey has also been the star of another "Out of the Bottle" classic, *The Mask*. It doesn't have to be God who bestows the magic. It can be a thing — like *The Mask* or a magic VW named "Herbie" in Disney's *The Love Bug*, or a formula that you invent to make the opposite sex fall in love with you as in *Love Potion #9* starring Sandra Bullock, or magic silly-putty that can save your teaching career as in *Flubber* starring Robin Williams.

The name Out of the Bottle should evoke the image of a genie who is summoned out of the bottle to grant his master's wish, but it doesn't have to be magic to be part of this wish-fulfillment genre. In *Blank Check*, there is no magic that gets Preston his million bucks — sure it's a long shot, and Colby and I went out of our way to make it seem reality-based. But it doesn't matter. Whether it's by divine intervention or luck or a magic being who enters the scene, it's the same device. For some reason or other, usually because we like the guy or gal and think they deserve it, their wish is granted and their lives begin to change.

On the flip side of Out of the Bottle, but very much the same category, is the curse aspect of wishing. These are comeuppance tales. Another Jim Carrey movie, *Liar, Liar*, is a good example (hmmm, are we seeing a pattern here about what stars consistently fit best into what Jungian archetypes?). Same set-up, same device — a kid wishes his lying lawyer father would start telling nothing

but the truth — and lo! It happens. Suddenly Jim Carrey can't tell a lie — on the day of a big case in which lying is, and has been, his best weapon. Jim's going to have to change his ways and grow if he is to survive, and by doing so, he gets what he really wants in the first place: the respect of his wife and son. Another comeuppance tale is *Freaky Friday*, both the Jodie Foster version and the updated Lindsay Lohan take. But there are many of these, such as *All Of Me* with Steve Martin and *Groundhog Day* starring another famous wise guy, Bill Murray.

The rules of Out of the Bottle then are this: If it's a wish-fulfillment tale, the hero must be a put-upon Cinderella who is so under the thumb of those around him that we are really rooting for anyone, or anything, to get him a little happiness. And yet, so the rules tell us and human nature dictates, we don't want to see anyone, even the most underdog character, succeed for too long. And eventually, the hero must learn that magic isn't everything, it's better to be just like us — us members of the audience — because in the end we know this will never happen to us. Thus a lesson must be in the offing; a good moral must be included at the end.

If it's a comeuppance tale version of Out of the Bottle, then the opposite set-up is applied. Here's a guy or gal who needs a swift kick in the behind. And yet, there must be something redeemable about them. This is a little trickier to pull off and must include a Save the Cat scene at the outset, one where we know that even though this guy or gal is a jerk, there is something in them that's worth saving. So in the course of the tale, they get the benefit of the magic (even though it's a curse); and in the end, they triumph.

DUDE WITH A PROBLEM

This genre is defined by the phrase: "An ordinary guy finds himself in extraordinary circumstances." And when you think about it,

it's another of the most popular, most primal situations we can imagine for ourselves. All of us consider ourselves to be an ordinary guy or gal, and thus we are drawn into sympathetic alignment with the hero of this type of tale from the get-go. Into this "just an ordinary day" beginning comes something extraordinary — my wife's building is taken over by terrorists with ponytails (*Die Hard*); Nazis start hauling away my Jewish friends (*Schindler's List*); a robot from the future (with an accent!) comes and tells me he is here to kill me and my unborn child (*The Terminator*); the ship in which we are traveling hits an iceberg and begins to sink without enough lifeboats for everyone on board (*Titanic*).

These, my friends, are problems. Big, *primal* problems.

So how are you, the ordinary guy, going to handle them?

Like Monster in the House, this genre also has two very simple working parts: a dude, meaning an average guy or gal just like ourselves. And a problem: something that this average guy must dig deep inside himself to conquer. From these simple components, an infinite number of mix-and-match situations can bloom and grow. The more average the guy, the bigger the challenge, as movies like *Breakdown* with Kurt Russell demonstrate.

In *Breakdown*, Kurt has no super powers or skills, no police training. Nada. But he shares with *Die Hard's* Bruce Willis the same domestic agenda all average guys understand: Save the wife that he loves! Whether our hero is skilled or not, it's the relative size of the challenge that makes these stories work. And one rule of thumb is: The badder the bad guy, the greater the heroics. So make the bad guy as bad as possible — always! — for the bigger the problem, the greater the odds for our dude to overcome. And no matter who the bad guy is, the dude triumphs from his willingness to use his individuality to outsmart the far more powerful forces aligned against him.

RITES OF PASSAGE

Remember the time you were awkwardly going through puberty and that cute girl you had a crush on didn't know you were alive? Remember that birthday party when you turned 40 and your husband came to you and asked for a divorce? These painful examples of life transition resonate with us because we have all, to a greater or lesser degree, gone through them. And growing-pain stories register because they are the most sensitive times in our lives. It's what makes us human, and what makes for excellent, poignant, and even hilarious storytelling. (Isn't Dudley Moore in *10* the funniest mid-life crisis put on film?) But whether it's drama or comedy, "Rites of Passage" tales are of a type. And all have the same rules.

All movies are about change, so to say that Rites of Passage stories document a change is missing the point. These are tales of pain and torment, but usually from an outside force: Life. Sure it's about the choices we've made, but the "monster" attacking us is often unseen, vague, or one which we can't get a handle on simply because we can't name it. *Lost Weekend*, *Days of Wine and Roses*, *28 Days* starring Sandra Bullock, and *When A Man Loves A Woman* starring Meg Ryan all tell stories about coming to grips with drugs and alcohol. Likewise, puberty, mid-life crisis, old age, romantic break-up, and "grieving" stories, like those about getting over the death of a loved one, such as *Ordinary People*, also have the same thing in common: In a good Rites of Passage tale, everybody's in on "the joke" except the person who's going through it -- the story's hero. And only the experience can offer a solution.

In essence, whether the take is comedic or dramatic, the monster sneaks up on the beleaguered hero and the story is that hero's slow realization of who and what that monster is. In the end, these tales are about surrendering, the victory won by giving up to forces stronger than ourselves. The end point is acceptance of our

humanity and the moral of the story is always the same: *That's Life!* (another Blake Edwards movie! Hmmm, between that, *10*, and *Days of Wine and Roses*, Blake Edwards appears to like and do well in this genre.)

If your movie idea can in any way be considered a Rites of Passage tale, then these films are fair game for screening. Like the steps of acceptance outlined in Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, the structure of this story type is charted in the hero's grudging acceptance of the forces of nature that he cannot control or comprehend, and the victory comes with the hero's ability to ultimately smile.

BUDDY LOVE

The classic "buddy story" is a type that I think of as a creation of the Movie Age. Though there were a few great buddy tales (*Don Quixote*, for example), this category really didn't take off as a story form until the dawn of cinema. My theory is that the buddy movie was invented by a screenwriter who realized that his hero had no one to react *to*. There was just this big, empty space where interior monologue and description is found in fiction. And the screenwriter suddenly thought "what if" his hero had someone to debate important story issues *with*? Thus the classic "buddy movie" was born, and from Laurel and Hardy to Bob Hope and Bing Crosby to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to the antics of *Wayne's World* (both *1* & *2*), it has become a movie staple. Two guys talking to each other like *48 Hours*; two girls talking to each other like *Thelma & Louise*; two fish talking to each other like *Finding Nemo* — they all work because stories of "me and my best friend" will always resonate. Again, they're very human and based on universal circumstances. These are stories you can pitch to a caveman and both he (*and* his buddy!) will get it.

The secret of a good buddy movie is that it is actually a love story in disguise. And, likewise, all love stories are just buddy movies with the potential for sex. *Bringing Up Baby*, *Pat and Mike*, *Woman of the Year*, *Two Weeks Notice*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* are — genre-wise — just sophisticated *Laurel and Hardy* movies where one of the buddies is wearing a skirt. And yet the rules for these, drama or comedy, sex or no sex, are the same. At first the "buddies" hate each other. (Where would they have to go if they didn't?) But their adventure together brings out the fact that they need each other; they are, in essence, incomplete halves of a whole. And realizing this leads to even more conflict. Who can tolerate *needing* anybody?

Penultimately, the All Is Lost moment (more on this in Chapter Four) which occurs toward the end of each of these stories is: separation, a fight, a goodbye-and-good-riddance! that is, in reality, none of these. It's just two people who can't stand the fact that they don't live as well without each other, who will have to surrender their egos to win. And when the final curtain comes down, they have done just that.

Often, as in *Rain Man*, one of the buddies is the story's hero and will do all or most of the changing (i.e., Tom Cruise) while the other buddy acts as a catalyst of that change and will do slight or no changing (i.e., Dustin Hoffman). I have been in many story discussions about this dynamic. *Whose story is it??* is what it very often boils down to. *Lethal Weapon* is like that to an extent. It's Danny Glover's story. Mel Gibson is the agent of change. And though Mel will not be suicidal by the story's end, it's Danny Glover whose transformation we care most about. These "catalyst" Buddy Love tales, in which a "being" comes into one's life, affects it, and leaves, is a subset of the Buddy Love dynamic and an important one to keep in mind. Many "boy and his dog" tales are like this, including *E.T.*

If you're writing a buddy movie or love story, either drama or comedy, the dynamics of the Buddy Love structure are a must to know. Sit down with a dozen of these, pop 'em into your DVD player, and get ready to be amazed by how similar they all are. Is this stealing? Is Sandra Bullock ripping off Katherine Hepburn? Should Cary Grant's estate sue Hugh Grant for copyright infringement? Of course not. It's just good storytelling. And the beats are the same for a reason.

Because they always work.

WHYDUNIT

We all know that evil lurks in the hearts of men. Greed happens. Murder happens. And unseen evildoers are responsible for it all. But the "who" is never as interesting as the "why." Unlike the Golden Fleece, a good Whydunit isn't about the hero changing, it's about the audience discovering something about human nature they did not think was possible before the "crime" was committed and the "case" began. Like *Citizen Kane*, a classic Whydunit, the story is about seeking the innermost chamber of the human heart and discovering something unexpected, something dark and often unattractive, and the answer to the question: Why?

Chinatown is perhaps the best Whydunit ever made, and a textbook example of great screenwriting. It's one of those movies that you can see a thousand times and drive deeper into smaller and smaller rooms of the Nautilus shell with each viewing. What makes it a great Whydunit is what makes all classic Whydunits work. From *China Syndrome* to *All the President's Men* to *JFK* to *Mystic River*, every detective story or social drama, these stories walk on the dark side. They take us to the shadowy part of the street. And the rules are simple. We in the audience are the detectives, ultimately. While we have a surrogate or surrogates onscreen doing the work for us, it's

we who must ultimately sift through the information, and we who must be shocked by what we find.

If your movie is about this type of discovery, take a look at the great Whydunits. Note how a surrogate onscreen represents us. And see why the investigation into the dark side of humanity is often an investigation into ourselves in an M.C. Escher-kaleidoscopic-reptile-eating-its-own-tail kinda way. That's what a good Whydunit does — it turns the x-ray machine back on ourselves and asks: "Are *we* this evil?"

THE FOOL TRIUMPHANT

The "Fool" is an important character in myth and legend and has been forever. On the outside, he's just the Village Idiot, but further examination reveals him to be the wisest among us. Being such an underdog gives the Fool the advantage of anonymity, and also makes everyone underestimate his ability, allowing him or her the chance to ultimately shine.

The Fool in the movies goes back to Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd. Little men, silly men, overlooked men, who triumph by luck and pluck and the specialness that comes from not giving up despite the odds. In modern movies, *Dave*, *Being There*, *Amadeus*, *Forrest Gump*, and many of the movies of Steve Martin, Bill Murray, and Ben Stiller come to mind as examples of how this tradition has evolved and why it will always have a place.

The operating principal of "The Fool Triumphant" is to set the underdog Fool against a bigger, more powerful, and often "establishment" bad guy. Watching a so-called "idiot" get the goat of those society deems to be the winners in life gives us all hope, and pokes fun at the structures we take so seriously in our day-to-day lives. Thus, no establishment is too sacred to be skewered, from the White House (*Dave*) to success in the business world (*The Jerk*)

to the overblown reverence for the importance of our culture (*Forrest Gump*).

The working parts of a Fool Triumphant movie are simple: an underdog — who is seemingly so inept and so unequipped for life that everyone around him discounts his odds for success (and does so repeatedly in the set-up) — and an institution for that underdog to attack. Often, the Fool has an accomplice, an "insider" who is in on the joke and can't believe the Fool is getting away with his "ruse": Salieri in *Amadeus*, the Doctor in *Being There*, Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*. These characters often get the brunt of the slapstick, the guy at the end of the Rube Goldberg chain of events the Fool sets into motion, who ultimately gets the pie in the face, like Herbert Lom in *The Pink Panther*. Their crime is being close to the idiot, seeing him for what he really is, and being stupid enough to try to interfere.

Special Fools, whether they're in comedies or dramas like *Charly* and *Awakenings*, offer us a glimpse of the life of the outsider. We all feel like that at times, and tales of the Fool Triumphant give us the vicarious thrill of victory.

INSTITUTIONALIZED

Where would we be without each other? And when we band together as a group with a common cause, we reveal the ups and downs of sacrificing the goals of the few for those of the many. Thus, the genre I call "Institutionalized" tells stories about groups, institutions, and "families." These stories are special because they both honor the institution and expose the problems of losing one's identity to it.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is about a group of mental patients. *American Beauty* is about a group of modern suburbanites.

*M*A*S*H* is about the American military. *The Godfather* is about a Mafia family. Each has a breakout character whose role is to expose the group goal as a fraud. Jack Nicholson, Kevin Spacey, Donald Sutherland, and Al Pacino, respectively, carry this role in these films.

The reason I've dubbed these stories Institutionalized is that the group dynamic these tales tell is often crazy and even self-destructive. "Suicide Is Painless," the theme song of *M*A*S*H*, isn't so much about the insanity of war as the insanity of the herd mentality. When we put on a uniform, be it the uniform of the Army or a comfortable cotton shirt with a little polo player over the pocket, we give up who we are to a certain extent. And these movies are all about the pros and cons of putting the group ahead of ourselves. Again, this is a very "caveman" kind of story. Loyalty to the group sometimes flies in the face of common sense, even survival, but we do it. And we have done it forever. To watch others fight that battle, just like we do every day, is why this genre is so popular... and so *primal*.

Often movies of the Institutionalized category will be told from the point of view of a newcomer. He is us — a virgin who is new to this group and who is being brought into it by someone who is more experienced. Jane Fonda in *9 to 5* and Tom Hulce in *Animal House* are examples. For any world in which the technology, lingo, or rules are not familiar to the average viewer, these characters can be invaluable relayers of exposition. They can literally ask "How does that work?" and allow you to explain the importance to everybody. It's a way to show what is often a "crazy" world to us civilians.

Ultimately, all the stories in this category come down to a question: Who's crazier, me or them? All one need do to understand how sacrificing oneself for the group can be an insane proposition is to check out Al Pacino's face at the end of *Godfather 2*. Here is a

guy who has committed suicide for the good of the family and "tradition." And look where it got him. It is just as shocking as Kevin Spacey's last-minute discovery in *American Beauty* and mirrors, almost exactly, Jack Nicholson's blank post-operative expression in *Cuckoo's Nest*. Why? Because it's the same movie, with the same message, told in extremely different and moving ways.

But they all work for a reason.

Because each movie followed the rules.

And they gave us the same thing... only different.

SUPERHERO

The "Superhero" genre is the exact opposite of Dude with a Problem and can best be defined by its opposite definition: An extraordinary person finds himself in an ordinary world. Like Gulliver tied to the beach by the Lilliputians, a Superhero tale asks us to lend human qualities, and our sympathy, to a super being, and identify with what it must be like to have to deal with the likes of us little people. No wonder so many brainy geeks and teens read comic books! They don't have far to go to get in sync and identify with what it's like to be so misunderstood.

This genre goes beyond stories about guys in capes and tights, however. It is more than the Marvel universe or the DC Comics characters. *Gladiator* and *A Beautiful Mind* (both Russell Crowe vehicles — another *hmmm, interesting*) are good examples of human superheroes that are challenged by the mediocre world around them. In both those films, it is the tiny minds that surround the hero that are the real problem. Don't they get it? Well, no they don't. That's why being "special" is so difficult. *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *X-Men* are the same in this regard. Ultimately, all superhero tales are about being "different," a feeling with which

even we Lilliputians can identify. Born into a world he did not create, the Superhero must deal with those who are jealous of his unique point of view and superior mind. And from time to time we all feel this way. Anybody who's ever been shot down at the PTA or sneered at for bold thinking in a meeting at work can identify with Frankenstein's monster being chased by an angry mob of mouth breathers with pitchforks and torches.

The problem of how to have sympathy for the likes of millionaire Bruce Wayne or genius Russell Crowe, is solved by stressing the pain that goes hand-in-hand with having these advantages. It's not easy being Bruce Wayne. The poor guy is tortured! And while it might be cheaper to get therapy (if he can afford a Bat-utility belt, he can certainly pay 150 bucks an hour for a shrink), Bruce Wayne is admirable because he eschews his personal comfort in the effort to give back to the community. This is so often why the first movie in a Superhero series succeeds and ones that follow don't (such as *Robocop 2*). The creation myth that begins each Superhero franchise stresses sympathy for the Superhero's plight. Once established, filmmakers forget to re-create that sympathy and draw us into the human side of the Superhero again. (*Spider-Man 2* avoids this mistake and, not surprisingly, was a smash hit.)

In truth, we will never truly understand the Superhero. Indeed our identification with him must come from sympathy for the plight of being *mis*understood. If you are writing a Superhero movie, a wide range of tales are available for dissection. It's a long-standing story type for a reason: It gives flight to our greatest fantasies about our potential, while tempering those fantasies with a dose of reality.

HOLLYWOOD'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

I'm sure having reviewed this list of genres you're not only seeing why so many movies are structurally identical to others, but have had many "Eureka!" moments when you're convinced that outright "stealing" has been perpetrated.

And guess what? You're not so wrong to think that.

Look at *Point Break* starring Patrick Swayze, then look at *Fast and Furious*. Yes, it's the same movie almost beat for beat. But one is about surfing, the other is about hot cars. Is that stealing? Is that cheating? Now look at *The Matrix* and compare and contrast it with the Disney/Pixar hit *Monsters, Inc.* Yup. Same movie. And there's a million more examples: *Who Saved Roger Rabbit?* is *Chinatown*. *Blank Check* is very similar to *Home Alone*. In some instances, the stealing is conscious. In others, it's just coincidence. But very often the reason it happens is that story templates work and they work for a reason that *must* be repeated. Each of these movies is an example of successful storytelling. Several are huge hits. Do you think anyone is complaining that *Fast and Furious* ripped off the story beats of *Point Break*? Did anyone notice but you and me? Doubtful.

The point I'm trying to get across here is — it works. And it works for a reason. Because the laws of physics that govern storytelling work every time, in every situation. Your job is to learn *why* it works and how these story cogs fit together. When it seems like you're stealing — don't. When it feels like a cliché — give it a twist. When you think it's familiar — it probably is, so you've got to find a new way. But at least understand why you're tempted to use the cliché and the familiar story. The rules are there for a reason. Once you get over feeling confined by these rules, you'll be amazed at how freeing they are. True originality can't begin until you know what you're breaking away from.

SUMMARY

The topic of genre dictates the categorizing of movies. But instead of typical categories such as Romantic Comedy or Heist Movie, we've created 10 new ones that define story types. These categories are all you need for now to help you identify the story mechanics of the movie idea you're working on. You will not need to find exclusions to them.

Or have I written those words prematurely?

You are a screenwriter. And as I said in Chapter One, all good screenwriters are bullheads. So I know what your response to the hard work and years of experience that went into what I've just related to you is: *What about the exceptions?* What about *Breakfast Club*? Huh? Is that Rites of Passage or Institutionalized? (Answer: Institutionalized). Oh, yeah, well what about *Rain Man*? Is that a Golden Fleece or a Buddy Love movie? (Answer: Buddy Love). Okay smart guy, what about Ben Stiller's *Zoolander*???? (Answer: It's just a bad movie!! Actually, it's one of my favorite bad movies. But it's also a great example of... the Superhero genre.)

If you're looking for the exceptions to the rules, you're missing the point of this chapter, which is to use categorizing as a storytelling tool. You *must* know movies. But you can't know them all. So this is a way to start. Take the script you're working on and try to find what category it's most like. Maybe you have moments in your script that borrow from all the categories? Maybe you start off your screenplay telling one type of story and end up telling another. That's fine, too. (I mean, **at the end of the day**, I doubt you'll sell that script, but we all have to learn the hard way. We're screenwriters! Pain is the game!)

The point is to be well-versed in the language, rhythm, and goals of the genre you're trying to move forward. If you know what genre

you're in, learn its rules and find what's essential; you'll write a better and more satisfying movie.

And have a better chance to sell it.

What's so great about these genres is how inspiring they are — at least to me. Seeing these genres laid out, and seeing their heritage — often going back to very ancient and familiar tales — tells me that the job of "Give me the same thing... only different" is not new. *Jaws* is just a retelling of the ancient Greek myth of the Minatour or even the dragon-slayer tales of the Middle Ages. *Superman* is just a modern *Hercules*. *Road Trip* is just an update of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* — isn't it? To not know the roots of the story you're trying to create, either from the last 100 years of movie storytelling or the last thousand, is to not honor the traditions and fundamental goals of your job.

"Give me the same thing... only different" then is what storytelling has *always* been about. But it's the way we put new twists on old tales, bring them up to date, and give them a spin that's meaningful for our contemporaries. It's a skill we must master and apply to all aspects of the craft. And in the next chapter, we'll discuss how to take all this wonderful background and draw out the most important part: the hero.

EXERCISES

1. Pick up the movie section of your newspaper. Review each of the movies available and decide what genre they fall into. If you go see that movie, compare and contrast it with the other movies in that genre. Were you drawn to it because of the type of movie it is?

2. Grab your handy *TV Guide* and go to the movie loglines. Going down the list to check films you've seen, write what genre each falls into. (Using the categories above, simply assign a number to each movie you've seen.) Does it work? Does every movie listed fall into a genre?

3. For the movie idea or script you're working on now, decide what category it falls into. Then make a list of other movies in that genre. As homework, go to your local Blockbuster and see how many of these are available. Make notes about how they compare and contrast to each other. Can you better explain what type of movie your idea or finished script is part of?

4. Finally, for those of you who love to find exceptions to the rules, make up your own genre and give it a name. Find three other movies in that genre. Can you find five? Maybe you've discovered a *new* genre!

If you come up with a brand new genre category, use my e-mail address found in the exercise section of Chapter One and send it to me. If it's really a good one, I may even include it in subsequent editions of this book.