

A2 Film Studies essay on Genre

Identify the strengths and weaknesses of a genre based approach to the analysis of a specific film.

The genre based critical approach to genre involves looking at a film based, as the name suggests, on its genre. Genre is, literally, the 'type' or 'class' of a film; for example 'horror', 'thriller' or 'film noir.' Films are ascribed to genre in a number of different ways – the iconography, themes, narrative, stars and director can all help identify the genre of a film. For example, 'Night of the Living Dead' can be ascribed to the horror genre. It contains the iconography (isolated house, blood and gore, zombies); the themes (distrust and incompetence of institutions like law enforcement, the breakdown of the family); the narrative structure (ending with a negative 'twist' rather than a restoration of Todorov's 'equilibrium'); a director (George A. Romero) and a setting (rural America) that are consistent with horror movies.

A genre approach involves looking at a film with these codes and conventions in mind, but also looking at the influence of genre on audience demands and expectations. In addition two other areas require consideration: the use of genre in industry marketing and the similarities and differences between specific genre films.

There are a number of advantages to using this theory to study and analyse specific films. The genre approach helps you to know what to expect from a film. Genre is all about expectation and surprise/similarity and difference: a film must be similar enough to the codes and conventions of a genre that the audience get what they were expecting, however it must contain enough different and surprising elements to make the film appealing and interesting to an audience. This point highlights another use of genre theory – it allows us to develop a greater understanding of the creative limitations involved in producing specific films.

Different and original mainstream films are uncommon in because they diverge from genre conventions, leaving the audience unsure of what to expect. This limits a film's appeal as the theory suggests that the reason that the majority of people watch films is the pleasure gained in anticipating and recognising the familiar. If a film is too unfamiliar or different from genre expectations, it will be hard to market and 'pitch' at an audience. Indeed, M. Night Shyamalan's most recent film 'The Village' was criticised by many as being falsely marketed as a horror film and many people disliked the film for not being like contemporary horror films.

Another major advantage of the genre based approach is that it allows a film to be analysed in comparison to a large range of other films from a variety of sources that fall into the same genre category. Under an auteur theory approach to films you are focused on the films of one particular director. However the genre approach opens up a much wider range of films from different directors from different backgrounds. For example, using a genre based approach, the films of George A. Romero and the films of Wes Craven can be compared, both direct horror movies, but raised in different eras. This then leads on to possibly the most useful aspect of genre criticism. By analysing specific films from a variety of directors and time periods, we can gain an understanding of the way that society and audiences have changed over time.

The 'genre triangle' identified by Stephen Neale identifies the three interlocking 'keys' to a film; producers, text and audience. The producers develop a text and the audience tell the producers whether it is the sort of thing they want to see or not by going to see or not going see different films. This then affects the next text to be produced in an attempt to conform to audience demands. By looking at the development of different genres and the development of films within the same genre, it is possible to look at changes and similarities and differences and identify changes in society and audience tastes and ideologies. For example, within the action adventure genre and the spy genre during the 60s and 70s it was common for the enemy to be Russian or Chinese, reflecting the society of the times fear of Communism and Communist countries. In contemporary films of the same genre the enemies will often be middle-Eastern, reflecting the fear of terrorism from countries like Iran and Iraq that currently pervades European and American society.

However, there are some problems with the genre approach. Genre expectations can often lead to certain films being ignored or criticised. For example, if a star or director becomes too associated with a particular genre, any attempt to move away from that genre could be ignored, criticised, or not even funded in the first place. Martin Scorsese, often identified most with the gangster genre, directed the biopic 'Kundun' which was criticised by many critics and ignored by audiences as it departed from expectation. Also, the approach treats films as groups rather than looking at them individually: it can tend to focus on the similarities between specific films, and ignore differences.

The major challenge when analysing recent films is that the increase in hybridisation and post-generic films has made the genre approach increasingly difficult and complex to apply. With hybridisation we see films like 'Donnie Darko' being produced, a film that is a 'Fantasy/Drama/Sci-fi/Mystery/Thriller' – elements of a huge range of genres. Post-generic films are films like 'Lord of the Rings' – a film that is easily identifiable as a fantasy film, yet one that appealed to people who would never normally watch fantasy genre movies. Both of these factors make analysing specific films under the genre approach more and more difficult.

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Teacher Assessment

The author addresses a complex Film Studies question appropriately for a high grade at A2 level. The theoretical summaries are simplifications of much larger bodies of work, yet they remain clear and relevant. Issues are subject to debate and points are supported with reference to a variety of evidence, including film examples. A clear context for the debate is maintained which enables the writer to produce a highly relevant and interesting conclusion, albeit based on material which might have been introduced at an earlier stage. This essay would be assessed as A grade.