

Film genres: features, functions, evolution

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Abstract

This Interactive workshop aims at exploring the origin of genres, their functions in cinema and their evolution, with particular emphasis on the latest developments. We first ask why we need genres at all and examine the variety of classification criteria that can be used. Then we focus on the specific features of genre films, analysing their conventions and their narrative structures. We then explore how different agents (from producers to audiences, from critics to film scholars) have used and still use genres, and highlight their economic, sociocultural and communicative functions. Finally, by taking a historical perspective, we explore how genres have evolved in the course of time and how modern cinema extensively use genre mixing and hybridization, thus pointing to the future of this important but complex category of film analysis.

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1. Introduction

At a first glance, film genres can appear as a simple, straightforward concept: after all, we all know what is meant by "Star Wars is a science fiction film" or by making a list of movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *1917*, *Full metal jacket* and *Dunkirk* and calling them "war films". However, there are times when this easy way of referring to a film genre begins to become a bit problematic: for example, how would you call films like *Mulholland Drive*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Green book* or *The shape of water*?

If you then compare magazines listing TV programmes, you may find that the same film is sometimes assigned to different genres, and the same may happen if you read film reviews, consult film dictionaries, browse Internet sites or join a discussion group or a blog for film buffs. This points to a first basic consideration: film genres are not born out of nowhere, but are the result of choices and decisions made by different people, for different purposes, in different situations. The second consideration is based on the fact that the parties involved in creating and changing film genres are not just viewers, but also journalists, film critics, advertising agencies, film scholars, and - last but not least - film producers, i.e. the people and organizations responsible for deciding what films are to be made and how to describe them to their audiences. In the third place, by no means do these parties have the same interests and purposes as regards film classification.

As you can see, the discourses surrounding an apparently simple concept like "film genres" are multiple and vastly different, and if you started studying film history, you would soon find out that the criteria for classifying films have changed through time as well. So it makes sense to delve deeper into the topic and consider the questions raised by classifying films and the possible answers that have been given, in time, to such questions. But before starting out on this journey of exploration, let's briefly consider a very basic issue: why bother with film genre, or rather, why bother with classification at all?

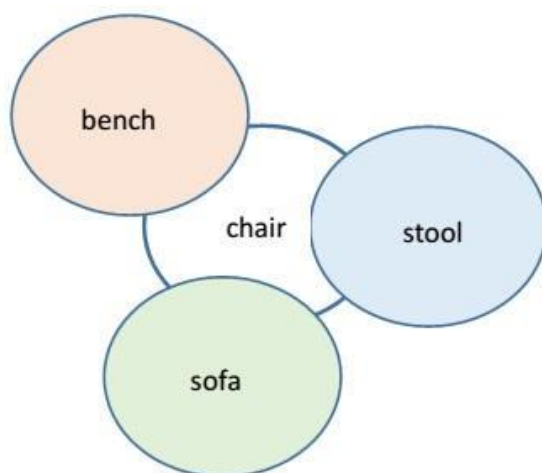
2. Why are generic labels useful and necessary?

Why do film genres exist? Perhaps the most general answer has to do with one of the basic processes that the human mind makes use of in order to bring order and balance in the otherwise chaotic and complex experiences that make up our daily interactions with the world we live in, including people, objects and ideas. This brain process has to do with classifying, i.e. grouping items that (seem to) share some basic features into more manageable categories. If every time we see a chair we had to make up a whole new mental representation of the object, our mind's capacities would be taken up by lengthy, burdensome operations. Instead, early in life we learn to build a general category of objects ("chair") which includes most, if not all, specific instances of chairs, irrespective of their size, colour, material, shape, style, etc. To create this category, we must include some essential features shared by all chairs, and thus we come up with a definition which helps

us to identify any particular example of the object, but also, at the same time, to exclude all other objects that do not share all the features of our "prototypical" chair:

"A chair is a piece of furniture for one person to sit on, with a back, a seat and four legs"¹

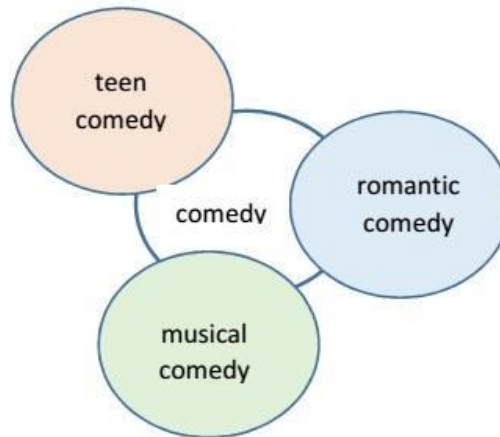
On the basis of this definition we can use our general category to identify what we recognize as "chairs", but also to exclude other objects which may share the same function (i.e. "to sit on") but do not conform to the standard idea of "chair", e.g. a stool, an armchair, a sofa, a bench ... although we can accept other items by qualifying them in one way or another: thus we can include in our general idea more specific items like a wheelchair, a high chair, a rocking chair, a swivel chair ... Graphically, we could express these relationships like this:



The concepts of "stool", "bench" and "sofa" only partially overlap with the more general concept of "chair", which, however, includes, as we have seen, several possible qualified variations.

If we now take "comedy" as "a play or film/movie that is intended to be funny, usually with a happy ending" (i.e. the basic concept), we are inevitably led to consider other, related types of plays/films/movies which share the basic concept but can (or must) be qualified by additional features, e.g. romantic comedy, musical comedy, teen comedy ...:

¹ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Longman, Harlow.



Several important introductory considerations can now be made.

First, we need "generic classes" or "categories" to refer, quickly and efficiently, to items which would otherwise be hard to describe or define every time we come up with a single, specific specimen of the category. Thus the most general function or purpose of genres is to make daily communication easier: if I tell you that I saw an old western or a science-fiction film last night, you most probably know what I mean, and, conversely, by mentioning a well-known film in the genre (e.g. High noon or Star Wars) I immediately pass on information on the genre itself. As we have already said, this immediacy and efficiency of communication is of the utmost value to many kinds of people interested in films - not just viewers, but critics, film magazines, and, most importantly, film producers, who can target specific audiences with specific genres of film which activate shared expectations.

This points to a second consideration - genres, like all categories or classes, must be widely accepted to be used with little or no possibility of misunderstanding, i.e. they must be shared by a community's discourse. However, because there are different discourse communities (e.g. the above mentioned viewers, critics, producers), and these also evolve over time, the meaning attached to a category can differ or change: as we shall see, "spy story" can mean quite different things to filmmakers, critics, and the general public, and what is referred to as "musicals" has certainly changed considerably all through the 20th century.

In the third place, genres can be very broad in nature (like "comedy"), but are also quite open to be qualified in different ways, producing what are sometimes referred to as "sub-genres", e.g. college comedy, family melodrama, "slasher" or "splatter" horror. In other words, the boundaries of a genre are not strictly fixed, with very broad categories coexisting with much narrower ones: some people are content with a most general term like crime, while others are keen to make finer distinctions, and would consider gangster

films, detective films and thrillers as fully autonomous genres.

Finally, categories change over time: spaghetti westerns, which were considered at the start just a "sub-genre" of westerns, may now be viewed as a more or less independent genre. Besides, processes of "hybridization" are always at work, and we are now ready to accept new "labels" like "tragicomedies" or "dramedies", "rom-coms" (i.e. "romantic comedies"), "docufiction" and "docudrama" (a mix of documentary and fiction), and so on.

3. In search of classification criteria

Of course, genres as the product of a classification system apply to a very wide range of media, including, e.g., literature (novel, short story, poetry ...), theatre (with "labels" that have often passed on to film, like tragedy, comedy, musical, burlesque ...), music (classical and its subgenres, rock and its subgenres, jazz ...), painting (landscape, portrait, still life ...), television programmes (news, soap operas, chat shows, reality shows ...). What strikes most in this list of examples is the extreme variety of criteria that can be used to define a group of items as a genre, and then to assign one particular instance to a particular genre. Films, in particular, can be grouped, e.g., by production modes (major, minor, independent studios ...), by format (feature films, short films, black and white or colour ...), by techniques (live action, animated cartoons, plus the various digital forms ...), by aspect ratio (standard, widescreen, Panavision ...), by quality of definition (standard vs high definition, 4K, 8K ...), by sound quality (mono, stereo, Dolby, THX ...), by rating (fit for viewing by everybody, parental guidance, "X" films ...), by audience (teen pics) and in many other ways.

Examples of categories, broad and narrow

"Grouping by period or country (American films of the 1930s), by director or star or producer or writer or studio, by technical process (Cinemascope films), by cycle (the 'fallen women' films), by series (the 007 movies), by style (German Expressionism), by structure (narrative), by ideology (Reaganite cinema), by venue ('drive-in movies'), by purpose (home movies), by audience ('teenpix'), by subject or theme (family film, paranoid-politics movies)."²

"While some genres are based on story content (the war film), other are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on

² Bordwell, D. 1989. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 148. Quoted in Chandler, D. 1997. *An Introduction to Genre Theory*, p. 2.

artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), location (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema)."³

"Before we talk about specific subgenres, we should perhaps talk about only three, very basic or principal film forms: narrative film, avant-garde/experimental film, and documentary film ... Nonfiction is related to those discourses that make explicit claims about reality and fiction to discourses that do not, a distinction between an assertive and a fictional mode, in which the spectator treats the reference from text to reality in two fundamentally different ways. This distinction between two modes is imbedded in our cognitive framework and is related to the distinction between a play mode and a reality mode."⁴

The sharing of common traits by a number of movies can help to group them in a class, category, or "genre". However, when we think about film genres, the "labels" that most readily come to our mind as viewers are, e.g. western, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and so on - which is to say that the criteria actually used to talk about film genres are usually more restricted than the "mixed bag" we have just mentioned. We tend to group movies mostly according to broad yet definite categories like, e.g. topic (sports, disaster movies), characters (superhero movies), stories or narratives (crime, romance, horror). There is no one way of compiling a comprehensive taxonomy of film genres, and attempts to list as many of them as possible has produced impressive lists which, however, sometimes end up being confusing rather than really helpful in a discussion of film genres.

All these considerations point to the fact that categorization is a complex process, and its products (i.e. lists or taxonomies) can by no means be taken for granted, so that considerable variations are the rule rather than the exception. As we have mentioned, the boundaries of a genre can be considered very broad or very narrow; very stable across time or quite variable; rather "universal" in nature or more limited to specific national or local realities. An additional problem is actually that most widely used taxonomies have been developed with western (mostly American or European) criteria of reference, i.e. have an ethnocentric nature, thus often ignoring the socio-cultural specificity of other (often less known) filmographies.

The "fuzzy" or even "messy" nature of possible taxonomies also means that a film can be thought to belong to several different "classes" or genres at the same time: for example, *Stagecoach* (by John Ford, USA 1939) can be considered to be a John Wayne film (actor), a

³ Stam, R. 2000. *Film Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 14. Quoted in Chandler, op. cit., p. 2.

⁴ Bondebjerg, I. 2015. "Film: Genres and Genre Theory", in Wright J.D. (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, Vol 9, Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 160–164.

John Ford film (director), an American film from the 1940s (historical period), a United Artists film (distributor), besides, of course, a western.



STOP AND THINK

1. What are your favourite film genres?
2. Try to build a simple classification of film genres: start from broader categories (like comedies or thrillers) and see if you can expand them into more specific subgenres. If you can, compare your list with a friend's and discuss the reasons for the similarities and differences.
3. Choose three or four movies that you know well and see in how many different ways they could be classified (as we did with Stagecoach above).
4. Watch the videos below⁵ and decide which genre(s) each film could belong to. Can you explain the reasons for your choices, i.e. what criteria did you use?



The various examples of taxonomies we have mentioned point to the fact that classification is not a neutral and unique process, but it depends on the purpose of this operation (and also, in connection with this, to the people involved). Different parties interested in the classification can have very different purposes in mind: a TV magazine listing the daily programmes clearly has in mind a different readership than an academic

⁵ Trailers from: 1 - Gettysburg (by Ronald F. Maxwell, USA 1993); 2 - The last picture show (by Peter Bogdanovich, USA 1971); 3 - An American pickle (by Brandon Trost, USA 2020).

collection of essays on cinema; and we have already mentioned the rating systems adopted in most countries to define and prescribe which type of movies can be shown to which kinds of (young) audiences. Other classification systems may refer to the effect that certain types of films can have on their expected audiences: the distinction between comedy and tragedy dates back to the classical Western philosophy, but even in the much more recent history of cinema it was soon clear that films could be used to make people laugh or cry, to make them feel happy or sad, to solicit sexual excitement or to cause fear or anxiety - not to mention the uses of film for (implicit or explicit) advertising or propaganda purposes, which highlights the fact that movies can vary even in subtle ways in the ways in which they aim to inform viewers rather than to change the latter's behaviour, by inducing responses that directly impact on the social, cultural and political messages that are embodied in the movies themselves.

As you may have noticed, these considerations tend to move us away from the actual film texts, i.e. the formal and structural aspects of particular genres, and towards their communicative value, particularly with respect to the audiences involved. We can thus point out that in studying film genres, we may resort either to an examination of the formal and structural features of a genre or to its functions, i.e. the purposes for which genres are used (whether economic, social, cultural or communicative) - although the two approaches can and do intersect. Adopting different approaches should hopefully help us to understand better the nature and features of film genres, both as a cultural phenomenon and as groups of films as works in their own right.

4. Film as text: genre conventions

The very notion of "genre" implies the presence of conventions - style, narrative devices, formal aspects or cinematic techniques that are typical of each particular genre, whose meaning is clear to the audience and which thus makes it recognizable as a (relatively) independent group of films. A convention is, for example, the fact that in musicals, characters often move smoothly from speaking to singing and dancing to music that suddenly seems to come into existence out of nowhere: this we, as viewers, readily accept as "part of the game" of watching a musical, although it obviously detracts from a feeling of "realism". Conversely, this convention would not be acceptable in a dramatic film, where we are invited to "suspend our disbelief" and move into the fictional world of the film, which must ensure a degree of realism to depict an illusionary yet "believable" world.

4.1. Style

"Style" is a category of conventions difficult to define, since it includes all the ways in which film language can be used to obtain a certain effect on the audience; this includes, e.g. choice of lenses, camera angles and movements, lighting, colour schemes, editing, special effects, etc. Certain genres, however, exhibit easily recognizable "styles" that make

it quite easy for the audience to establish the kind of film they are watching. Film noir, for example, employs low-key lighting, dark contexts, night scenes, as well flashbacks as formal narrative structures.



The big combo (by Joseph H. Lewis, USA 1955)

Horror films similarly use light contrasts, close-ups and tight framing, using the "off screen" as an element of suspense - inviting us to wonder when and how the monster or killer will actually appear "on" the screen.

Melodrama often uses stylistic excesses to underline the feelings and emotions of the characters: an excessive *mise-en-scène*, with vivid colours which highlight the presence of plenty of objects that become part of the emotional atmosphere; use of contrasting lights; and an excessive acting which underscores the passions lying beneath the surface of things.



All that heaven allows (by Douglas Sirk, USA 1955)

Thrillers involving a (serial) killer may use distorted images and eerie sounds to suggest that the criminal is psychologically disturbed.

4.2. *Soundtrack*

Soundtrack is so intimately connected to the overall style of a film that we often seem to be unaware of it, although it plays a crucial role in setting the atmosphere: the ballad-style music which often accompanies the opening of so many westerns, for example, is so much a part of a western storyline that we tend to take it for granted. Horror films would lose much of their impact if we removed the music and sounds that keep us on edge, only to be broken, sometimes quite unexpectedly, by some other sounds that make us jump to our feet. Although generalisations are not really possible, on the whole we can say that "sweeping strings" are the usual accompaniment of love stories and other kinds of romantic drama, while electronic, even experimental soundtracks, are used as the score for science-fiction films.

4.3. Setting

The space and time, i.e. where and when, the story of a film takes place are particularly important for some genres, less so for others. Comedies and dramas, for example, can take place everywhere and at any time - in the past, present and even future, but westerns focus on the American frontier (west of the Mississippi), mostly in the latter half of the 19th century. Some would argue that films like *The last of the Mohicans* (by Michael Mann, USA 1992), which takes place at the time of the fight between the settlers and the English near the east coast, in the second half of the 18th century, are not westerns. And the same could be said for *Pocahontas* (by Mike Gabriel, Eric Goldberg, USA 1995) and for *Hud* (by Martin Ritt, USA 1963), which takes place in Texas but in the present.



The last of the Mohicans



Pocahontas



Hud

Musicals, on the contrary, can take place in the past, like *Meet me in St. Louis* (by Vincent Minnelli, USA 1944), and even in a western context, like *Seven brides for seven brothers* (by Stanley Donen, USA 1954).



Meet me in St. Louis



Seven brides for seven brothers

They can also take place in the present (i.e. the present of when the film was made), like *West Side Story* (by Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins, USA 1961) or *La La Land* (by Damien Chazelle, USA 2016), or even in some timeless, fantastic place, like *Brigadoon* (by Vincente Minnelli, USA 1954).



West Side Story



La La Land



Brigadoon

However, as we have just said, we must beware of generalizations. While it is true that film noir and gangster films take place mostly in cities (although the city itself is more a symbol of a decaying modern society rather than a real urban area), there are movies in these genres whose stories take place in the mountains of California, like *High Sierra* (by Raoul Walsh, USA 1941) or in desert of Arizona, like *The petrified forest* (by Archie Mayo, USA 1936) - once again, settings that would also fit a western quite well.



High Sierra



The petrified forest

Similarly, horror movies often choose an isolated place (a lake, a cottage in a forest, a derelict building, a basement, a graveyard) as the perfect setting for the brutal killings that take place; but, once again, there are examples of movies that are set in a New York middle-class apartment, like *Rosemary's Baby*, in an ordinary motel near an ordinary highway, like *Psycho* (by Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1960), or aboard a sailing boat in the middle of the sea, like *Dead calm*.



Rosemary's Baby



Dead calm

Science fiction films face the choice of using already existing settings, although of a futuristic nature, like *A clockwork orange* (by Stanley Kubrick, GB 1971), which also imply a sort of dramatic link between the present and a (dystopic) future, building new sets from scratch or, the most obvious choice nowadays, have recourse to computer imaging. Of course, films that take place aboard spaceships or on a distant planet must provide their own appropriate settings.



A clockwork orange

4.4. *Iconography*

Cutting across conventions, iconography refers to the role that people, objects, animals and even abstract ideas are represented in images, with the understanding that different peoples, religious or political groups may and do use different ways to represent the same reality. Some people and objects, by the very fact of having appeared in a long sequence of films, have thus become icons of that particular genre, i.e. they are readily accepted as symbols in the fictional reality represented in the film: wagons, horses, stagecoaches, sheriffs, the gunfighters, the "Indians" in westerns; priests as "exorcists" in horror films; raincoats, cigarettes and (again) guns as essential features of the detective (the "private eye") in classic noir films; and of course several well-defined topic-based films (like the sports and war films) have their own sets of icons.

Icons are much more than people and objects which have become archetypal or even stereotypes: they usually carry with them a set of beliefs, attitudes and values which are recognized and accepted by the audience because they are shared by a community: the "Indians" in western have long been portrayed as wild, violent, primitive people contrasted with the western civilization advancing (across their lands); priests and their religious attributes convey the idea that Christian values can eventually defeat evil forces.

Icons are not fixed and their meaning may change through time, helping the genre they belong to evolve in different directions: as we shall see in a later section, for example, westerns have undergone considerable changes in the course of time, and from the middle 1950s the classic opposition between the "Indians" and the settlers advancing westwards has been put into question. So, if the basic iconography may remain the same, the values and attitudes attached to it are subject to revision and change.

4.5. *Stories/Themes and their narratives*

The narrative of most films relies on a storyline that suggests some kind of conflict between characters (sometimes even within a character), or between characters and some external force, implying a problem that must be solved, usually by overcoming obstacles in order to reach a new "balance" by the end of the film (this may, but not necessarily, take the form of a "happy ending"). Different genres obviously propose conflicts of different kinds: not just heroes and villains (whether it's a western, a horror or a science-fiction film), but also lovers and their plights (such as in comedies and dramatic movies). In this respect, Schatz⁶ identifies more "physical" conflicts, which address mainly social and "public" issues (like the gunfight in westerns and the fight between gangsters in gangster movies) and more individual, "private" conflicts (like the troubles in a sexual relationship or the psychological problems in family melodramas). The two kinds of conflicts often overlap, and the happy ending in that case implies the resolution of both the social and the psychological / romantic" problems, i.e. a kind of "closure" of the story. However, such closure, where problems are solved and questions are answered, is by no means mandatory: even in classic movies, and increasingly so in post-modern and contemporary cinema, a film may leave its basic issues open, thus denying the audience the reassuring feeling of a new balanced order. If the Cold War and the nuclear threat were symbolically represented in science-fiction and horror films of the 1950s, with the alien force or the monster being eventually destroyed, later films, e.g. expressing the anxiety of the Vietnam War and the social and political tensions of the 1960s and 1970s, were not so reassuring in the way they left their issues unanswered: zombies were not completely defeated and the dangers facing society were still very much on the forefront even at the end of the movie. Thus stories can handle their underlying themes in different ways across different socio-cultural contexts.

Narrative conventions are so important that we shall soon come back to them and consider them in more detail in Section 5 below.

4.6. *Characters and actors/actresses*

Characters are the essential feature that sets the action in motion. Their psychological traits, and above all their goals and motivations, explain their behaviour and the roles that they play in the overall storyline. In genre films they tend to be "icons", i.e. recognizable types that symbolize the main themes expressed in the movie, and, as such, they run the risk of becoming stereotypes or even caricatures: the detective and the "femme fatale" in film noir, the zombie or the serial killer in horror films, the "buddies" and the "nerds" in

⁶ Schatz T. 1981. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*, Random House, New York, p. 26. Quoted in Grant H.K. 2007. *Film Genre. From iconography to ideology*, Wallflower Press, London and New York.

teen comedies, the coach and the team members in sports films, the cavalry and the "Indians" in westerns, and so on.

Actors and actresses can specialize so much and so well in playing "generic" characters that they can end up being "cast to type", i.e. chosen to play essentially the same iconic character in a number of films, sometimes throughout their whole acting career. Others, while retaining some sort of recognizable "screen persona", may be capable of playing different roles, or at least variations within the same basic role. The "image" that actors and actresses carry with them can be associated with a particular film genre in which they first built their reputation (although they may have successfully played quite different roles in other films genre): John Wayne and the western, Cary Grant and Marilyn Monroe and the comedy, Humphrey Bogart and the detective movie, Sylvester Stallone and the action movie ... This does not mean that actors and actress cannot play completely different roles, or even expressly cast "against type", i.e. asked to play a character who is, psychologically and socially, the opposite of (or at least quite different from) the generic role they are primarily associated with.



John Wayne



STOP AND THINK

Refer to the above list of genre conventions we have just made. Watch the videos below and try to make a list of the conventions that seem most relevant to assign each film to a particular genre. In other words, what are the essential features that would make you decide on a possible film genre in each case?⁷

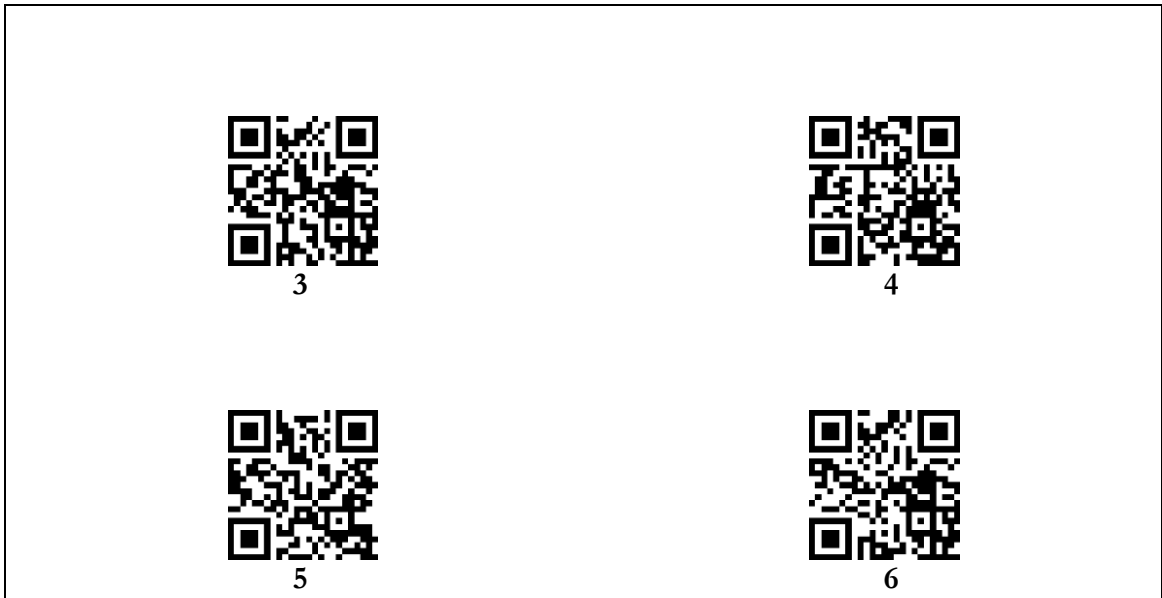


1



2

⁷ 1 - *Casino Royale* (by Martin Campbell, GB/USA/Germany/Czech Republic 2006); 2 - *Sliding doors* (by Peter Howitt, GB/USA 1998); 3 - *Avengers: Endgame* (by Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, USA 2019); *Friday the 13th* (by Sean S. Cunningham, USA 1980); 5 - *Barry Lyndon* (by Stanley Kubrick, UK/USA 1975); 6 - *Atonement* (by Joe Wright, UK/France/Germany 2007)



5. Film as text: narrative structures

Within the context of genre film conventions, there have been attempts at considering the overall narrative structure as the basis for classifying films: in other words, films deemed to belong to the same genre should appear to be organized along a similar story development. Carroll⁸ applies this frame of reference to the horror film, distinguishing between a *discovery plot* and an *over-reacher plot*. Both rely on a basic distrust of science and scientists, but in the former case this stresses the incompetence and inefficiency of science as a rational guideline for human actions. This is shown in such diverse films as *Dracula* (by Tod Browning, 1931, and subsequent versions), *Cat people* (by Jacques Tourneur, USA 1942, and its remake), *Invasion of the body snatchers* (by Don Siegel, USA 1956, and its two remakes), *Jaws* (by Steven Spielberg, USA 1975) and *The exorcist* (by William Friedkin, USA 1973, and its multiple sequels).

In such movies the story goes through different stages:

a) the monster or alien force shows itself for the first time: e.g., in *Dracula*, the vampire first appears disguised as the driver of a coach; in *Cat people*, the panther is only hinted at in various terrifying ways; in *Jaws*, the shark's first attack mobilizes the people);

⁸ Carroll N. 1981. "Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings", *Film Quarterly*, 34, pp. 16–25; and Carroll N. 1990. *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Routledge, New York. Quoted in Moine R. 2008. *Cinema genre*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 66.



Jaws

b) an individual or a group of people discovers the monster or alien and try, usually in vain, to alert the authorities, who don't believe them: e.g., in *Invasion of the body snatchers*, there is a moment of "discovery" when the bodies of people, who are the exact duplication of real ones, are discovered almost by chance; in *The exorcist*, 12-year-old Regan starts witnessing strange phenomena;



Invasion of the body snatchers

c) the people who recognize the danger try to convince the others, including scientists, that urgent action is necessary, but they are not believed and the suspense increases as time presses on and the danger becomes stronger: the inefficient scientific community is contrasted with the wisdom of the "common man" (quite often adolescents in teen movies like *A nightmare on Elm Street* (by Wes Craven, USA 1984);

d) eventually the danger is recognized, forces are joined and the monster or alien force is usually defeated: e.g., in *Invasion of the body snatchers* the police is finally convinced to block the roads and the F.B.I. is alerted.

The alternative narrative structure, the *over-reacher plot*, shows the limits and dangers of science when its experiments cause great harm to the community. This is the case of such movies as *Frankenstein* (by James Whale, USA 1931, and its numberless remakes and sequels, including the highly successful parody *Young Frankenstein* by Mel Brooks, USA 1974), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide* (by Robert Mamoulian, USA 1931, and its remakes, including the famous one by Victor Fleming, USA 1941) or *The fly* (by David Cronenberg, USA 1986) and its sequels). Again, the story develops through different phases:

a) the preparations for the experiment are described and discussed, with the scientists providing their own rationale for trying out the experiment itself;

b) the experiment is successful, boosting the self-confidence of the (mad) scientist;



Frankenstein

c) the experiment shows its darker side and moral failure: the monster escapes from the scientist's control and causes innocent victims. This is the case of Frankenstein's monster drowning a young girl;

d) the final destruction of the monster, as in *The fly*, where the monster's lover Veronica eventually kills him; or self-destruction, as in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide*, where the monstrous Hyde is shot by the police and transforms back into Jekyll.



Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide (1941)

Similar attempts at defining a genre on the basis of its story structure have involved the western, too. Wright⁹ identifies four major types of plot, appearing in some very successful movies, which can thus be considered as representatives of the genre:

a) the "classical" plot: this involves a lone stranger who arrives in a troubled town and restores law and order, as in *Dodge City* (by Michael Curtiz, USA 1939);

b) the "vengeance" plot, as in *Stagecoach* (by John Ford, USA 1939), where the fugitive Ringo survives the three-against-one final shootout;



Stagecoach

⁹ Wright W. 1975. *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, University of California Press, Berkeley. Quoted in Moine, op. cit., p. 53.

c) the "transition" plot, in which the hero eventually leaves society, as in *High noon* (by Fred Zinnemann, USA 1952), where Sheriff Kane, after shooting a vicious outlaw, throws his marshal's star in the dirt and departs with newly-married Amy on their wagon;



High noon

d) the "professional" plot, featuring professionals "paid" to fight for the law, as in *Rio Bravo* (by Howard Hawks, USA 1959), but also in "new wave" western films like *The Professionals* (by Richard Brooks, USA 1966) and *The Wild Bunch* (by Sam Peckinpah, USA 1969).

These basic plot structures are complemented by a set of typical characters (the hero, the villain, and society as represented, e.g., by a town's folks or a group of ranchers) and by the already mentioned oppositions between basic values (exterior vs interior, good vs evil, strong vs weak and wild vs civilized). Such oppositions constitute the structural relationships that lie at the basis of the situations and actions of the "classical" western, which can be summarized like this:

*"The Western is always set on or near a frontier, where man encounters his uncivilized double. The Western thus takes place on the border between two lands, between two eras, and with a hero who remains divided between two value systems (for he combines the town's morals with the outlaw's skills)."*¹⁰



STOP AND THINK

* Have you got any favourite *horror* and/or *western* movies? Briefly summarize their plot and then try to analyse their narrative structure following the discussion and the examples in this section.

* Do you agree that such films can be considered as representative examples of their genre?

* Which other films come to your mind that could easily be fitted into the same genre(s)?

¹⁰ Cawelti J. G. 1975. *The six-gun mystique*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green. Quoted in Altman R. 1999. *Film/Genre*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 220.

6. *Film as text: semantic-structural approaches*

In popular discourse, genres are often identified by referring to the topic and/or theme that they deal with, e.g. the meeting with aliens in science-fiction films, the search for the criminal in thriller and detective films, the "boy-meets-girl" theme in romantic comedies, the rise and fall of a gangster in gangster films, and so on. As Stam (Note 3) has observed, although topic seems to be, on the surface, the most likely candidate as a basic criterion for grouping films, it really begs the important question of how the topic (the thematic content) is dealt with. This has led Rick Altman, one of the leading scholars in the field, to suggest that

"... Genres are thought to reside in a particular topic and structure or in a corpus of films that share a specific topic and structure. That is, in order to be recognized as a genre, films must have both a common topic ... and a common structure, a common way of configuring that topic. Even when films share a common topic, they will not be perceived as members of a genre unless that topic systematically receives treatment of the same type."¹¹

Semantic-structural approaches to the study of genre consider not just semantic elements (which we listed as genre conventions), but also the ways in which such elements are woven together, so that, in a particular genre, they tend to be treated in the same way, i.e. to be organized in a similar structure. We have already seen this principle at work in describing narrative structures, and have considered how films belonging to the same genre appear to be organized along similar lines of story development. Now we will discuss in more detail how the network of relationships between semantic elements (its syntax) helps to establish the overall meanings conveyed by the film.

Taking once again the western as an example, we saw that recurring semantic motifs include spaces (natural, like deserts, mountains, canyons, etc. and human, like saloons, banks, railway stations, etc.), characters (cowboys, "Indians", sheriffs, farmers, etc.), objects (like guns, wagons, coaches, etc.), situations (like Indian attacks, fights between heroes and villains, gunfights, etc.), but also, and most importantly, its space and time settings, specifically, and broadly speaking, the American (Far) West in the second half of the 19th century. (Interestingly, although we mentioned *The last of the Mohicans* and *Pocahontas* as films set in the eastern U.S.A. in the 18th century, there is no "eastern" film genre, mostly due to the fact that there have never been enough movies to justify the adoption of another specific genre - an important factor which we will take up again later, when discussing how genres are born and evolve.)

Although the semantic motifs would seem to be sufficient to justify the existence of a

¹¹ Altman, op. cit., p. 23.

recognized, established genre as "the western", the syntactic, structural elements of this genre also concur to make it distinctive and original, particularly when we focus on the relationships that are typically created between motifs, and which give each film its overall "flavour" as a western. Such relationships are not simply pointed out owing to the mere presence of physical objects, characters and situations, but are mostly conveyed through the relationships between characters, the psychological traits of the characters themselves, the values and attitudes they express, the link between the human and the natural environments, and the narrative that fuses all these elements together - plus the technical choices and stylistic qualities that have become typical of the formal handling of the stories and their characters. Once again, it is crucial to stress that all such elements have won a socially recognized significance because they have been used again and again, through time, by filmmakers, so that the "western" has eventually acquired the status of an established "genre".

As an example, consider the opening credits and opening sequence of *Rio Bravo* (by Howard Hawks, USA 1959).



Opening credits



Opening sequence

The opening credits are superimposed on an arid desert landscape, through which slowly advances a long caravan of "cowboys" escorting a number of horse-drawn carriages. Fade-out to black. Fade-in to a door, opening slowly to allow a man (Dean Martin) to come in. The shabby clothes he is wearing shows that he is probably a vagrant (a drifter, a tramp?). He enters a saloon full of people sitting at tables or drinking at the bar, wanders among the tables, until another man (Claude Akins) meets his eye. The two men exchange glances - the first nods in a rather condescending way - he would clearly enjoy a drink if only he had the money - while the second, smiling scornfully, tosses him money into a spittoon. The first man stoops to recover the money, when we see a foot pushing off the spittoon ... the man raises his eyes and meets the figure of a third man (John Wayne), holding a gun, looking down at him ...

Throughout the opening credits we hear a musical score that we have come to recognize as typical "country/western" music. However, notice that the following sequence has no dialogue, but only sounds from the set and a low guitar accompaniment, which is broken only when the second man tosses the money, underscoring the sudden dramatic turn culminating in the appearance of the John Wayne character.

The semantic elements of the western are already all there - the open spaces, the wild

landscape, the long caravan across the desert, the saloon with its usual customers, and the characters with recognizable attitudes: the wild but sympathetic tramp, the scornful villain, and, above all, John Wayne, who will soon be identified as the sheriff. However, it is the syntax of this sequence that "holds" the semantic elements together and produces the overall effect on the audience: a network of relationships is immediately established between the "outsider" (Dean Martin), the villain (Claude Akins) and the representative of the law (John Wayne), and we expect these relationships to develop into the well-known conflicts that westerns stage between law and order, wilderness and civilization, society and outsiders. Since there is no dialogue, all these elements are conveyed through acting (gestures, movements, glances ...) and camera movements, including the "up shot" which introduces the John Wayne character with his familiar aura of distinctive personal qualities.

The combined effects of semantic and syntactic elements can only be obtained because we, the audience, are so familiar with them that we do not even need a dialogue to understand and appreciate the total significance of the story which is starting to unfold on the screen. The role of the viewers' expectations is a crucial element of a genre, as we shall better discuss in a later section.

Similar considerations to the ones just made for the western could be applied to other film genres. For example, the musical, which started in the late 1920s with a stock repertoire of semantic features (e.g. the setting on a stage, the preparations for the *mise-en-scène* of a play, combined with a love story which the music progressively underscores) developed in the 1930s by using the same semantic material but structuring it through the establishment of relationships, e.g. relating the music, and especially the dancing, with the affective and sexual implications of a couple's joys and sorrows (remember the Astaire-Rogers movies), but also with a new sense of community values and a renewed function of music as a means of community entertainment. A new syntax could thus allow a film genre to reflect and respond to new audience expectations (e.g. by counterbalancing the worries and misery of the Great Depression years).

As examples, consider *On the town* (by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, USA 1949) and *La La Land* (by Damien Chazelle, USA 2016).



On the town



La La Land

Well-established semantic motifs that an audience would soon recognize include a storyline, which promises interesting developments for its characters (three sailors enjoying a 24-hour shore leave in New York Harbour in *On the town* and two artists - an

aspiring actress and a jazz pianist - briefly sharing their lives in Los Angeles in *La La Land*), several songs and dancing numbers all along the storyline, the acting which alternates between realism and rhythmic movements following the musical score. However (as was the case with *Rio Bravo*) it is the syntax, i.e. the structural relationships between and among the semantic features, that make the movies coalesce, while at the same time establishing their character as representatives of the musicals as a film genre. The narrative, for example, binds together the characters, sometimes underscoring their parallel profiles, sometimes making them stand out on their own or even contrasting them - and the links are both "professional" and "affective/sexual": in (1) the three sailors must face a deadline (the 24-hour leave), trying to see as much as they can of New York City, while at the same time finding a love interest (in three quite different ways); in (2) the actress and the pianist gradually develop an intense relationship while pursuing their own careers. The plot includes incidents, misunderstandings and other small events which, however, do much to develop the storyline. Music and dancing are obviously not just the "language" of the films, but the building blocks of the story, since they integrate smoothly with the feelings, aspirations, dreams and wishes of the parties involved. In both films (despite the 67 years that separate them) music and dancing numbers are not just a neutral accompaniment - they communicate meanings and, in a way, advance the story itself. There is no discontinuity between dialogue and songs - the characters are talking when they start singing (and dancing), and vice-versa, and the feelings conveyed by the music easily and effortlessly extend to the whole setting, creating a new, though illusionary, world.



On the town



La La Land

A similar shift in the role of semantic and syntactical features can be traced for the science fiction film, which ranged from adventurous stories set in an indefinite future (like *20,000 leagues under the sea*, by Stuart Paton, USA 1916) to the depiction of a futuristic oppressive society (like *Metropolis*, by Fritz Lang, Germany 1927), but soon borrowed features of the syntax of the horror (like in an early version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide*, by John S. Robertson USA 1920), and, in the second half of last century, even seemed to border on the western (as some critics have suggested with respect to *Star Wars*, by George Lucas, USA 1977).

7. Repetition and variation

We have already mentioned that for a genre to be established, recognized and accepted, there must be a series of recurring features, or conventions, that can be found in any specific movie which is said to belong to that particular genre. However, this does not

mean that genres can be turned into strict rules: if a "generic" film (i.e. one that can be assigned to a genre) were just to repeat plots, characters, situations, etc. that are typical of its genre, then there would be little interest in watching it. What audiences get used to are repetitive features, but also, and at the same time, some variation across movies. In other words, the film industry must strive to achieve a balance between repetition and variation, between standardization and innovation. A "generic" movie should invite viewers to watch it, on the one hand, with the assurance that their expectations will be confirmed, but, on the other hand, with the promise of something new and (relatively) unpredictable. As Altman notes, "*Genre film suspense is thus almost always fake suspense: in order to participate in the film's strong emotions we must provisionally pretend we don't know that the heroine will be saved, the hero freed, and the couple reunited.*"¹²

This also means that a "generic" film must include intertextual references, i.e. links to other films of the same genre, but also to actors, directors, etc. A musical refers to all the musicals that were made in earlier times (see *La La Land*, above); a war film implicitly suggests all the connections with other war films that we have already seen; we know what to expect in most cases when we go and see a Tom Cruise film; and if you are a Quentin Tarantino fan, the pleasure of watching his new film certainly derives, not only from its new features, but also from your recollection of his previous films. Some directors (starting from Tarantino himself) like to make reference to other films as well as to their own previous work and play with the audience's expectations. All in all, we enjoy both repetition and difference: if all we got from a film were repetitive situations, we would soon get bored; if, on the other hand, everything were totally new, we would probably find the film difficult to understand - but, most importantly, we would not derive the pleasure that comes from seeing our expectations fulfilled. Tarantino is a master of this subtle and difficult balance: he likes to "stretch" and manipulate the conventions of a genre, and therefore our expectations, but we may even enjoy this operation since Tarantino himself makes it very clear and invites us to join him in enjoying the conventions of a genre as well as the departures from them.

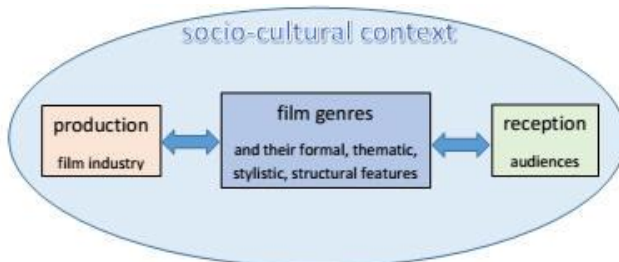
8. Genres as sociocultural elements

We have already discussed how film genres are defined not in a vacuum, as abstract ideas or by single persons or institutions, but are, first and foremost, the result of a sort of "agreement" between the film industry (the "production" side), on the one hand, and the audiences (the "reception" side) on the other - based, of course, on the assumption that films are made to make a profit, and this profit comes from audiences. The "film as product" thus becomes a bridge between production and consumption, a shared code, much the same as any other mass-media product, and a powerful means of communication (particularly nowadays, when physical communities are joined by a host of

¹² Altman, op. cit., p. 25.

virtual Internet communities).

However, we have mentioned that the discourses about films and film genres are not limited to producers and audiences, but imply the participation and interaction of a number of other "stakeholders", from film critics to film scholars, from advertising agencies to cultural institutions. Thus the very definition of "genre" must include the roles that such a concept plays in a variety of different contexts: in other words, film genres are defined and used within a very broad socio-cultural context, as the following graph shows:



While we should always "keep an eye" on the formal, structural, stylistic features of a film genre (i.e. film as text, which we discussed in the above sections), the communicative nature of film genres now needs to be considered - in other words, to fully grasp the nature of film genres we must explore how they are used by different users for different purposes. This will later lead us to consider in more depth what functions (economic, socio-cultural, communicative) genres serve within the overall socio-cultural context in which they are embedded.

9. Beyond film text: the uses of genres

To fully appreciate the different ways in which the same film text is used, we can start (following Altman and Moine¹³) from exhibition modes, i.e. the different venues (physical, but also cultural) where the film is projected and "consumed" by an audience. Showing a film in an "art cinema" rather than in a theatre specialising in pornographic movies or in a film festival specialised in a particular "theme" (from "mountaineering" films to LGBTQI+, from "climate change" movies to women directors), inevitably ends up describing that film (if only temporarily) with a "generic" label. The same could be said when films are mentioned and described in specialised magazines and "trade" publications (besides, of course, magazines devoted to TV programs, or publications targeted at specific audiences, e.g. teenagers).

On a more general level, the role of critics in assigning a film to a particular genre is not to be underestimated, especially because reviews (which now make a large part of many web-

¹³ Altman, op. cit; Moine, op. cit.

based film sites) have a direct impact on their readers, who then may (or may not) become the audience of that film. The often-quoted example of film noir shows how many American post-war movies, which had in no way been labelled like that, were first described by several French critics as noir, an adjective which had for some time been used in France to refer to novels which had dark (rather than simply black) connotations. As the label "film noir" started to be used and quickly gained the "status" of a genre, it was taken up by the industry as a convenient way of describing (and marketing) certain kinds of movies - and the genre then achieved quite a consistent nature, in time too, with the "New Hollywood" and, later the "neo-noir" trend of the 1980s using it repeatedly.

The role of critics has somewhat changed over time, and is now complemented by the work carried out by Internet users who, in web sites, blogs, online chats, social networks, etc., continually define and re-define film genres, showing how audiences are now, in a way, far more active than they used to be, since they contribute to the on-going discourse about films and are often very popular, influencing viewers' choices, opinions and judgments in addition to and beyond the work carried out by critics and film journalists.

More generally speaking, cultural movements have also contributed in a significant way to the recognition of films as specific "genres": LGBTQI+ is an obvious example for gay movies, but the same could be said of feminist movements in helping to establish the (rather broad) category of "women's films" and civil rights movements in introducing "blaxploitation", a term which periodically gains new resonance, as the recent "Black Lives Matter" movement clearly shows.

We have already mentioned the ratings films are given by institutions like the State, the Church and other bodies, i.e. the results of censorship, which has vastly different implications for different countries and across time. The way films are labelled in relation to age restrictions obviously has implications for the genre they are supposed to belong, especially if they are qualified as "adult" movies. Producers usually downplay the importance of ratings in their publicity materials, except, of course, for exclusively adult movies (e.g. the XXX films), which benefit from their rating being clearly displayed, as a sign of belonging to a particular, well-defined genre.

Genre significance also varies across time, and as new genres come to the fore, old labels fade away, or, perhaps even worse, assume a sort of pejorative connotations. "Slapstick" comedy and "melodrama" were for a long time fully recognized genres, but in the course of time have lost this specificity and now describing a film as "melodramatic" is often considered a negative judgment. This should make us conscious of the variance of genre meanings across time, and the importance of not losing sight of the history and evolution of a genre to capture its full significance and its possible connotations.

Such brief considerations point to the crucial fact that film genres do not have "unique" or "universal" meanings shared by all the parties concerned with film (as we have seen, not

just producers and consumers), but can be described in different terms by such parties, according to their purposes and in relation to the contexts in which genres themselves come to be identified and described.

10. Not just genres ...

Using "generic" labels, i.e. publicizing and marketing a film by assigning it to a specific genre, is not always the first choice by producers - indeed, it may be the opposite. While it is true that advertising a movie as "an action-packed film" or a "sexy musical comedy" may go a long way in describing its theme and style to audiences, and thus activate viewers' expectations and, accordingly, a certain degree of confidence that such films will be appreciated by at least certain audiences, it is also true that studios, particularly in the golden era of the "Hollywood system", had several other assets that they could use to promote their films, and, most importantly, to make them as different as possible from the competition. A studio could (and, in a way, modern production system still can) rely on actors under contract, directors, characters, technical processes ("Technicolor", "Cinerama") and their own trade names (a "United Artists" release, a "Paramount" production ... - watch the video below). Using these assets could (and can), on the one hand, save costs, e.g. for producing completely new publicity campaigns, and, on the other hand, provide a continuity with previous films that can be exploited through the audiences' familiarity. This is one of the reasons why, rather than put an emphasis on the genre of a film (genres, by definition, cannot be copyrighted), producers very often prefer to establish series, cycles, sequels, remakes, etc. Using copyrighted characters like Indiana Jones, Rambo, Conan, and the wide range of "superheroes", from Batman and Superman onwards, has proved extremely profitable, as have been recurring names in titles, like Die Hard, Lethal Weapon, Star Trek, Predator, etc. Indiana Jones was first introduced to the audiences as "the new hero from the creators of JAWS and STAR WARS", thus stressing the brand name of the producers (the "creators"). And the same happens when a movie is promoted by highlighting the actors, the directors and the screenwriters of previous successful films. In the last few decades, moreover, this process has become even more sophisticated, as the movie itself is only a sort of "core product" at the centre of myriads of additional or side products, from CDs and DVDs to karaoke discs, from videogames and toys to clothes and even food and beverages - all bearing the basic trade mark of the "franchise".



Best known logos of Hollywood studios

Hollywood industries, as well as more recent production systems, have always tried to reap the full rewards of their films, well beyond the films themselves: each film carried with it important assets like, as we said, the studio's name, the stars involved, the characters and the film titles - all elements that can be used time and time again, thereby creating a "chain" of extra benefits that extends from a film to the next.

11. The functions of genres

Exploring the nature and significance of film genres is a multi-faceted task which, while considering "generic" films as texts, should also discuss their functions as powerful elements of the socio-cultural contexts of cinema. This implies their economic function (i.e. the role that they play in how films are produced following the rules of mass markets), their socio-cultural function (i.e. how they express and mediate between different world views, ideologies and values) and their communicative function (i.e. how audiences interpret a film, relate to other subjects involved in cinema, and thus contribute to shape the meanings that film genres eventually express)¹⁴.

11.1. The economic function

One of the main advantages of establishing recognized, accepted and shared genres for the cinema industry is the opportunity it offers to standardize production, i.e. to offer audiences movies that meet their expectations and can thus guarantee a certain level of box-office success - all this, of course, within the limits imposed by the master principle of "repetition and variation" - a successful film cannot be simply replicated, but should offer elements of novelty and surprise:

"The genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers. Since it is also a practical device for enabling individual media users to plan their choices, it can be considered as a mechanism for ordering the relations between the two main parties to mass communication."¹⁵

The idea of a sort of "assembly-line" production of movies certainly belongs to the "golden era" of Hollywood studios, but even after the collapse of this system, and in more recent decades, it is still widely accepted that being able to rely on a set of different genres can help predict audience expectations (if not really control demand) and, at the same time, differentiate production in order to meet the needs and preferences of different

¹⁴ Moine, op. cit.

¹⁵ McQuail D. 1987. *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (2nd Edn.), Sage, London. Quoted in Chandler, D. 1997. *An Introduction to Genre Theory*, p. 6.

audiences, with the additional, important, bonus of adding standardization and stability to the production process.

However, there remains the question of how to identify a "genre" in the first place. Altman¹⁶ calls the process by which producers establish and manage genres "The Producer's Game", which has a few critical rules:

- "1. From the box-office information, identify a successful film.
2. Analyze the film in order to discover what made it successful.
3. Make another film stressing the assumed formula for success.
4. Check box-office information on the new film and reassess the success formula accordingly.
5. Use the revised formula as a basis for another film.
6. Continue the process indefinitely."

Although this "Game" includes the word "formula" as one of its main principles, it is definitely not a rigid set of "rules" - quite the contrary, it is a highly flexible mechanism which is based, on the one hand, on the constant reference to box-office results (i.e. profitability), and, on the other hand, on a continuous (re)assessment of the features that make a successful film. Far from creating a set of "rules" for a genre, it stresses the qualities of "repetition and variation" which we have already discussed. In a way, this process, which never stops but is closely linked to the constant evolution of the markets, is a very creative one, because it must ensure that a careful balance is achieved between the new and the old, the risks and the guarantee of success - in sum, there is no standardization without innovation - and viceversa.

The history of cinema abounds in examples of the practice of the "Producer's Game". Even outside Hollywood, the game has been used time and time again: in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the British company Hammer specialised in the production of science-fiction and horror films after the great success of "test films" like *The Quatermass experiment* (by Val Guest, GB 1955) and *The curse of Frankenstein* (by Terence Fisher, GB 1957) respectively. After establishing these genres, the company was able to standardize production by employing the same directors, cinematographers, set designers, and, of course, actors (like Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee) - a "recipe" which greatly helped to keep costs at the lowest possible level while maximizing profits.

¹⁶ Altman, op. cit., p. 38.



The Quatermass experiment



The curse of Frankenstein

Although genres can greatly help a company establish a standardized group of films, which are then exploited to the full of the opportunities they offer, the industry must be very careful in keeping the image and "status" of its production quite distinguishable from competitors. This is why, once a genre has been established and after several studios have tried to "copy" the originals, a generic label can become useless and even dangerous for the company which first marketed it. Rather than describe its films as "science fiction" or "horror", that company may prefer to make a prominent display of what it has to offer in terms of differences from its competitors, first of all its stars, but also its characters, its directors, its possible "cycles", and so on. Another reason not to be limited by generic labels in the marketing of films is a company's willingness to promote the same film with the largest possible audience, and not just the fans of a particular genre. This is a powerful example of the different discourses that help to shape the "labels" assigned to a film: it is not just a question of production (i.e. what genre a company is supposed to assign to a particular film), but also, at the same time, but also of marketing and publicity strategies, and, last but not least, what genre the audiences perceive the film to belong to.

After all, companies are concerned not so much with producing films that could fit any particular genre, but first and foremost to make full use of their peculiar brand name and all this has to offer to the market. This is also one of the reasons why genre attribution may change over time in response to changing circumstances. The first 007 James Bond film, which we nowadays would have no difficulty in assigning to the "spy story" genre, was not described like that at all when it was first launched. *Dr No* (by Terence Young, GB 1962), the first film in what would soon become a most successful cycle, was simply presented in posters as "The first James Bond film", with the hero occupying only a small portion of the poster, alongside with a number of beautiful girls; the second film, *From Russia with love* (by Terence Young, GB 1963) was similarly presented as "James Bond is back", but a portion of the poster adds "Sean Connery as James Bond", plus the (already familiar by now) glimpse of beautiful girls and a touch of exotism with a small image of Istanbul - clearly, the effort was to establish a character in order to give rise to a cycle, and also, after the huge success of the first film, to inextricably link the character with the actor (Sean Connery) impersonating it. No mention of genres at all.



Dr. No



From Russia with love

Not much later, in the wake of 007's success, another spy-hero was launched: Harry Palmer (played by Michael Caine) who, in many ways, could be considered the antithesis of Bond: a sort of downbeat alternative, wearing glasses and a dreary raincoat. And yet, if we look at one of the posters advertising the first film in the cycle (*The Ipcress file*, by Sidney J. Furie, GB 1965), we find that it is described as "The most daring "sexpionage" story you will ever see": the fact that "sexpionage" is printed in inverted commas is clearly a sign that a new term was being coined, possibly a new genre (although it didn't turn out to be so), with a hint at both the "spy" and the "sex" components of the story, which were already established as trademarks of the James Bond adventures. In another poster for the same film, the "sex" component is entirely lost, and the film is described as "A thinking man's Goldfinger, funnier by far than any of the Bond films and more rewarding, too!" and also as "An admirable thriller in every respect!". Clearly, the competition was trying to take advantage of the comparison with the already hugely successful James Bond character, and it did so by directly comparing the names of the two spies (with Harry Palmer described as a "thinking man", with the obvious implication that 007 was not ...). The word "thriller" is mentioned, but not as a heavy reference to a genre. This shows that in many cases films are marketed with the clear intent of providing something new, some distinguishable features, thus avoiding "generic" labels" (like "spy story"), which can eventually be added (much) later.



The Ipcress file

Similarly, when the Indiana Jones saga was first launched, the poster for the film (*Indiana Jones and the raiders of the lost ark*) showed the name of the character in large letters at the top

of the poster, with the clear purpose of establishing a new cycle rather than hinting at the kind of film that was presented (no generic labels were used, certainly not "adventure film"). So, all in all, genres are a double-edged sword for cinema industries: they can be profitably used to inform audiences of the kind of story being told, but they can also become a "straightjacket" with the opposite effect - so, once again, a balance must be struck between addressing audience expectations and distinguishing a particular product by avoiding generic labels and thus differentiating it from its possible competitors.

11.2. *The socio-cultural function*

The discussion on the functions that genres fulfil in the socio-cultural context has been heavily influenced by ideological concerns. For some, genres are one of the best ways through which audiences can see their hopes, aspirations, values, beliefs and attitudes mirrored on the screen; for others, they are instead a way through which institutions (both private and public) can convey messages, influence people's behaviour and maintain the status quo, i.e. the values and ideologies of the dominant classes and the prevailing power relationships. This, in turn, points to two very different concepts of the function of mass media in modern societies - one emphasizing the value of popular (mass) production, the other seeing this production as alienated and repressed by the dominant social system. In any case, there is no doubt that film genres, as all other cultural artifacts, are not neutral, but rather express different, even alternative, world views.

Film genres (like all examples of "genres") are characterized by some recurring, if not repetitive, features, which tend to provide audiences with characters, stories, situations which can easily turn into stereotypes. Now, stereotypes are over-simplified views that deny singularity and differentiation and promote generic, ready-made value judgments - as such, they lend themselves easily to reducing the complexity and diversity of phenomena to simplistic ideas. The "happy ending" of many (Hollywood) movies is often cited to show how an audience can easily be influenced and alienated from the harsh facts of reality, suggesting dreams and aspirations that can hardly be realized for most members of the audience itself in the real world. This has been considered as a way to distract viewers away from the problems that await them outside the theatre, far from the screen - an "escapist", illusionary function that generic films can fulfil, especially at particular times in history. The musical genre of the 1930s, for example, by offering love stories in a (usually) high-level social context, where "problems" can be solved by singing and dancing, leading to the bliss of the couple in question (remember the Astaire-Rogers films) has been seen as a powerful instrument to move audiences away from the realities of the Great Depression and into an imaginary, illusionary world, a way to escape from the daily reality of actual social problems. In the same vein, monsters belonging to vastly different film traditions, from Murnau's *Nosferatu*, made in 1922 in the critical period of the German Republic of Weimar, to Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and Cooper and Schoedsack's *King Kong* in the

early 1930s American Great Depression, seem to transfer the audience away from the depressing reality of the times, displacing them to another, imaginary level.



Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror



King Kong

"[King Kong] ... converts social danger (the crisis) into a sexual danger (the representation of the crisis exclusively involves a woman – Ann is a thief before becoming the catalyst for Kong's amorous passion). At the same time, it empties historical time of its actual culture (New York in the 1930s) in order to replace it with a mythical and imaginary world (the kingdom of Kong). It is not surprising that commentators and critics have often seen in the irruption of King Kong in New York the return, terrifying and phantasmagorical, of the repressed – whether psychic (the Other, desire, the all-powerfulness of impulses, etc.), or social (the Great Depression, the effects of which are quickly shown and evacuated at the beginning of the film, returning in the form of a monster that destroys everything in its passage)"¹⁷

More recently, in similar critical periods film genres have helped viewers divert their anxiety from actual social and economic problems by displacing their fears to alternative causes, as the so-called disaster movies tried to do: the 1970s saw the production of films like *The Poseidon adventure* (by Ronald Neame, USA 1972), *The towering inferno* (by John Guillermin, Irwin Allen, USA 1974) and even the early Spielberg blockbuster *Jaws* (USA 1975) - but the 1970s were also the time that saw the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the oil crisis and an economic recession. Those who believe in the alienating function of film genres had reasons to suggest that real dangers were replaced and exorcised by fictitious, far-removed dangers, thus reinforcing the ideology of the dominant social values.



The towering inferno

¹⁷ Ishaghpour Y. 1982. *D'une image à l'autre*, Denoël, Paris, pp. 83–103. Quoted in Moine, op. cit., p. 95.

Whright¹⁸ goes so far as to suggest that some of the most popular (Hollywood) film genres all fulfil this function, by presenting a simplified view of reality where problems are solved in a superficial way so as to leave the audience "exorcised" and satisfied with what is just another way of turning one's back to the "real" problems. Thus science-fiction films dissolve the problems posed by "the Other" into alien forces; westerns show how violence can lead to the use of force to achieve legal order; and gangster films demonstrate that the "gangster", i.e. an outlaw who tries to climb the social ladder with violence, is ultimately a tragic hero, destined to failure and possibly death, since success sought outside one's own social class brings no reward. This ideological view is hidden by replacing the real social causes of this human condition with psychological causes, so that the gangster's tragic figure is often presented as a psychotic personality, as in *The public enemy* (by William A. Wellman, USA 1931).



The public enemy

However, this "negative" view of the social function of film genres is counterbalanced by other approaches, which tend to present them as collective expressions of the socio-cultural contexts and problems of their respective audiences - in this case, the genre is not seen as a manipulation of the viewers but rather as one powerful way of highlighting tensions and conflicts in an attempt to express them on the screen and possibly even solve them. According to this view, then, westerns embody, through their stories and characters, some essential cultural conflicts (e.g. the myth of the frontier as the dividing line between wilderness and civilization), which already exist as concepts belonging to a society's mental structure. Schatz¹⁹ suggests that most classical film genres express one of two major classes of conflicts through their narrative structures and their corresponding iconographies: on the one hand, the western, the detective film and the gangster film give concrete substance to the already mentioned conflict between the legal and the illegal, chaos and order, and are thus quite "physical" in their *mise-en-scène* which privileges open spaces; on the other hand, the musical, the screwball comedy and the melodrama express more personal psychological conflicts through a *mise-en-scène* that prefers "enclosed" spaces. Of course, such a drastic opposition needs to be tempered by avoiding simple dichotomies (e.g. not all movies of the first class feature men prominently, and not all films of the second class

¹⁸ Whright, J. H. 1995. "Genre Films and the Status Quo", in Grant, B. K. (Ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*, University of Texas Press, Austin, pp. 41–49. Quoted in Moine, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁹ Schatz 1981, op. cit.

feature women prominently) - plus the fact that, as we have already mentioned, genres often mix and clear-cut distinctions cannot so easily be made.

The latter part of last century, and increasingly the 21st century, have witnessed a huge development of what may generally be classed "fantasy films" - a sort of super-genre which actually cuts across several different, more traditional genres like science-fiction and horror, plus the amazing production of super-hero films. The central concern of all these films seems to be a conflict, or at least a confrontation, between "man" and "other beings", like non-human, semi-human and even animal creatures. It is human identity which is clearly at stake here: modern (wo)man's impossibility to define her/himself and her/his nature, when faced with "machines" which cannot simply be "used" but give way to different sort of (positive and negative) relationships, with a virtual dimension which increasingly seems to connote such relationships. Thus "fantasy" films, in their rich range of "sub-genres", raise questions of identity, inclusion and exclusion, positive and negative forces at play between man and a world that is rapidly changing its traditional connotations. Starting with James Bond, who "uses" machines and technology in a masterly way while not forgetting his sensuality (of which he is a master, too), and proceeding with the Star Wars and Star Trek sagas, where androids and humans interface and are active agents in the struggle between good and evil, "life" and "death" forces, "fantasy" films have also dealt with evil extra-terrestrials who even infiltrate the human body (as in the *Alien* franchise), and, although in quite different ways, with animals as another dimension of human life and the associated biotechnologies (from *Jaws* to *Jurassic Park*), until we reach the ultra- or super-natural dimension of generations of super-heroes.



The *Alien* saga

These considerations also help us to realize the potential of film genres as socio-cultural agents. The consumption of generic films, often (although now certainly less than in the past) carried out as a collective experience, provides not just the pleasure of seeing one's own values and/or conflicts expressed on the screen, but also the opportunity to experience the sharing of common concerns, of feeling (although maybe briefly and fleetingly) a sense of "community". Of course, as we have just seen, this view of film genres is always filtered through opposing ideologies.

At the same time, however, the socio-cultural functions of film genres, as we have considered them in this section, must give due attention to the role of audiences, since films acquire their full meaning when they are actually seen, analysed and interpreted by actual viewers, who are not just passive recipients of sounds and images from the screen.

Viewers' experiences with previous films, their motivations, expectations, beliefs and attitudes interact with the films as texts, making audiences active participants in the process, so that the functions of genres can only be assessed in the light of this interaction. Also, the vast majority of studies on film genres deal with Hollywood movies, thereby insinuating the doubt of an ethnocentric view. Other film industries, which are the expression of different cultures, produce film genres that may be interpreted quite differently.

Certainly the Hollywood (and, at least partially, more generally Western) cinema industries are powerful financial corporations, obviously serving the economic and ideological interest of their stakeholders, which makes their products (films, and film genres in particular) capable of exercising a degree of control on the receptive side as well, i.e. on audiences. This is a crucial key in explaining the success of a Hollywood genre, by relating the economic with the socio-cultural functions of genres. The formula, as Altman has shown²⁰ is to combine the financial-economic objectives of the cinema industry with the aspirations and preferences of audiences: when this happens, box-office success is (almost) assured, and the ideological implications of the whole operation usually remain in the background. Audiences can continue to delight in pleasures that would otherwise not be allowed by watching them through the filters of genre films: thus, gangsters, horrific monsters and dangerous aliens can commit all sorts of hideous actions on the screen, with the assurance that by the end they will be punished; and characters in comedies can go a little too far in their sexual encounters and misunderstandings, with the assurance that "proper" behaviour will be restored by the end of the movie.

11.3. The communicative function

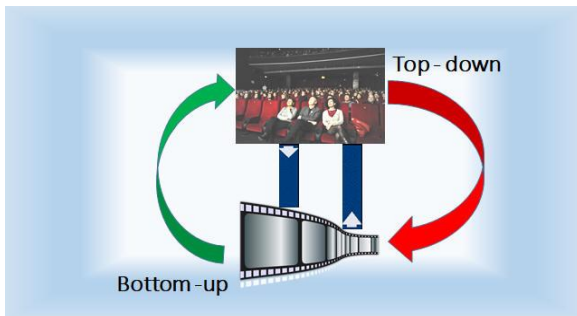
The primary level of communication supported by film genres is obviously with respect to the audiences, who are the final consumers of film as product. We have already remarked how genres, by presenting audiences with well-known, accepted conventions (from topics and themes to characters and settings, etc.) greatly help viewers to activate expectations, to retrieve background knowledge and eventually to understand, interpret and appreciate a particular "generic" film. Audience response is a complex psycho-social process (described in detail in Mariani²¹), whereby viewers actively construct meaning from what they see and

²⁰ Altman, op. cit. Quoted in Moine, op. cit., p. 105.

²¹ Mariani L. 2018. *Expectations, attitudes and strategies: a bridge between screen and audience.*



hear by combining two main kinds of mental processes: top-down (the previous knowledge and experience which they bring to the viewing) and bottom-up (the information that is delivered through the actual film text they are viewing), as the figure below shows.



The role that genres play in this process can hardly be underestimated. By making available well-known conventional content, they assist audiences in approaching a film with the correct and appropriate cognitive anticipation and emotional involvement, which makes the process of meaning-formation easier and quicker. As soon as we watch the opening sequence of any James Bond film, we immediately activate a range of information elements, many of which are conventions that we have learned by watching previous 007 movies (from themes to characters, from typical situations to the smallest details about James Bond's life and characteristic features).

This powerful function that genres exercise over audiences has been considered, on the one hand, in terms of useful guidelines which assist and improve viewers' understanding and appreciation of a movie, and, on the other hand, in terms of pre-determined routes that viewers are obliged to follow, in a way limiting their own personal experience with the movie itself and pointing to "preferred" meanings. Both positions have some truth in them, but fail to recognize that audiences are made up of individuals who have their own "story" in terms of previous experiences and expectations, and also that multiple users can give rise to multiple (and often conflicting) interpretations. In other words, audiences are not passive subjects, but rather active "constructors" of meaning, so that watching a movie is an on-going process, in which genre conventions play their role within the context of an active mind who is also alert in spotting deviations from the conventions and in responding to unexpected twists and turns. In order for a movie to be successful, at least at the box-office, there must be a sort of tacit, implicit, agreement between the film (and its makers) and the audiences, who must accept some essential shared features (the "conventions of the genre") but must also feel free to orient their viewing according to their own experiences, beliefs, attitudes and values. In other words, watching a movie is not a matter of "accepting" or "refusing" its form and content, but is rather a matter of "negotiating" between different interpretations, and even of debating or rejecting them. This also relates to the remark we have already made, i.e. that working within a genre

means not only making use of well-established conventions ("repetition") but also inventing something new and perhaps unexpected ("variation")(see Section 7 above). Too much routine gets boring, but too many challenges may lead to the audience's irritation, misunderstanding and, in extreme cases, to the genre being subverted, thus losing its value and usefulness.



STOP AND THINK

The power of genre conventions becomes particularly clear when they are "broken", i.e. when we form expectations based on the conventions, but are then forced to "re-orient" them in the light of new input, or new elements that appear on the screen.

* Watch the first 60 seconds of Video 1 below and then STOP. What kind of genre do you think this movie belongs to? Briefly list the conventions that help you to form expectations as to the genre involved.

* Now continue watching the video. Have your expectations changed? Why, i.e. what new elements are introduced and challenge your initial attribution of the movie to a particular genre?

* Watch Video 2 below. Again, decide which genre you think the movie belongs to and make a brief list of the relevant conventions.

* In both cases (Video 1 and Video 2) how has your previous knowledge of the film, the director, the actors, etc. helped you to form your expectations as regards the genre involved?²²



Video 1



Video 2

In Video 1, the genre conventions clearly point to this movie as a horror. However, after the first 60 seconds, we hear "Action!" and other voices in the background, and we realize that this was a horror movie being shot: we see the set, and the actor being helped out of his position (we will discover that he suffers from claustrophobia!). Then the video proceeds with the opening credits superimposed on the presentation of the main

²² Video 1: *Body double* (by Brian De Palma, USA 1984); Video 2: *Young Frankenstein* (by Mel Brooks, USA 1974)

character, and we have no other indication of its actual genre. However, if we are familiar with director De Palma and its film production, we have good reason to assume that the film we have just been introduced to will be some sort of thriller (with the opening sequence working at all effects as a parody of horror films). If we have seen and remember the actual film (*Body double*) we are of course in a better position to interpret and appreciate this opening sequence.

Video 2 is, again, a clear introduction to a horror film. However, even in this case our own previous knowledge of the film and of its director (Mel Brooks) and/or actors (including Gene Wilder) will enable us to assign this movie to a special genre - the comedy-horror (or, again, a parody of horror films, and of the Frankenstein films in particular).

All this clearly shows that viewers start watching a movie with many kinds of previous information stored in their minds, as regards the movie itself, but also the director, the actors, the theme/topic - and this information comes from all sorts of different sources, like advertisements, TV trailers, film reviews, newspaper and magazine articles, discussions with friends, chats, blog and web sites on the Internet, etc. This points to some important facts. First, viewers use all this background information as the top-down part of the viewing process, integrating it with the information that comes, bottom-up, from the film they are actually watching. Second, genres are established not only through the films themselves, but also through many other sources of information which, directly and indirectly, form a network of communicative discourses which intersect and interact with the main relationship between the producers (the film companies) and the consumers (the audiences), as shown in the figure at the beginning of Section 8. Third, watching a "generic" film always implies a dynamic process of mediation between the author of the film (often, but not always, identified with the director) and the viewers: if the intention of the former coincides with the expectations and interpretations of the latter, the process is successful; if there is some sort of discrepancy, the film may become difficult or even impossible to decipher, leading to viewers' frustration (or, in a more positive context, leading to viewers constructing an alternative interpretation).

This explains why a "generic" label superficially attached to a film may turn out to be an element of confusion rather than understanding: if we label as "war films by Steven Spielberg, USA 1998)" such different movies as *Full metal jacket* (by Stanley Kubrick, USA 1987), *Saving Private Ryan* (by Steven Spielberg, USA 1998), *The thin red line* (by Terrence Malick, USA 1998) and *Dunkirk* (by Christopher Nolan, GB/USA/France/Holland 2017) we may find out (perhaps too late!) that our expectations as regards a "war film" are met in very different ways by such movies - which makes "genre" only one of the possible ways of approaching a film.



Full metal jacket



Saving Private Ryan



The thin red line



Dunkirk



STOP AND THINK

* Have you seen, do you remember and/or are you familiar with the four "war" movies we have just mentioned? If so, would you simply assign them to the "war" genre, or would you differentiate one from the other? What elements would you use for such a differentiation? (You may consider the list of genre conventions which we discussed in Section 4.)

* If you have not seen these films or do not remember them well enough, watch the videos above (and, if you like, watch other excerpts from the same films on YouTube). What elements would help you to assign all of them to the "war genre"? What other elements would help you to differentiate one from the other? (You may consider the mentioned list of genre conventions).

12. A historical perspective

To fully appreciate the meaning and value of film genres it is important to consider them through the history of cinema - which means asking ourselves when and how a particular genre came into being, its popularity and the variability of its mass appeal, whether it underwent changes and why, if and when it became obsolescent and eventually disappeared, and whether its features were incorporated into a similar or different genre. Answering such complex questions naturally implies constant reference to the aspects which we have already discussed, namely the essential features of a genre (in Sections 4 to 7) and its economic, socio-cultural and communicative functions (in Sections 8 to 11).

12.1. *The evolutionary perspective*

When the concept of "evolution" is applied to a film genre, we can see it as appearing at a particular moment in time in opposition to (or in competition with) other previous or contemporary similar films, from which it progressively differentiates itself until it achieves a recognizable, original form. This form is then successfully repeated through a succession of movies until it becomes a sort of "canon" or "blueprint". The popularity of this new genre brings along a number of imitators which turn the original into a stereotype: at this stage, it becomes the target of other, more innovative forms, which causes the original to lose its impact. The new form turns into a new genre and begins a similar process. This perspective views innovation and competition as the key agents, through which a (new) genre both achieves its original status and loses it under the pressure of (new) more powerful forms.

The evolutionary view thus identifies different stages in the life cycle of a genre: the new form first consolidates its essential features (iconography, themes, patterns, etc.), then achieves a classic (or maturity) stage or "golden age", and later begins its process of decadence, which can take various forms (e.g., a revision of its original features, the introduction of more complex issues which depart from its classical forms, a reflection on its own characteristics, i.e. questioning its own status, until we reach the more extreme forms of parody or satire of its topical aspects). As we shall see, this "final" stage can cause the original genre to change, blend with or extend to various elements of the same or other genres, a process which we can call "hybridization". For example,

"The backstage musical provides a textbook illustration of a genre's development from a period of experimentation in which the conventions are established (1929-33) to a classical period during which a balance reigns (1933-53) to a period of reflexivity dominated by parody contestation and even deconstruction of a genre's native tongue."²³

Film scholar André Bazin has described in similar terms the evolution of the western. Western as a topic, theme or setting had been present almost since the birth of cinema, with *The great train robbery* (by E.S. Porter, USA 1903) often mentioned as the first "western", although at the time this film was promoted by using other, then more fashionable terms, like "the chase film", "the railroad film" or "the crime film" - indeed, there was no "western" genre recognized as such.



The great train robbery

²³ Feuer J. 1993. *The Hollywood musical* (2nd Ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington. Quoted in Altman R. 1999. *Film/Genre*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 22.

In fact, it was only in the 1930s that the "western" gradually achieved its "classical" perfection, with such films as *Stagecoach* (by John Ford, USA 1939) or *Northwest passage* (USA 1940) by King Vidor: "John Ford achieved a perfect equilibrium between social myths, historical evocation, psychological truth, and the traditional themes of the western *mise-en-scène*."²⁴



Stagecoach

The war years were the genre's turning point, since they speeded up a development which implied the inclusion of other aspects of an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, erotic, etc. order - aspects which were not intrinsic to the classical form, but which now became prominent as directors started to employ them with a conscious reflection on the western itself as a genre. A clear example is *Duel in the sun* (by King Vidor, USA 1947).



Duel in the sun

The original trailer describes as a film offering, in the first place, "moments of romance", emphasizing the sensuous, erotically-charged atmosphere in the relationship between Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck, and only after that "moments of adventure" - plus "moments of comedy", "moments of tenderness", "moments of heartbreak" - culminating in the final scene where the two lovers shoot each other, but die in each other's arms. The "adventurous" side of the western, with its mythic iconography and classical "virile" themes, is explicitly accompanied, even superseded, by other themes, first and foremost love ("romance, tenderness, heartbreak") and even "comedy". Note that, since the way a film is publicized and marketed tells much about its prospective audience(s), a film like this is clearly trying to attract not just the traditional "male" audience of the western, but also (and perhaps even more) the relatively "new" female audience that was quickly gaining prominence in the post-war years.

²⁴ Bazin, A. 1995. "Évolution du western", in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Cerf, Paris, pp. 229–239. Quoted in Moine R. 2008. *Cinema genre*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 153.

Thus the western was opening its doors to other themes, foreshadowing what were later to be called "revisionist" westerns, in which some of the traditional topics and issues were put into question or explicitly reformulated, like the "hero vs villain" dualism, the use of violence as a way of settling disputes, or a new attitude towards "Native Americans", no longer represented as "savages". Just a few years later, the "New Hollywood" directors would put even more pressure on questioning classical western myths and exposing the violence perpetrated by the "civilized" man, with films like *Little Big Man* (by Arthur Penn, USA 1970) and *Soldier Blue* (by Ralph Nelson, USA 1970), where the genocide of the Native Americans is described in devastating, almost unbearable detail.



Little big man



Soldier blue

A similar route we have examined for the western can be explored by referring to another classical genre, i.e. the musical. If we take the Astaire-Rogers musicals of the 1930s as examples of its classic "golden age", then several post-war musicals exhibit a tendency to become self-reflective, by, e.g., making allusions to earlier musicals, borrowing songs and famous scenes, or celebrating, often with affection and admiration, past hits - all signs that the musical has gone beyond its classical formula and is perhaps reaching some sort of decline. These signs can already be read in the 1950s, in movies which were nevertheless still very successful - the typical example being *Singin' in the rain* (by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, USA 1952), with its nostalgic evocation of the glorious (although problematic) days of the transition from silent to sound film, or *The Band Wagon* (by Vincente Minnelli, USA 1953) in which Astaire plays a once famous star of musical comedies, now almost forgotten, who manages to arrange his comeback on stage with the help of some friends: the end of the film is in fact a sort of celebration of Astaire and, with him, of the glorious past of the musical genre.



The Band Wagon

As we mentioned about the western, the musical, too, started to incorporate themes and tones from different genres: the clearest example is perhaps *Seven brides for seven brothers* (by Stanley Donen, USA 1954), which is basically a musical in a western setting.



Seven brides for seven brothers

12.2. *The ultimate evolution: parody and satire*

The evolution of genres, especially their transition from a "classic" maturity stage towards new forms (and possibly new genres or sub-genres) thus includes such phenomena as the inclusion of new themes or topics, the partial mixing with other genres, the tendency to become self-referential (and therefore achieve some kind of reflexivity) and, as a more radical change, the appearance of parodies of the film genre itself, in a way the ultimate recognition that a genre has fully developed its intrinsic potential and can now be exploited on a secondary level, by exposing and satirizing its forms and conventions.

In parodies, themes, topics and conventions of a genre are recycled with a comic purpose. This, of course, presupposes that the audience is fully knowledgeable with the main features of a given genre, so that viewers can recognize them: this, in turn, gives the same viewers a double cause for entertainment, since they can enjoy the original conventions of the parodied genre and, at the same time, enjoy the comic or satirical way in which such conventions are treated.

Practically every genre has given rise to corresponding parodies, which have sometimes been very successful as "original" movies in their own right. Examples include the horror (like *Young Frankenstein*, by Mel Brooks, USA 1974), the western (like *Blazing saddles*, by Mel Brooks, USA 1974) and the so-called "disaster movies" (like *Airplane!*, by Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker, USA 1980), which had become popular in the 1970s.



Young Frankenstein



Blazing saddles



Airplane!

A particular, subtler kind of parody or satire does not necessarily imply a comic intent, but rather a sophisticated re-working of the conventions of a genre - which requires, in the

first place, a thorough awareness and knowledge of such conventions and the ability to manipulate them with great skills and expertise, and in the second place, a deeper, subtler treatment of the subject matter (which the comic intent, here lacking, makes somewhat easier and more evident). On the viewers' part, too, such parodies require an ability to recognize the parodical intent behind the "façade" and appreciate the overall operation carried out by the director/screenwriter. A classic example is *Zelig* (by Woody Allen, USA 1983), which is what has become to be known as "mockumentary", i.e. a false biographical documentary which builds a fake biography of a supposedly famous person - inviting viewers to believe in what they see and hear, but also prompting them to appreciate the subtle re-working of the well-known conventions of the "biopic" film genre.



Zelig

Zelig tells the story of a sort of "chameleon" who can take on the characteristics of the strong personalities around him, eventually turning into an actor. Director Woody Allen uses all the means at his disposal to make the movie as "realistic" as possible: real and fake images cleverly mixed together, a voice-over commentary, interviews with contemporary intellectuals which analyse and testify to the man's qualities, and even fake sequences from an American B-movie about an episode in his life. (We shall return to this particular "genre" when discussing what more recently have been called "mockumentaries" and "docudrama".)

12.3. Beyond the evolutionary view

In the course of time, several criticisms have been levelled at the just described evolutionary perspective, highlighting the fact that the stages through which a genre is supposed to go through, from birth to maturity to decline, tend to describe a pre-determined, rigid, almost deterministic route, when in fact genres develop and evolve in a constant process of (re)definition. Also, the examples generally quoted to identify the various "stages" do not take into account the large variety of films produced at different points in time, which do not seem to describe such a straightforward route. And, as we have already noted, genres always interact with one another and the process of hybridization is always at work, making a genre's status temporary and subject to change.

"These theories, by making a determinist principle the key to the evolution of genres, relegate to the ranks of the coincidental the whole history of changes affecting the social, cultural, and political contexts of films, the modifications that occur to the economic and aesthetic system of their production, and changes in the nature of audiences and their expectations. While this model might be useful for appraising classical

*Hollywood genres, despite its systematizing nature, it is not very relevant to an understanding of genres after the studio era, or those that flourished in places other than Hollywood."*²⁵

Just to return to the genres we have briefly examined in the above discussion, parodies of westerns were made even as early as the 1910s, and a consideration of socio-cultural contexts leads us to observe that what we may now perceive as a "classic" example like *Stagecoach* may have been perceived by its contemporary audiences as a film which was recycling and reviving forms and conventions of earlier westerns.

Besides, as we have seen, the very tendency of a (once) "pure" genre to survive by incorporating themes that were not part of its original features enable genres to survive, even in quite different forms, contributing to a process of hybridization which is one of the major aspects of genre evolution. In the new century, for example, the musical has been revived in the form of melodrama in *Dancer in the dark* (by Lars von Trier, Denmark/Argentina/Finland/France/Germany/Iceland/Italy/Holland/Norway/Spain/Sweden/G B 2000), where a poor Czech immigrant in the U.S.A. (Icelandic musician Bjork) fights her impending blindness in order to work and save money to pay for her son's operation, which may save him from blindness too; or in the form of comedy/crime in *Chicago* (by Rob Marshall, USA 2002), where two dancers (Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones) both end up in jail, charged with murder, with the latter defended by a brilliant lawyer (Richard Gere).



Dancer in the dark



Chicago

12.4. *Genesis of a genre*

We have already mentioned the fact that although *The great train robbery* (1903) has long been considered the first example of a western, its audiences would not identify it as such simply because the western as a genre did not exist in public discourse. This points to the principle that genres can be identified only after many films have been produced that share some generic qualities and a "label" has been created and shared among the various communities that have some kind of interest in it (in the first place producers and audiences, but also journalists, critics, scholars, advertisers, etc.). In other words, such communities must develop an awareness of a new genre, and give it a name, before films can be assigned to the emerging category. This means that a historical perspective is

²⁵ Moine, op. cit., p. 157-158.

needed to ascertain the time of "birth" of a new genre.

Altman²⁶ notes that the new genre may emerge from genres already in circulation in other artistic domains, such as literature (for the western), theatre (for melodrama) and non-fiction (for the biopic), or from themes linked with emerging issues and concerns, like technology (e.g. sound as a prerequisite for the musical, scientific and technological knowledge for the science-fiction film). However, how can we explain the birth of a really new genre from pre-existing types of films that already exhibited some features that would be adopted in the new genre? For example, musical melodrama and musical comedy have little in common, and yet there are some pre-existing relationships that they share: in this case, the presence of music as a vehicle for giving form to a performance: what we now often consider as an early musical classic like *The Broadway melody* (by Harry Beaumont, USA 1929) was not considered a "musical" when it was launched.

In order for the genre "musical" to emerge as an independent label, however, there must be a number of films that go beyond the typical material (i.e. music) and add new themes/topics connected to that material in such a way that its name (music) can be used as a generic label: in this case, the specific use of music as a unifying and structuring element to express love and romance in a couple. But for this new label (musical) to be assigned to certain films, the audience has to become so aware of the structures binding such films in a single category that they start identifying them through the structural concept. In other words, viewers must begin having expectations tied to the label "musical" (like characters, plots, relationships, style, etc.) that they attribute meaning to certain films on the basis of this process. Thus, an Astaire-Rogers film becomes a "musical" in public discourse because audiences start to expect a love story expressed through singing and dancing (like in *Swing time*, by George Stevens, USA 1936).



Swing time

Likewise, the term "western" was used for a long time in association with a wide range of other genres, like "western romance", "western comedy", "western melodrama", etc. - all films where the adjective "western" was used to qualify comedies, melodramas, etc., which shared some superficial western motifs like characters, scenery or iconography. It was only when a substantial number of films started to take as their main themes topics like the spread of civilization against the "savage Indians", the contrast between a lawless wild West and the establishment of law and justice, or the building of a national American

²⁶ The theme of this and the following paragraph follows Altman, op. cit., pp. 20 and 53.

identity tied to the colonization of the western lands, that the term "western" began to be assigned to films exhibiting such issues and activating relevant audience expectations (like in *Wagon master*, by John Ford, USA 1950).



Wagon master

Thus, according to this view, the emergence of a new genre is a process which implies an awareness, from both production (cinema industries) and reception (cinema audiences) of a set of films which can be attributed to a certain type because they express specific kinds of form and/or content. This means that the same genre can emerge in different contexts and at different times, so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to "pin down" a genre to a specific "date of birth". Moine (Note 5) provides the example of the so-called "peplum", i.e. films set in ancient times in Egyptian, Greek, Roman or even imaginary contexts: films of this type were produced early in Italian cinema (e.g. *Quo vadis?*, by Enrico Guazzoni, Italy 1913, or *Cabiria*, by Giovanni Pastrone, Italy 1914) as well as in Hollywood (e.g. *The ten commandments*, by Cecil B. De Mille, USA 1923, or *Ben Hur*, by Fred Niblo, USA 1926), but the term "peplum" itself only emerged in France in the 1960s, and only after that it was adopted by general audiences. For this to take place, however, we have to wait until the Italian production of Italian ideological films of the Mussolini era (like *Scipio the African*, by Carmine Gallone, Italy 1937) and immediately after the war (with films like *Labours of Hercules*, by Pietro Francisci, Italy 1957): this opened the way to the big Hollywood productions of the 1950s (e.g. the remake of *The ten commandments*, by Cecil B. De Mille, USA 1956), which, besides reaching French screens again, paved the way to the (often low-budget) Italian movies of the 1960s (like *Ulysses*, by Mario Camerini, Mario Bava (uncredited), Italy/USA/France 1954), with which the term "peplum" was eventually attached.



The ten commandments



Ulysses

Although the term then began to be associated to a large number of films of this sort, but vastly different in terms of country of origin, level of budget and ideological background, the same term never actually spread in America, where the term "epic" was rather used - also applied to such later different films as *Spartacus* (by Stanley Kubrick, USA 1960) or, more recently, *Gladiator* (by Ridley Scott, USA 2000).

13. Genres and "cycles"



STOP AND THINK

The James Bond saga is probably one of the longest running in the industry, having produced so far (2021) twenty-five movies since the very first one, *Dr. No* (by Terence Young, GB/USA 1962).

To refresh your memory about the 007 saga, watch the compilation below - and, if possible, think back to Bond films you have watched and can remember. Would you call this saga a "film genre"? Why/Why not? What criteria would you use to give your answer? Then read my comments below



A playlist of opening sequences of James Bond films

The history of cinema can be viewed as an ever-growing collection of films, i.e. the production of groups of films which share certain features - without necessarily turning into proper "film genres" as we have tried to describe them. If quite a large number of movies, which both film industries and consumers identify as sharing similar features, start to be produced, we can witness the birth of a "cycle", which may or may not develop into a recognized "genre". There are various reasons to explain such developments. A cycle usually develops out of previous movies, which are differentiated by the inclusion of (relatively) new forms and topic/themes. 007 movies can be described as "spy stories", part, perhaps, of the more general group "adventure stories" - and, from the very beginning, the James Bond iconography (a very special secret agent "with the license to kill", hyper-technology, glamorous locations and even more glamorous groups of Bond-girls, etc.) as well as the topics/themes (generally speaking, Bond trying to save the world from the threat of destruction by a secret power, making him a sort of super-hero) have given shape to a distinctive "cycle" which is very clearly recognizable right from the start of each movie, with its opening sequence and relevant soundtrack (as the above video shows).

And yet, can we speak of a "James Bond" film genre (or, in much the same terms, of a "Rocky" or "Rambo" genres)? Probably not, and we can try to list some of the main reasons for this. First, the "image" of the protagonist (and the associated "public images" of the actors playing him, from Sean Connery onwards) is unique, although it has been

replicated several times with different degrees of success, and is so distinctive that it is often more interesting than the plots themselves. Second, and on the other hand, the "ingredients" of the saga, most notably the sexual and technological motifs, are certainly not unique to the Bond films. Third, the topics/themes are also shared by other kinds of films. Fourth, the Bond films can be said to "beckon" to other genres, from comedy to science fiction, from adventure to romance. Thus the 007 saga has not turned into a recognized genre, but has remained a highly successful, independent "cycle", like a brand which cannot be replicated.

By contrast, the so-called "disaster movies", which can be said to begin in the early 1970s with movies like *The Poseidon adventure* (by Ronald Neame, USA 1972), display all the qualities to give birth to a genre.



The Poseidon adventure

*"Disaster films are motion pictures which depict an impending or ongoing disaster as a central plot feature. The films typically feature large casts and multiple storylines and focus on the protagonists' attempts to avert, escape, or cope with the disaster presented."*²⁷ Such movies, unlike the Bond films, are not focussed on a single interesting character but are unified by the "disaster" level of the plot and by shared story developments which usually lead to a happy end (although often with a massive loss of lives and other terrifying consequences). Such shared features have become so distinctive in a large number of movies that "disaster" now qualifies a specific set of films, i.e. a genre (perhaps within the more general "adventure" genre, which has in the meantime so widened its scope as to be much too "generic" as a genre ...).

*"The birth of a cinematic genre is always the outcome of a combination of factors, being the result of a process in which several cinematic genres and several cultural forms meet. However, there also needs to be a particular conjunction of historical circumstances for an identifiable filmic formula to become established. The industrial conditions relating to cinema also enter into this conjunction."*²⁸

14. The end of film genres?

We have already mentioned how the western genre underwent radical modifications from the 1950s onwards, and increasingly so in the following decades. This was a particular time

²⁷ From Wikipedia.

²⁸ Moine, op. cit., pp. 167-168.

in the history of cinema, with several dramatic changes taking place within the span of just a few years: the Paramount case (1948) banned the "vertical integration" of film companies, whereby they controlled film production and distribution through the ownership of theatres; the progressive weakening of the self-censorship system known as Hays code (1968); the advent of television with its fierce, devastating competition; and, as a partial consequence of all this, the collapse of the studio system, which for decades had controlled the work of all professionals with its strict system of contracts, which in turn paved the way to the emergence of a group of young directors (the so-called "movie brats"), like Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian DePalma and others, well-versed in the history of cinema, often coming out of academic film studies, and at the same time possessing a deep knowledge of classical film genres (which, paradoxically, they had grown up watching on television). At the same time, the "auteur theories", originated in Europe and elsewhere with a series of "New waves", shifted the power and role of directors away from production companies, allowing them an unprecedented amount of freedom, which they could use to give voice to a new socio-cultural sensibility - in the process, using genres only if and how they wanted to, reaffirming or, more often, reinterpreting them without the heavy legacy of the mythology of classical Hollywood.

No wonder, then, that many wondered if film genres had reached their end. However, as happens with so many aspects in the history of cinema, the presence of genres in the "New Hollywood" was not to be dismissed so easily. A case in point is, once again, the quintessential Hollywood genre, the western. If in so many of classical westerns the cavalry arrived in the nick of time to save the civilised white people from the savagery of wild "Indians", this image, and the concepts underlying it, was seriously questioned in the post-war years, with so many wars fought (and, more often than not, lost) by the U.S.A. in various places like Korea and Vietnam - not to mention the new threat of international terrorism. It is no surprise, then, if that convention seems to resurface in a completely different genre, the science fiction of *Star Wars* (by George Lucas, USA 1977), when Hal Solo (Harrison Ford) comes back for the final showdown, again "in the nick of time", and enjoys the final moment of glory just like the typical western hero; or remember the very beginning of the *Star Trek* saga (*Star Trek - The motion picture*, by Robert Wise, USA 1979), when space is defined as "the final frontier". Also consider the fortunes of Akira Kurosawa's *The seven samurai* (Japan 1954), first remade as a western (*The magnificent seven*, by John Surges, USA 1960) and then as a science fiction film (*Battle beyond the stars*, by Jimmy T. Murakami, USA 1980).



Star wars



Star Trek

Thus genres have the capacity to re-emerge, but usually with new themes/topics and/or with a changed iconography, in response to socio-cultural changes and the ever-present call from audiences:

*"Genre films essentially ask the audience, 'Do you still want to believe this?' Popularity is the audience answering, 'Yes.' Change in genres occurs when the audience says, 'That's too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated.'"*²⁹

The dramatic developments of digital technologies, the Internet and videogames have allowed movies just that - the opportunity to provide audiences with "something more complicated" - and not just in terms of themes or topics. On a deeper, syntactical level, narrative forms have been deeply affected in terms of moving away from a simple, linear treatment of time and events to more complex ways of telling stories, thereby affecting character motivations and causal relationships too. This tendency, which is at its clearest in what have been called "puzzle films" runs through a variety of genres, affecting and reinterpreting them.

Finally, what has probably been most evident in the past few decades is the mixing of genres, which is partly responsible for the relative disappearance of "pure" (classical) genres and the emergence of elements from different genres that together help define certain kinds of movies - although probably not in terms of creating "new", well-identifiable genres.

15. Genre mixing and hybridization

From the historical perspective we adopted in the previous sections we discovered that the mixing of genres within a single film is not something rare or extraordinary; on the contrary, the openness of genres to integration and hybridization is one of their typical features (remember the examples of the mixing of musical with western in *Seven brides for seven sisters*, with melodrama in *Dancer in the dark* and with crime/comedy in *Chicago*).

In fact, the mixing of genre was already a typical feature of Hollywood movies, as Altman points out:

"Hollywood studios appealed to at least three separate audiences by publicizing (and usually inserting into each film) three independent set of genre cues [at least one from male genres: action adventure, gangster films, war film, western; at least one from female genres: drama, musical, romantic comedy, weepie; at least one from a tertium quid: fantasy, historical/costume, slapstick comedy, travel

²⁹ Braudy L. 1977. *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*, Anchor Doubleday, Garden City, NY, p. 179. Quoted in Grant H.K. 2007. *Film Genre. From iconography to ideology*, Wallflower Press, London and New York, p. 49.

*adventure] ... What western is not at some points a melodrama? What musical can do totally without romance? The typical screwball comedy stitches together a series of episodes each of which has its own generic character. As a matter of fact, Hollywood studios hired multiple screenwriters for each film, in order to combine their known talents for different genres."*³⁰

On the other hand, we also remarked that genres, as categories or classes to which a number of films can be assigned, are by their very nature subject to interchanges and intersections. The very fact that for their very existence they must rely on a balance between repetition and variation makes genres suitable objects for productive cross-fertilization.

Another important consideration we made earlier was that genre labels are always defined and used "a posteriori", i.e. using facts and ideas to form a judgment about what must have happened before - in most cases, contemporary audiences (but also producers, critics, scholars, etc.) are not aware that a genre "is being born". Moine³¹ quotes the example of *Mildred Pierce* (by Michael Curtiz, USA 1945), which has been described, in turn, as a melodrama, a woman's film and a film noir, when in reality we should say that this film has been considered, at various times and by different people, as a melodrama, a woman's film and a film noir - which highlights the fact that critical interpretation can vary across time and on the basis of changing cultural sensibilities and expectations.



Mildred Pierce

Of course, the main economic concern of the cinema industry is to make a film as profitable as possible, and this can be achieved, paradoxically, by not promoting a movie as an example of a specific genre, because this would run the risk of alienating possible audiences not interested in that particular genre. A film can thus be promoted with a variety of labels, often mixing different genres (like comedy/action), or features of different genres can be included in the movie itself, with a view to attracting the widest possible range of audiences.

Different, and even diverging, ideological positions can also be accommodated within a single movie, or the positions themselves can be blurred, so that the movie can lend itself

³⁰ Altman, op. cit., pp. 128 and 141.

³¹ Moine, op. cit., pp. 157-158.

to alternative interpretations and, once again, attract viewers who hold different worldviews. In *Body double* (by Brian De Palma, USA 1984), for example, a man watches, through a telescope, a woman who erotically dances at a specific time every night, but also witnesses her murder without being able to help her. The film offers ample space to voyeurism (which is actually one of its main themes) and a profusion of sex and violence. Some could say that this is the triumph of the so-called "male gaze", i.e. the opportunity for men to watch female bodies at a safe distance (and at the time of its release the movie was actually fiercely attacked by both feminists and defenders of moral standards), but on the other hand others were ready to point out director De Palma's virtuosistic treatment of the same "gaze" to unmask the harsh realities of contemporary society (and in the meantime celebrate cinema's power to do so).



Body double

The tendency of mixing genres in order to both combine the successful qualities of previous films and attract a variety of audiences is described in vivid detail in *The Player* (by Robert Altman, USA 1992), where a producer (Tim Robbins) has to go through dozens of scripts daily submitted to him, and in doing so tries to ensure that as many genres as possible are catered for in a possible future movie. Thus he has to consider scripts which he defines as "a kind of psychic political thriller comedy with a heart", or as a combination of the "comedy-romance-thriller *Ghost*" with "a tingling political paranoia thriller", or as "Out of Africa meets *Pretty woman*", or as a sequel to *The graduate*, in which Mrs Robinson, now an aged mother who has had a stroke, lives with her daughter and son-in-law Director Altman's brilliant irony effectively captures the effort to combine as many different genres as possible within a single movie. We might add that Altman's film is itself a mixture of comedy, drama and thriller with a clear satirical outlook on Hollywood's unscrupulous practices ...



The player

There is no doubt that genre hybridization has become much more prominent in the latter part of the last century, continuing into the present. There are several different reasons for this phenomenon. Changing cultural sensibilities and socio-cultural patterns have, as always, been mirrored in cinema: the past few decades have witnessed an impressive crisis

of ideologies and Western values, leaving behind it worldviews no more characterized by clear oppositions: the "good vs bad" dynamic of so many classical genres (e.g. sheriff and villain in the western; gangster and police in the crime movie, and even opposing characters in romance and comedy) has been replaced by a more nuanced opposition between characters who are more often than not problematic and in a way undefinable (like the tormented detective who has a number of problems of her/his own, reflecting the instability if not chaos that is a feature of modern social and cultural contexts). The present is often a source of anxiety and doubt, and the future is often seen in gloomy terms if not as utterly dystopian. Even technological developments are, more often than not, portrayed as a source of possible problems and unclear challenges. *Blade runner* (by Ridley Scott, USA 1982), for example, incorporates many of such themes, questioning the very nature of human beings and their role in a dark futuristic society - and it does this by paying clear homages to various genres, from science fiction to detective stories, from action movies to film noir.



Blade runner

The mixing of genres obviously implies a knowledge and appreciation of past genres before one can start to revisit, reactivate or reinterpret them. As we already noted, starting with the "New Hollywood" (also sometimes called "Hollywood Renaissance"), new generations of directors well versed in cinema history often use this awareness of past genres to build their own visions and stories. No doubt this has had consequences on the production and reception of movies, with the cinema industries always ready to try out mixed formulas to cater for the needs and preferences of a range of diversified audiences. This has been matched with the readiness of audiences themselves to accept and appreciate genre mixing and the network of references that is established between and among movies.



STOP AND THINK

- * Watch the videos below and try to track down the traces of film genres that can most clearly be perceived in each of them.
- * To do this, refer to the typical themes/topics as well as to the typical conventions of genres and see how they seem to "resurface" in these movies.
- * If you were to assign "genre labels" to each of these movies, would you be able to assign

them to one single genre or would you rather describe them as a mixture of several genres?

* Then read my comments below.



Raiders of the lost ark
(by Steven Spielberg, USA 1981)



Scream
(by Wes Craven, USA 1996)



Thelma & Louise
(by Ridley Scott, USA 1991)



Die hard
(by John McTiernan, USA 1988)



Titanic
(by James Cameron, USA 1997)



The Blair Witch Project
(by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, USA 1999)

The *Indiana Jones* saga feeds motifs and conventions from several past genres into the making of what is a perfect example of the blockbusters of the latter part of the 20th century: these include references to the exotic settings typical of movies, cartoons and "graphic novels" of the 1930s, to the "new horror" which was beginning to surface since the '70s, touches of comedy (even of slapstick), traces of epic adventure with a historical background and thriller twists and turns of the plot which make it an action-packed product. Besides, Indiana Jones, like James Bond, has been turned into a self-standing character, initiating a cycle which would give birth to several sequels with the associated "franchise". The ironical touches which are a distinctive feature of Indiana Jones also show a level of reflexivity and self-consciousness which is another landmark of a new generation of Hollywood movies (as well as a prerequisite to the successful revival of themes and conventions of many classical film genres).

Scream, too, proved immediately popular and generated a number of sequels - a sign that

this revived form of horror was meeting the sensibilities of new generations of (young) viewers, who were ready to say, as we noted, "That's too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated." As a matter of fact, these new audiences were actually asking for a higher-level pleasure - the excitement to recognize past themes and conventions and even to laugh about them. *Scream* thus provides a careful balance of anxiety and comic relief, and this is achieved through constant self-awareness of the elements that make up (and made up) a classical horror. Reflexivity is here at a maximum level, since the young people who are the victim of the monster can find a way to save themselves only if they give correct answers to questions about horror movies ... almost a cinephile's game. Again, the ironical touch adds another dimension of meaning and entertainment to the whole mixture.

Thelma & Louise is the story of two housewives (Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis) who decide to take a break from their daily routine and embark on a trip during which they will encounter both the violence of a man-centred society and the excitement of "breaking free" from the rules and conventions of the same society - even if this will turn their trip into a tragedy. At the time of its release, the movie caused sensation and protests, with reactionary movements calling it an example of "criminal feminism". As a matter of fact, this film, a road movie entirely in the hands of two women, was probably the first example of a female "buddy movie", a genre which pairs together two characters who are quite different (in terms of age, class, ethnic background and gender) but share a common job or purpose in life. Hollywood had provided many examples of such "buddies", starting, for example, with the early appearances of Laurel and Hardy or Abbot and Costello, and going on with musical/comic pairings like Bing Crosby and Bob Hope or Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis; more recently, Paul Newman and Robert Redford had starred in a western (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, by George Roy Hill, USA 1969) and Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy in a police action/drama (*48 hours*, by Walter Hill, USA 1982). *Thelma & Louise*, however, progressively mixes comedy and drama, reaching an almost epic dimension at the end.

Another blockbuster which spawned several sequels, *Die hard* once again brilliantly mixes the adrenaline-packed exploits of action movies with the typically comic touches of the '80s, providing a new dimension to both genres. However, the movie also makes references to other genres, like thriller, "disaster movie" and even melodrama, and shows a high level of self-awareness and cinephile consciousness, with a masterful use of suspense and a careful balance between violence and irony.

Titanic marks the end of the last century with the features of a highly successful blockbuster which combines all the tension and anxiety of the "disaster movie" with the equally powerful romance of a passionate love story - two ingredients which help each other to update both classical genres in a new 21st century version. At the same time, this combination of genres is granted a fresh start by combining a historical tragedy with the power of social class conflict, thus making the love story more integrated with both the social context and the sad story of the two ill-fated characters.

The Blair Witch Project was one of the first movies for which a new descriptive term (a new genre?) was coined - mockumentary - meaning a fake documentary which is presented as real footage. This "project" could probably never have had its extraordinary success if its launch had not been able to profit from a massive Internet publicity campaign, which was meant to spread the voice that all that was shown was real. What strikes most about this sort of experiment is the clever editing of the "footage", presented as the recordings, made through a handycam and a 16mm camera by three students searching for a mythical witch supposedly responsible for the serial killing of children. The opening credits actually state that the material was found a year after the tragic disappearance of the students, with the additional effect of suggesting that they never came back, thus adding to the suspense and horror of the whole operation: a revival of the classical horror, where most action takes place off screen, with a subjective viewpoint, and in which the lengthy dialogues between the characters add almost nothing to the solution of the mystery (which by the very nature of the "project" remains unsolved). The film, with its huge box office success, almost started a new genre: the so-called "found footage" as the basis for fake documentary-like stories (combined with all sorts of digital effects).

16. Genre - a "universal" category?

A final important feature of genre is worth stressing at this point, i.e. that, although we may attach very generic terms as "comedy" or "melodrama" to a variety of films produced at different time in history, in different national contexts, and by different authors, this "universal" nature of genres is in fact a product of a rather ethnocentric view. Most studies of genres have taken Western cinema, and Hollywood in particular, as their main focus, often ignoring or downplaying the importance of other world cinemas, many of which have developed their own "genres", which are often difficult to understand and appreciate through western eyes only. Some national genres have their own distinctive features, but often remain isolated within their national boundaries, since they do not enjoy worldwide distribution. In addition, even if we use rather generic terms as "adventure" or "thriller", their meaning may change when applied to different national or local cinemas, e.g. Indian "Bollywood" or Asian martial arts films. Generally speaking, we have to acknowledge that when we fail to recognize the same strong "system of genres" in cinemas other than Hollywood, this does not mean that local cinemas do not have genres - it simply points out that different cultural viewpoints are needed to understand and appreciate how films are produced, marketed, consumed and classified as "genres" in different parts of the world.



STOP AND THINK

Hollywood "melodrama" was at its best in the post-war years, and especially in the 1950s. More or less at the same time, a large number of films were produced in Italy, which were (and are still largely) identified as "melodramas". Watch the examples in the videos below and read the short notes about their plots.

* Would you apply the same label of "melodrama" to all these films? How are they similar (i.e. what features of this genre - themes/topics, style and conventions - do you think they share?) How are they different (i.e. what particular features differentiate American from Italian melodramas?).

Then read my comments below.



All that heaven allows (by Douglas Sirk, USA 1955)

In *All that heaven allows*, a rich, still young widow (Jane Wyman) falls in love with her gardener's son (Rock Hudson), a much younger man. Her relationship meets the fierce hostility of both family and friends, and she decides to put an end to it. However, when her lover has an accident and needs help, she runs to him and eventually realizes that social conventions will not stop her from marrying him.



I figli di nessuno/Nobody's children (by Raffaello Matarazzo, Italy-France 1951)

In *Nobody's children* Guido (Amedeo Nazzari), the owner of a marble quarry, falls in love with Luisa (Yvonne Sanson), the daughter of one of his employees, and they have a baby together. However his mother kidnaps the baby and Luisa becomes a nun. Guido, believing that Luisa is dead, gets married. The two lovers will meet again at their child's deathbed, after he has had an accident in the quarry.



Catene/Chains (by Raffaello Matarazzo, Italia/Italy 1949)

In *Chains* Guglielmo (Amedeo Nazzari) kills his wife Rosa (Yvonne Sanson)'s ex-boyfriend, who was blackmailing her. He flees to America, but is sent back to Italy to stand trial. The only way he can be set free is if his wife confesses to adultery – so the murder can be considered a crime of passion – and she does it. Guglielmo's lawyer explains Rosa's sacrifice to him and he is eventually able to save her from committing suicide.

The themes and topics of melodrama include characters who are usually either good or bad (but can also change quite unexpectedly in the course of time); women who are often victims (of men's actions); a chain of dramatic, often catastrophic but also at times providential, events; a possible series of (unlikely) coincidences; a happy ending, which rather hastily solves the painful contradictions we have witnessed all through the movie. The themes are treated with strong emphasis on feelings and passions, stressing the pathos associated with both love and violence. All in all, some basic themes and topics seem to be shared by both Hollywood and Italian melodramas - but only on the surface. Strong cultural differences explain the emphasis in the latter on family values being threatened, on marriage and adultery, on betrayal and jealousy, often associated with women's sensual (and thus dangerous) nature, leading to sinful behaviour (in the prevailing Catholic tradition) and even murder, although the final resolution usually implies the (re)affirmation of traditional values embodied in the patriarchal family sanctioned by religious marriage.

However, it is the form and style that set Hollywood and Italian melodramas apart. Perhaps the most obvious difference is in the use of colour in American movies in contrast with the black and white of the Italian ones. Colour, which was one of the main attractions through which Hollywood tried to face the competition of television, is used in melodramas to add brilliance and intensity to the scenes, making them more spectacular, but, like the settings and the iconography, it also "externalizes" the passions burning inside the characters. Rather than being simply used for realistic effects, colour becomes symbolic, highlighting the character's emotions to the point of excess. By contrast, the black and white of most of the Italian melodramas stress the darker atmospheres and the dramatic tension involved in the breaking of social (sometimes regional) conventions that threaten the cultural identity of the characters and their families.

A final difference regards the use of music: while vibrant strings accentuate the pathos of most dramatic scenes in both cinemas, the Italian musical tradition sometimes leads to the inclusion of songs within the story (as shown in *Chains*), thus paying homage to music in

several of its forms (from opera to regional heritage songs, often in the Neapolitan tradition).

17. Conclusion

A very concise definition of "genre films" was given by Barry Keith Grant:

*"Those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations."*³²

Indeed, the concept of "familiarity" (especially to audiences) is a central one in defining genre films, and yet, as this Dossier has tried to demonstrate, the issues at stake are more complex and varied than what this definition might suggest. It is not simply a question of creating "categories" into which we can more or less easily fit any film, or of assigning any particular film to a pre-determined category. Instead of holding such a rigid, unchangeable view of genres, we have tried to consider how attribution to genres may change in the course of time, in response to the variability of the historical, economic and socio-cultural contexts in which films are produced and consumed, so that the very definition of genres is subject to constant change by all the parties involved, from producers to audiences, from critics to film scholars.

*"It would seem indispensable to substitute a dynamic conception of genre for essentialist definitions. The generic characteristics of a film, like generic appellations, far from constituting fixed and immutable points of reference, are the effects of constant (re)compositions and (re)interpretations to which producers, critics, and spectators contribute. The generic identity of a film is not given to it once and for all, and is not enclosed within the text of a film. The preexisting agreement that allows a genre and a genre film to be recognized is an unstable balance, a crossroads where cinema practices, ideological perspectives, and various interpretive approaches intersect and encounter one another. To examine the relation between films and genres is, therefore, not so much a matter of determining what film(s) one is going to place in which generic box(es), as of reflecting, first, on who is doing the putting, why, and in what context, and, second, on the multiple historical and sociocultural cinematic interactions in which films and genres are created, exist, and are received. Instead of a simple generic denomination – one that uses dictionaries and programs for purposes of classification – it is better to adopt a pluralist conception, and to speak of multiple generic identities."*³³

³² Grant, B. K. (Ed.) 1995. *Film Genre Reader II*, University of Texas, Austin Press, p. XV. Quoted in Moine R. 2008. *Cinema genre*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 118.

³³ Moine, op. cit., pp. 147-148.

Further reading (and watching)



A list of resources

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