

3. Have any genres significantly atrophied or disappeared in recent history (e.g., the romantic comedy with strong leads for both sexes)?

Mittell: Genre categories always wax and wane. The Western frequently seems like a dead genre, and then a new example emerges to reinvigorate it, such as with Deadwood or There Will Be Blood. You can chart television history with critical proclamations of the death of the sitcom, immediately followed by a new hit to restore its centrality. So I'm reluctant to look at genres as having clear lifecycles.

Shary: The Western is apparently on hold after a brief revival in the early '90s.

Shetley: Perhaps more significant than the fortunes of any particular genre is the transformation of the hierarchy of genres that occurred in the blockbuster era. I'm hardly the first to observe that action/adventure filmmaking has risen to dominate Hollywood production in the last three decades; this rise is connected to a larger rejection of adulthood in American filmmaking, a rejection of adult themes, situations, and sensibility.

In particular, American filmmaking seems almost entirely to have lost interest in adult women. Compared to earlier epochs of movie history, it is striking the extent to which films built around adult female protagonists have become scarce. Careers are always hard to sustain in Hollywood, but the dearth of good roles for female actors means that even those who have demonstrated extraordinary abilities find far fewer opportunities than they deserve, and far fewer than comparable males. Could any female performer with as little to offer as Sylvester Stallone occupy our movie screens for as long as he has? And while much was wrong with the studio system, it would no doubt have made better use than contemporary Hollywood of natural resources like Judy Davis, Uma Thurman, and Julianne Moore.

So the genre whose passing I'm most inclined to mourn is the women's picture. I'm not arguing for a return to the celebrations of female self-sacrifice the studios once turned out so regularly, but surely Hollywood is showing a culpable deficit of imagination in its failure to replace the melodrama of self-sacrifice with anything that offers a similar focus on women's lives and similar scope for the talents of female stars.