Chapter 25

Film Genres

Objectives: The chapter aims to define and understand the term genre; and to help learners get familiar with some major genre theories.

Key words: genre, genre bending, genre blending

Background

Rick Altman, ‘In the genre world, every day is Jurassic Park day.’

Genre is a French word and means a category or a type, a collection of instantly recognizable stylistic features. It is addressed as a system for organizing production as well as groupings of individual films which have collective and singular significance. You must have come across video libraries (or even book shops) where DVDs and CDs are shelved according to their categories: ‘classics’, ‘drama’, ‘action’, ‘crime’, Sci-fi and ‘horror.’ From the commercial point of view, genres are important because there is a demand for these categories. Classification of films into genres has always helped the film industry to produce and market films.

The use of the term in cinema studies is fairly recent, though it has always been used to describe works of high art and literature. Genre is a popular term for those interested in films. For example, a person interested in, say, ‘Western’, or ‘Gangster’, may not be interested in ‘Rom-Coms’. Someone who prefers ‘Musical’, or ‘Chick flicks’ may not necessarily be interested in ‘Thrillers’, ‘Courtroom Drama’, or ‘Chinese Martial arts’. But very often it is not so simple. Genre often refers to expectations of audiences and also to their predictions about the ending of the film (a gangster hero must die, for instance; a ‘teen’ flick should end on a promising note for the protagonist, etc.). Genre evokes the look of the characters, physical environment, significant objects and genres identity preserves a film’s integrity. They allow for expectations: certain things can happen, certain things cannot, and basically treat the MacGuffin (Hitchcock’s term for plot gimmick) in a creative way. According to Steve Neale, genre study should be centered on the industry’s own promotion and maintenance of categorizing terms. Marketing of genres focuses on posters and films press releases. Thus, in an action film, such as the Die Hard series or the Terminator series, the focus is on the action hero, his body and his weapons. All the posters and marketing strategies therefore capitalize on the stars, that is, Bruce Willis and Schwarzenegger.

The Western has one of the most recognizable iconography in Hollywood cinema, where iconography refers to the way location, props and costume produce meanings through our collective cultural understanding of a
product. Similarly, film noir is strongly identified by its iconography, where one finds low key lighting, morally ambiguous characters, rain drenched streets, haunted protagonists, and silhouettes and shadows.

**The Third Man** (Carol Reed, 1949)

_The Third Man_ starring Orson Welles-Joseph Cotten is a film that fits the noir category like a glove. Set in the postwar Vienna, it captures the moral and physical decay of its times. The city is a site of expressionist nightmare, always in darkness, with floating dead bodies, sewers, and drenched cobblestone streets. The city is a haven for corrupt officials, assassins, and black marketers. The oblique camera angles capture the images of ruins and rubble, all set to the strings of a zither.

Sub-genre

Sub-genres are the categories within an overarching genre and defined by specific characteristics. Some notable examples include slasher films of horror, post-apocalyptic of sci-fi, film noir of gangster films, sport films of drama, courtroom dramas of drama etc. Genre by itself is not new, as Aristotle identifies the epic, comedy, tragedy and so forth as essential genres of poetry. Literature, of course, has abundance of examples of creatively developing sub-genres, thus, Hugo Gernsback established the science fiction genre in its modern form with _Amazing Stories_ (1926), and William Gibson introduced ‘cyberpunk’ SF with his _Neuromancer_ (1984).

Generally, the genre film uses the same material over and again and is repetitive in nature. A genre specialist has a distinct set of rules, conventions and style. The repetitive nature seems to diminish the importance of each film’s ending, along with cause-and –effect sequences. Genre films depend on the cumulative effect of the film’s often repeated situations, themes and icons therefore, onscreen deaths of the gangster hero: James Cagney (_Public Enemies_, 1931), Edward Robinson (_Little Caesar_, 1931), Paul Muni (_Scarface_, 1932) are a given. Genre production is allied with decorum, nature, science, and other standards produced and defended by the sponsoring society. The study of genre is often read as an attempt to deal with cinema as an industrial mode of film production.

One of the most influential books on genres is _Film/Genre_ (1999) by Rick Altman, in which he offers 10 tendencies of Lit genres. Genres have a distinct border and can be firmly identified.

- Genre theorists seek to describe the already existing genres; The internal functioning of genre texts is considered entirely observable and objectively describable
• Texts with similar characteristics systematically generate similar readings, similar meanings and similar uses; Producers, readers and critics all share the same interest in genre;
• Reader expectation and audience reaction have received little independent attention;
• Question of genre history
• Can genres be objectively or scientically studied?
• Genres are never neutral categories.
• Genre theorists generally do not recognize the institutional character of their own generic practice.
  (Source Film/Genre, Rick Altman, 1999)

Dudley Andrews in Concepts in Film Theory states, “Genres are specific networks of formulas which deliver a certified product to a waiting customer. They ensure the production of meaning by regulating the viewer’s relation to the images and narratives constructed for them. Genres construct the proper spectator their own consumption.”

**Genre Blending**

A good example of genre blending is *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). It can be read as a war film, a romance with songs; an adventure/thriller and even a buddy film. It is all things to all viewers. Stylistically, the films that blend genres mix the precise and the indeterminate. The semiotics are confusing (signifier/signified) therefore viewers are kept guessing. They subvert the established conventions and codes.

Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (starring Jonathan Pryce and DeNiro) can be seen as an example of genre bending. Brazil has a vague tag line: ‘Somewhere in the 20th c’, and is a Sci-fi, romance, futuristic, war, dystopia, and satire, where genre bending is used for the sharpening of the satirical edge. In terms of style, the film blends a set of indeterminable with certain specifics. The action takes place in the future, but has the manners of Britain in the 30s. The juxtaposition of the old and the futuristic tropes result in unsettling the audience, as we are denied the comfort of settling into ready-made assumptions about the sci-fi genre.

Genre defying films are those that are hard to classify, for e.g., *Mars Attacks* (1996), *A Serious Man* (2009). In fact, most films by the Coen Brothers can be seen as exemplars of genre defiance, as a reviewer for *Fargo* (1996) explains:

…it is an eccentric hybrid of conventions and provocations, never quite settling into an identifiable genre or resolution. The first image is a spread of dreary, swirling whiteness. A car’s headlights slowly emerge, moving toward the camera in long shot, such that the background becomes readable as a snowy highway, a desolate nowhere on the way to somewhere else. This transformation isn’t so much startling as it is stark and foreboding….The Coens are experts at this kind of slippage, visual and thematic; they’re as renowned for their inventive manipulations of lenses and steadicams as for their deconstructive smartassness. (Fuchs, 2003).
Lets us now understand how Quentin Tarantino bends and blends genres in his *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

### *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino 1994)

What is pulp fiction? Historically, pulp fiction was printed on cheap wood pulp paper and was a successor to penny dreadfuls, dime novels. It provided affordable entertainment to working-class novels, for instance, *Argosy* -1896, (a popular magazine). Pulp is mostly an American phenomenon that featured the hoi polloi and was essentially lurid, sensational, titillating, and fast-paced.

Is *Pulp Fiction* a gangster film or a thriller? A musical or a boxing film? We can try to understand this if we consider the sources that inform Tarantino’s works, which are, to begin with, pulp fiction writers, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Raoul Whitfield, Horace McCoy and crime writers such as Elmore Leonard and Charles Willeford. Film noirs of the 40s and the 50s, are other significant influences, for example, the glowing box is a throwback to Robert Aldrich’s noir *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), along with Hong Kong action films from the 80s, blaxploitation films of the 70s (it’s a sub-genre of films with urban blacks as protagonists), the heist film genre, girl-band movies, the 60s Western, horror films, vigilante movies of the 70s, and television from 1966-1990. The film is a study in a world of masculine codes of violence where rituals and codes of criminals are observed to the hilt. Like many other Tarantino films, it is also about men on a mission with lengthy dialogues, and exchanges on pop culture.

All the above created a new genre, that is, Tarantinoesque. But what was most interesting about the film was its narrative. Consider the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pulp Fiction’s Structure: The way events are presented</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Honey Bunny/Pumpkin episode in a restaurant</td>
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<td>2. Credits</td>
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<td>3. Vincent &amp; Jules retrieve the case;</td>
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<td>4. Butch &amp; Marsellus (Vincent &amp; Jules enter);</td>
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<td>5. Little Butch receives his watch from Capt. Koons;</td>
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<td>6. Butch wins the fight; kills Vincent;</td>
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7. Vincent & Jules retrieve the case
8. Vincent kills Marvin
9. Vincent & Jules in the restaurant held up by HB and Pumpkin

Chronologically
- Capt Koons episode;
- Vince and Jules retrieve Marsellus’s case; shoot the partners; Vince shoots Marvin; Mr Wolf helps in cleaning up;
- Honey Bunny/Pumpkin planning a robbery; Jules handles the situation;
- Butch/Marsellus followed by the scene where Vince buys drugs; Mia episode;
- Butch in his dressing room...decides not to throw the fight; returns to retrieve his watch; kills Vince; runs into Marsellus; rescues Marsellus from the two homosexuals;
- Clears his debt and is free.
- Devoted lovers planning robberies;
- Hit men quote scriptures;
- Have in-depth discussions about cheeseburgers;
- Win trophies at dance competitions;
- Femme fatale who overdoses & is rescued;
- Boxers with sentiments for a watch;
- Mr Wolf, troubleshooter with poise;
- Marsellus, dreaded mobster, who gets raped

Genre bending

Though hard to define, there are certain standard features of genre bending. Films that defy genres often defy remakes, play with the codes, and resist closure.

Richard Linklater’s Boyhood (2014) is a recent example that bends genre. The film tells the story of Mason (Ellar Coltrane) who is six when the film opens and eighteen when the film ends. The startling feature is that Linklater shot the film with the same actor, and we watch him grow in real time. The film was shot over a period of twelve years. The film has been universally recognized for its novel structure:

What emerged from those dozen years is a series of meticulously textured and structured scenes set to the rhythm of life. The structure is crucial. Mr. Linklater has long experimented with nontraditional narratives... His films are sometimes mischaracterized as having no plot, perhaps because they may seem so, when compared with aggressively incident-jammed mainstream movies. One of the fascinating things about “Boyhood” is that a lot happens — there are parties and fights, laughter and tears — but all
these events take place in a distinctly quotidian register and without the usual filmmaking prodding and cues. (Dargis, 2014).

In India, genres are extremely important and cater to the country’s specific segments and regions. Family dramas, mythological, and musicals appeal to a certain section of society, and have always been in huge demand. Still, a universal blockbuster such as *Sholay* (1975), though categorized as a dacoit drama/curry western, has something for everyone. Likewise *Lagaan* (2001) struck a chord with all sections of society as it appeals to the sentiments of a cross-section of people.

Reference


Suggested readings

1. Altman, Rick. *Film/ Genre*.

Suggested websites

- http://www.filmsite.org/genres.html
- http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/list/filmgenres
- http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Film_genre.html
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- http://www.filmsite.org/publ.html
- http://worldfilm.about.com/od/bollywood/a/bollywoodgenres-historical.htm
Quiz

1. Answer the following:
   i. Why are genres important?
   ii. Mention any 3 sub-genres, with examples.
   iii. What is genre blending?

2. State whether the following are true or false:
   i. Aristotle lists different kinds of literature in *The Poetics*.
   ii. Quentin Tarantino has his genre called ‘Tarantinoesque.’
   iii. Cyberpunk is a subgenre of horror.

3. Assignment
   Analyze Pulp Fiction with reference to the 5 codes (The enigma code, the connotative code, the action code, the symbolic code and the cultural code) you have studied in the chapter on “Semiotics of Films”.

Answer key

2. i-True; ii.-True-; iii-False (Science-fiction)