Genre is dead - long live genre A critique

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Genre is a term all Media and Film Studies students are familiar with - it's at the heart of both analysis and production, But in a world where Teen Horror Chick flick rubs shoulders with genre-bending sitcoms, is it still a useful concept?

If you're a Media Studies student the chances are you've already 'done genre' at some point in your Media course. You'll therefore be aware that the media are dominated by generic production, and that it is thought to be very difficult for media products - from the new Black Eyed Peas CD to the next television crime series - to find an audience unless they can be marketed by repeating and exploiting their familiar and reassuring features. You might have studied soap operas or tabloid newspapers or teenage magazines. You might have described the codes and conventions of Science Fiction films, the iconography of Horror movies or the typical narratives of Romances across a range of media. You may have thought to yourself: 'This is pretty easy stuff - I've seen dozens of Horror movies, I know how they work. They all have iconography, that's Freddy, Jason and Dracula isn't it? Stakes; crucifixes; extraordinarily impressive fingernail grooming?' Put simply, surely, Horror films should attempt to horrify their audiences. If they don't, they're not Horror. So, genre - it's not exactly rocket science is it?

We are frequently encouraged to think of genres as self-contained entities, rather like biological classifications. In Biology, dogs are dogs, cats are cats and amoebae are, well, amoebae. Discrete, different, with some classifications close and capable of a degree of cross-fertilization, but with others forever separated by the rigid boundaries of species and genetics.

This analogy certainly seems to be reinforced in a great many textbooks in Film and Media Studies, which tend to discuss 'the Western' or 'Melodrama' within their own discrete terms of reference. Thus, a genre in any medium is likely to be conceived in quasi-biological terms. Genres can, by this consideration, be seen to 'evolve'; frequently becoming increasingly sophisticated as each new entry attempts to introduce new and innovative features while reworking key formulaic essentials. Certainly, many genres seem receptive to this approach, with the result that you can view The Unforgiven alongside The Searchers and conclude that both look and feel pretty much like Westerns.

Frankenstein - SF or horror?

Science Fiction has been a popular genre for years. Audiences seem to have a very clear idea of what constitutes a Science Fiction text. Consider the first sound version of Frankenstein made by Universal in 1930. Brian Aldiss considers the original novel to be one of the key early (indeed proto-typical) works of Science Fiction and, of course, the film has a 'mad scientist' - undoubtedly a genre 'staple'. However, it is equally feasible to claim the film version as Horror, as it possesses an archetypal 'monster' and is clearly designed to produce sensations of fear in the minds of its audience. You might therefore conclude that as the early Frankenstein series made by Universal studios in the 1930s were considered to be and marketed as Horror, so Frankenstein should rightly be considered a hybrid. Or you might even take a view that after a clutch of sequels, there is little merit in discussing films such as Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein in terms of the Science Fiction genre, as the only discernable elements are of Horror and Comedy. By 1957, I was a Teenage Frankenstein sees the story remade as Teen/Juvenile Delinquent movie; and in 2004, Victor and his creature turned up in supporting roles in Stephen Sommer's Van Helsing, a film which took most of Universal's (and Hammer's) Horror characters (apart from The Mummy which he'd already done) and placed them in an Action Adventure that owed more to John Woo and James Bond than it did to Mary Shelley.

The strange case of Star Wars

If Frankenstein isn't Science Fiction, surely Star Wars is? Wasn't it the key Science Fiction text of the 1970s? The film kick-started an entire revolution in the field of special effects, which in turn came to be seen by studios as the main tool in providing audiences with production value. The burgeoning special effects industry boosted the genre's most traditional iconography: after Star Wars, films embraced robots, 'laser-blasters', space-ships and aliens like never before. Often, this focus on the visual aspects of the entertainment was achieved at the expense of plot logic, decent characterisation and thematic depth. The rush to 'emulate' Star Wars' success produced such genre classics as Battlestar Galactica, Star-Crash and The Black-Hole (no apologies to any lovers of these magnificent creations - there should always be room in our hearts for derivative pap - and Battlestar Galactica has latterly been reinvented as a dark and brooding post-X-Files mini-series!).

However, although Star Wars has a place in any serious discussion of the Science Fiction genre, it is, in some respects, questionable as to whether it should be there at all. Lucas himself conceptualised the film as a combination of various archetypal mythologies of heroic Action and the Samurai film, ultimately viewing his modestly budgeted mythical hero's journey as, above all else, a Fantasy film for children. He 'borrowed' liberally from movie history to supply the film's most memorable sequences; from Westerns for the cantina scene in Mos Eisley spaceport; from World War II movies such as The Dambusters for the raid on the Death Star; from the Historical epic for the film's orchestral soundtrack and widescreen compositions; and from 1940s and 1950s Saturday morning Adventure serials for the cliffhanging moments that punctuate the narrative. Most of the characters, however (Princess Leia, Obi Wan Kenobi, the evil Emperor) can be traced back to fairy tales and legends; the concept of 'the force' is clearly quasi-religious and indeed every film in the series is prefaced with the words 'A long time ago, in a Galaxy far away ...' - Lucas's own spin on 'Once Upon a Time ...'

Star Wars, then, can be seen as a massive generic pot-pourri, consciously infused by George Lucas with the generic equivalent of super-fertilized grow-bags and with its 'futuristic' iconography used more for window dressing and narrative convenience than for its thematic significance. Interestingly, a sizeable segment of the Science Fiction audience rejected the film from 'their' genre altogether. For fans, the genre is organised into two distinct categories: Sci-Fi and SF.

n Sci-Fi is a derogatory term used to refer to 'pulp' Science Fiction - precisely the kind of 1930s literary and film serial 'space opera', that George Lucas had tried to emulate.

n SF, on the other hand, refers to truly 'mature' Science Fiction. This emphasises the speculative rather than the science (indeed the term Speculative Fiction could more readily be attached to the initials). It refuses to be tied down to space ships and robots. Often, it rejects the traditional visual iconography and embraces the genre's ability to stimulate intellectual thought and radical ideas.

SF fans complain that true SF films are rarely made. Even worse, they claim, the infantile plot, character and situations of Star Wars juvenilized the genre beyond repair, much as the film has subsequently been blamed for causing the juvenilization of Hollywood, as a whole.

So are Star Wars and Frankenstein rare or unusual in appearing to belong to more than one genre? Far from it: a growing number of critics and theorists have pointed out that the generic 'hybrid' is far more common than many give it credit for. Others argue that genres in the media have always been 'impure' formations, marked by arbitrary definitions and contingent 'boundaries'. Genres span various media in complex webs and hierarchies of genres and sub-genres, unmanaged by any particular 'authority'. Generic terms are used in particular theoretical or institutional contexts in often diverse and conflicting ways. Terms such as 'drama' mean fundamentally different things when used in the fields of literature, theatre, film or television. Some film scholars would argue that, for cinema, the term 'drama' exists outside of genre altogether, whereas other media theorists believe that all cultural production is inevitably and inherently generic.

Within the music industry, the idea of genre has become increasingly fluid and difficult to categorise. You can read a case study on the explosion of new musical genres in MoreMediaMag.

Meanwhile, back at school ...

As universities and then schools, began to develop Media and Film Studies courses in some form or another, the study of genre became institutionalised. Over the years, hundreds of books emerged on every conceivable genre. Indeed, whole genres were created by critics themselves, looking for ways to group together films which shared an identifiable range of characteristics. Foremost in this category is Film Noir a term coined retrospectively by grouping together a disparate group of Crime films, Detective thrillers and bleak Melodramas sharing themes of dispossession and a distinctive, sometimes expressionistic visual style. Nowadays, film-makers themselves happily recycle the term and so we have a whole slew of Noirs, including Classic, Post-classic, Neo-Noir and Quasi-Noir etc.

Genres appear to evolve differently across different media with interesting results. In the 50s and 60s the Western film found itself in gradual decline. Those Westerns that did get made had to become darker and sometimes more violent in order to maintain audiences. Italian films such as A Fistful of Dollars redefined the genre's visual style and traditional locations; Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch established new levels of acceptable screen violence, but Mel Brooks' surreal comedy Blazing Saddles spiked several conventions so effectively that it would be years before they could be used again in a dramatic context.

Genre and TV - the rise of the format

On television, however, the term genre was a word less used than format. As a broadcast medium, TV embraced the idea of a continuous flow of programming. Programmers created appropriate schedules in which familiar programme styles could co-exist. News programmes, game shows, sitcoms and variety shows etc. were all required to fit into specific time slots. As critics began to apply the term genre to television, it became evident that the terms genre and format did not precisely overlap. Whereas format tended to refer to the structural elements of a programme; such as the order and timing of events, the term genre had a wider meaning, referring to categories of programmes linked through theme, intention, target audience and institutional origins. So, some TV genres such as 'Light Entertainment' could embrace a variety of similar formats from the variety and sketch show to the game show and sitcom, while others, such as Children's TV, were even less coherent as a genre, as they covered every conceivable format from Newsround to Power Rangers.

60s genre-bending - *The Avengers*

In the 1960s, several long-running TV programmes forged ahead creating their own genres, by shifting from their original premise or by radically reworking their characters and style. Speaking of The Avengers (see overleaf) Kim Newman claims:

[it] started off as a straight Spy/Thriller/Mystery show and edged into a sort of bizarre parodic Edwardian version of the Bond series

The Avengers exploded into colour in the mid-60s after a few series of studio-bound police thrillers. The series changed dramatically after successful foreign sales enabled its producers to begin shooting on (more expensive) film, and develop a new and fresh dynamic between the lead characters of John Steed and Emma Peel. Brian Clemens, the creator of the series, reflects on his experience of working on the show:

As long as we kept within the budget and within the bounds of good taste and within the bounds of what made an *Avengers* which nobody really knew - but we instinctively knew what *didn't*make an *Avengers* - then I was given carte blanche.

*Happy Days* - jumping the shark ...

There comes a point in a long-running programme's lifespan in which the integrity of its original concept is all but lost. This is known in the industry as 'jumping the shark'. The phrase originates from an episode of the sitcom Happy Days in which the character of the Fonz, played by Henry Winkler, jumps on the top of a shark, during a beach vacation. An inescapable fixture of the schedules during the 70s, Happy Days started life as a (relatively) authentic look at early 60s American small-town teenage life. However, as the 70s wore on, the show began to run out of plausible social situations as sources for humour and increasingly embraced the wacky and ludicrous (mid-way through the run it introduced the character of Mork from the planet Ork, who later became a character in the hugely popular spin-off series which launched the career of Robin Williams). The characters were looking increasingly unlike the teenagers they were supposed to be - Henry Winkler was a good 15 years older than his character.

Other long-running TV series have 'jumped the shark', by altering the format significantly, if not destroying it. Sometimes, this was down to an institutional requirement - the need to continue a series after the departure of a key actor. When David Duchovny left the X-Files it carried on without him, despite the body of opinion suggesting he was integral to the programme's success. When the actor playing Scots' detective Taggart died, Taggart the series continued. In the television industry, the show is clearly 'bigger' than any particular cast member; however, producers and executives are also keenly aware that there is always a risk of 'breaking the contract' between the show and the audience.

Breaking the contract

Possibly the most notorious examples of breaking this assumed contract are the classic 80s American super-soaps, Dallas and Dynasty. These shows had already redefined the classic soap-opera formula. Historically most American soaps had been made relatively cheaply and featured relationship-orientated storylines designed to appeal to predominantly female viewers. Dallas, set in the Texas oil industry, was clearly designed to widen the traditional soap audience. The wealthy milieu and A-list cast demanded a prime-time slot and the show soon developed its own unique style of glossy, pacy, just-about-plausible realism. After several series, Miss Ellie, the family matriarch, was replaced by another actress overnight in a change that went unnoticed by every other character. Then another key character, Patrick Duffy, decided to leave. His character, Bobby Ewing, was killed off fairly definitively, and a subsequent series followed with new characters and plotlines. However, when Duffy decided that he wanted to return, the producers decided that they would write off the entire series (31 episodes running over a year) as having been an overnight 'dream' of Bobby's wife, and Ewing was reintroduced at the beginning of the next series in what has become the most famous shower scene in TV history. It would have been fun to witness the writers' conferences, once they heard Duffy was returning; perhaps they felt that, having already accepted major mid-show cast changes, viewers would swallow pretty much anything.

Other soaps in both Britain and the States preferred to leave such drastic plausibility shifts to the very end of the programme's run. So Dynasty, Dallas's main US competitor, ended its final series with the abduction of several characters by alien spaceship. (One can but wish that Den Watts and Ian Beale might suffer the same fate.) More recently, the entire run of the briefly revived Crossroads was also revealed to be the dream of one of its characters.

Producers of all long-running TV programmes have to juggle the tensions between keeping them 'fresh' and attracting new viewers, and retaining the loyalty of older viewers by perpetuating the original concept, cast or format. This, of course, is the dilemma of genre. Viewers' expectations must be simultaneously satisfied and challenged. The problem faced by programmes like Happy Days or Dallas is a result of its shift from one mode of realism to another.

Of course broadcasting faces more restrictions than cinema, such as those governing 'factual' and news programming. The conventions of television news are fixed by a host of external guidelines, mostly to reassure the audience that journalistic standards are being maintained. On the other hand it is clear that documentary as a genre has been reconfigured by developments such as reality television, and possibly even programmes like The Office which, out of context, could conceivably be taken for the real thing.

The Office also demonstrates how flexible we need to be in analysing a television genre. As with so many other media, the most innovative texts seem able to transcend categorisation. So The Office was able to ditch the laugh track, make its characters aware of the 'documentary' cameras observing, and indeed interviewing them, and also create a narrative arc that allowed for change in its characters' lives. Yet we can still clearly discuss The Office with reference to a thing called a 'sitcom'.

Final thoughts ...

The examples I have identified here represent the predicament faced by almost all producers of mass media entertainment. For years, critics of popular culture have considered genre products as cheap, derivative and lacking in the 'quality' associated with 'high art'. And if you reflect on this, it might strike you that the more generic a film or piece of music is, the more predictable and 'bound' by over-familiar convention it seems to be. Conversely, films like Star Wars, Donnie Darko, Ghost World or television like the X-Files, Buffy, the Vampire Slayer and The Office are popular and successful precisely because they have played with and challenged previous generic conventions and audience expectations, whilst simultaneously setting up new sets of conventions, drawn from several genres.

Film theorists such as Steve Neale and Janet Staiger suggest that this practice is essentially as old as the film industry itself. Our view of genres - or of the development of any specific genre - depends on a number of factors:

n the ways in which those genres' histories have been written and described by others

n the specific point in time at which those histories are examined

n the choices made about which texts constitute a particular genre's canon.

So is genre dead then? My argument is that it's simply nonsense to claim that genres possess clear, stable and identifiable boundaries. This challenges many of the assumptions that are made about how genre works.

A better way to describe the way texts work might be to suggest that they function in relation to genres, rather than being defined by them. We should also acknowledge that whatever assumptions we might make about a genre's supposed features will depend on a particular audience's own understanding and viewing histories, and that audiences will think about genres differently from critics, academics, film-makers or marketing departments. Ultimately, perhaps we need to remember that the concept of genre is a little like stereotyping. Once you start investigating real people in all their complexity, stereotypes tend to fall apart; similarly, once you start analysing a complex media text, generic labels become fairly meaningless.

And finally, as a student, you should keep an open mind about how texts use genre and how genres influence texts. Neale encourages his readers to invent their own genres, by grouping films together in unusual or original combinations. So here's to gunkadelic music, unreality television and Pan European Sci-Fi Biker movies.

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*This article first appeared in MediaMagazine 11. February 2005*