

How any two films
work with the
narrative and stylistic
conventions



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In order to study genre of any kind, it is important to be able to define exactly what genre is. There are various explanations for the meaning of genre. Brainy Media (2003) defines genre as: “ Kind; genus; class; form; style, esp. in literature. ” Interapple Inc (2003) defines genre as: “ Kind, sort, form, variety - a category of things distinguished by some common characteristic or quality” Therefore, it could be argued that genre can be distinguished as having distinct qualities.

Jameson (1994) in Altman (1999: 13) argues that genre is second nature to the movies, arguing that movies belong to genres much the same way people belong to families or ethnic groups. “ Name one of the classic bedrock genres- western, comedy, musical, war film, gangster picture, science fiction, horror- and even the most casual moviegoer will come up with a mental image of it. ” This statement suggests that genres simply exist, and that every individual film naturally falls into, and has the inherent characteristics of a specific genre.

However, Cook and Bernink (1999) argue that Hollywood has played a crucial role in creating and defining genre. They assert that genre, as a term, was created by the film industry to organize production and marketing of movies. In this sense, generic terms exist for economic reasons, to produce money. “ Genres emerged from the studio system’s dual need for standardization and product differentiation. The genres, each with its own recognizable repertoire of conventions running across visual imagery, plot, character, setting, modes of narrative development, music and stars enabled the industry to predict audience expectation. (Cook and Bernink, 1999: 137)

As the market for the entertainment industry is extremely hard to predict and control, profit is dependent on identifying and captivating specific audiences. Therefore, Hollywood has a dual need for standardization and differentiation as it allows for different audiences to be catered for. In this sense, genre is marked by difference. However, Warshow (1970) argues against this, suggesting that instead, genre is marked by repetition.

For a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the accepted vehicles of a particular set of attitudes and aesthetic effect. " (Warshow in Cook and Bernink, 1999: 137) However, Pye (1975) argues that it is much more difficult to place genres into specific categories, claiming that terminology like ' definition' and ' classification', is misleading, as they suggest a greater precision of method than actually possible. " It seems more likely that the outlines of any genre will remain indistinct and impossible to chart.

Genre criticism should concern itself with identifying tendencies within generic traditions. " (Pye in Hollows and Jancovich, 1995: 67) Inevitably, so many disagreements mean that genre is extremely difficult to define. Nevertheless, as Pye suggests, there are a number of dominant characteristics that, according to which, may allow for the easier categorization for movies into specific genres. There are various conventions applicable to every genre, and can be separated into two categories: semantic and syntactic. Semantic, or Iconographic, conventions are concerned with the visual aspect of the film.

According to Telotte (2001), these include character types, physical attributes and costume, lighting, tools or weaponry, special effects and the settings, elements that have been described as “ the language of the genre” (2001: 17). Buscombe (1970) stresses the importance of adopting an iconographic approach. “ Since we are dealing with a visual medium, we ought surely to look, for our defining criteria, at what we actually see on the screen. ” (Buscombe in Hollows and Jancovich, (1995: 68) However, it could be argued that examination of the visual exterior of a film is simply descriptive, and does not provide any analysis.

King and Krzywinska (2000) emphasize the limitations of using a purely semantic approach, as it does not delve far enough, thus providing lack of sufficient meaning. Therefore it is important to consider the syntax, the structure of the film. Telotte (2001) states that the syntax of a film is formed by the language, relationships, plot developments, character actions and typical events. It is important to consider both semantic and syntactic approaches when examining films, in order to attempt to determine which genre specific films may fall into, and thus distinguish genres from others.

The term ‘ science fiction’ was first used in the nineteenth century, arguably as a result of the ‘ father’ of science fiction, H. G. Wells, infamous for his works *The Time Machine* in 1895, *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of Worlds* (1898). However, Cook and Bernink (1999) argue that science fiction did not become fully established until the beginning of the twentieth century, when magazines began producing science fiction in written format.

Science fiction cinema achieved mainstream popularity in the late 1960's and 70's, particularly with the infamous 2001 Space Odyssey in 1968 the prominent Star Wars in 1977. Since then, it has exploded as one of the most famous and significant genres, leaving its status as a B-Movie firmly behind in the past. Theorists have outlined a variety of elements that are commonplace within science fiction.

Using the semantic and syntactic conventions outlined above, an analysis of two specific films, *The Fly* (1986) - the story of an intense scientist Seth Brundle, who has a vision to alter the boundaries of space and time through the use of a teleportation device, however, somehow manages to, when experimenting on himself, to combine his DNA with that of a fly, producing disastrous results - and *Event Horizon* (1997) - in which a crew travel into space in an attempt to save a ship built by scientist Dr Weir, which, whilst being abandoned in outer space has traveled into unknown dimensions - will be conducted in order to determine whether, and to what extent, they conform to the conventions of science fiction as a genre.

In terms of semantics and iconography, both *Event Horizon* and *The Fly* exhibit characteristics that may classify them as science fiction films. Firstly, King and Krzywinska (2000: 11) argue that, with regard to characters, the central figure is extremely likely to be human. " The central figure is likely to be representative of the human. Other elements include aliens, computers and cyborgs. "

Both *Event Horizon* (in which the central focus is on Dr Weir, played by Sam Neill), and *The Fly* (Jeff Goldblum plays Seth Brundle) exhibit this, although it

is arguable that their characters both transform into creatures that cannot, in any terms, be simply defined as purely human. In addition, the tradition of the human being the central character is shown in the majority films deemed as science fiction, including Alien- Sigourney Weaver (Ripley), Fifth Element (1997) - Bruce Willis (Major Korben Dallas), Predator (1987) Arnold Schwarzenegger (Major Dutch) and Lost in Space (1998) William Hurt (Prof. John Robinson), to name but a few. However, the central characters in Star Wars highlight the variety of different races, many of which are not human, for example, Chewbacca, and even Luke Skywalker and Han Solo.

This is especially so as the film is not set on Earth, or even in our galaxy. Both Event Horizon and The Fly adhere to the convention defined by King and Krzywinska (2000) through the inclusion of scientists. Both scientists, at the beginning, seem to have their sanity in tact, however as each film progresses, this seems to wane more, reducing them to 'mad scientists'. This character is exhibited in other films, such as the character Dr. Emmett Brown, played by Christopher Lloyd, in Back to the Future (1985), however Lloyd's character arguably does not experience the physical and mental changes that cause Dr Weir and Brundle to commit such sinister actions.

Although the presence of aliens or cyborgs is notably absent from both films, it could be argued that the ship in Event Horizon has, in some respects, an alien life force, since, towards the end of the film, the ship is conceded to be 'alive', thus confirming the films status as science fiction. The layout and setting of Event Horizon is synonymous with expectations of science fiction films, which are often set in space, or a futuristic setting. This is a

characteristic that has been applied to a plethora of science fiction movies, <https://assignbuster.com/how-any-two-films-work-with-the-narrative-and-stylistic-conventions/>

such as 2001 Space Odyssey, Alien, Fifth Element, The Matrix and Star Wars, all of which have settings unfamiliar to the viewers' real-life experience.

In addition, objects like space ships, computers and futuristic technology arguably going beyond the realms of possibility (for example, Dr Weir's dimensional gate) are highly featured. The emphasis on computers is exhibited in The Fly, where Goldblum's character communicates with a computer by giving it commands, which operate the teleportation system.

"(The Fly) offers us a number of semantic elements we have come to expect of science fiction narratives: the computer, a lab, strange equipment, the recording of results." (Telotte, 2001: 184) Special effects are one of the most conventional characteristics of science fiction films, as well as being one of the reasons that the genre has gained such widespread appeal.

The appeal of special effects is undoubtedly one of the attractions offered by science fiction cinema, whether as a way of making convincing a fantastic narrative, or providing audio-visual sensation for its own sake." (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 66) It could be argued that it is necessary for science fiction films to have special effects- how could Seth Brundle be transformed into a fly, to go through the various stages until he is literally a combination of human, fly and telepod? In the case of Mars Attacks (1996), there is a scene where an official literally disintegrates as a result of being shot by alien fire. How could this have been created without the use of special effects?

It is arguable that the themes in many science fiction films are so unusual and unrealistic, that the genre itself depends on special effects, whether

they are visually or audio based. A dominant theme in science fiction is time or space travel, as exhibited in both Event Horizon and The Fly. However, while such themes would work well in a book, where the reader is invited to use their imagination, they would be impossible to believe in films without the use of special effects. Although many directors have been criticized for too heavy an emphasis on special effects, one may argue that they are an essential part of the genre. Therefore, in terms of semantics, both Event Horizon and The Fly conform to the conventions of science fiction.

In terms of syntax, there are various arguments relating to the themes, and meanings produced within science fiction films. In many science fiction films, such as 2001 Space Odyssey for example, the increased use of computers and development of technology has disastrous results: generally speaking, HAL develops the ability to make decisions for himself, and does what he wants, rather than obeying human commands, with terrible consequences for the crew. There appears to be a convention that any involvement whatsoever with computers, futuristic technology and thus the unknown, has negative and often damaging results, perhaps highlighting an increasing fear of technological development. This convention is exhibited in a number of films.

In addition to Event Horizon, in which the ship develops a strong hold over the minds of the crew, and The Fly, Terminator (1984) is a famous example showing the flawed relationship between man and machine, where man creates a supercomputer called SkyNet, the first artificial intelligence that is put in control of the world, resulting in the manufacture of its own race, dubbed the Terminators, who develop genocidal tendencies and attempt to

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eradicate the world of human existence. The nature of these films highlights an underlying fear of technology. “ In many science fiction films, technology threatens not to liberate but to takeover, dominate or even destroy humanity. (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 15)

Although many films may begin with positive aspirations for the future, asserting technology as an asset, this theme does not remain in the majority of science fiction films. Aliens, cyborgs and in fact anything which is not considered to be human constitutes as a threat to humanity, and intensify the difference between human and ‘ other’, highlighting a fear of the unknown. “ Evil aliens can be read as metaphors for a range of perceived threats to humanity. ” (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 31) The often utopian visions of the world are destroyed, and turned into a dystopian nightmare, often as a result of ‘ the other’.

Seth Brundle himself terms the telepods as “ miracles of modern science- they’ll change the world as we know it”. However, it is important to consider, particularly in the case of computers, whether ‘ the other’ has been simply discovered by humans, or created by them, and if so, are flaws a result of human usage? This links another theme continually demonstrated in science fiction cinema: an alternative to the way we, as humans on earth, live. Science fiction allows viewers to imagine the different kinds of futures of existence that could be lying ahead. In this sense, the nightmares experienced by the cast within a film can often make the viewers problems seem less serious.

Taking into account the problems experienced by Seth Brundle, or as he terms himself, ' Brundlefly', audience troubles may seem like paradise in comparison. As science fiction, as a genre, is often considered to be very masculine and gendered, it is important to consider the role and actions of the female. " Genres are often seen as being gendered. The appeal of science fiction might be considered to be chiefly masculine. " (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 37) The characters Ronnie (The Fly) Peters and Stark (Event Horizon) highlight the presence of strong female characters that do not have an unfounded role in their respective films. In addition, Alien, The Matrix, and Tank Girl (1995) also have strong female characters.

However, at several intervals through both films, the female characters grow increasingly dependent on men to help them through their struggles. Peters is the first to die on Event Horizon, perhaps emphasizing female weakness when compared to men. Although Stark contradicts this statement, as she is one of the only survivors, the viewer is uncertain whether any of the crew really have survived, and is invited to imagine what fate lays in store for them. The female, in many other genres, is considered to be the source of visual pleasure. However, both Event Horizon and The Fly place very little focus on the female as a source of spectatorship.

There are certain scenes where this is apparent, for example in The Fly, where Ronnie (Geena Davis) is asked to remove her stocking in order to prove that the teleportation system works, and whilst doing so, the camera moves in closer, to perhaps a medium close up of her leg. Event Horizon also has a scene where, as Dr. Weir is imagining his wife, Claire naked, and as he imagines laying his head on her breast, the camera moves in to a close up of <https://assignbuster.com/how-any-two-films-work-with-the-narrative-and-stylistic-conventions/>

Dr. Weir, emphasizing Claire's breast and nipple, thus: " The female body has often provided a source of visual pleasure in science fiction. " (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 40) The attire of the female characters is non-sexual. Although there are brief instances, it is both men and women who are partially nude.

In a contrast to *The Matrix* and *Alien*, in which the female characters arguably wear fetishistic clothing- leather, latex- all the characters in *Event Horizon* wear boiler suits, thus portraying them in a non-sexual manner. In this sense, both *Event Horizon* and *The Fly* exhibit strong characteristics genre of science fiction. They conform to many of both the stylistic and narrative elements discussed by the various theorists above, in terms of both semantics and syntax. However, although the difficulties of defining genre as a whole have been made known, there are further problems in categorizing films as part of a specific genre; many films have elements of generic hybridity.

This is a particular characteristic of the science fiction genre, as argued by King and Krzywinska (2000: 3): " Science fiction cinema has borrowed from a variety of sources. These range from Greek tragedy and the epic, to the melodrama and gothic fiction, from the western to the horror novel, to the literature of science fiction. It also exchanges form and images with media as varied as comics, television, radio, video games, religion, philosophy and even science itself. " This is a characteristic displayed by both films, in the sense that they could arguably be defined as crossing the boundaries of science fiction, into horror. Particular scenes from each film stand out.

In the case of *Event Horizon*, when the ship begins to develop some control over Dr. Weir, he finds himself at home, in the bathroom, with his wife Claire. Viewers discover that she killed herself in the bathtub, and as he imagines her getting out of the tub, he realizes that she has no eyes, which prompts him to remove his eyes, although he perceives that she is removing them. This scene is reminiscent, to some extent, of that from *The Shining*, a notorious horror by Stephen King, (directed by Stanley Kubrick), when Jack finds a beautiful naked woman in the bath, but soon realizes that she is extremely old, so much so that she is stripped from parts of flesh, thus highlighting the element of generic hybridity.

Moreover, *The Fly* also has some gruesome scenes- Stathis plans to save Ronnie when Brundlefly captures her, however he is caught unawares whilst loading his gun. Brundlefly's revenge is to vomit over his wrist and leg, subsequently dissolving them to nothing but a stump. The repulsive nature of the scene is repulsive, stomach churning and almost vomit inducing (!), and thus has more in common with the gore and blood often shown in horror. Therefore, both *Event Horizon* and *The Fly* exhibit generic hybridity. As a result, it is ever more difficult to define science fiction and therefore to distinguish whether both films conform to the conventions of the genre. In conclusion, as stated at the beginning of this essay, genre is notoriously difficult to define.

Although it is clear that both films have strong ties to science fiction as a genre, it is uncertain whether they can be defined as science fiction: it seems more plausible that they be defined as a cross over: for example science fiction/horror, or visa versa. As Altman in Telotte (2001: 195) argues <https://assignbuster.com/how-any-two-films-work-with-the-narrative-and-stylistic-conventions/>

“ Generic purity is something that we can seldom if ever expect to encounter. ” In addition, another factor that has gone unmentioned so far is the importance of the audience perceptions. Interpretation of meaning is extremely varied, For example, some may see aliens as science fiction, but it is equally plausible that aliens are symbolic of fantasy- since their existence is still unknown. In respect of this, whilst Event Horizon and The Fly conform to many elements of science fiction, it seems unrealistic to identify them as pure forms of the genre.