



# *Access Film*

**Genre**

# Film Genre

## Introduction

- Frequently, people choose to go to the movies to see a certain **type** of film.
- Popular genres include:
  - Action
  - Comedy
  - Western;
  - Science-fiction;
  - Horror;
  - Musical
- Genres are used by industry officials in deciding what kinds of films to make and as a simple way to characterize film.
- There is usually a link between popular national cinemas and genre.

# Understanding Genre

## Defining a Genre

- It is difficult to define a particular genre.
- Some genres are determined by their subject or theme
  - Westerns: frontier conflict
  - Science-fiction: technology beyond our current means
  - Gangster: large-scale urban crime
- Other genres are determined by their manner of presentation
  - Musicals: singing and dancing
- Still others depend upon a particular plot pattern
  - Detective: investigation of a crime (murder)
- While others are determined by the emotion they evoke
  - Horror: fear
  - Comedy: Laughter
  - Thriller: tension
- Many films do not fit into just one genre category because they contain elements of many different genres.

# Understanding Genre

## Analysing a Genre

- Genre can be analyzed in terms of the **genre conventions** - some type of common identity which reappears in film after film.
- Genre conventions include:
  - Plot elements (investigation - detective)
  - Specific types of characters (hardball sergeant major - war)
  - Themes (love will conquer all - romance)
  - Techniques (rapid editing - action)
  - Iconography
    - Tommy gun - gangster
    - Samurai sword - martial arts
    - John Wayne - Westerns
- As well as following conventions, films can revise or reject genre conventions.
- Audiences expect something familiar from genre films but also demand fresh variations.

# Understanding Genre

## Genre History

- Genre conventions change over time.
- Their conventions change, and by mixing conventions from different genres, filmmakers create new possibilities from time to time.
- The mixing of genre conventions makes it possible for genres to borrow elements from one another.
- Though each genre is formulaic to a certain extent, they must constantly be evolving, as they generally don't remain successful for very long.
- Rather, they experience periods of popularity called **cycles**.
- Genre cycles usually begin with the purest examples of the genre and end with self-referential films.

# Understanding Genre

## The Social functions of Genres

- Often, genres provide a basis for social analysis.
- By exploiting social values and attitudes, genre harmonizes with public attitudes.
  - Heroism should be rewarded
  - Romantic love is desirable
  - Evil will be punished
- This may serve to distract us from real social issues.
- Genres often **reflect** the attitudes and values of the society in which they are produced.
  - 1950s sci-fi
- **Reflectionist** approaches are sometimes rejected as oversimplistic.
  - 1990s film violence
- Sometimes, they also rely on their conventions to make larger social commentary and challenge prevalent beliefs and assumptions.
  - Brokeback Mountain

# Three Genres

- The Western is categorized by the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier. Complete with stock characters and stock scenarios, Westerns emerged early in the history of cinema. The change in attitudes towards the ‘civilised settlers’ and ‘savage natives’ shows how genre conventions can change. Contemporary Westerns often deal more with emotional turmoil than with external conflict.
- Horror films are usually determined by the response they look to evoke. Because a horror film can create its emotional impact with make-up and other low-technology effects, the horror genre has long been favored by low-budget filmmakers. Horror films usually evoke their desired emotional action by providing an agent of fear that somehow perverts or defies the laws of nature. The changing elements of the horror genre reflect prevalent social attitudes and cultural fears and concerns.
- Starting out as musical revues, the musical is categorized by its use of song and dance. Two early typical plot patterns were the backstage musical plot and the “let's put on a show!” plot, although straight musicals where people may sing and dance in everyday situations were also popular. The musical has often been associated with children's stories, such as *The Wizard of Oz*. The range of subject matter in musicals is so broad that it is hard to pin down specific iconography associated with its genre. Along with children's stories, musicals have also dealt with more serious, tragic stories.

# Questions

- Identify the prevalent characteristics of the following genres (consider settings, character types, plot devices, themes, cinematic techniques, iconography, etc.):
  - Comedy; Action; Science fiction; Fantasy; Film Noir; Thriller; Gangster; Melodrama; Romance; War.



# Questions

- To what genre(s) do the following films belong?  
Why?
  - *Lord of the Rings, Casablanca, Psycho, Halloween, Donnie Darko, Jaws, Alien, Lawrence of Arabia, Pulp Fiction, Star Wars, Zoolander, Easy Rider, The Last of the Mohicans, Infernal Affairs, Sin City, West Side Story, Gone with the Wind, The Wrestler, The Seven Samurai.*

# Questions

- Identify major convention changes over the history of the following genres. What might be the reasons for these changes? (consider social changes, technological advances, etc.)
  - Western; Comedy; Romance; Horror; War.