

## AN INTRODUCTION TO POPULAR GENRES

One definition of genre is "a group of films having recognisably similar plots, character types, settings and filmic techniques, such as, camera shots, sound, music, lighting, editing and themes..."

These elements, or conventions, are repeated from film to film and allow the cinema-going public to place films into groups or categories. A filmmaker relies upon the audience's familiarity with these conventions which have been used over and over again in the films they have watched in the past.

"Genre films are also popular because they deal with universal dilemmas and appeal to universal psychic needs."



Here are some genre groupings:

- ACTION/ADVENTURE
- COSTUME DRAMA
- GANGSTERS
- HORROR
- SCIENCE FICTION
- THRILLERS
- THE WESTERN

### Can you think of any others?

Pick two films from a particular genre and compare their plot, character types, settings, filmic techniques and themes. In other words, how similar are the conventions that the filmmaker uses and what is it that makes the two films from this particular genre different? Why would an audience want to go and see both?

If generic conventions are simply repeated over and over again the films made could be dull and too predictable. The creative filmmaker relies upon conventions but also mixes them with his or her own vision and ideas. It is this addition of some new element within the familiar that gives rise to the pleasure and anticipation that we feel when watching a genre film.

Have you seen any films of a particular genre that conform to your expectations but yet have a twist or something new that surprises and pleases you? Name

some examples of where a filmmaker mixes two or more genres in one film. For example, a musical western, a science fiction film with elements of a thriller, or perhaps, an action film which is also a costume drama.

Cinema-going audiences respond positively to the repetition of generic film conventions and get satisfaction in finding themselves in a familiar filmic world. We go to see a genre film because we already know the kind of experience that is to be enjoyed. In America studios have been anxious to make films that appeal to the widest audiences and to do so they depend on successful formulas. The film industry is a creative and commercial business which needs to make money. The huge financial stakes mean that some studios and investors are reluctant to try out new ideas or invest in projects that seem too risky.

In following public tastes the film industry has also perpetuated the popularity of certain types of film. In other words it's a circular movement. The studios make films that they think we, the audience, like and we go to see them at the cinema. This makes the studio heads think these particular films are popular and so they make more of the same genre.

Which genres of film do you think are currently the most popular? Make a list of all the films that your class has been to see in the last two months and see if you can divide them into genre groups.

Although we are able to put films into groups quite easily we don't always examine closely enough the criteria we have used to classify them. Sometimes we put them into groups through subject matter, for example, the western, war films and romance. Other films can be grouped through the intended effect they have on the audience, such as, horror films which make us frightened, comedies which make us laugh, thrillers which offer excitement and suspense.

What are the characteristics or intended effects of a love story, a science fiction film and a horror film?

One of the characteristics that all genre films seem to have in common is that they conform to audience expectations about narrative. Nearly all the stories in any genre are about situations which are disrupted by a problem. For example, a peaceful village is wrecked by robbers and one of the children is taken hostage. A lone rider is begged by the villagers to get them out of this predicament and to help find the lost child. The film's story is about how the stranger defeats the villains, finds the child, restores harmony and rides away. The purpose of the story or narrative is to resolve the initial disruption and to re-establish a new satisfactory situation.

This story provides tension for the audience, as on one hand we wish the problem to be solved, but on the other hand we want the story to continue in order to maintain the pleasure. Narratives have to operate strategies for both moving towards a solution and yet simultaneously putting it off by complications.

Character A has something that character B wants. Character B takes it and the film tells the story of how Character A gets it back. Decide on two genres and write a story around this plot according to the generic convention. Think about lighting, framing, sound music, settings, locations, casting and characters.

Genre films are also popular because they deal with universal dilemmas and appeal to universal psychic needs. For example, the dilemmas could be the hero or heroine fighting to clear his or her name; good finally overcoming evil; a new community establishing itself in an already established world with different values; the outsider re-establishing order in the community and then moving on elsewhere.

Can you think of any examples of these kind of situations that you have seen in films?

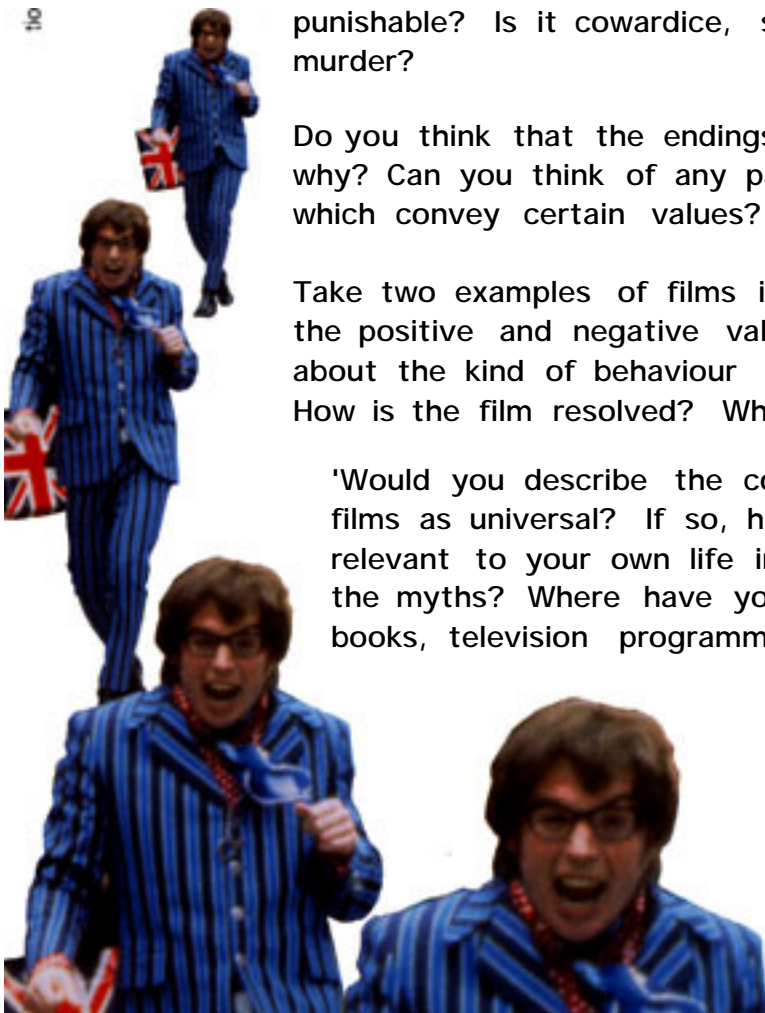
As well as recycling familiar characters, stories, situations, dialogue, music and actors -genre films deal with values. In other words, we are watching behaviour on film which we, as an audience, consider to be right and admirable or wrong and contemptible.

What kind of behaviour is valued in love stories, war films and science fiction films? Is it heroism, violence, innocence, beauty, family life, physical strength or bravery? What are the negative values in these films? What kind of behaviour is punishable? Is it cowardice, selfishness, ugliness, theft, murder?

Do you think that the endings of genre films matter? If so, why? Can you think of any particular endings or resolutions which convey certain values?

Take two examples of films in one genre and write down all the positive and negative values that you can think of. Think about the kind of behaviour that is rewarded and punished. How is the film resolved? Who succeeds in the end?

'Would you describe the conflicts and dilemmas in these films as universal? If so, how are they universal? Are they relevant to your own life in some way? Do you recognise the myths? Where have you heard similar stories before - In books, television programmes or other films?



# SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction has been popular since the early days of cinema. Throughout a century of film making audiences have continued to show an interest in the genre, from the earliest one-reel wonders to the special effects blockbuster extravaganzas of today.



"Science fiction did not regain its popularity until the late 1970's with the release of 'Star Wars' and 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'."

Four out of the ten biggest cinema box-office successes of all time are science fiction films. Can you guess what these are? Why do you think science fiction is so very popular at the cinema?

Minority Report © 20thCentury Fox.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GENRE

Like any other genre, the popularity of science fiction has come and gone with certain films remembered for their originality and impact. Early audiences were amazed and astounded by the fantastical special effects created for such films as Georges Melies' 'A Trip to the Moon' (1902) in which the filmmaker used his knowledge of theatrical tricks and experimented with early photographic techniques to portray a landing on the face of the moon. The novelty value of these early science fiction films soon faded but by 1909 the genre had been revitalised and had taken on a more ominous tone as Walter R Booth adapted the texts of prominent writers of the time, such as, H G Wells and Jules Verne for his film 'The Airship Destroyer'. The promotion for this film ran as "...show(ing) what might happen in the future when aeroplanes have been perfected to the point of being practicable engines of war..." the dark vision of worlds to come was again portrayed by German director Fritz Lang as he created his dramatic city of the future in 'Metropolis' (1926).

In the 1930's and 1940's science fiction films took on a lighter tone as audiences flocked to see the fantasy adventures of comic book heroes such as Flash Gordon, Dick Tracy and Captain Marvel. However, the increasing interest in scientific and technological advances in the post war years, particularly with regard to space travel, resulted in a more serious approach to the genre. 'Destination Moon' (1950) directed by Irving Pichel which won the 1950 Oscar for special effects, aimed for a documentary style realism, and through attention to detail in costume and location, achieved a very convincing look even though it would be another twenty years until man eventually landed on the moon,

The anxieties of post war relations between the USA and the USSR, a fear of the devastating effects of new weapons and the increasing reports of UFO sightings led to a massive revival of interest in the science fiction genre. As the decade wore on the industry cashed in on this in the form of cheap, corny productions such as 'Plan 9 from Outer Space' (1956) and 'Attack of the Crab Monsters' (1956). Despite the impact of

Stanley Kubrick's '2001- A Space Odyssey' in 1968, science fiction did not regain real popularity with cinema audiences until the late 1970's with the release in 1977 of both 'Star Wars' (George Lucas) and 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' (Steven Spielberg). The special effects created for these films were to set a standard for future productions. Budgets for this new type of sci fi film were huge, but then so were the profits to be made - the commercial possibilities of film merchandising were first realised with 'Star Wars'. Science fiction blockbusters became the order of the day and the trend for this has continued through the 1990's and into today with the success of films such as 'Men In Black' (1997), 'The Matrix' (1998), A.I. (2000) and Minority Report (2002)

Can you suggest reasons why science fiction should be more popular in certain periods of the twentieth century than at other times? Can you suggest reasons for the current interest in science fiction? Why is science fiction such a popular genre?

## THE GENRE AND ITS CONVENTIONS

Science fiction - or sci fi as it is commonly known is a term which we use to cover a wide range of films.



Sam Emerson ©2002 by Paramount Pictures Corporation

Part of its popularity is the fact that it is so diverse, covering subjects that range from space travel to future worlds to the adventures of fantasy heroes. Like any other genre, science fiction films may have similar subject matter which is treated in different ways, for instance, 'Independence Day' saw the world being attacked by alien spacecraft but did not have the sinister tones of the invasion in 'War of the Worlds' (1953). Some are a mixture of more than one genre. 'Men In Black' is comedy/science fiction, whereas 'Alien' (1979) is a horror/science fiction film.

Make a list of twenty science fiction films. Try to categorise them under different headings. What common elements can be found in each of the categories? What common elements can be found across the categories?

Think of two science fiction films that treat the same subject matter in different ways. How do the elements of filmic language give each film a different tone?

## **NARRATIVE**

Stuart Kaminsky, the author of the book 'American Film Genres' (published by Nelson Hall: Chicago 1985) has described the science fiction film as being like "a shared dream ...a mythic representation of universal concerns and fears." By this he is suggesting that it appeals to everyone because the narratives of many science fiction films follow patterns that we are all familiar with. These are based on the ancient myths and legends that are found in cultures and societies all over the world. The concerns and fears he talks about, for example, that humankind will destroy itself through the search for more powerful weapons, are fears shared by everyone. On a simpler level, sci fi narratives offer us an all-enveloping escape from the problems and realities of everyday life.

What other universal concerns are represented in sci fi films? What sci fi films can you think of that use myths for their inspiration? How predictable are the narratives of modern sci fi films?

The characters in science fiction films are often easily recognisable and their motivation easily explained. Heroes are real heroes and villains are utterly despicable. As the villains are often aliens, and therefore not real people the audience is unified by its hatred of them and happily cheers as they are defeated without feeling at all guilty. They're also not serious threats to our security and happiness as we know they will be defeated in the end.

Think of the villains in sci fi films that you have seen. How many of them are real people? What was the reasoning behind their thoughts and actions?

Have you seen sci fi films with aliens in who were 'good' characters? Who were the villains in these films? What qualities did these aliens possess that made them goodies?

## **STARS**

Which stars are associated with science fiction films? What types of characters do they play? Do they always play the hero?

## **AUDIENCE**

The target audience for each science fiction film will vary, but it is generally regarded as appealing to young men. Can you suggest reasons for this? What other groups do you think could be targeted in terms of marketing the science fiction genre?

"Four out of the ten biggest box office successes of all time are science fiction films."

## THE WESTERN



What westerns have you seen? Make a list of as many film titles of westerns as you can. What do you remember about these stories and the characters in them? If you met someone who had never seen a western before, how would you describe a western to them.

Since the early days of Hollywood the western has been a popular genre with audiences throughout the world. The western films are simply about the west of America. This genre is popular with audiences throughout the world Europe, Africa, Asia and South America - and film industries in Japan, Italy, Germany and Spain have also made their own westerns. Since the 1950's westerns have been a popular subject for television dramas. Elements of the genre can be seen in other forms of moving image, such as television advertisements.

### BACKGROUND

When we watch westerns we are aware that they are fictions. We do not normally watch them as historical films - films which give us a background to a particular period of history. However westerns are based on a particular period of American history, roughly between 1865 and 1890.

At the time when the early Hollywood westerns were being made there were remnants of the 'Wild West of America' still in existence. Although much of the landscape of the original Wild West had been altered by settlement and progress, the landscape and weather conditions around Hollywood were ideal for its recreation.

In 1903 Edwin S Porter made the first western film 'The Great Train Robbery'. Only two years before the outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Hole-in-the-Wall gang had carried out their last raid in the United States. The birth of the western film therefore occurs at the lime of the disappearance of the Wild West itself. Stories about the West and the frontiers of the USA had been in print for many years in what were called 'dime novels' and the names of many of the cowboys and outlaws of the past had been turned into heroes - Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp, Jesse James. These dime novels were not written for the inhabitants of the West but for the inhabitants of the new towns and industrial cities which were slowly spreading westward. Authors romanticised the exploits of their heroes and glories of life on the frontier where a man was not held down by the rules of society.

By the time of the first western film a series of myths had grown up about America's past which were readily taken up by the filmmakers. When we see a western, we should not be saying 'is it like it was in the real Wild West?'. The events and characters featured in these films had already been shaped by writers into epic and heroic tales. What we are seeing are the legends and myths that America has produced about its own past.

## **CHARACTERS**

The western depicts a range of characters in communities who are usually under threat from outsiders, either Native Americans or individuals who take the law into their own hands. How the communities react to these problems forms an integral part of the narrative of the western.

The range of characters in the western is varied but limited. It includes the Native American, cowboys, gamblers, ranchers, judges, doctors and women who are either saloon girls or home-makers.

Now read the following passage:

A lone rider, sitting easily in the saddle on his dusty horse, rides across the plains towards a small, new town with muddy streets and lively saloons. He wears a tattered, wide-brimmed hat, a loose hanging vest, a bandanna around his neck, and one gun rests casually at his side in a smooth, well-worn holster. Behind him, the empty plains roll gently until they end abruptly in the rocks and forests that punctuate the sudden rise of towering mountain peaks.

This descriptive scene is relatively easy for us to identify with yet very few of us will have actually experienced the environment and situation. It is familiar because we have all at one time seen a western or television programme and recognise elements of the genre which informs our reading of this passage.

As an audience we know what to expect in general terms - we are intrigued to know how the well-known ingredients will be presented in the film. You cannot spoil anyone's enjoyment of a western if you tell them how it ends.

Look again at the above passage and write a list of possible characters that this 'lone rider' might meet. What type of situations might he encounter? What will be this character's story? Write a similar descriptive passage from another scene in the film.

## **FILM CODES AND SIGNALS**

Film language uses conventions which contain literal meaning (denotative) as well as a hidden or symbolic meaning (connotative). This language includes camera shots, the image, costume, music and sound, lighting and editing. The filmmakers communicate to the audience through the language associated with each film genre as a short hand, to communicate plot and character development.

Using the following headings list the codes and conventions that are familiar within a western, and analyse them according to their literal and symbolic meaning.

	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>DENOTATIVE</b>	<b>CONNOTATIVE</b>
Soundtrack	Beat of drums	Drum beat	Danger/warning signs/different/being observed
Scene	Tribes of Native Americans on a mountain top		
Special effects	Smoke signals		
Costume			
Camera shots			
Setting /location			
Lighting			
Props			

## **Teachers' Notes**

This study guide has been produced as an introduction to popular genres to support the use of film in the classroom. By focusing on certain elements of two popular genres - science fiction and the western students are presented with the idea of narrative convention, characters, audience and institution.

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