

Do genres change over time essay



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Most people who come across the term genre take it to mean 'type' films at first sight are easily sorted into types horror movies, musical, western etc. A example of this could be taken from a western, we can list all the features that make up this genre men in Stetsons, women in long skirts, horses used as transport. There are gunfights love affairs, bank robberies; all these ingredients are which go into a film to make up the action of a western. From this we may be confident that the setting, characters who usually have a clear appearance and a limited number of personality traits for easy identification.

The symbols in the frame (guns, etc) the type of conflict shown and the way conflicts are resolved all contribute to genre. But there as always been a problem to find the point at which one genre ends and another begins. We find ourselves problems when a attempt is made to identify specific genres of discourse. How are we able to say this is a western, this is a science fiction. Andrew Tudor view on this particular issue which is quoted in the 'History of genre criticism' was as followed " To take a genre such as the 'western' and list principle characteristics... is to..... solate the body of film which are ' westerns' But they can only be isolated on the principle characteristics which can only be discovered by the films themselves after the films have been isolated. "

Has you might of already worked out there is no point in following this circular process unless we are prepared to give up the search for an accurate definition of genre. What we all might come to agree with is the idea that the 'cinema' is not just simple the collection of institutions that physically

produce and circulate films, but it also includes the wider social institution which might include audiences as well.

In genre Stephan Neale solved the problem of how best to understand genre. His notion was “ Genres are systems of expectations and conventions, that circulate between industry, text and subject. ” The idea of audiences foreknowledge (which is the knowledge of a genre in advance, based on experience of other texts) will obviously lead to a certain set of expectations. It is these expectations which are then used to catch the attention of the audience whenever a film is being publicised. So do genres change over time?

The aim of the descriptive approach to genre is to classify, or organise a large number of films into a small number of groups, in film studies this process of classification does not systematically organise films into genres, as we already know the boundaries between film genres are fuzzy, rather than clearly described also genres are not static they do not remain the same but evolve therefore their common attributes change over time Most films are hybrid genres, since they possess the common attributes of more than one genre, a typical example of this is the singing cowboy film, which possesses the attributes of both the musical and the western.

Overall genre films create expectations that condition our responses. The familiarity of the genre film enables each spectator to anticipate and predict what will appear in them. The genre film sets up hopes and promises and brings pleasure if these hopes and promises are fulfilled. Genre critics have reoccurring patterns which are not merely formal patterns instead they

reflect the basic questions, problems, anxieties, difficulties, worries and more generally the values of a society and the way members of that society attempt to tackle those basic questions and problems.

A genre film is satisfying then, if it addresses those questions and problems that the spectators expect them to address, it is a mirror held up to society that embodies and reflects the shared problems and values of that society. Common sense will show us that the problems and questions asked by the spectators will change as the society we are living in evolves over time, therefore for genre film to bring pleasures to fulfil the hopes and promises of the spectators. What might of scared a 1950s audience then in the horror genre might not be relevant to a modern audience simply because they are categorised into two different groups in terms of society.

A audience of this decade would probably find it funny to watch a horror of the 1950s but at the time the 1950s audience would of perceived it as being very scary, this is how horror genres play on audiences fears by taking into account our natural fears but also playing with the fears of our society this allows the audience to experience these fears in a safe environment.

Therefore when institutions produce films they have got to be aware of the audiences foreknowledge in order to have an impact. The same way fashions change so do genres because peoples tastes, likes, dislikes etc change according to the environment in which they are living.

The following is just a demonstration of how genres have got to change in order to keep up with and fit into audiences values and expectations.

Suppose we allow the cowboys in a western to wear bowlers hats instead of

Stetsons? It may only mean that the action is set further east. Suppose everything remains as it should except the characters in the film are shown riding camels instead of horses, this would definitely begin to confuse the viewer of this generation to think are we watching the same genre all because the type of transport the cowboys got around on changed. The point here is each generation, society etc have expectations and if these expectations are not fulfilled then it will not be relevant to that particular audience

What about if in the future cowboys were represented to have camels as a form of transport, to the future audience this would be seen as the norm it might not be the norm to us, as our societies representation of a cowboys transport is a horse, however if this change did take place then this convention would have to change as the audience of the future would not be able to identify with it therefore it would not be relevant to their expectations. The genre film also offers solutions to problems, and reinforces social values. A genre film cannot obviously offer real solutions to real questions and problems, its solutions are imaginary and idealistic.

But this may explain the attraction of the cinema and the genre film in particular; it offers imaginary answers to real problems in which society is facing although during the film these answers seem to be more than mere fantasy. It is only at the point of leaving the cinema as we try to get home or switch of the TV that the real problems begin to emerge again. From discussing the function of genre films we can argue that watching them is a form of cultural ritual and by studying genre films is one way of studying the culture that produces and consumes them. Barry Keith Grant argues that: “

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Surely one of our basic ways of understanding film genres, and of explaining their evolution and changing fortunes of popularity and production, is as collective expressions of contemporary life that strike a particularly resonant chord with audiences.

It is virtually a given in genre criticism that, for example, the thirties musicals are on one level 'explained' as an escapist Depression fantasy; that film noir in the forties expressed first the social and sexual dislocations brought about by world war II and then the disillusionment when it ended; and then the innumerable science fiction films of the fifties embodied cold war tensions and nuclear anxieties to that decade" The genre film offers a lesson in how to act within society and how to deal with current problems and anxieties. But it does not offer a neutral way to deal with social problems, instead it prescribes a preferred set of values; those of capitalist ideology which emphasises on the individual- the individuals right of ownership, private enterprise and personal wealth; the nuclear family with the wife staying at home and the husband working, the necessity of conforming to moral and social laws etc.