cinemafocus.eu

Studi sul cinema
Film studies
Laboratori interattivi
Interactive workshops

Film genres

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Section 1: Introduction

Comments

"Last night I watched an old western"
"Do you like horror *films?"*
"What would you like to watch tonight? A
thriller*?"*

Western, horror, thriller ... *they are all
examples of* film genres*: a way to classify
films into more or less homogeneous
categories, which help viewers (but also, and
in the first place, producers) to identify films
and to make choices. If we are fond of a
particular genre, we expect to find a series of
recurring elements: savage and cruel, as well
as mysterious, murders in a* horror *film, a love
story, maybe with a touch of humour, in a*
romantic comedy*, the story of the life and
exploits of a famous figure in a* biographical
film (biopic)*, and so on.*

*To start off, I invite you to do the following
tasks (better still, with a friend - it's more
interesting and enjoyable!):*
1. Which film genre(s*) do you like best?*
*2. What sort of emotions do you like to feel
when watching a film, and which film genre(s)
seem to ensure that your expectations will be
met?*
*3. Try and make a list of film genres - make it
as exhaustive as you can. You can use
"classical labels" like* western, comedy,
adventure*, but you can also create new and
personal terms to refer to a genre!*
4. Now try and group some of these genres

into wider categories (for example, as sub-genres *of the maxi-genres* adventure *or* comedy*).*
5. If you have the opportunity to exchange your views with others, do you think that your classifications are more or less the same, or do you find that they are linked to the strictly personal ways of choosing and judging films?
6. Finally, compare your ideas with my comments on the right.

Comments Section 1: Introduction

There are of course several ways to classify films: for example, we can make reference to the kind of stories *being told (melodrama, comedy, biopic ...), or to the basic* topic *dealt with (sport and historical films, documentaries ...) or to the way images are produced (animation films) and even to more* general *criteria ("auteur" films, "avant-garde" or experimental films ...) or* geographical *criteria ("national" and "foreign" films, "international" films like science fiction, musical or pornographic films and "regional" films, like the* blaxploitation *movies (US movies produced between 1970 and 1975, starring black actors and originally targeted at black audiences) or the* Heimat *movies (mainly German movies usually set in a national past and emphasizing traditional values)). It is also true that the lists of genres can be more or less detailed: a "musical" can refer to a musical comedy like* La-La Land*, to an opera like* La Traviata*, to the recording of a rock concert like* Shine a light*, and can even turn into a concert/documentary like* Woodstock.

Classification criteria are, as we shall see, extremely varied, so that lists of film genres can be quite different, both in terms of the criteria used and in terms of the general vs specific ways to classify films. This accounts for the huge variety and comprehensiveness of these lists. For example, the weekly [Film TV](#) lists these film genres: animation, adventure, action, biblical, biographical, disaster, comic, comedy, documentary, dramatic, erotic, science fiction, fantasy, gangster, "giallo" (an Italian variety of the thriller), grotesque, war, horror, melodrama, mythological, musical,

noir, "poliziesco" (a variety of detective movies), sentimental, experimental, spy story, sports, historical, superhero, thriller, western.

To have an idea of how many genres it is possible to identify, through a detailed analysis, you can simply access the relevant section of the [IMDB - International Movie Database](). *This analysis often implies the identification of* sub-genres, *through which you can create very detailed lists, which can be organized into macrocategories: the* [Student Resources]() *of the New York Film Academy identifies several* macrocategories, *each comprising a certain number of* sub-genres. *For example, in the* action *category you can find the following* sub-genres*: epic movies (like* Ben Hur, *but also* Gone with the wind*),* spy *stories (like the* James Bond *films or* Mission: Impossible*),* disaster *movies (like* The Poseidon adventure *or* The towering inferno*), thrillers (like the* Die hard *and* Lethan Weapon *sagas), the* martial arts *movies (like* Enter the dragon *or* The karate kid*), as well as movies connected with* videogames *(like* Prince of Persia *or* Tomb raider*).*

Section 2: Criteria to identify a genre

1. Choose a film genre (this can be your favourite one or any other) and try to list the features *that help you to identify it with respect to other genres, i.e. the* criteria *which can be used to assign a film to a particular genre. For example:*
- the kind of story *being told or the* topic *dealt with;*
- the typical or recurring characters *and they way they are portrayed;*
- the settings *and contexts;*
- the mise-en-scene, *the set designing;*
- costumes and make -up;
- special effects;
- the sound score *(noises, music ...);*
- the inclusion of stars *particularly linked to a certain genre;*
- the emotions and thoughts that are generated in the audience;
- ....
2. Do you think that these criteria are fixed and relatively stable in any film of the chosen

genre, or do you think that minor or major varations are possible? For instance a thriller *could include* paranormal *elements, or scenes with* horror *effects, or it could include characters which are typical of* gangster *films ... Do you think that today film genres can be* hybrid, *so that genre classification becomes less stable and undergoes constant evolution?*
3. Think back to the film genre that you chose to analyse. As a spectator, do you expect (or even demand) to find in any film of that genre the conventions and the typical elements of the genre? Or do you accept variations and new "angles" with pleasure and interest? Can you give examples of films that strictly adhere to the "classical" conventions of the genre and of other films which, conversely, introduce new and original elements, thus distancing themselves from the typical and well-established "canons"?
4. Finally, compare your ideas with my comments on the right.

Comments Section 2: Criteria to identify a genre

1. Let's take the horror *genre as an example. Some of the features of this genre could be:*
- ordinary people who find themselves suddenly threatened by strange creatures (whether human, superhuman or supernatural), by hardly identifiable dark, evil forces, by hostile, menacing natural elements (like animals), by dark and ancient curses, by genetic mutations. Generally speaking, we are dealing with the fear of the "different" or the "unknown" which displays hideous looks;
- settings which, although "normal" at the start, soon change into frightening, ghastly places (houses alive with monsters, impenetrable forests, ruined castles ...);
- scenes aimed at causing fear, terror, disgust;
- gradual intensification of these feelings as the story unfolds (suspense, flight and chase sequences ...);
- special effects reinforce violence, sadism, wickedness: the "unknown" can look like a monster or an alien being, thanks to make-up;
- dramatically obsessive music is accompanied by a range of sound effects which amplify the horror conveyed by the images.
*2. Several elements can further enrich this genre, but they can at the same time move it*

closer to other genres: for example, the presence of a serial killer, depending on the cruelty or violence of some scenes, can evoke a horror *film, but also a* thriller*; if the monsters are aliens, the movie can approximate* science fiction*; if the imaginary elements play a decisive role, the movie could also be defined as a* fantasy *film; and so on.*
*3. A horror film, which is meant to be perceived as such (and, above all, which is advertised and marketed in the corresponding way) cannot do without all or even many of the elements listed above. However, if the film limits itself to the application of a "classical" recipe, it can run the risk of being boring. For this reason cinema tends, on the one hand, to confirm the conventions of a certain genre (so that viewers who expect to see zombies should not be disappointed by their absence), but, on the other hand, it also tends to introduce some element of novelty, in order to make the film different from all the previous movies of the same kind and thus to make it appear at least partially "original" (so that it can be advertised as such). We are, once again, dealing with the subtle balance between* convention *and* innovation.

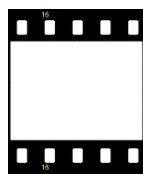**Section 3: Identifying genres and variations**

1. Watch these film trailers and try to assign each of them to a particular genre. What are the main elements or features that help you to classify each film within a certain genre?
2. If you find it difficult or even impossible to "label" with precision one or more of these films, what combination *or* association of genres *do they seem to refer to? In other words, what elements of different genres do such "hybrid" films seem to include?*
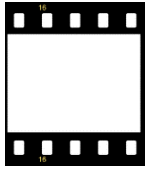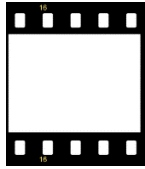*3. Then compare your ideas with my comments on the right.*
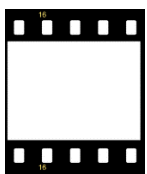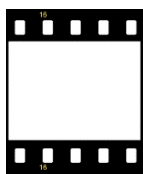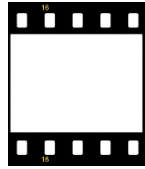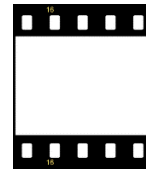

(1)   (2)   (3)

(4)   (5)   (6)

Comments Section 3: Identifying genres and variations


(1) Road to Perdition *(by Sam Mendes, USA 2002) takes place in 1931, during the Prohibitionism and Great Depression period in the USA. The story is told mostly by the protagonist's son. His father works as a killer for gangster bands. Many scenes actually remind us of the* gangster *genre (night sequences, ambiguous relationships between cynical and ruthless people, suddens outbursts of violence, lack of values except for the protection of one's own interests at all costs …). But at the heart of the film is the relationship between the father, who becomes more and more tightly involved in his friends/fiends' activities, and the son, who has complete trust in him and loves him - until the very end. Thus this is also a* dramatic *film, in which emotions, feelings and the relationship between father and son end up taking central stage even more than the features of the mere* gangster *movie and in fact shape the final meaning: the son (who, when asked about his father, always simply answers "He was my father") is the only character in the film who can hope for a different life.*

(2) 120 BPM (beats per minute)*(by Robin Campillo, France 2017) tells the story of* Act Up*, the French group of homosexuals who, in the early '90s fought a hard battle to awaken institutions and public opinion to the risks of*

AIDS and the need for prevention, as well as against pharmaceutical companies who were accused of making big profits by delaying the marketing of adequate drugs. This is thus primarily an activists' film, which privileges the political, ideological, collective dimension: this attention to and documentation of reality could turn it into a sort of documentary *film. However, the collective and public dimension is tightly interwoven with the love story between two boys, which is portrayed with passion and painful participation until the death of one of them (although this is not appropriately shown in the trailer). This second, "private" dimension, which is not in contrast with but follows closely the first, more "political" one, also qualifes 120 BPM as a* dramatic *film, which involves viewers both affectively and ideologically.*
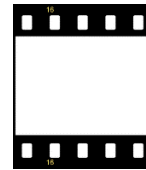

(3) The imitation game *(by Morten Tyldum, GB/USA 2014) tells the true story of the mathematician Alan Turing, who in 1939 was employed by the English secret service to decode the messages which the Germans sent by using an extremely sophisticated device called "Enigma". The period scenes, set within the war background, are typical of* spy *stories, with the* suspense *and curiosity linked to an exciting feat like deciphering a code. However, this is not the only topic of the film, which also follows Turing's private life. As a gay man, he was sentenced to chemical castration, which led him to commit suicide when he was 41. This is also, at least in part, a* biographical *film* (biopic), *which in this case, too, links a background in real history with a painful private story.*

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(4) Femme fatale *(by Brian De Palma, France 2002) is a* thriller *centred on a very complex plot involving jewels being stolen, dangerous photographs being exchanged and violent actions by ruthless people. However, this is a particular subgenre, the* erotic thriller, *in which ever-present beautiful women, endowed with an irresistible but wicked and extremely dangerous charm, take us back to the femmes fatales of the film* noir *of the '40s. The frenzied editing of the trailer reflects the real editing of the film, which is full of technical virtuosity and a whirling mix of images, to tell a plot full of cues, false starts, alternating truth and lies, which the director is not so keen on working out at the end. This movie is thus very difficult to classify - technical virtuosity seems at times an end in itself.*

(5) Far from heaven *(by Todd Haynes, USA/France 2002) takes as its explicit inspiration Douglas Sirk's melodrama movies of the '50s, by adopting its formal aspects (like the brilliant colours and the rich mise-en-scene which were typical of those films), but making them even more dramatic and deeply moving (the protagonist's husband discovering his gay nature, her falling in love with an African American gardener ...), thus stressing even more the hypocrisy of the social conventions which stifle feelings and emotions. Burning passions are revived together with a social critique of what has not changed to this very day.*
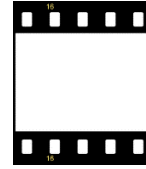
(6) La La Land *(by Damien Chazelle, USA 2016) could be seen, first and foremost, as a* romantic comedy, *centred on the relationship between a boy and a girl who - just by chance (!) - work or would like to work in the show business with passion and commitment. In practice music and dance are part and parcel of the development of the story, which turns effortlessly, even within the same scene, from simple "acting" to singing and dancing. Thus this is (also) a* musical, *in which music, dancing and singing are not mere accidents but are part of the actual plot development. After decades in which musicals seemed to have disappeared, this movie takes them to the limelight again, with an emotional appeal and a sweeping rhythm which, linked to the most romantic of stories, revives the typical conventions of the genre.*

Section 4: Do genres die? Do they survive?

By briefly examining some trailers of more or less recent films you can easily conclude that today many films are "hybrid", in the sense that they draw on several different genres, although most of them can still be assigned to a more specific genre. Hollywood cinema, in particular, has actually never given up anything of its past history, but is has often renewed, reinforced, widened many of the conventions and features of its "classical genres".

It is also true gthat genres go through stages of popularity, i.e. through cycles of success (which also coincide with a massive prduction of films belonging to the same genre) and cycles of (relative) stagnation or loss of popularity. A cycle can begin when a highly successful film opens the way to a more or less vast array of imitations, as was the case with The Godfather, *which generated a revival of* gangster *films.* Disaster *movies, starting with* Earthquake *and* The Poseidon adventure, *have been very popular since the '70s, and the same*

period witnessed the revival of science-fiction (sci-fi) *films, whose initiator was definitely* Star Wars. *And the early 2000s have seen the triumph of fantasy films with the* Harry Potter *and* The Lord of the Ring *sagas.*

At the same time, as we have just said, genres themselves have become "hybrid", with an indefinite number of elements of two or more genres being combined within the same film. A genre can be made the object of parody, or its typical conventions can be played with, as Woody Allen has done by shooting comedies *on the basis of* science fiction *films* (Sleeper)*,* gangster *films* (Take the money and run)*,* thrillers (Manhattan Murder Mystery)*, and even* historical *films* (Love and death*). The same can be said of Mel Brooks, who in his* comedies *played with* science fiction *films* (Spaceballs) *or* westerns (Blazing saddles)*. Other hybrid films have been produced at the cross-section of* science fiction *and* horror (Alien)*,* western *and* musical (Cat Ballou, Seven brides for seven sisters), melodrama *and* musical *(*Yentl *and the various versions, including a very recent one, of* A star is born*),* musical, science fiction, comedy *and* horror (The Rocky Horror Picture Show)*,* gangster *and* musical (Guys and dolls) *and* melodrama *and* film noir *(*Mildred Pierce *and the recent TV series of the same name). The influences of a genre on others can cross borders, as happened with* Yojimbo *and* A fistful of dollars*, with* Schichi-nin no Samurai *(aka* Seven samurai*) and* The magnificent seven *and its sequels and remakes; with* martial arts *and their choreographies and* science fiction *(the* Matrix *saga).*

Some have argued that when a genre is no longer able to represent significant aspects of the reality it refers to, it is also no longer able to attract audiences - but this argument clashes, at least in some respects, with the filmmakers' ability to renew and infuse new life into "moribund" genres. The question is open to productive discussions, although it cannot probably lead to definite answers in either direction.

Think about the following and, if possible, discuss it with somebody else: if you consider the list of genres which you made in Section 1, which ones do you consider particularly productive and thriving today, also in the sense that they can deal with and somehow reflect problems, issues, anxieties and open questions of today's world? Which genres, conversely, seem to be less represented in today's film production? And finally, do you think it possible for a genre to come to a real, final end? Then compare your ideas with my comments on the right.

Comments Section 4: Do genres die? Do they survive?

We cannot dismiss the fact that, for instance, after so many years when epic *films (and among these, the so-called Italian* peplum *movies, set, for example, in ancient Rome) have practically disappeared, in 2000* The gladiator *was extremelly successful; and the same happened, as we have just seen, with the* musical *genre in 2016* (La La Land). *An interesting, though not directly related, phenomenon, is the persistent success of films which are now considered as "cult" movies (like* Saturday night fever, Grease *or* The Rocky Horror Picture Show), *which do not seem to strictly belong to any of today's most popular genres.*

However, there are more serious and "structural" reasons against the argument that genres can finally die. In the first place, in the first half of last century the production of movies belonging to a particular genre had an important marketing function: each genre had its target audience, and it made sense to produce movies of that kind. Today we face the triumphant success of what have variously been called blockbusters, action movies *(and, in particular,* fantasy *or* super-hero *sagas) or "special effects movies", which refer to several genres at the same time, thus attracting many kinds of audiences: in other words, the same film shows so many varied and heterogeneous elements that it can appeal to different categories of viewers, each of which can find reasons to feel interested and satisfied.*

Section 5: The persistence of genres and their social significance

Far from being considered as an obsolete or even useless concept, genres actually continue to thrive, and the most important evidence of this is their evolution, which is due to various kinds of reasons (economic, technological) as well as to market demands. As we have said, genres tend to be at the same time conservative *and* innovative*. This happens, first and foremost, from the* production *standpoint: "formulas" which seem to "work" for audiences are continually reproduced, while at the same time new technologies, intended to renew the typical conventions, are constantly being introduced. This also happens from the* consumption *standpoint: viewers expect and appreciate the fact that traditions are respected, but at the same time they also wish to watch innovative content and forms.*

Genres evolve at the ideological level too, by responding to viewers' wishes, demands and expectations: audiences want to find a reflection of their values and attitudes in the films they choose to watch. A classical

Contemporary filmmakers employ a huge quantity of different and heterogeneous materials; they do not hesitate to borrow (or even copy), mention, make more or less explicit reference to a variety of previous films (and not just films: recurring motives can be traced back to several other sources, like videogames, comics, television programmes, advertisements ... as well as myriad products associated with ever-growing franchising practices). These materials are assembled, "mixed", re- or de-structured in several different ways, and the result are movies which have been called trans-genre *or* post-genre*: just think of* Batman*, and then of films like* Last action hero*, the* Lord of the Ring *and* Harry Potter *sagas, the films by Quentin Tarantino (like* Pulp fiction*), by Baz Luhrmann (like* Romeo + Julie*t) and by Cristopher Nolan (from* Memento *to* Inception*). This does nor mean that "genre" films are no longer produced: these may, from time to time, revive the* comedy *or* action *genres, just to give a couple of examples.*

example is represented by the western, *which for decades was centred on clear and ideologically consistent oppositions: civilization* vs *the wild frontier, law and order* vs *disorder and lawlessness; "good","civilised" white people* vs *savage and violent native indians, the "hero" who brings with him and defends social security* vs *outlaws threatening civil order, and so on (as witnessed in "classical" Hollywood westerns, starting with* Stagecoach *(by John Ford, USA 1939).*

*Starting with the '60's, these typical features of the western have undergone substantial changes, also as a reflection of the changed social and cultural contexts and of the urge to renew and defy tradition which were typical of those years. Thus the "hero" is no longer part of society as the outpost of civilization, but tends to be an isolated figure himself, now fighting "from the outside" against a corrupt social order. Also, the distinction between "good" and "bad" is no longer so clear-cut: the "hero" often shows a new interior complexity (*The searchers, *by John Ford, USA 1956) and the outlaws themselves can carry expectations of freedom and a wish for change (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, *by George Roy Hill, USA 1969) and are no longer blameless, like the bandits redeeming themselves by fighting for an oppressed people (*The wild bunch, *by Sam Peckinpah, USA 1969). At the same time native indians are rehabilitated and now seen as noble antagonists as well as the victims of a cruel repression by the white conquerors (*Little big man, *by Arthur Penn, USA 1970;* Soldier blue, *by Ralph Nelson, USA 1970). And the western has continued to change in various ways, adding new issues and dimensions, from* Dance with wolves *(by Kevin Costner, USA 1990), to* Unforgiven *(by Clint Eastwood, USA 1992), from* Brokeback Mountain *(by Ang Lee, USA 2005) to* The hateful eight *(by Quentin Tarantino, USA 2015).*

Bordwell and Thompson (Bordwell D. and Thompson K. 2008. Film art, *McGraw Hill, New York) have given a clear synthesis of*

what they consider to be the social functions of film genres (quotations are between inverted commas):

"It is common to suggest that at different points in history, the stories, themes, values, or imagery of the genre harmonize with public attitudes. For instance, do the science fiction films of the 1950s, with hydrogen bombs creating Godzilla and other monters, reveal fears of technology run amok? The hypothesis is that genre conventions, repeated from film to film, reflect the audience's pervasive doubts or anxieties. Many film scholars would argue that this reflectionist approach helps explain why genres vary in popularity."

The "reflectionist" approach is so called because it assumes that genres reflect the attitudes, values and social conventions of a certain historical period. However, the issue at stake here is not so simple. Others could actually argue that "a genre film may reflect not the audience's hopes and fears but the filmmakers' guess about what will sell". For example, there is hardly any doubt that US cinema has shown increasingly higher levels of violence in the last decades, and that such scenes are particularly popular with teenager viewers (which constitute an important share of the "market"). Following the numerous and recurring episodes of violence which have taken place in American schools, the American filmmakers have tried to keep a closer look on their projects so as to reduce the impact of brutal, cruel violence scenes. Can we then argue that this decision is a reaction to the changed attitude on the audience's part towards violent scenes? In the same vein, the terrorist attacks to the Twin Towers in 2001 caused the audience's reaction to violence at the start, except that, a few years later, there was an increase in the production of war films linked to the invasion of Iraq and the capture of Bin Laden - films that somehow reflected Americans' "patriotic" reaction to the attacks that had been brought to their home ground.
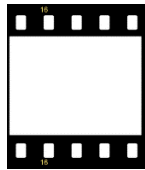
Appendix: Music and genres

The musical score, too, is part of the typical conventions of each film genre: we expect that the music we hear matches the images we see, the theme, the atmosphere and the kind of story being told.

As an end to this Workshop, I invite you to listen to a series of short music clips and to match each of them with a particular film genre. You have two options:

1. (more difficult): listen and try to guess the film genre;
2. (easier) listen and match each music clip with one of the following genres (listed here in scrambled order): history - comedy - science fiction - drama - adventure - musical - horror - action - melodrama - fantasy

Now click the screen below, listen, make your choices and then watch the video with the answers in my comments on the right.

Credits: Many thanks to Matilda Fielding and her *youtube* Movie Genre Quiz

Comments Appendix: Music and film genres

You have listened to music clips in this sequence of genres:

adventure - action - comedy - drama - fantasy - history - horror - melodrama - musical - science fiction

Now watch the original video. Can you recognise any of the movies?

Want to know more?

* From the *Student Resources* of the *New York Film Academy:*
  - Ultimate list of film sub-genres
* From the *filmsite.org* website:
  - Film genres: origins and types
* From the *IMDB website*:
  - a database of popular genres, popular themes, movie and TV charts, top rated English movies by genre, and more
* From the *tvtropes.org* website:
  - an impressive list of genres, each analysed in detail
* From the *Box Office Mojo* website, a very detailed list of genres with their relevant box office success: Genre Index
* Videos from *youtube*:
  - Genres of films (with examples) by Jess Farey
  - Genre examples by Ernesto Sosa
  - Introduction to film genres by WarnerJordanEducation
  - What is genre? Let's talk theory by Dapper Mr Tom
  - Introduction to genre movies - Film genres and Hollywood by *Ministry of Cinema*

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