

GENRE AND THE HOLLYWOOD SCREENWRITER

*A PRAGMATICAL STUDY ON THE FUNCTION OF GENRE FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY SCREENWRITER*

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INTRODUCTION

*“A screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure. That is its essential nature.”
(Field 19-20).*

In film genre studies, there has yet to be a general discourse on the screenwriter and genre. And vice versa, in screenwriting, there is much room to use the analysis of genre, while in the practical craft of the screenwriter, genre is a concept that must often be taken into account. That is why in this thesis, we will try and begin a discourse on the practical use of genre for the screenwriter, or to be more specific: What is the function of film genre for the contemporary Hollywood screenwriter in the creative process of constructing a screenplay?

WHY HOLLYWOOD?

This main question focuses solely on the area of contemporary Hollywood, because American popular cinema is a place where genre has always played an important role and is commonly accepted, as it has been from its early days.

In the late 1940s André Bazin and his contemporaries started to point out that different sorts of films had standardized their forms and styles quite considerably. Bazin attributed the success of Hollywood cinema to what he called ‘the genius of the system.’ In (our) view, his phrase referred not to the studio system as a business enterprise but rather to an artistic tradition based on solid genres and a standardized approach to cinematic narration. (Bordwell)

The main goal of each party of Hollywood’s production-distribution-exhibition process is attracting viewers. Therefore, in every level of the making of a movie, genre is taken into account, as it’s an important aspect of aiming each movie at the prospected audience. The awareness of the specific use of genre is of great economic importance to the Hollywood film industry, as in Hollywood, genre functions as “a golden thread that knits the concerns of industry together with the desires of audiences” (Watson 110), and “a financial security blanket for the industry by providing a logic, or framework, for organizing its output so as to capitalize on

previous models of success and thus minimize financial risk.” (ibidem). Also, Watson (120) says that many Hollywood these days are almost solely made up of generic aspects as seen in other cultural forms and media, repositioned in a way that is always connected to generic understanding. Steve Neale focuses more on the business side of Hollywood film production in noting the importance of genre in Hollywood films, when he says that industrial film production is reliant on genres because they “serve as basic and ‘convenient’ units for the calculation of investment and profit, and as basic and ‘convenient’ categories in which to organize capital assets so as to ensure that their capacity will be utilized to the maximum”. (Neale, 2003, 53)

After narrowing down the subject basis, let’s narrow down our definition of the term *genre*, which can have many, sometimes conflicting definitions. In any case, it’s “a French term imported to film theory from literary studies meaning ‘type’ or ‘class’” (Watson 110). It “implies a process of categorization; that is to say, sorting cultural products into discrete groupings based on similarities and common properties.” (ibid.113). A bit more abstract, but well covering way of describing it, is as “a vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts” (Kitses 10). An in this case very useful definition of genre when used to study it in relation to the screenwriter, comes from Jule Selbo, who defines film genre for the screenwriter as “the type of film story and its essential elements such as iconography and themes and mental space which have a historical heritage known to attract and emotionally affect a particular audience” (78). We’ll get back on some of the elements of this definition later on.

Within this context of the taxonomic view of genre, mapping the boundaries between genres becomes less important and we aim our interest mainly to the view of genre as an economic strategy and as “a function of cognition, as a contract between producers and consumers”. (Watson 112)

A SHORT HISTORY OF GENRE THEORIES

“Genre history holds a shifting and uncertain place in relation to genre theory.” (Altman 12). Still, if we want to use a method based on earlier assumptions about genre and genre theories, it is important to know what historical developments in genre theories these assumptions are based on.

Genre theories have grown from the beginning of the classical genre theories of Aristotle¹ and Horace², who formed the foundation for any further developments in genre studies, to a broad field of study, with varying views on the discourse. As a lead up to a study on the relationship between genre and the screenwriter in this current age, it is important to review how genre theories have developed to become a field of study where the pragmatics of genre have become an important element in analyzing genre and the relationship between genre and its users. Aristotle saw history and theory, criticism and practice, audience and poets, as somehow intertwined, “Horace sets up a simple generic model for the ages: poets produce by imitating a predefined original sanctioned by the literary-critical oligarchy.” (Altman 4).

The neoclassical age focuses mainly on genre identification and separation, where genre critics become the leading factor in the developments of genre theories. Followed by the nineteenth-century aim on the breaking down of the generic differences of the various genres. From this age, it is commonly accepted that “genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, that they can be firmly identified, that they operate systematically, that their internal functioning can be observed and scientifically described, and that they evolve according to a fixed and identifiable trajectory.” (Altman 6). Coming into the twentieth century, critics were encouraged to investigate the relationship between structure and technique, and ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ form (Wellek, Warren 231), From then on, the emphasis was put back on classical views on structure and canon, taking away responsibility from critics and giving it back to the audience. (see Fowler).

In the last few decades, genre study has established itself “as a field separate from literary genre study. As such, it has developed its own, assumptions, its own *modus operandi* and its own objects of study.” (Altman 13)

¹ *Poetics* by Aristotle

² *Ars Poetica* by Horace

THE SEMANTIC / SYNTACTIC / PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Some recently commonly accepted assumptions shared by theorists, that derived from the developments in the history of genre theories, are now being questioned once more, for different reasons. These are some assumptions that are not necessarily to be agreed with in the rest of this study on the use of genre to the screenwriter.

Most importantly, it is commonly accepted that genres exist, “that they have distinct borders, and that they can be firmly identified.” (Altman 11). Also, “it is regularly assumed that producers, readers and critics all share the same interests in genre, and that genres serve those interests equally” (ibid 12). As opposed to these statements, the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach, that was first devised by Rick Altman, that recognizes the importance of analyzing the function of genre to different film users, does not see all film users as sharing the same interests, let alone serving those interests equally. This was drawn up from the recognition of the need for a new approach, that:

“Addresses the fact that every text has multiple users, considers why different users develop different readings, theorizes the relationship among those users; and actively considers the effect of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labeling and display of films and genres alike.” (Altman 214)

This challenges the until recently commonly accepted theory that, “genre texts with similar characteristics systematically generate similar readings, similar meanings and similar uses.” (Altman 12).

The semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach is an expansion of Altman’s earlier established semantic/syntactic approach. The ‘pragmatic’ element was added by himself because of the need for genre theories to recognize the importance of the notion that “genres look different to different audiences” (Altman 207) and “genres might serve diverse groups diversely” (ibid.). To the various film users, be it during in the production or the viewing process, on the sending or receiving end of the medium, genres might be read and interpreted differently. Each audience perceives genre in different, sometimes even conflicting ways, constantly influencing the perception of genre by other user groups in varying ways. Pragmatics “assumes

a constant (if sometimes extremely slow) cross-fertilization process whereby the interests of one group may appear in the actions of another.” (ibid. 211). It is important to review the various functions genre has for different film users. This is the ‘pragmatic’ part of the semantic/syntactic/ pragmatic approach to film genre, literally meaning “relating to matters of fact or practical affairs often to the exclusion of intellectual or artistic matters: practical as opposed to idealistic.” (Merriam-Webster 974).

Pragmatics does not completely refute other leading theories. It recognizes reception study as an important basis for further integration by important additions from the pragmatic approach and “as an appropriate way to acknowledge the activities of specific user groups, but only in order subsequently to embed reception in a broader process-oriented and interactive analysis of competing user groups.” (Altman 212). The attention of genre studies must therefore shift from reception practices alone to a more complete view of the broader, sometimes conflicting, usage patterns of all film users in the various layers of the discourse (ibid. 213).

On this idea of multiple film audiences using genre in varying ways, Altman notes that “when the diverse groups using the genre are considered together, genres appear as regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single social fabric.” (208). Considering this, it would be interesting to analyze the ways in which these diverse groups use genre each in their own way. There are many film users to take into consideration before it would be possible to try and recognize the combined social fabric. And yet, it can already be beneficial to see the results of this analysis for each film user individually. Not only to combine separate studies into a combined renewed discourse about genre, but to see which function genre serves to different groups in different places of the film user spectrum. As stated before, in this case, we will specifically look at the function of genre for the very first user of each film; its creator, the screenwriter.

STUDYING THE WRITER

This pragmatic approach to genre fits together quite well with Watson’s economic approach to genre, that asks what function genre performs and “directs attention to the role genre plays within the industrial practices and structures of Hollywood” (Watson 117). Since the screenwriter is an important factor within the Hollywood

structure of film production, we can accept the writer as a valuable film user on the production side of the Hollywood film industry. Being one of the multiple film users, who develop different readings of the same text, who have reciprocal relationships with other film users.

The screenwriter is the first person to create the multiple signs that make up the story of the film, on which Altman says that “every film image makes meaning only through a process of multiple commutation engendered by the multiple usefulness of the sign in question” (Altman 215). Therefore, when looking at use of genre for the screenwriter, we are looking at the origin of the entirety of signs that are the foundation for the genre of each film.

In the study of the use of genre for the screenwriter we must look at the relationship between the screenwriter and other film users, mainly the producer and the audience, and the relationship between the screenwriter and the film text. To establish these relationships, it is important to first analyze the screenwriter as the ‘film user’ it is. What is the role of the screenwriter in the process of making a film? What is the relation between the writer and the screenplay? How does the screenplay communicate the signs of the film text to the audience? And what role does the writer play in this process? In other words, what kind of ‘film user’ is the screenwriter?

THE METHOD AND THE SCREENWRITER

The screenwriter is the first person to create the beginning of the journey a movie takes from its original creation to the finished product as being watched by the movie-going audience. The original idea that forms the foundation for the story of a screenplay, originates in the mind of the writer. From then on, the writer is the film user who forms the story into a complete screenplay, ready to be developed into a movie by the producer, director and everyone else involved in the making of a film.

Building the story starts with an original idea. A character with a goal, that will become the main storyline for a film. Building from that first idea, the characters are developed, as are the circumstances they are in, such as a specific time and place and the struggles they must face to reach their goal, be it internal or external. In Hollywood, very often the 'goal' is a specific end target the protagonist or protagonists move towards, while overcoming the various obstacles on the way to that goal. This story is written by the screenwriter, within the structure of the screenplay, with a beginning, middle and end to form a complete narrative. (See Syd Field)

Although the writer is the only film user that can create the first signs of the text without, theoretically, having to take any previously created context or any already existing forms of the film into account, as is the case to any others involved in the production process, who have to base their input on the already existing screenplay set up by the writer, the screenwriter is not in complete control of the signs sent out through the film when viewed by the audience. The writer creates the narrative of the movie in terms of everything that can be written down on paper. The dialogues and actions of the characters in great detail, the locations and a character's looks and personality in a more general sense and to a lesser extent the pace, look and general atmosphere of a film. The latter will be developed further by other departments involved in the production of the film, such as the director, the actors and the art and music departments. Other signs, such as the music, the voice of a character and the interpretation of the dialogues are completely out of the hands of the writer and yet to be determined independent of the written script. These signs that are all first thought up, or at least influenced by, the screenwriter, are subject to the various relationships between the writer and the other film users. And all these signs contribute to the message sent to the viewer of the end product

that make up the interpretation of the genre of the film, be it intentional by anyone in the production of the film or only existing for the spectator.

Altman writes on traditional approaches to genre studies that they commonly assumed “ that genres (a) pre-exist spectators and (b) guide audience reception. Reception study denies the latter claim but accepts the former. Because the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach instead treats genres as a site of struggle and co-operation among multiple users, it must deny both claims.” (Altman 211). If we assume there is something to this idea that genres do not in fact, pre-exist spectators, according to his semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre theories, we must look at the screenplay writer in a broader sense than creator alone. As it is clear that genre exists in some form within the written script, before being produced into a movie, or even when only existing in the imagination of the screenwriter, we could say that the screenwriter is in this case both the producer and his own audience of the film text, creating the narrative as a producer and reviewing it as a spectator, both sides constantly interacting with one another.

THE SCREENWRITER AND OTHER ‘FILM USERS’.

The most important film users the screenwriter has to take into account and is most associated with during the process of writing the screenplay, are the producer and the audience. And these film users share their own relationship apart from the writer on their own account. Especially when taking into account the audience’s (generic) preferences, which are inextricably linked to film production. The audience’s desires are most often linked to a preferred film genre, which is why genre is an important issue for any film producer who wants to attract an audience for his or her movie.

In this time of the Hollywood studio system, the screenwriter, assuming his or her screenplay actually gets made into a movie, has most personal contact about the screenplay and working on the film with the film producer(s). This contact involves close consultation about the content of the story as well as business arrangements about such things as deadlines and pay rate. Because the writer works as an employee for the producer as soon as the writer’s agreement is signed, it is important to take the relationship between the producer and the screenwriter into account when looking at the role the writer plays in the formation and

interpretation of the content of the screenplay, and with that the elements of the screenplay that define the first characteristics to guide the interpretation of the genre of a film.

Even though the writer might not have direct contact with the viewer of the film the writer has written the screenplay for, he or she already takes into account that the story is eventually intended to be seen by an audience. When writing the screenplay, one can only take into account the intended audience, as opposed to the real audience, as “the real audience is anyone who reads or perceives the author’s message and the intended audience is the target group that the message-sender has in mind as he creates.” (Chandler 1-3). The writer needs to take into account the various issues, of “taste, preference, identity and pleasure associated with particular kinds of film (...) in the effort to make their product appealing to audiences” (Watson 110). According to Selbo, (39) it is impossible to construct a story that reaches out to every single possible spectator. That is why it is the writer’s task to identify his or her intended audience. And the film-goer “is cognizant (consciously or unconsciously) of the schematic structures of film genre and has expectations that certain criteria of that film genre will be met.” (ibid. 40). Even more, according to Steve Neale, these expectations of the spectator are what make up the genre of the film, when he says,

“genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process.” (Neale, 2003, 160) .

According to Culler, the relationship between writer and reader is what makes genre important, as it establishes a contract between reader and writer “so as to make certain relevant expectations operative and thus permit both compliance and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility” (147).

Thought the writer is obviously a major factor in the production of a film, it is important to realize that the screenwriter does not only exist on the production side of the film spectrum, because the writer is not only the sender, but at the same time the first interpreter of his or her own screenplay and all the signs it is built up from. Whether it’s in forming the first creative ideas, structuring the story or writing the actions and dialogues, a screenwriter is constantly reviewing the text as a reader of the signs as well as the creator of them. Even taking on the role of other

film users, whom he or she is dependent on concerning the production of the screenplay. Screenwriter Ron Bass³ puts it like this in an interview in ‘101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters’:

”You definitely write a script knowing that someone is going to read it... I communicate intent to the reader, who may be the studio executive, the director, or the actress... what you say between the lines helps the reader get the idea and the feeling of the atmosphere of what’s going on, compensating for the fact that you’re not watching the movie.” (139-140)

The producers, in their own right, are part of a specific network of film users, of which both the writer and the spectator find their place. Within this network, they should be very much interested in the relationship between the screenwriter and the spectator, because for them, it is important to attract an audience, which can be done with a short cut, so to speak, with the genre film.

“The advantages to producers of the principle of classifying movies by type are clear. Firstly, they offer a financial guarantee: generic movies are in a sense always pre-sold to their audiences because viewers possess an image and an experience of the genre before they actually engage any particular instance of it” (Maltby 112)

Although it’s questionable how appropriate this idea still is to the current Hollywood audience. Obviously, genre alone does not automatically guarantee a box office hit, and financing and publicity models and the demise of the vertical integration of the production-distribution-exhibition organization are under heavy changes. Also, major studios have avoided associating their films with any single genre for a while. Another strategy for studios to attract audiences is using the same famous actors, character or look and Hollywood often leave the emphasis on genre for other decisions regarding production and publicity. Though the attention to genre has not entirely disappeared, genre has “a far more limited structural role to play”. (Darley 144). That being said, still, genre plays an important part in the writer-producer-audience relationship triangle.

³ Writer of *Rain Man* (1988), *Stepmom* (1998) *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999)

CONCLUSION: THE SCREENWRITER AND GENRE

“The task of the screenwriter is, in most cases, to create a feeling of satisfaction by using the schematic knowledge and specific knowledge of film genre of the audience. While building satisfaction, the screenwriter also wants to strive to gain a sense of closure of the narrative without providing a “by-the-numbers” or predictable plot line.” (Selbo 53)

For some scholars, genre does not lie within the text of a film, but is created from the context by the reading of the text by an audience. It can be seen as a complex negotiation between industry, critics and audience expectations (Ryall 28). This does not mean the writer is not aware of generic elements existing in his or her screenplay. It is important, though, for the screenwriter to realize that the writer’s view on genre is not definite, but continuously subject to the interpretation of each reader.

There are some specific instances when it might be beneficial to the screenwriter to consciously involve the idea and analysis of genre into the writing of the screenplay, even when not taking into account the writer’s connection to the producers or the studio, but purely looking at the creative writing process, though constantly keeping in mind the intended audience.

The first hurdle on the track to production is the reader (be it a film or development executive or director or actor or financier), and that reader needs to acknowledge the production and marketing potential of the script, it is the task of the screenwriter, using only the words on the page, to bring the reader to the most common possible experience (dominant decoding of the screenwriter’s intent) of the story. (Selbo 43)

Altman says that “all Hollywood genre films share certain essential properties (...) (they) depend on the cumulative effect of the film’s often repeated situations, themes and icons.” (25). The writer is capable of using these properties to direct the narrative towards an envisioned genre. By deliberately implementing these certain generically recognizable situations, themes and icons into the narrative, the same narrative can be told in different genres, by placing the emphasis on different generic elements (Selbo 27). For example, the story of a man looking for love in a war environment, can be presented as a drama or action movie by putting the

emphasis on the war, or a comedy by writing in funny and light hearted scenes, or a romantic comedy or drama by putting the emphasis on the love story. The choice to write to a certain genre helps frame the narrative in a recognizable context. This is only true for some genres, “some genres such as the western and the musical are established industrial categories of production readily recognizes by both filmmakers and audiences, others, such as the ‘gross-out comedy’ are constructed by critics only after the film has been released.” (Watson 115)

Still, it is important to realize that, even though the screenwriter can deliberately implement specific generic elements into the narrative, he or she is not the only one responsible for the eventual film text, and the film text is not definitive in depicting the genre of a film (Watson 111). A writer can assume that the eventual film’s audience is used to living in a culture where films are often viewed on various media, and has in the process of becoming familiar with watching movies, incorporated a sense of the generic framings. That is why it is possible for the writer to create a recognizable, yet new, set of circumstances to try and form a basic generic context for the reader. Because “each film varies the details but leaves the basic pattern undisturbed” (Altman 25) and “genre films must not only be similar in order to succeed, they must also be different” (ibid. 21). While the generic elements are familiar to the audience, it is also important to give those elements a twist. The viewer is not looking to see an exact replica of earlier films, but just the same form. By doing this, by considering the intended audience and using the knowledge about genre, screenwriters can make the best use of their writing skills.

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