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FILM AS SOCIAL PRACTICE
(4th ed.)

Genre

One of the ways in which we distinguish between different kinds of film narratives is through genre. Borrowed from literary studies, where it is used to delineate the difference between satire and comedy, tragedy and farce, and so on, the term 'genre' has become a useful tool in film analysis. In film, genre is a system of codes, conventions, and visual styles which enables an audience to determine rapidly and with some complexity the kind of narrative they are viewing. Even the musical accompaniment to the titles can indicate to an audience whether the film fits into broad generic categories like the comedy or the western. Finer discriminations develop as the film continues, involving the recognition of a visual style perhaps, or a recognizable set of moral and ideological values which will be inscribed into such genres as detective thrillers.

What genre does is recognize that the audience watches any one film within a context of other films, both those they have personally seen and those they have heard about or seen represented in other media outlets. This aspect of genre, *intertextuality*, polices the boundaries of an audience's expectations. It can tell them what to

expect or it can deliberately mislead them by offering expectations that are not going to be met. In general, the function of genre is make films comprehensible and more or less familiar. Even parodies or criticisms of a genre depend on the audience's recognition of familiarity with the target. The choice of a black sheriff in the Brooks spoof western *Blazing Saddles* (1974) is comic only if aware of how radical a departure this is from the conventions of the genre. Sometimes parodying of genre can be risky, however. Reviews of *Starship Troopers* (1997) suggested that its difficulty in reaching its audience was in part due to its slightly obscure relation to the genres of the space adventure and the teen romance; some audiences couldn't decide if it was a parody or just plain unconvincing.

A genre often includes specific narrative expectations – recurrent settings, set-piece sequences of action (the shoot-out, the car chase) – so that the task of resolving the film's conflicts can be deferred on to the genre. The western's final confrontation between opposing forces is almost ritually represented as a shoot-out. Through the management of the shoot-out (who wins and how) the film-maker 'closes' the film. Similarly, sci-fi films which routinely pit humans against machines lead to a resolution where human ingenuity (or some other dimension of specifically human behaviour) rather than brute force is used to defeat the machine's technical superiority. Generic conventions assist closure, confirming it as a textual force, and sharing some of the film's responsibility for articulating an individual resolution.

Genres depend on the audience's competences and experience: on the skills they have developed in understanding films and the body of similar experiences they can draw upon. Although many films fail because they are too predictable and too much bound by the limits of the genre, many others fail because they are simply not comprehensible. One of Francis Ford Coppola's few commercial disasters was *One from the Heart* (1982). Promoted with the tag line, 'When Francis Ford Coppola Makes a Love Story . . . Don't Expect Hearts and Flowers', it mixed genres unpredictably as well as moving frequently between fantasy and reality. As a result, and despite Coppola's reputation as a director (*The Godfather* (1972) and its sequel *The Godfather Part II* (1974) both won three Oscars

and *Apocalypse Now!* (1979) won two Oscars), the film irritated and confused its audiences, who soon stopped coming. Films need to encourage expectations that they can satisfy; or if they fail to satisfy them there must be a plausible reason and a reward for the audience in the final denouement. A mystery thriller, for instance, will offer many possible resolutions to the problem it sets up as a way of misleading the audience until the appropriate moment to reveal the killer. Audiences accept this. As long as the real culprit is revealed in a satisfying and convincing manner, the audience can forgive the deception. But a film which arbitrarily ushers in a solution without the support of a generic convention or without foreshadowing is in danger of offending and irritating audiences. Contemporary viewers of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* usually react in this way to the contrived ending of the film.

It is easy to make genre sound like a deterministic threat to creativity. It is true that all popular media, not just film, have to deal with the familiar and the conventional more than do, say, painting or poetry. The individual perception is not given the privileged place in the popular arts that it is in more elite forms like literature. Instead, there is a pleasure in the familiar, in recognizing conventions, and relishing their repetition and restatement. Nevertheless, there is innovation and originality in genre films, and the best examples can achieve a very complicated and delicate balance between the familiar and the original, repetition and innovation, predictability and unpredictability. Producers of popular film know that each genre film has to do two apparently conflicting things: to confirm the existing expectations of the genre, and to alter them slightly. It is the variation from the expectation, the innovation in how a familiar scenario is played, that offers the audience the pleasure of the recognition of the familiar, as well as the thrill of the new.

Genres are dynamic. They change. Christian Metz (1975) has argued that genres go through a typical cycle of changes during their lifetime. In his view, the genre evolves through a classic stage, to self-conscious parody of the classics, to a period where films contest the proposition that they are part of the genre, and finally to a critique of the genre itself. It is a little early in the history of film to be certain of such propositions but there is certainly evidence that



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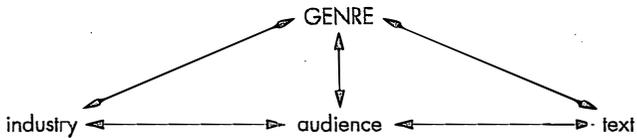
such a genre as the western has evolved and exhibited the kind of dynamism we are discussing.

In his *Six-Guns and Society* (1975), Wright examines the kind of cyclical development Metz argues is characteristic of film genres. He employs the combination of the methods of narrative analysis we have already met in this chapter: he uses the notion of myth associated with Lévi-Strauss, the use of oppositions as a means of describing narrative structure also developed by Lévi-Strauss, and describes a 'deep' narrative structure in the same terms as Vladimir Propp. Wright argues that the western genre goes through a thematic and approximately chronological change from what he calls the 'classic' western (*Shane* (1953), *Dodge City* (1930), *Canyon Passage* (1946), and *Duel in the Sun* (1947) are among his examples) to the 'transitional' western (*High Noon* (1952), *Broken Arrow* (1951)) and finally to the 'professional' western (*Rio Bravo* (1959), *The Professionals* (1966), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1970)). He acknowledges a further variation on the 'classic' western which he calls the 'vengeance' western and which includes films such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *One-Eyed Jacks* (1960). The transition he describes reorients the hero in relation to his society, and reflects, according to Wright's analysis, social and political shifts in America over the period concerned. Briefly, the changes represent American society as inadequate, the heroes as more isolated, and all parties as less effective at resolving problems (in the professional western, death often resolves the narrative problem for heroes who are basically antisocial). The development is, Wright argues, not merely one internal to the film texts; there is clearly a broader social and political dimension involved as well.

Finally, to bring this discussion of genre to a close, it is important to emphasize that genre is the product of at least three groups of forces: the industry and its production practices; the audience and their expectations and competences; and the text in its contribution to the genre as a whole (see diagram on p. 124).

For the industry, there is often enormous market pressure to repeat successful versions of popular genres; hence the rash of sequels we are seeing these days. Within the industry, films are often conceived in terms of genre, marketed through their associations

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with other films within the genre, and produced with an eye on the conventional limits of the genre. *Romancing the Stone* (1984) was a film which, in a sense, was made possible by the success of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which itself allowed its audience to understand its genre by carefully referring to the serial adventure film throughout its length. Genre is one of the determinants of the audience's choice of a film, not only in terms of whether or not they possess the competences to appreciate that genre, but in terms of which kind of film it is they want to see, and whether the specific example of that general kind of film (say, a comedy) suits their taste – is it a teen comedy like *American Pie* (1999) or an adult romance like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)? Or, to pick up this last example, among the ways that *You've Got Mail* (1998) specified its audience was through repeating the pairing of Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan that had been so successful in *Sleepless in Seattle*. Finally, the film itself indicates how it is to be understood through its own signifying systems by its intertextual links with other films.

Chapter 5 will discuss the specific roles of the audience in greater detail but it is worth suggesting here that audiences make genres as much as film-makers do. Also, genre can be as much of a challenge to directors as a restriction on them. While it may tend to restrict audience hypotheses about a film to the 'how' rather than the 'what', it enables complex narratives to be told in a minimum of screen time, actually enhancing the capacity of the medium to deal with complex and sophisticated material. Its familiarity, on the other hand, offers the many of us who want it the pleasure of seeing the predictable happen in unpredictable ways.