

Chapter

4

Cowboys, Deadly Women and Co.: Genres of the Cinema

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We discover that the critical theory of genres is stuck precisely where Aristotle left it. The very word “genre” sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is.
(Northrop Frye)

We all have to realize we write in a genre, so we must find originality within that genre. Did you know that there hasn't been a new genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary? My genre's thriller, what's yours?
(Donald Kaufman)

TAKE ONE. SCENE ONE.

An unshaven man with his hat on, drinks his gin with a gulp, and throws his head back in a jerk. We see him from behind, the morning lights of an empty, dusty street provide the source of light. The man stands up, his boots knocking a slow rhythm on the creaky floorboard. He pushes the flinging doors open, walks to the middle of the street, turns to look towards the end of the road, engraving his place into the sandy road. Another man waits at a considerable distance down the street, fiddling with a toothpick in his mouth. He looks at the opposite man who has just arrived to the scene. The dusty town is silent; shrubs are flying across the road farther down the street. The two men squint in the daybreak sun but do not move. Then, all of a sudden, they pull out their colts and fire their bullets. Silence falls, and the toothpick's movement in the mouth of one of the men suddenly stops, and the man almost immediately falls. The winner of the shooting mounts his horse and disappears beyond the town limits.

CUT. END OF SCENE.

Without knowing anything about the situation, the characters or the story, this one scene would ensure a spectator (or even a reader) that the scene is a *western* (also spelled Western), and the men are cowboys. Knowing this, a spectator can immediately fill in the omissions in the above description, conjure up the atmosphere, even a typical western scenery. This is the power of *genre*. What one most probably finds out about a film first – apart from its title and the stars featuring in it – is its genre. We can decide, based on our mood or taste, whether we wish to see a horror, a thriller, a melodrama, a western or a science fiction film. Genre is originally a French word that means “type” or “category,” and is not restricted to the

vocabulary of arts. While nowadays it is sometimes very difficult to tell an action packed thriller set in World War II from a war movie, or a thriller with heaps of corpses and pools of blood from a horror film, it is still essential to see why we keep on labeling films according to their genre. Why do we say that, for example, “I like romances and comedies” instead of describing what exactly we like in films?

Considerations of genre have a long history, starting from Aristotle, who differentiated among the types of poetry. Aristotle’s *Poetics* “provides a model for centuries of genre thinkers,” a solid theoretical base with its “apparently incontrovertible simplicity” and “transparent expressions” (Altman 2). However, the rhetorical straightforwardness of Aristotle’s text conceals other possible interpretations and theoretical alternatives, but does not allow for the extension or even the rethinking of categories set up in the treatment of poetics. Building upon Aristotle, Horace already took for granted everything that *Poetics* tackled (3). He did not define what genre was, as genres had been taken to be existing categories, and Horace’s role was to talk about the differences among them. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the approach of Aristotle and that of Horace, which is reflected by the two sides of film genre later: while Aristotle’s text is descriptive, and sometimes he even acts as a critic, Horace’s work is prescriptive, aiming to talk about “appropriate modes of writing poetry” (ibid.). These two orientations can be seen as forerunners of considerations of film genres: being either categories of reception (when a film is labeled on the basis of audience expectations) or those of production (when a film is labeled on the basis of production rules, codes, and protocols, during the time of the Hollywood studio system; Cf.: Chapter Five “Cinema and Its Discontents: Auteur, Studio, Star”).

During the second half of the 18th century a new genre appeared: the *melodrama*. “At first called the ‘serious genre’, as opposed to the classical genres” and later “baptized simply ‘drama’,” (5) melodrama emerged as the most popular genre through the 19th century. Melodramas were advocating codes of morality. Their roots reached back to medieval morality plays, and their plots centered on the relationships in family (Hayward 213–14). Influenced by the scientific paradigm shift initiated by Charles Darwin’s work on biology also at the end of the 1800s, genre theory began to view genres as species, and took an evolutionary approach (Altman 6). One of the most notable manifestation of this approach was *L’Evolution des genres* [*The Evolution of Genres*] by French literary historian Ferdinand Brunetière, in which the author provided scientific support for the claim that genres exist in reality similarly to the biological species (ibid.).

One of the most influential views on genre in the 20th century was expressed by René Wellek and Austin Warren in their *Theory of Literature* (1956). Wellek and Warren made a distinction between “inner” and “outer” forms: inner form being the “attitude, tone, purpose” of a literary work, the outer form designated as “specific metre or structure” (Wellek and Warren 231) and encouraged genre critics to analyze their subject matter based on the

relationship of technique and structure. While arguing that literature is a similar institution to the church, the state or the university, Wellek and Warren failed to consider the role and position of the critic (as advocator and creator of generic institutions) itself (Altman 8). It was Northrop Frye who extended Wellek and Warren's notions of inner and outer forms, and he redefined age-old generic categories such as tragedy, comedy, and romance. In the *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye brings the use of these archetypes into focus in literary analysis, which frees genres from being judged and tackled in terms of literary tradition (131–239). Based on his discussion of literary genre theory, Rick Altman lists ten typical problems of genre analysis that should be avoided in future filmic genre theories:

- (1) It is generally taken for granted that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, and that they can be firmly identified. Indeed, these facts have seemed so obvious to theoreticians that they have rarely seemed worthy of discussion, let alone of questioning.
- (2) Because genres are taken to be 'out there', existing independently of observers, genre theorists have generally sought to describe and define what they believe to be already existing genres rather than create their own interpretive categories, however applicable or useful.
- (3) Most genre theory has attended either to the process of creating generic texts in imitation of a sanctioned predefined original, or to the internal structures attributed to those texts, in part because the internal functioning of genre texts is considered entirely observable and objectively describable.
- (4) Genre theorists have typically assumed that texts with similar characteristics systematically generate similar readings, similar meanings, and similar uses.
- (5) In the language of theoreticians, proper genre production is regularly allied with decorum, nature, science and other standards produced and defended by the sponsoring society. Few genre theorists have shown interest in analysing their relationship.
- (6) It is regularly assumed that producers, readers and critics all share the same interest in genre, and that genres serve those interests equally.
- (7) Reader expectation and audience reaction have thus received little independent attention. The uses of generic texts have also largely been neglected.
- (8) Genre history holds a shifting and uncertain place in relation to genre theory. Most often simply disregarded by its synchronically oriented partner, genre history nevertheless cries out for increased attention by virtue of its ability to scramble generic codes, to blur established generic tableaux and to muddy accepted generic ideas. At times, genre history has been used creatively in support of specific institutional goals, for example by creating a new canon of works supportive of a revised genre theory.
- (9) Most genre theorists prefer to style themselves as somehow radically separate from the object of their study, thus justifying their use of meliorative terms like 'objective', 'scientific' or 'theoretical', to describe their activity, yet the application of scientific assumptions to generic questions usually obscures as many problems as it solves.
- (10) Genre theoreticians and other practitioners are generally loath to recognize (and build into their theories) the institutional character of their own generic practice. Though regularly touting 'proper' approaches to genre, theorists rarely analyse the cultural stakes involved in identifying certain approaches as 'improper'. Yet genres are never entirely neutral categories.

They – and their critics and theorists – always participate in and further the work of various institutions. (11–12)

Although genre theory in film is not the same as its literary counterpart, it certainly derives largely from the work of literary theorists (12). Discussions of genre were not introduced as a separate trend in film theory and criticism until the middle of the 1960s and early 1970s, while generic forms had been “one of the earliest means used by the industry to organise the production and marketing of films, and by reviewers and the popular audience to guide their viewing” (Cook 58). Genres were first used, on the one hand, to create a standard for mass production in the studio era; on the other, the introduction of generic categories helped film product differentiation (*ibid.*). According to John Belton, genre, in terms of the cinema, designates “various categories of motion picture production” including types of films such as “musicals, comedies, action and adventure films, westerns, crime and detective films, melodramas, science fiction and horror films, gangster films, war films, suspense thrillers, epics and disaster films:” a list that can further be broken down into several subgenres (127). In the film industry, genres are essentially the results of “the proven success of one-of-a-kind films” (128). If a certain type of film achieves financial success, this would facilitate the production flow of similar films. The assumption behind this logic is that if the audience liked a certain type of film, they would gladly repeat the experience and pay for a new film of the previous kind.

Genre films (i.e. films belonging to a specific genre) rely on a prescribed set of motifs, character features, story types, visual style, and thematic context. As Belton argues, it is true that genres function in many ways as brands in because they always promise to deliver the same atmosphere, plot, directors, and stars, but audiences “are also enticed by the prospect of seeing a film that *differs* in a number of respects from films they have seen before” (129). On the one hand, genres serve to identify and propagate types of films; yet on the other hand, they also help to raise audience expectations for subtle changes and new ways of combinations within the given category of filmic repertoire. In other words, when a spectator chooses to watch a western, it is because s/he knows what to expect, but at the same time s/he also expects more: a different combination of characteristics of westerns that makes the particular film worthy of seeing.

The debate around film genre started as a displacement of the debates – in France and in the U. S. especially – around the notion of the auteur (Hayward 166). The shift in focus was signaled by the approach called *auteur-structuralism* that, instead of celebrating the genius of the auteur, the individual artist or filmmaker, “saw the individual author as the orchestrator of trans-individual codes (myth, iconography, locales)” (Stam 123). The relevance and critical legitimacy of the auteur being the “author function” (Foucault) was pointed out in the chapter on auteur theory (Cf. Chapter Five “Cinema and Its Discontents: Auteur, Studio, Star”), but auteur-structuralism went even further: it investigated structural patterns and wider cultural contexts that shaped these patterns. The focus, therefore, shifted from the auteur to the filmic

texts and their structural logic and consistency. Critics started to analyze films under the name of an auteur and soon realized that the authorial name was quite often related to a specific type of film, and this led to an interest in genre analysis.

One of the most famous analyses of this kind was Peter Wollen's study of director John Ford's western films, in which the critic was not primarily looking for stylistic visual elements that could have served as identifying the auteur, but uncovered "fundamental structural patterns and contrasts" in the films under scrutiny, which were based on different binaries of culture/nature: "garden/wilderness; settler/nomad; civilized/savage; married/single" (ibid.). Whereas the concern of auteurism was primarily cinematic, auteur-structuralism broadened the thematic scope and looked at motifs and binary structures "broadly disseminated in culture and the arts" (ibid.). Similar conclusion is drawn in Jim Kitses's structural analysis of western which reflects Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis formulated in 1893 under the title "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." "According to the U. S. Census Report of 1890," Turner said, the frontier, the boundary or frontline of westward expansion on the American continent "no longer existed" (Belton 250). For Turner, the frontier represented the shaping of American character since, as he argues,

The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. (qtd. in Belton 250)

Turner's concept of the frontier has subsequently been called into question, but it nonetheless nurtured the mythical aspect of the West that provided the basis for western films and literature. The first filmic representations of the West were the scenes from Buffalo Bill Cody's *Wild West Show*, shot by Edison in 1894 with his Kinetoscope. He also filmed two fictional scenes in 1898: *Cripple Creek Bar-Room* and *Poker at Dawson City* (251). Beside the *Wild West Show*, the western film genre heavily relied on dime novels (novels that cost 5 to 25 cents) and stories from popular magazines. As Belton explains, even "Buffalo Bill himself owed his fame and fortune to dime novels" (252). It is also the dime novels of the period that helped James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bampo character of the *Leatherstocking Tales* to world-wide fame. Bampo – whose fictional characterization is said to be based on the real-life Daniel Boone – served as a model for several western films to come, ranging from the "backwoods hunters in *The Big Sky* (1952, [dir. Howard Hawks]) to the alienated antiheroes of *Stagecoach* (1939, [dir. John Ford]), *Shane* (1953, [dir. George Stevens]), and *The Searchers* (1956, [dir. John Ford])" (253), but the list should also include Clint Eastwood's characters both in Sergio Leone's "spaghetti" westerns and in the films he himself directed: *High Plains Drifter* (1972), *Pale Rider* (1985), and *Unforgiven* (1992).

According to Kitses, the western, permeating all aspects of U.S. culture, articulates a national mythology. This myth is informed by a *deep structure* composed of underlying basic binary oppositions that not only nourish the mythical aspect of the western but, later on, also serve as structuring principle for the “latter day western:” *science fiction*. In this – otherwise separate – genre the frontier is the space. The lessening interest in westerns coincided with John F. Kennedy’s proclamation of the “New Frontier” in the 1960s, which paralleled an intensified interest in science fiction films. According to Belton, one cannot miss the obvious link of, for example, Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) to *The Searchers*, the former reworking the same plot – just as George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977), which also “borrowed extensively” from the western classic (274). Science fiction, of course, has earlier links historically, starting with films by Méliès discussed in chapter one (cf. Chapter One, “Encounters of the First Kind: Once Upon a Time in Film”), but it was during the Cold War period that they attained conspicuous political content. Films such as *Them!* (1954, dir. Gordon Douglas) and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957, dir. Jack Arnold) envision the irreversible harm done by radiation that is the result of nuclear tests conducted in the U. S., while other movies, *Invaders from Mars* (1953, dir. William Cameron Menzies) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, dir. Don Siegel) among them, associated invaders and the practice of brainwashing with Communist ideology. Lately, a peculiar fusion of western and science fiction appeared with Barry Sonnenfeld’s *Wild Wild West* (1999), in which western and science fiction clichés are not only utilized but also ridiculed.

Beside western, another typically American genre, with a completely different view on society, is *screwball comedy*, which is a hybrid of various comedy styles. The phrase “screwball” refers to the baseball pitch that takes “funny turns” and spins in unexpected directions (Sikov 54). According to Belton, screwball comedy blended romantic comedy and comedy of manners with *slapstick comedy* (the origin of the phrase “slapstick” is the theatrical prop “battachio” that is a stick used by actors to hit one another without injury, at the same time producing loud smacking noise), which was considered to be a low and cheap genre (186) in which clowns and funny persons were bouncing, falling, and the inevitable cakes were flying into the unexpected faces of bystanders, to name a few typically burlesque turns. This distinct combination of different types of comedies took leading stars of dramatic genres and introduced them into the world of vulgarity and cheap jokes. Established and high profile actors did unconventional and unexpected things: John Barrymore in *Twentieth Century* (1934, dir. Howard Hawks), for example, picked his nose. Screwball comedies often featured references to explicit sexual play: when Katherine Hepburn leaves a fancy nightclub in Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), the back part of her skirt tears open, exposing her backside, which Cary Grant tried to cover with his top hat (ibid).

Andrew Sarris described screwball comedies as “sex comedy without the sex” because these films repressed sexuality which, in turn, resulted in the never ending allusion to a sexual sub-

text (8–15). The birth of this genre coincided with the “tightening of restrictions in the Production Code” in 1934 (Belton 186), so scenes of adultery or illicit sex, of passion, obscenity, seduction or rape, and miscegenation were banned from films (Cf. Chapter Five “Cinema and Its Discontents: Auteur, Studio, Star”). Whereas historically almost all screwball comedies were made during the era of the Great Depression, and it would be logical to suppose that social conditions and problems would be present in these films, it is rather on account of censorship that these films made it to the screen (Altman 20). While there certainly is much to be said for the sociological approach that tackle issues of the era in relation with these comedies, films of this genre “operate on a more subversive cultural and psychological plane” (Sikov 55). Screwball comedy was all about undercover sex; on the other hand, it refused to follow the classical Hollywood narrative trajectory of order/disorder/order (56), that is, the pattern in which the beginning of the story presents a narrative world where everything is all right, then this order is shattered by some disturbance (for example, an accident happens), and by the end the problems that arise by the disturbance are resolved. *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1941, dir. Frank Capra), for example, presents a married couple, whose marriage seems to be about arguments. Once a dispute is resolved, there comes another, until they discover that they are not even married. Screwball comedies were elementarily about conflicts, but the resolution was not necessarily a component: even if *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* are seen in an embrace at the end of Capra’s film, it does not project a “happily ever after” closure that would be the end of a romantic comedy. As Belton explains, “[m]ore often than not, [screwball comedies] began with a couple already constituted, whose harmony was then shattered, disturbed by internal strife or conflict” (Belton 189), but the final consummation was barely a happy end in the traditional sense. At the heyday of the studio system, with the celebration of the classical Hollywood narrative style, screwball comedies offered a subversion of the system that produced them.

Another subversive filmic trend was *film noir*. The phrase means “black film” and was coined by two French critics, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, in an attempt to describe American films that were based on hard-boiled novels of the 1930s, and were presented in France after the end of the Second World War under the Blum-Byrnes accord that reopened the French movie market to American films (Vernet 4, 26; Belton 225–26). The films that were brought to French cinemas in 1946 were something the French critics and audience did not expect. They were astonished to discover “in the post-war American cinema, coming from a nation whose military power and economic well-being were so striking, [...] films with an appearance of poverty in which the optimistic and moral lesson could not always be easily discerned by non-natives” (Vernet 4–5). Films, including *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, dir. John Huston), *Laura* (1944, dir. Otto Preminger), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944, dir. Edward Dmytryk), *Double Indemnity* (1944, dir. Billy Wilder), *Woman in the Window* (1944, dir. Fritz Lang), *The Lady in the Lake* (1946, dir. Robert Montgomery), *Gilda* (1946, dir. Charles Vidor) and *The Big Sleep* (1946, dir. Howard Hawks), presented a dark, disillusioned world of mani-

pulation, “crime, corruption, cruelty, and an apparently unhealthy interest in the erotic” (Belton 226). French critics were quick to notice that these films shared common stylistic elements, narrative and character traits, and the choices of themes. They soon found the roots of these similarities in pre-war American pulp fiction, often referred to as *hard-boiled detective fiction*, of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich. Indeed, most of the film noirs arriving in France in 1946 were adaptations of hard-boiled fiction, often featuring one of these writers as the adaptors of their own novels.

The main difference between the hard-boiled school of detective fiction and the classical detective genre in literature can be best grabbed by the different methods of the detectives. According to Slavoj Žižek, the difference between the Sherlock Holmes type of detective and the Philip Marlowe kind is that the former is not literally “engaged” with the crime itself: “he maintains an eccentric position throughout; he is excluded from the exchanges that take place among the group of suspects constituted by the corpse” (60) and maintains an exterior position to the whole affair. The hard-boiled detective, on the contrary, finds himself in the drift of events, in chases and fights, “and solves his cases with the personal commitment of somebody fulfilling an ethical mission, although the commitment is often hidden under a mask of cynicism” (ibid.).

The character of the detective, through the physical engagement with the crime, often finds himself opposite of the *femme fatale*, the deadly woman character, who is usually a suspect in the particular criminal cases. The *femme fatale* is a sexually charged, dangerous, seductive character (Cf. Chapter Six “Gender and the Cinema: All Sides of the Camera”), whose role is usually to hinder the solution of the crime by destabilizing the male detective: both emotionally and existentially. The emotional, or rather sexual, challenge is intricately bound up with the existential threat because by seducing the detective, the *femme fatale* also makes him cross the boundary between the binary opposition of ethical good and bad: if the male detective enters a relationship of sexual nature with one of the potential suspects, how will he be able to solve the crime and sustain his professional integrity? The basis of the *femme fatale*’s character can be traced back to two possible sources, the socioeconomic and the psychoanalytic. On the one hand, “the changing status of women during the war and postwar period challenged male dominance” (Belton 240) because women entered the workforce, took over traditionally male roles, working, for example, on assembly lines, making tanks, airplanes, etc., which subverted traditional sexual stereotypes. This change posed a threat to traditional values the basis of which was the institution of the family. This socioeconomic shift was reflected in psychological terms, as well. Women were seen as threat to social stability in a male-centered world, depriving them of their traditional roles not only at the workplaces, but also at home. The active figure of the woman had to be devalued and punished in order to restore the shattered ego of the male: she either had to die, or domesticized in order to restore the setup of the traditional nuclear family.

Beside characterization, the most obvious feature that marked the difference of film noirs from previous genre films was their visual style. The high-key lighting style that was used to create the glamorous atmosphere for stars in the 1930s was left behind for a low-key lighting that created harsh contrast, dark, gloomy atmospheres, and claustrophobic spatial composition (with a harshly lit front detail framed by a very dark background). Arguably the lighting style reached back to *German expressionism*, “a particular filmic style which emerged in Germany during the years 1919–24” (Hayward 171–72) known for presenting taboo topics, such as “madness, and primitive, sexual savagery” (172) in “expressionistic sets and high-contrast chiaroscuro lighting” (173).

Film noir, therefore, seemed to be subversive both in its thematic concern and visual style. Yet, there is no agreement that the group of films under the umbrella term of film noir constitute a circumscribable genre because, while the films visibly share some basic characteristics, they do not conform to set rules of generic production. In other words, even if they are similar, they are just as much different from each other in the way they treat their subjects. Film noir themes and modes of representation, moreover, return cyclically: in the 1980s dark, pessimistic *techno-noirs* (noir films in which technological advancement exists in a dehumanized world) appeared signaled by Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), or later by films such as *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995, dir. Robert Longo), *The Terminator* (1984, dir. James Cameron), *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski), *The Detective Story* in *The Animatrix* (2003, dir. Shinichirô Watanabe), and *V for Vendetta* (2005, dir. James McTeigue). As Elizabeth Cowie argues, studios only recognized the “hybridity” of these films (their mixing different, existing generic ideas of fellow genres, like the gangster film, the detective film, and the melodrama), but they did not categorized them into a separate genre in terms of production (131). Cowie offers an alternative way of defining film noir without relegating it to any generic categorization by saying that “what has come to be called film noir, whilst it does not constitute a genre itself, does name a particular set of elements that were used to produce ‘the different’ and the new in a film; hence the term film noir names a set of possibilities for making existing genres ‘different’” (ibid.). In a quest to define what film noir is, Marc Vernet offers a refreshing description:

It is an object of beauty because Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall are to be found there, because it is neatly contained in a perfect decade (1945–55), because it is simultaneously defined by its matter (black and white) and by its content (the crime story), because it is strange (see its relation to German expressionism and to psychoanalysis), [...] because it assures the triumph of European artists even as it presents American actors, because it is a severe criticism of faceless capitalism, because it prolongs the reading of detective novels while feeding comparatism, because there is always an unknown film to be added to the list, because the stories it tells are both shocking and sentimental, because it is a great example of cooperation – the Americans made it and then the French invented it [...] On the whole, film noir is like a Harley-

Davidson: you know right away what it is, the object being only the synecdoche of a continent, a history and a civilization, or more precisely of their representation for non-natives. (Vernet 1)

As the examples of the western, the screwball comedy, and film noir show, in the genre analysis of film, history and criticism are pulled together into a productive dialogue with the aim of establishing or defining generic categories and of uncovering deep structures that power surface manifestations. The notions of literary genre theory have not really entered the vocabulary of the analysis of film genres. Beginning with the work of Ed Buscombe, the division of formal categories was apparent. In his study of the western, Buscombe introduced the interpretive categories of *outer and inner forms* with a special focus on the visual elements of a particular film (outer form) and the way these elements are structured (inner form) to create a meaningful whole. Without direct reference to Wellek and Warren's terminology, Buscombe argues that the outer form of a genre is made up of a repertoire of visual elements (wide-brimmed hats, guns, board houses, sandy streets, the saloon, etc. in the case of a western film) (Stam 126). These elements are then combined into a filmic expression by the filmmaker, resulting in a combination structural principles of which are shared by a certain number of productions. Instead of relying on auteur theory and the idea of the *mise-en-scène* as providing "the means of materialising the author's personal vision" (Cook 60), Buscombe focused on the *iconography* of films, by which he meant "recurrent images, including the physical attributes and dress of the actors, the settings, the tools of trade" (*ibid.*), and which made it possible to look at the role of the filmic image with its wider scope of implications for film analysis. It opened the way for a genre analysis that completely detached itself from its literary counterpart.

Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres* introduces a sociologically oriented study of film genres, and discusses genres in their relation to broader social, cultural, and economic contexts. Schatz divides Hollywood genres into two groups in order to define the function of genre that – as a cultural ritual – helps "to integrate a conflictual community through romance or through a character who mediates between rival factions" (Stam 127). The first group consists of genres which present the reestablishment of social order: westerns, gangster and detective movies. In this cluster of films the disorder in the social setup that gives the *apropos* of the narrative is resolved by the end. The other group is made up of genres whose aim is to advocate social integration: the musical, comedy, and melodrama. Here outcasts become equal members of society, and everybody achieves their aims.

In terms of general development, Schatz distinguishes four stages in the cycle of any film genre. The first is an experimental period in which generic rules, schemes and stylistic characteristics are established. The second stage is the "classical" period, which serves to iterate and institutionalize the characteristics of the genre that have been developed in the first period, and audience expectations are consolidated by the recurrence of similar films. The third stage of the development of a cycle is the period of decline in the sense that no new generic inventions

are introduced in the development, and the genre cannot renew itself. The final, fourth period in the development of a genre, according to Schatz, is the self-reflexive stage, in which the classical and typical generic features – the ones that make the particular genre a genre – are called into question (Vasák 8).

According to Steve Neale, genres are systems that consist of specific orientations in terms of the narrative, which raise expectations in the audience (e.g. how a film should end), thus setting the agenda for distribution techniques, and prescribe conventions, modes, and methods for production (how a musical or melodrama should be done) (Stam 127, Hayward 166). Because of the interaction of the three elements – audience, distribution, and production – genres are prone to “rework, extend and transform the norms that codify them,” so it is impossible to “straightjacket” any of them (Neale 58). The prescriptive methods for making genre films are never “innocent,” however, as Robin Wood suggests (478). Ideology is always already present to reinforce, for example, gender distinctions: representations of active men versus passive women in western, independence versus domestic entrapment, family and marriage in melodramas, are only a few that have themes that lie at the basis of generic definitions, yet reflect the ideological preferences of the era in which the particular films of the given genre are made (*ibid.*). The control of these underlying antinomies, often referred to as binary oppositions, by the production offers *preferred readings* of genre films, that is, interpretations that are pre-coded, with the message that images and stories presented by the film “are meant to mean what they say” (Hayward 285). It helps to satisfy audience expectations, on the one hand, and extend production control on the other hand. This view is supported by the routine of studios to define the market for their films: they arranged publicity campaigns according to the audience sector in view, choosing generic categories from a “menu” that included male genres (action adventure, gangster film, war film, and western), female genres (drama, musical, romantic comedy, and weepie), and the rest, called *tertium quid* (Latin, “third thing”), which could not be otherwise categorized along gender lines (fantasy, historical/costume, slapstick comedy, travel adventure) (Altman 128).

According to Altman, this selective system was in use until the 1960s, when new methods were introduced to examine audience demographics (*ibid.*). This model recognized only two factors: age and sex, so “either you were a sexually defined adult (and either male or female) or not (and thus part of the *tertium quid*, which was sometimes broken down into children and older audiences)” (*ibid.*). Instead of ideological criticism, Altman offers a flexible model for genre analysis in his programmatic “A semantic/syntactic approach to film genre.” He distinguishes between the *semantic* approach that concerns the narrative content of film, which he calls “a genre’s building blocks” (219), and the *syntactic* one that focuses on the different structures into which the narrative blocks are arranged. The semantic view is comprised of what would be called in Wellek and Warren’s and later Buscombe’s phrase “outer form:” “a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, set, and the like” (*ibid.*). The

syntactic view – largely synonymous with “inner form” – is made up of “certain constitutive relationships between undesigned and variable place-holders” (ibid.). Unlike in earlier theories of film genre analyses, the syntactic and semantic approaches are in a complementary relation with each other, which makes possible the analysis of films that are inventive in their blending the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another. Thus, a genre, like musical, can renew itself by incorporating elements of the melodrama, and genre analysis would not be concerned with the violation of genre boundaries, but would be looking at the various ways the incorporation enriches the particular film’s interpretation. With the semantic/syntactic approach Altman avoids the problems present in a unilateral approach: his view does not limit a genre to its historically determined tradition, and does not limit itself to interpretative, universal definitions (such as Schatz’s order versus integration antinomy in the classification of genres). Altman, however, later extended his model by introducing a third component that complements the semantic/syntactic binary: a *pragmatist approach*. This approach guides the focus of analysis towards exactly which particular semantic and syntactic features should be discussed (210). The pragmatic approach tells the analyst what and how to investigate in a complementary semantic/syntactic genre analysis.

Once neglected and underrepresented theoretical trend in the history of film theories, genre theory has become a sophisticated critical terrain – with its own problematic issues. According to Stam, one of the main problems with genre analysis is the question of “extension” (128). This means that some genre definitions are too broad to help interpretation and genre analysis, others are too narrow. Saying that a film is a comedy does not help much, while a category such as psycho-thriller of serial killers unnecessarily limits the number of generic components. As Stam explains, genre analysis should avoid “normativism,” which means that the interpreter should forget about pre-conceived ideas “of what a genre film should do” and instead look at genre “as a trampoline for creativity and innovation” (ibid.). In other words, no two films within the same genre look and do the same; consequently, the critic should not expect them to act against their nature. The third problem is that genre is often thought to be “monolithic,” that is, believed to belong to only one genre. In reality, even genre films from the studio era testify of occasional overlap between genres to a certain extent. Thus a war movie may contain characteristic elements of melodrama, or a spy movie may easily appropriate elements of the thriller films.

Another potential problem arising in discussions of film genres is the view that considers genres to have a “life cycle” – an argument advocated by Schatz’s theory of the development of genres. According to Stam, this view is driven by the plague of “biologism” because, for example, the stylistic features of the last, self-reflexive or decadent phase of the generic cycle can be present at the birth of the particular cycle, too (ibid.). On the contrary, parody and self-reflexive structures are often present in the programmatic films of a genre (129): notable examples include David Wark Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) or Buster Keaton’s *The Three Ages*

(1923). Finally, Stam argues that genres can be “submerged,” that is, on the surface a film may appear as belonging to one genre, yet structurally, in terms of narrative or visual style it belongs to another one (ibid.). While on the surface Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) or George Lucas’s *Star Wars* have nothing to do with western structurally, narratologically, and in their method of characterization they can easily be analyzed as westerns.

The theory of film genre has gone a long way from its genre theory in literature. Today most film theorists agree that genres “can be identified by” and analyzed based on an investigation of “the iconography and conventions appearing within” them (Hayward 171). As a critical term, genre remains slippery and shifting: its meaning and critical application varies with the changing codes and conventions that operate it. As Christine Gledhill concludes, “[g]enres are fictional worlds, but they do not stay within fictional boundaries: their conventions cross into cultural and critical discourse, where we – as audiences, scholars, students, and critics – make and remake them” (241).

Keywords

genre, auteur-structuralism, inner and outer forms, deep structure, binary oppositions, preferred reading, iconography, western, melodrama, screwball comedy, film noir, techno-noir, hard-boiled detective fiction, femme fatale, German expressionism, semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approaches

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