the course of the film, the journalist is won over and sees the “rightness” of American involvement in Vietnam. The film was only marginally successful at the time of its release.

Auteurism is most closely connected to traditional views of rhetoric although organic criticism would allow inclusion of concepts from other approaches as well. Auteur criticism enables the critic to examine a series of rhetorical acts by a single director or star to discover how the nature of these acts was influenced by, and influenced, the rhetor’s persona.

The final way to focus film criticism is to study a series of rhetorical acts linked, not by a common rhetor, but by a set of common characteristics.

**Genre Criticism**

Genre criticism describes and categorizes films by their narrative patterns, similar story lines, and ability to offer the viewer a relatively predictable experience. Westerns, crime dramas, and slapstick comedy were the first film genres, and we shall examine these and other genres in the pages that follow. The relationship between a film representing a particular genre and the social and political conditions of its time is important. Critics typically look at salient economic, political, and ideological forces in the culture to discuss a genre’s popularity and how it has changed over time.

**The Western**

The Western, the one truly American film genre, embodies the conflict between community values and individual values that is inherent in our society. This value conflict, usually the source of dramatic tension in Westerns, makes them uniquely American because our expansion was accomplished by imposing a series of codes of legal, philosophical, ethical, and economic behavior on the wild frontier (Wead and Lellis, 1981). In a Western, civilization always confronts chaos.

The Western is also about a place. Even if you have not seen a Western lately, you probably have a mental image of the landscape: hot, harsh, rugged, dusty, mountainous, and generally inhospitable. There is always a town in a Western, symbolizing the encroachment of civilization, the boundary between the savage wilderness and the communal interdependence of city life.

Westerns primarily feature male heroes and villains; women play secondary roles, in which their purpose is to humanize and to bring the values of civilization to the wilderness. The hero may have a wife or romantic interest, but she seldom plays an important role in resolving the conflict.

The Western hero has certain characteristics that set him apart, something from his past—a mistake, a deep hurt, an as yet unresolved incident—that makes him a loner (Solomon, 1976). The hero is also a survivor, with the courage and skills to handle his environment, who may seem priestlike in his separateness (Marsden, 1982). The plot always forces the hero to confront his past and
symbolizes the conflict between civilization and the wilderness. The hero confronts the threat to civilization, frequently resorting to the violence of the wilderness to conquer it.

The badman or outlaw is the other important character in the Western. He may also display certain virtues because, unlike the ostentatious wealth of urban gangsters, the Western outlaw has no wealth; he depends on his skill and daring and is also a survivor in a harsh environment. Frequently, the only thing that separates outlaw from hero is a single criminal act or a life outside the law forced on him by circumstance. Ultimately, the outlaw always loses, outnumbered or outgunned by law and order (Solomon, 1976).

How officers of the law are characterized in Westerns ranges from hero to outlaw to supernumerary. The local sheriff or marshal may be empowered by the townspeople to act on their behalf, may be in the employ of a wealthy cattlebaron villain, or may be simply one of the secondary characters who gather around the hero at the conclusion.

The plot of the Western frequently features the journey motif: a cattle drive, wagon train, stage coach crossing Indian or bandit territory, or a lawman or bounty hunter bringing an outlaw to town. The journey is a movement through danger, culminating in the hero's confrontation with his past (Solomon, 1976). What does this motif mean in terms of our culture? It symbolizes our national journey from the raw, uncivilized, quasitribal, autonomous collection of towns in earliest colonial America to present civilization.

The West on film is a romanticized West, the West as it ought to have been (Marsden, 1982), and John Ford's *Stage Coach* (1939) is one of the best films of the genre. The film was shot in Monument Valley, a common location for Hollywood Westerns. Its harsh yet majestic scenery is the image most of us have of the wild west. *Stage Coach* was a benchmark film defining the journey motif and John Wayne as a Western hero. It tells the story of a group of people traveling through Indian country, who we recognize as the stereotypes present in every "group-of-strangers" film. *Stage Coach* celebrated cooperation and the ability of ordinary people for heroic and noble behavior in trying circumstances. It is important to recognize the impact of this film on audiences in 1939, ordinary people being tested by the Depression and the growing war in Europe, and to speculate why it was more successful at the box office than *Our Daily Bread*, a film with a similar theme.

Crime Dramas

The crime drama is related to the Western because it also focuses on the conflict between the law and those outside it. Crime dramas are set against an urban landscape, and the outlaw is someone out to succeed in the big city. Most crime dramas are based on some aspect of the American dream run amok. Marxist criticism of crime films concludes that the genre reflects class struggle in America; crime is a logical consequence in a society that measures individual worth in terms of material possessions.
There are four types of criminals: the gangster or syndicate member, the concealed criminal, the prisoner, and the thief or swindler (Solomon, 1976). Differences among types are accommodated by variations in the basic plot line. For example, the gangster, mobster, or syndicate member is an overt criminal, part of a large family or organization. Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar* (1930), James Cagney in *The Public Enemy* (1931), and Humphrey Bogart helped established the genre by creating compelling characters.

Lawmen in early gangster films were often inept and sometimes corrupt themselves. The film industry was charged by the Catholic church and other concerned groups with promoting immorality and responded by establishing production codes and making films that portrayed law enforcement in a more favorable light. One technique was to have a popular gangster star do a turnaround. In *G-Men* (1935), James Cagney portrayed a man who joined the FBI. The popularity of *G-Men* apparently led the House of Representatives to vote a budget increase for the FBI (Bergman, 1971). Edward G. Robinson also did a turnaround in *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), playing a double agent who worked his way up in a gang in order to destroy it.

Gangster films remain popular. Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) are films as much about organizational change in a changing world as they are about crime. Both films tell the story of the Corleone family as leadership passes from one generation to the next. Michael Corleone must reshape the family crime business in the face of competition or lose everything, a choice not unlike that facing many business leaders in the 1970s.

Another form of the crime drama is found in films about private investigators who inhabit a world of criminals. These film *noir* (black film) dramas always have a sinister element—a looming threat, fear, the feeling of helplessness—a trend first popularized in American filmmaking in the 1940s as a counterbalance to the patriotic zeal of wartime filmmaking.

As opposed to the idealism of the society fighting together to combat the political evil of facism, film *noir* dealt with individuals conspicuously antisocial in their greed and selfishness, driven to betrayal, violence, and crime (usually including murder) out of an incurable sickness (often ending in death or incarceration). Their malaise was presented as endemic to the human species, and the world they inhabited was a dark one literally as well as morally. The films seem to take place mostly at night, in seedy furnished apartments and on rain-washed streets of big cities. A jungle atmosphere was created in those studio sets (a human jungle, an asphalt jungle, a neon jungle), with predators stalking prey and danger lurking in the shadows, intermittently revealed by flashing signs. (Ellis, 1985, p. 219)
Humphrey Bogart’s portrayal of Sam Spade in The Maltese Falcon (1941) established the archetypal noir hero. Spade is not heroic, he is cynical, sardonic, and world weary, but he lives by a code that says “a man’s got to do the right thing.” For him, that means finding out the truth about his partner’s death, even though he didn’t really like the guy and even though it means turning in a woman who offers him love and wealth (Wead and Lellis, 1981). In Sam Spade’s hierarchy of values, professionalism as an investigator is more important than personal gain.

In Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974), Jack Nicholson played Jake Gittes, a private investigator trying to figure out what is going on and why. “Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown,” the last line of the film, became a catch phrase to explain the unexplainable. William Palmer interpreted the rhetorical significance of Chinatown at the time:

We all lived in a Chinatown world where nothing was ever what it seemed, where reality was so layered and complicated that it could never be grasped, where any natural impulses were doomed to failure, where innocence was but a naive dream in the face of the sinister and brutal nightmare known as reality. . . . that last line also implies all of the futility and hopelessness of the film and of the seventies decade. In the course of the movie, “Chinatown” has become more than just a sinister L.A. neighborhood. It has become a way of life, a mode of thinking, a symbol of all that is opaque, sinister, and ultimately, dangerous. “Chinatown” becomes a symbol of the futility of attempting to grasp and interpret reality. Those who listened to what was left of the Watergate tapes, who sat throughout those interminable Watergate hearings, must have felt the same frustration with grasping reality that Jake felt in Chinatown. Those who examined their conscience about Vietnam, either in-country or at home, faced the same problem of understanding what they were doing that Jake faced in Chinatown. (PALMER, 1987, pp. 118–119)

The Comedy

Although films in other genres can be comedies, we classify comedy as a separate genre based on its specific elements of structure and characterization. More will be said about humor as a rhetorical form in Chapter 12, but we shall describe the rhetorical aspects of the comic film briefly here. All comedy works rhetorically by showing the arbitrariness and perversity of codes of social conduct. The structure of comedy disrupts one or more of these established patterns and then resolves the disruption in a “happy ending.” Comedy films have