

Questions of genre

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THIS article will discuss some of the issues, concepts and concerns arising from work on genre in the cinema published over the last decade or so. It seeks to highlight a number of questions and problems which may pinpoint some possible directions for future research. I will be particularly concerned with the constitution of generic corpuses with the extent to which they are constituted by public expectations as well as by films, and with the role of theoretical terms, on the one hand, and industrial and institutional terms, on the other, in the study of genres. The concept of verisimilitude is central to an understanding of genre, as is the question of the social and cultural functions that genres perform. These, too, will be discussed. Stress will be laid throughout on the changing, and hence historical nature, not just of individual genres, but of generic regimes as well.

I shall be referring to several books and articles (and thus, to some extent, this piece will serve as an extended review) But at a number of key points I shall be taking my cue, explicitly or otherwise, from an article by Alan Williams entitled, 'Is A Radical Genre Criticism Possible?' (an article which is itself a review of Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres*, and to some extent of my own book, *Genre*)¹

Despite, or perhaps because of the fact that it raises so many fundamental questions, Williams' article has not been discussed as much as it deserves. In saying this, however, I should note that, insofar as I shall be concentrating here on America, American cinema and American genres, I shall myself be ignoring (or at least setting to one side), one of Williams' most important points – that "genre" is not exclusively or even primarily a Hollywood

¹ Alan Williams, 'Is A Radical Genre Criticism Possible?', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* vol 9 no 2 (Spring 1984) Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: Random House 1981), Steve Neale *Genre* (London: BFI 1980)

phenomenon', and that 'we need to get out of the United States.'² I concentrate on America partly because, as Williams himself notes elsewhere in his article, there is still an enormous amount of research to be done on what is still the most powerful national cinema in the world, and partly because most of the work published on genre and genres to date has tended overwhelmingly to concern itself with Hollywood. In order to engage with this work, it is necessary to engage with its object. However, I should like to note too that a number of the more general, conceptual points I wish to make are as applicable to the consideration of genre and genres in India or Japan or Italy or Britain as they are to America and Hollywood.

Expectation and verisimilitude

There are several general, conceptual points to make at the outset. The first is that genres are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labelled and defined. Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render films, and the elements within them, intelligible and therefore explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: a way of working out why particular events and actions are taking place, why the characters are dressed the way they are, why they look, speak and behave the way they do, and so on. Thus, if, for instance, a character in a film for no reason (or no otherwise explicable reason) bursts into song, the spectator is likely to hypothesize that the film is a musical, a particular kind of film in which otherwise unmotivated singing is likely to occur. These systems also offer grounds for further anticipation. If a film is a musical, more singing is likely to occur, and the plot is likely to follow some directions rather than others.

Inasmuch as this is the case, these systems of expectation and hypothesis involve a knowledge of – indeed they partly embody – various regimes of verisimilitude, various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief. Verisimilitude means 'probable' or 'likely'.³ It entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and *therefore* probable (or probable and *therefore* appropriate).

Regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre. (Bursting into song is appropriate, therefore probable – therefore intelligible, therefore believable – in a musical. Less so in a thriller or a war film.) As such these regimes entail rules, norms and laws. (Singing in a musical is not just a probability, it is a necessity. It is not just

3 For discussions of verisimilitude and genre see Ben Brewster, 'Film', in Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Michael Irwin (eds.), *Exploring Reality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), esp. pp. 147–149. Gerard Genette, 'Vraisemblance et motivation', in *Figures*, vol. 3 (Paris: Seuil, 1969) and Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction and An Introduction to Verisimilitude' in *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) and *Introduction to Poetics* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981) esp. pp. 118–119.

likely to occur, it is bound to.) As Tzvetan Todorov, in particular, has insisted, there are two broad types of verisimilitude applicable to representations: generic verisimilitude on the one hand, and, on the other, a broader social or cultural verisimilitude. Neither equates in any direct sense to 'reality' or 'truth'.

If we study the discussions bequeathed us by the past, we realize that a work is said to have verisimilitude in relation to two chief kinds of norms. The first is what we call *rules of the genre*: for a work to be said to have verisimilitude, it must conform to these rules. In certain periods, a comedy is judged 'probable' only if, in the last act, the characters are discovered to be near relations. A sentimental novel will be probable if its outcome consists in the marriage of hero and heroine, if virtue is rewarded and vice punished. Verisimilitude, taken in this sense, designates the work's relation to literary discourse: more exactly, to certain of the latter's subdivisions, which form a genre.

But there exists another verisimilitude, which has been taken even more frequently for a relation with reality. Aristotle, however, has already perceived that the verisimilar is not a relation between discourse and its referent (the relation of truth), but between discourse and what readers believe is true. The relation is here established between the work and a scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership; in other words, to *public opinion*. The latter is of course not 'reality' but merely a further discourse, independent of the work.⁴

⁴ Todorov (1981) *op. cit.* pp. 118–119.

There are several points worth stressing here. The first is the extent to which, as the example of singing in the musical serves to illustrate, generic regimes of verisimilitude can ignore, sidestep, or transgress these broad social and cultural regimes.

The second is the extent to which this 'transgression' of cultural verisimilitude is characteristic of Hollywood genres. This has implications for conventional notions of 'realism'. There is, of course, always a balance in any individual genre between purely generic and broadly cultural regimes of verisimilitude. Certain genres appeal more directly and consistently to cultural verisimilitude. Gangster films, war films and police procedural thrillers, certainly, often mark that appeal by drawing on and quoting 'authentic' (and authenticating) discourses, artefacts and texts: maps, newspaper headlines, memoirs, archival documents, and so on. But other genres, such as science fiction, Gothic horror or slapstick comedy, make much less appeal to this kind of authenticity, and this is certainly one of the reasons why they tend to be despised, or at least 'misunderstood', by critics in the 'quality' press. For these critics, operating under an ideology of realism, adherence to cultural verisimilitude is a necessary condition of

'serious' film, television or literature. As Todorov goes on to argue, realism as an ideology can partly be defined by its refusal to recognize the reality of its own generic status, or to acknowledge its own adherence to a type of generic verisimilitude.

A third point to be made is that recent uses of the concept of verisimilitude in writing on genre tend to blur the distinction between generic and cultural verisimilitude, and tend therefore to vitiate the usefulness of the term. Both Christine Gledhill and Kathryn Kane, for instance, in writing about melodrama and the war film respectively, tend to use 'verisimilitude' simply as a synonym for 'realism' or 'authenticity'.⁵ This is a pity because, as, in fact, both Gledhill and Kane implicitly demonstrate, melodrama and the war film are genres which often themselves seek to blur the distinction between the cultural and the generic, and are often particularly marked by the tensions between the different regimes.

The fourth point is that, at least in the case of Hollywood, generic regimes of verisimilitude are almost as 'public', as widely known, as 'public opinion' itself. It is not simply in films or in genres that the boundaries between the cultural and the generic are blurred: the two regimes merge also in public discourse, generic knowledge becoming a form of cultural knowledge, a component of 'public opinion'.

Fifth, and finally, it is often the generically verisimilitudinous ingredients of a film, the ingredients, that is, which are often least compatible with regimes of cultural verisimilitude – singing and dancing in the musical, the appearance of the monster in the horror film – that constitute its pleasure, and that thus attract audiences to the film in the first place. They too, therefore, tend to be 'public', known, at least to some extent, in advance.

These last two remarks lead on to the next set of points, which concern the role and importance of specific institutional discourses, especially those of the press and the film industry itself, in the formation of generic expectations, in the production and circulation of generic descriptions and terms, and, therefore, in the constitution of any generic corpus.

Genre and institutional discourse

As John Ellis has pointed out, central to the practices of the film industry is the construction of a 'narrative image' for each individual film.

An idea of the film is widely circulated and promoted, an idea which can be called the 'narrative image' of the film, the cinema's anticipatory reply to the question, 'What is the film like?'⁶

The discourses of film industry publicity and marketing play a key role in the construction of such narrative images; but important, too,

5 Christine Gledhill 'The Melodramatic Field: An Introduction' in Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987) esp. p. 9. 'As a bourgeois form, melodrama is constrained by the same conditions of verisimilitude as realism. If the family melodrama speciality is generational and gender conflict, verisimilitude demands that the central issues of sexual difference and identity be realistically presented.' Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UMI Research Press, 1976), esp. p. 121. 'The achievement of *G.I. Joe* however is not really one of historical data providing the truth of what is portrayed. Rather its power is the result of an insistence on verisimilitude: the stylistic groundwork on which the authenticity props rest.'

6 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1981) p. 30.

are other institutionalized public discourses, especially those of the press and television, and the 'unofficial', 'word of mouth' discourses of everyday life.

Genre is, of course, an important ingredient in any film's narrative image. The indication of relevant generic characteristics is therefore one of the most important functions that advertisements, stills, reviews and posters perform. Reviews nearly always contain terms indicative of a film's generic status, while posters usually offer verbal generic (and hyperbolic) description – 'The Greatest War Picture Ever Made' – as anchorage for the generic iconography in pictorial form.

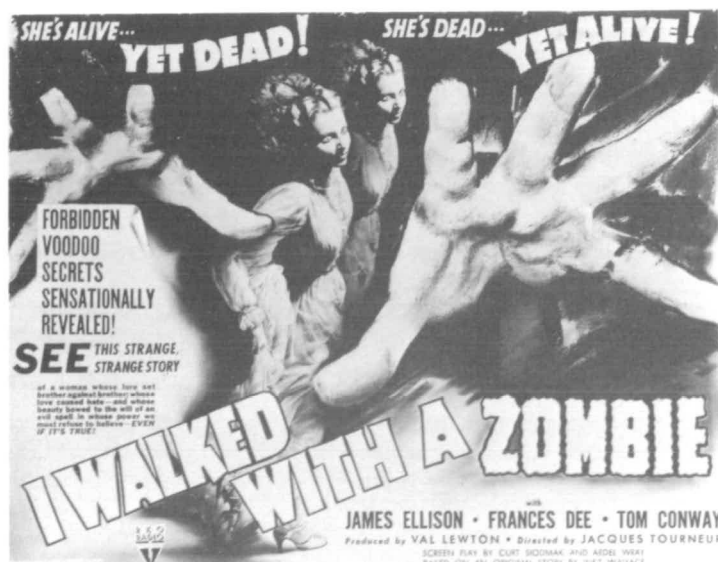
These various verbal and pictorial descriptions form what Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci have called the cinema's 'inter-textual relay'.⁷ This relay performs an additional, generic function: not only does it define and circulate narrative images for individual films, beginning the immediate narrative process of expectation and anticipation, it also helps to define and circulate, in combination with the films themselves, what one might call 'generic images', providing sets of labels, terms and expectations which will come to characterize the genre as a whole.

This is a key point. It is one of the reasons why I agree with Lukow and Ricci on the need to take account of all the component texts in the industry's inter-textual relay when it comes to studying not only films, but genre and genres. And it is one of the reasons why I would disagree with Rick Altman, in *The American Film Musical*,⁸ on the limited significance he assigns to the role of industrial and journalistic discourses in establishing a generic corpus (though it is one of the many merits of Altman's book that he

7 Gregory Lukow and Steve Ricci, 'The "audience" goes "public": inter-textuality, genre, and the responsibilities of film literacy', *On Film*, no. 12 (Spring, 1984), p. 29.

8 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and London: BFI, 1989).

Poster for *I Walked with a Zombie* (1946)
(Courtesy of Turner Home
Entertainments)



devotes the best part of a chapter to this issue. Most books and articles on genre fail to discuss it at all.)

For Altman, the role of industrial and journalistic terms is crucial in establishing the presence of generic consistencies, but of limited use in defining them:

The fact that a genre has previously been posited, defined, and delimited by Hollywood is taken only as *prime facie* evidence that generic levels of meaning are operative within or across a group of texts roughly designated by the Hollywood term and its usage. The industrial/journalistic term thus founds a hypothesis about the presence of meaningful activity, but does not necessarily contribute a definition or delimitation of the genre in question ⁹

9 *ibid* p 13

The identification of an industrial/journalistic term, then, is for Altman merely the first step in a multi-stage process. Having established a preliminary corpus in this way, the role of the critic is next to subject the corpus to analysis, to locate a method for defining and describing the structures, functions and systems specific to a large number of the films within it. Then the critic, using this method as a basis, reconstitutes and re-defines the corpus:

Texts which correspond to a particular understanding of the genre, that is which provide ample material for a given method of analysis, will be retained within the generic corpus. Those which are not illuminated by the method developed in step three will simply be excluded from the final corpus. In terms of the musical, this would mean admitting that there are some films which include a significant amount of diegetic music, and yet which we will refuse to identify as musicals in the strong sense which the final corpus implies ¹⁰

10 *ibid* p 14

Having thus established a final corpus, the critic is finally in a position to produce a history of the genre, and to analyse 'the way in which the genre is moulded by, functions within, and in turn informs the society of which it is a part.'¹¹

11 *ibid* pp 14–15

Before explaining my disagreement with this, it is important to recognize, along with Altman, that it is not possible to write about genres without being selective, and that many of the deficiencies of a good deal of writing on genre stem from defining and selecting on the basis of pre-established and unquestioned canons of films. As Alan Williams points out, this is one of the central deficiencies of Schatz's book, in which coverage of any given genre,

. . . depends not on historical or theoretical evenhandedness but on tacitly agreed-upon landmarks. Thus the chapter on the musical covers mainly Warner Brothers/Busby Berkely, Fred Astaire at RKO, and the Freed Unit at MGM. So where is Lubitsch and the operetta? (Maybe the latter is not 'a Musical'.

but *Hollywood Genres* does not explain) Al Jolson and the crucially important melodramatic musicals of the early sound years? Who decided that these points alone would suffice?¹²

In contrast, Altman's book is impressively wide in its range of references, and refreshingly free from established canons of taste and categorization, including as it does not only Jolson, operetta and Lubitsch, but also the Elvis Presley films of the fifties and sixties, and films like *Grease* (1978) and *Flashdance* (1983). It is important to say, too, that I agree with Altman that journalistic and industrial labels rarely, on their own, provide a conceptual basis for the analysis of genres, or for the location of generic patterns, structures and systems, just as I agree that such analysis is vitally important.

Where I disagree, however, is on Altman's assertion that the importance of industrial/journalistic terms is restricted to the first step of generic analysis. I disagree with this because I do not believe the aim of generic analysis is the re-definition of a corpus of films. Such an aim is in the end no different, in effect if not in intention, from the highly selective categorizations of Schatz, or from the worst, pigeon-holing inheritances of neo-classical literary theory. We can easily end up identifying the purpose of generic analysis with the rather fruitless attempt to decide which films fit, and therefore properly belong to, which genres. We can also end up constructing or perpetuating canons of films, privileging some and demoting or excluding others. (Thus even Altman, despite his broad range, and despite the power of his method, finds himself excluding films like *Dumbo* [1941] and *Bambi* [1942], and nearly excluding *The Wizard of Oz* [1939])

Such an aim is, therefore, inherently reductive. More than that, it is in danger of curtailing the very cultural and historical analysis upon which Altman rightly insists as an additional theoretical aim. The danger lies not only in the devaluation of industrial/journalistic discourses, but in the separation of genre analysis from a number of the features which define its public circulation. These features include the fact that genres exist always *in excess* of a corpus of works; the fact that genres comprise expectations and audience knowledge as well as films, and the fact that these expectations and the knowledge they entail are public in status. As Todorov has argued (while himself tending to equate genres solely with works):

One can always find a property common to two texts, and therefore put them together in one class. But is there any point in calling the result of such a union a 'genre'? I think that it would be in accord with the current usage of the word and at the same time provide a convenient and operant notion if we agreed to call 'genres' only those classes of texts that have been perceived as such in the course of history. The accounts of this perception are

found most often in the discourse on genres (the metadiscursive discourse) and, in a sporadic fashion, in the texts themselves.¹³

As far as the cinema is concerned (Todorov here is writing about literature – and High Literature at that), this metadiscursive discourse is to be found in its inter-textual relay. Clearly, generic expectations and knowledges do not emanate solely from the film industry and its ancillary institutions; and clearly, individual spectators may have their own expectations, classifications, labels and terms. But these individualized, idiosyncratic classifications play little part, if any, in the public formation and circulation of genres and generic images. In the public sphere, the institutional discourses are of central importance. Testimony to the existence of genres, and evidence of their properties, is to be found primarily there.

A distinction needs to be made, then, between those studies of genres conceived as institutionalized classes of texts and systems of expectation, and studies which use critically or theoretically constructed terms as the basis for discussing classes of films. (Studies of *film noir* are obvious examples of the latter.) A distinction also needs to be made between institutionally recognized sub-genres, cycles and categories ('operetta' and 'the singing Western') and theoretically or scholarly based classifications ('The Fairy Tale Musical', 'The Show Musical', and 'The Folk Musical'). This is not to argue that theoretically based studies and classifications are somehow illegitimate. (Far from it. These examples all illustrate how productive they can be.) It is, however, to insist on the pertinence of Todorov's distinction for an understanding of what it is that is being studied.

Institutional discourses and genre history

Not only do industrial and journalistic labels and terms constitute crucial evidence for an understanding of both the industry's and the audience's generic conceptions in the present, they also offer virtually the only available evidence for a historical study of the array of genres in circulation, or of the ways in which individual films have been generically perceived at any point in time. This is important for an understanding of the ways in which both the array and the perceptions have changed.

Let me give some examples. Both 'the Western' and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) are firmly established in genre studies, the latter as an early, highly influential example of the former. However, in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Eric Partridge dates the first colloquial use of the term 'Western' in anything other than an adjectival sense to around 1910. The first use of the term cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with reference to

3 WESTERN "AMERICANS" EVERY WEEK

A CHEERFUL MESSAGE TO THE INDEPENDENT EXHIBITOR! GOOD "WESTERNS" INvariably "PULL" AT THE BOX OFFICE—YOU KNOW THAT'S TRUE IF YOU EVER NEGLECTED YOUR WEEKLY ALLOTMENT OF "WESTERNS"—AMERICAN "WESTERNS"—REMEMBER—NO PROGRAM OF THREE OR MORE PICTURES IS COMPLETE WITHOUT AN OUT-OF-DOORS WESTERN—AND, THAT BEING THE CASE, SEE THAT YOU GET THE BEST—AND "BEST" IS JUST ANOTHER WAY OF SPELLING "AMERICAN."



"It Pays To Wait"

(Release Monday, July 30, 1912)

A Smashing, Rollicking Good Western Comedy illustrating that old wag, Natural Situations backed by side-splitting pantomime and superfine photography. A picture, clean, healthy and simply overflowing with good-natured fun.



"The Fight At The Mill"

(Release Wednesday, July 31, 1912)

A powerful Western, distinctly original and exciting. A Western containing a beautiful story of a young Indian boy's fight with a notorious outlaw.

"A Life For A Kiss"

(Release Thursday, August 1, 1912)

A magnificent subject telling a pretty story of a fighting Western, full of gunplay, and containing a splendid spectacle of good-time medicine.

"The BATTLE-GROUND"

(Regular Release Monday, August 12) TWO REELS

An Emotional Masterpiece. A sound "family" or "Madam X" for splendid dramatic situations. A two-reel feature of absorbing beauty. Intertwining some powerful scenes in the Sanitary of Great Mother's Church with the life of the quarter in the slum districts of London. A story of the life of a man dealing with the most emotions of the human heart. Read synopsis for a wonderful full story.

"THE FALL OF BLACKHAWK"

(That Monster TWO-REEL HISTORICAL with Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Zachary Taylor, and General Winfield Scott the central characters) is meeting with the Big success we predicted. A few States unsold, offering a splendid opportunity to Live State Rights Buyers.

American Film Mfg. Co. FIFTH FLOOR, ASHLAND BLOCK : : CHICAGO



The Moving Picture World,
20 July, 1912

a film dates from 1912, occurring in a review of *The Fight at the Mill* (1912) in an issue of the trade magazine, *The Moving Picture World*, dated 27 July. This was nine years after *The Great Train Robbery* was released.

Now it may be argued, of course, that this is merely quibbling. While the specific term 'Western' may not have been available to audiences in 1903, Westerns themselves, in the form of dime novels, Wild West shows, paintings, illustrations, short stories and the like (as well as one or two films), had been around for some time.¹⁴ Thus audiences of *The Great Train Robbery*, well-accustomed to these forms, would have drawn on the paradigms they provided in understanding and locating the film. Charles Musser, however, has convincingly argued that this was not the case, that the paradigms used both by the industry and its audiences were different, and that

¹⁴ On 'the Western' prior to the emergence of the cinema, and on all these forms, see Edward Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: André Deutsch/BFI, 1988), pp. 18–22.

it was the confluence of paradigms provided by melodrama, the 'chase film', the 'railway genre' and the 'crime film', rather than 'the Western', which ensured the film's contemporary success:

Kenneth MacGowan attributed this success . . . to the fact that the film was 'the first important Western', William Everson and George Fenin find it important because it is 'the blueprint for all Westerns'. These, however, are retrospective readings. One reason for *The Great Train Robbery's* popularity was its ability to incorporate so many trends, genres and strategies fundamental to the institution of cinema at that time. The film includes elements of both re-enactment of contemporary news events (the train hold-up was modeled after recently reported crimes) and refers to a well-known stage melodrama by its title. Perhaps most importantly, *The Great Train Robbery* was part of a violent crime

THE MOVING PICTURE WORLD 47

THE TRIUMPH OF WESTERN REALISM!!
Now Ready for State Right Men

Most sensational and true-to-life picture ever acted before a camera. Every scene an actuality.

THE LAST STAND OF THE
DALTON BOYS
At Coffeyville, Kansas

2900 FEET - 3 REELS 90 TRUE SCENES
Pictures Posed By People That Actually Took Part In The Raid

This picture and all future releases will be under the personal direction of Mr. Jack Kenyon, formerly of the Selig Company, and will be acted by his well-known star Co. of motion picture actors.

The picture opens at the childhood home of the Daltons, where as boys they played together and were brought up by a devoted mother, who believed in the Good Book from "kiss to kiss." The boys grown to manhood, and the appointment of Frank Dalton as Deputy U. S. Marshal—His bravery and courage in doing his duty as a servant of Uncle Sam in stamping out that evil of the Southwest, "hog-tiggers." Why it is a crime to sell whiskey to an Indian—Frank Dalton meets his death in performance of his duty—His brothers join the U. S. Marshals—Through political chicanery and malice, the Daltons are ousted from the service without their back pay (but with the knowledge of headquarters, but through the crankiness of a U. S. Marshal of that district).—Then the Dalton Gang was organized—The Daltons terrorized the Southwest, until the final raid at Coffeyville, Kansas—You will see Emmet Dalton, the last of the Dalton Gang, whose home is at Bartlesville, Okla.—The Old Liverman at Coffeyville—The man who did the killing of the Dalton Gang.—The actual cave—The posse of U. S. Marshals—Swimming the Arkansas River—Bob Dalton winning a bucking horse contest—The actual store where they purchased ammunition—Sensational fight in Death Valley—The bank robbery—Emmet Dalton's escape and his return when warning his brother was wounded—The shooting of Emmet and his arrest as he lay helpless in Death Valley—His execution and pardon.

Watch for This One! **Coming Out Soon!**

DEADWOOD DICK
"THE HERO OF THE BLACK HILLS"

It will be perfect in photography. It will be big enough to get big money. Write, wire, telephone—but get this feature quick.

Atlas Manufacturing Co., 412 Century Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.
BELL OLIVE 2131—TELEPHONES—KINLOCH, CENTRAL 4716

The Moving Picture World,
 28 July, 1912

genre which had been imported from England a few months earlier Porter was consciously working (and cinema patrons viewing) within a framework established by Sheffield Photo's *Daring Daylight Burglary*, British Gaumont/Walter Haggart's *Desperate Poaching Affair* [sic This should be *Affray*] and R.W Paul's *Trailed by Bloodhounds* . . . [Thus] When initially released, *The Great Train Robbery* was not primarily perceived in the context of the Western Its success did not encourage other Westerns but other films of crime – Lubin's *Bold Bank Robbery*, Paley and Steiner's *Burned at the Stake*, and Porter's own *Capture of the Yegg Bank Robbers* . . . It was only when the Western genre emerged as a vital force in the nickelodeon era that *The Great Train Robbery* was interpreted from this new perspective.¹⁵

Musser's argument here serves to indicate, in addition to the change in generic status of *The Great Train Robbery*, the extent to which different periods in the history of the American cinema have been marked by different generic systems, different 'generic regimes'. It is an important theoretical point that genres 'do not exist by themselves; they are named and placed within hierarchies or systems of genres, and each is defined by reference to the system and its members',¹⁶ and that, 'each era has its own system of genres' ¹⁷ Company catalogues are a particularly useful resource in establishing the generic regimes of the earliest years of the cinema Their terminology and their groupings indicate the considerable differences between these regimes and the regimes of the studio era Thus instead of the Westerns, horror films and war films of later years, the Kleine Optical Company's catalogue for 1905 lists films in the following groupings:

1. Story
 - a. historical
 - b. dramatic
 - c. narrative
2. Comic
3. Mysterious
4. Scenic
5. Personalities¹⁸

Meanwhile, Biograph's 'Advance Partial List' of films for sale in 1902 lists its 'subject' under the following titles and headings: Comedy Views, Sports and Pastime Views, Military Views, Railroad Views, Scenic Views, Views of Notable Personages, Miscellaneous Views, Trick Pictures, Marine Views, Children's Pictures, Fire and Patrol Views, Pan-American Exposition Views, Vaudeville Views, and Parade Pictures ¹⁹ (The number of 'documentary' or 'actuality' categories here is, of course, indicative of the extent to which

15 Charles Musser 'The Travel Genre in 1903-04 Moving Toward Fictional Narratives', *Iris*, vol 2, no 1 (*1er semestre*, 1984), pp 56-57 The references here are to Kenneth MacGowan *Behind the Screen* (New York Delacorte, 1965), p 114, and George Fenin and William K Everson, *The Western From Silents to Cinema* (New York Orion Press 1962), p 49

16 Ralph Cohen 'History and Genre', *New Literary History*, vol 17 no 2 (Winter 1986) p 207

17 Todorov (1976) *op cit* p 103

18 *Complete Illustrated Catalog of Moving Picture Machines Stereoptikons Slides, Films* (Chicago Kleine Optical Company November 1905) p 36

19 *Biograph Bulletins 1896-1908*, compiled by Kemp R Niver (Los Angeles Locaire Research Group, 1971) pp 59-73

documentary genres far outweighed fiction in the period prior to 1903/4).

In demonstrating the degree to which genre categories and generic regimes have changed, these examples illustrate the historical character of all genres. Genres are inherently temporal: hence, their inherent mutability on the one hand, and their inherent historicity on the other. In disagreeing with Altman on the significance of institutional discourses, I now wish to focus attention on a further aspect of that temporality.

Genre as process

It may at first sight seem as though repetition and sameness are the primary hallmarks of genres: as though, therefore, genres are above all inherently static. But as Hans Robert Jauss and Ralph Cohen (and I myself) have argued, genres are, nevertheless, best understood as *processes*.²⁰ These processes may, for sure, be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change.

The process-like nature of genres manifests itself as an interaction between three levels: the level of expectation, the level of the generic corpus, and the level of the 'rules' or 'norms' that govern both. Each new genre film constitutes an addition to an existing generic corpus and involves a selection from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in time. Some elements are included; others are excluded. Indeed some are mutually exclusive: at most points in its history, the horror film has had to characterize its monster *either* supernaturally – as in *Dracula* (1930) – *or* psychologically – as in *Psycho* (1960). In addition, each new genre film tends to extend this repertoire, either by adding a new element or by transgressing one of the old ones. Thus, for instance, *Halloween* (1979) transgressed the division between psychological and supernatural monsters, giving its monster the attributes of both. In this way the elements and conventions of a genre are always *in* play rather than being, simply, *re-played*;²¹ and any generic corpus is always being expanded.

Memories of the films within a corpus constitute one of the bases of generic expectation. So, too, does the stock of generic images produced by advertisements, posters and the like. As both corpus and image expand and change with the appearance of new films, new advertising campaigns, new reviews, so also what Jauss has termed the 'horizon of expectation' appropriate to each genre expands and changes as well.

. the relationship between the individual text and the series of texts formative of a genre presents itself as a process of the

²⁰ Cohen, *op cit.*, p. 205–206
Hans Robert Jauss *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton: The Harvester Press 1982), p. 80
Neale *op cit.* p. 19

²¹ I owe this phrase to an unpublished lecture on genre by Elizabeth Cowie

continual founding and altering of horizons. The new text evokes for the reader (or listener) the horizon of expectations and 'rules of the game' familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced.²²

²² Jauss *op cit*, p. 79

This is one reason why it is so difficult to list exhaustively the characteristic components of individual genres, or to define them in anything other than the most banal or tautological terms: a Western is a film set on the American Western frontier; a war film is a film that represents the waging of war; a detective film is a film about the investigation of criminals and crime, and so on. More elaborate definitions always seem to throw up exceptions. Altman provides an example. He cites Jean Mitry's definition of the Western as a "film whose action, situated in the American West, is consistent with the atmosphere, the values and the conditions of existence in the Far West between 1840 and 1900"²³ He then goes on to cite an exception, the 'Pennsylvania Western'

²³ Jean Mitry *Dictionnaire du Cinéma* (Paris Larousse, 1963) p. 276, cit Altman *op cit* p. 95

To most observers it seems quite clear that films like *High, Wide and Handsome* (Mamoulian, 1937), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (Ford, 1939), and *Unconquered* (DeMille, 1947) have definite affinities with the western. Employing familiar characters set in relationships similar to their counterparts west of the Mississippi, these films construct plots and develop a frontier structure clearly derived from decades of western novels and films. But they do it in Pennsylvania, and in the wrong century.²⁴

²⁴ Altman *op cit*, p. 96

Exclusive definitions, lists of *exclusive* characteristics, are particularly hard to produce. At what point do Westerns become musicals like *Oklahoma!* (1955) or *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954)? At what point do Singing Westerns become musicals? At what point do comedies with songs (like *A Night at the Opera* (1935)) become musical comedies? And so on.

These examples all, of course, do more than indicate the process-like nature of individual genres. They also indicate the extent to which individual genres not only form part of a generic regime, but also themselves change, develop and vary by borrowing from, and overlapping with, one another. Hybrids are by no means the rarity in Hollywood many books and articles on genre in the cinema would have us believe. This is one reason why, as Marc Vernet has pointed out, 'a guide to film screenings will often offer to the spectator rubrics like: western, detective film, horror film, and comedy, but also: dramatic comedy, psychological drama, or even erotic detective film.'²⁵ Indeed, in its classical era, as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have shown, nearly all Hollywood's films were hybrids insofar as they always tended to combine one type of generic plot, a romance plot, with others.²⁶ Moreover, it is at least arguable that

²⁵ Marc Vernet, 'Genre', *Film Reader* 3 (February 1978), p. 13

²⁶ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London Routledge, 1985), pp. 16–17

many of the most apparently 'pure' and stable genres, both inside and outside the cinema, initially evolved by combining elements from previously discrete and separate genres either within or across specific generic regimes. Ernest Mandel, for example, has argued that the detective genre emerged in this way, by combining three such generically disparate elements: 'the "reverse story" . . . developed by Godwin (*Caleb Williams*, 1794), the divination deduction technique originated in Persia and introduced into modern literature by Voltaire (*Zadig*); and the *coup de théâtre*, borrowed from melodrama.'²⁷ Similarly, Richard Traubner has shown, in painstaking detail, both how operetta emerged by combining the features of *opera buffa*, German *Singspiel* and British ballad opera, and how it subsequently evolved by displacing some of these features, and replacing them with elements of burlesque and revue; then, in America at least, displacing these in turn, until the genre finally emerged as the 'musical play' with shows (and films) like *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, *Brigadoon*, *Carousel*, *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady*.²⁸

Hence the importance of *historicizing* generic definitions and the parameters both of any single generic corpus, and of any specific generic regime. For it is not that more elaborated definitions are impossible to provide, just that they are always historically relative, and therefore historically specific. It is not that the process-like nature of genres renders generalizations invalid. Genre films, genres and generic regimes are always marked by boundaries and by frameworks: boundaries and frameworks which always have limits. Thus even hybrids are recognized as hybrids – combinations of specific and distinct generic components – not as genres in their own right. (This is why I would prefer to say, not as Jim Collins has recently done that a genre text always 're-makes' norms, but rather that a genre text always either re-works them, extends them, or transforms them altogether).²⁹ The point, though, is that if these limits are historically specific, they can only be determined empirically, not theoretically.

Genre history: three approaches

There currently seem to exist three major ways in which genre history has been conceived. The first is what Jauss has called 'the evolutionary schema of growth, flowering and decay'.³⁰ This schema is open to several objections: it is teleological; it is (for all its organic metaphors) highly mechanistic; and it treats genres in isolation from any generic regime.

Similar objections apply to a second model of evolutionary development used by Thomas Schatz, in which genres progress

²⁷ Ernest Mandel *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London and Sydney Pluto Press 1984), p. 18.

²⁸ Richard Traubner *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (London: Victor Gollancz 1984).

²⁹ Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 46.

³⁰ Jauss *op. cit.* p. 88.

towards self-conscious formalism. Here is Williams' description of Schatz's approach:

As genres change over time, and their audiences become more and more self-conscious, genres progress from transparency to opacity, 'from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism' (p. 38). Not all genres complete this cycle unimpeded. Gangster Films, for example, were disrupted by the threat of censorship as were, at various points, War Films. (Williams, p. 123)

To this Williams poses a theoretical objection:

Note that Schatz locates this shift to opacity *within individual genres*, such that a 'new' genre in the 1980s would have to go through a 'classical' stage before evolving into self-conscious formalism. It is not the filmmaking system or the social context that has changed, but the genres that have evolved. (In my opinion, this is clearly wrong) (p. 123)

and an empirical objection

One can find self-conscious Westerns, such as Fairbanks' *Wild and Woolly*, as early as the late teens. In fact, the entire mid-to-late silent cinema seems remarkably 'formalistic', which is possibly one reason it is wholly absent from Schatz's book. (pp. 123–4)

(A similar point has been made at greater length, and to equally devastating effect, in an article by Tag Gallagher.³¹)

The third historical model is the one provided by the Russian Formalists.³² It has the virtue of embedding the history of individual genres within the history, not just of generic formations, but of wider cultural formations as well. It is perhaps best known for Tynyanov's concept of 'the dominant' (with its correlative concept of genre history as the displacement of one dominant genre by another),³³ and by Shklovsky's idea that such displacements occur according to a principle known as 'the canonization of the junior branch'. 'When the "canonized" art forms reach an impasse, the way is paved for the infiltration of the elements of non-canonized art, which by this time have managed to evolve new artistic devices.'³⁴ Quoting from Juri Streidter's introduction to a German anthology of Russian Formalist texts, here is Jauss's description of the Formalists' conception as a whole:

The Formalist conception of genre as a historical system of relations participates in the attempt to replace the classical notion of literary tradition – as a steady, unilinear, cumulative course – with the dynamic principle of literary *evolution*, by which they do not mean an analogy to organic growth or to Darwinian selection. For here 'evolution' is supposed to characterize the phenomenon

31 Tag Gallagher 'Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the Evolution' of the Western', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1986)

32 See in particular Boris Eikhenbaum 'The Theory of the Formal Method' and Yuri Tynyanov 'On Literary Evolution both in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds.), *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications 1978), and Viktor Shklovsky's views as summarized both in these works and in Victor Erlich *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1981), pp. 259–260

33 Tynyanov *op. cit.* pp. 72–73

34 Quoted in Erlich *op. cit.*, p. 260

of literary 'succession' 'not in the sense of a continuous "development," but rather in the sense of a "struggle" and "break" with immediate predecessors through a contemporary recourse to something older.' In the historical evolution of literature thus understood, literary genres can be grasped in the periodic alternation of the dominating role as well as in a sequence of rivalries. (Jauss, p. 105)

In addition,

From a diachronic perspective the historical alternation of the dominating genre manifests itself in the three steps of canonization, automation, and reshuffling. Successful genres . . . gradually lose their effective power through continual reproduction, they are forced to the periphery by new genres often arising from a 'vulgar' stratum if they cannot be reanimated through a restructuring (be it through the playing up of previously suppressed themes or methods, or through the taking up of materials or the taking-over of functions from other genres). (p. 106)

There is clearly a great deal here that is both attractive and useful. As a theory or model, it takes account of the historicity, not only of genres, but of specific generic regimes; it takes account of their process-like nature; and, in its insistence on the importance of an interplay between canonized and non-canonized forms of representation, and between canonized and non-canonized genres, it takes account both of the transience of generic hierarchies, and of the role of hybridization in the formation and dissolution of individual genres.

In sketching the application of this model to the American cinema, one could argue, for instance, that the cinema itself arose in, and as, the conjunction of a variety of art forms – canonized and otherwise – from photography, through pictorial entertainments and spectacles like the diorama, the zoétrope and the magic lantern show, to magic itself, and to the vaudeville routine. Its earliest generic regime, in America as elsewhere, was dominated by the genres associated with these forms: the moving snapshot or 'view', re-enacted and reconstructed news, trick films, and slapstick and gag-based comedy. Subsequent to this, there is a shift to a predominance of fiction, in particular of melodrama (whether in its thrilling, mysterious, domestic or spectacular guise) on the one hand, and of comedy on the other. With accompanying subdivisions, and with the addition of genres like the musical, this 'dominant' came to be stabilized in the era of oligopoly and studio control. Later, in a period of crisis and re-adjustment, 'adult' drama and 'epic' values – marked by, and derived principally from, the epic itself, and spreading from there to the western, the war film, the

musical, and even, with films like *The Great Race* (1965) and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), to slapstick comedy – gained a position of dominance, though by now beginning to jockey for position with ‘exploitation’ genres, and the ‘juvenilization’ of Hollywood’s output. Finally, more recently, the process of juvenilization has continued, with the emergence of the ‘teenpic’, and the predominance of sci-fi and horror. Meanwhile, in exemplary illustration of Shklovsky’s thesis, some of these genres, in combination with serial-derived individual films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Romancing the Stone* (1984), have been promoted from the ‘junior branches’ of Hollywood’s output to achieve hegemony within the realms of the family blockbuster

What is particularly valuable about the Formalists’ model is that it neither prescribes the conditions for generic outmodedness, nor specifies any single mechanism by which non-canonized forms, devices or genres might find a place within generic regimes or assume a position of dominance within them. It allows for a variety of factors and reasons. This is especially important in the case of the cinema, where, for example, the initial predominance of actuality genres is as much a consequence of technological factors as it is of their popularity or ‘canonization’ elsewhere in the contemporary culture, and where, on the other hand, the promotion and predominance of ‘juvenile’ genres is as much a consequence of market research and the targeting of audiences,³⁵ and, in some cases, of new special-effects techniques, as it is of any new-found aesthetic vitality.³⁶

What, meanwhile, is particularly striking about this historical sketch is the extent to which many genres either originated in forms and institutions of entertainment other than the cinema, or were (and are) circulated additionally by them. Melodrama, for example, originated on the stage. It fed from there, in a process of increasing and mutual interaction, firstly into written fiction then into the cinema. All the while, in all three fields, it generated sub-divisions like the crime story, the mystery, the adventure story and the romance, as well as domestic drama. Comedy came from vaudeville, the circus, burlesque and the newspaper cartoon strip, as well as from the ‘legitimate’ stage, and, later, from radio and television. The musical came from Broadway (and its songs from Tin Pan Alley). Cheap hardback and paperback books, meanwhile, together with both ‘slick’ and ‘pulp’ magazines, comic books, comic strips and mass-produced fiction of all kinds, helped in some cases to originate, and in all cases to circulate, genres like the Western, the detective story and the thriller, horror, science-fiction, war and romance. This generic fiction often appeared in series or serial format with precise generic titles and names: *Adventure Library* (1897), *The Detective Library* (1917), *Western Story Magazine* (1919), *Thrill Book* (1919), *Love Story Magazine* (1921), *Love Story*

³⁵ On exploitation, juvenilization and the emergence of the teenpic, see Thomas Docherty *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988)

³⁶ On the role of special effects see Steve Neale ‘Hollywood Strikes Back – Special Effects in Recent American Cinema’, *Screen*, vol. 21 no. 3 (1981) pp. 101–105

³⁷ Dates for series titles indicate initial year of publication. On mass-produced fiction series and genres, see among others, Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West Popular Western Fiction 1860–1960* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Tony Goodstone (ed.), *The Pulps Fifty Years of American Pop Culture* (New York: Chelsea House, 1970); Ron Goulet, *Great History of Comic Books* (Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1986); Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Quentin Reynolds *The Fiction Factory, or From Pulp Row to Quality Street* (New York: Random House, 1955); Frank L. Schick, *The Paperbound Book in America* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1958); and Piet Schreuders, *The Book of Paperbacks A Visual History of the Paperback* (London: Virgin Books, 1981).

³⁸ The only books dealing with a number of genres across a variety of institutions and forms, remain so far as I am aware John G. Caweltz, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976); and Robert C. Toll, *The Entertainment Machine American Show Business in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Research is also needed on the institutional connections between the cinema, the theatre, radio, television and popular music which in part enable cross-media generic circulation. For a summary and bibliography of some of the work to date, see Calvin Fryluck, 'Industrialization of Entertainment in the United States' in Bruce A. Austin (ed.), *Current Research in Film*

Library (1926), *War Stories* (1922), *Gangster Stories*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction* (1942), *Bestseller Mysteries* (1942), *The Vault of Horror* (1950), and so on.³⁷

It is worth, at this point, signalling the need for a great deal more research both on cross-media generic formation and circulation, and, as a corollary, on the particular contributions of individual institutions and forms.³⁸ More research is needed, too, on the aesthetically specific transformations and adaptations each genre undergoes in each institution and form.³⁹

Finally, I should like to move on to discuss a set of questions to do with the aesthetic characteristics of mass-produced genres, their institutional functions within the cinema, and their putative social, cultural and ideological significance.

The first point to make here is, again, an historical one. It concerns the provenance, and status, of the term 'genre' itself, its applicability to the cinema, and its role in characterizing not only the cinema, but mass-produced art and entertainment in general. It is a point which, once more, has usefully been focussed by Williams:

Perhaps the biggest problem with genre theory or genre criticism in the field of cinema is the word *genre*. Borrowed, as a critical tool, from literary studies . . . the applicability of 'genre' as a concept in film studies raises some fairly tough questions. Sample genres are held to be Westerns, Science Fiction Films, more recently Disaster Films, and so on. What do these loose groupings of works – that seem to come and go, for the most part, in ten- and twenty-year cycles – have to do with familiar literary genres such as tragedy, comedy, romance, or (to mix up the pot a bit) the epistolary novel or the prose poem? (Williams, p. 121)

He continues,

For the phrase 'genre films', referring to a general category, we can frequently, though not always, substitute 'film narrative.' Perhaps *that* is the real genre. Certainly there is much more difference between *Prelude to Dog Star Man* and *Star Wars* than there is between the latter and *Body Heat*. It's mainly a question of terminology, of course, but I wonder if we ought to consider the principal genres as being narrative film, experimental/avant-garde film, and documentary. Surely these are the categories in film studies that have among themselves the sorts of significant differences that one can find between, say, epic and lyric poetry. If we reserve this level for the term *genre*, then film genres will by definition have the kind of staying power seen in literary genres. What we presently call film genres would then be *sub-genres*. (pp. 121–22)

39 The kind of studies I have in mind are best instanced, to date, by Altman's book on the Musical, especially his emphasis on edited alternation in constructing a dual focus' narrative, and his concepts of the 'Audio' and 'Video Dissolve' *op cit esp* pp 16-27 and 59-89. John Mueller's book, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986) especially the section on 'Astaire's Use of the Camera' pp 26-34 and Christine Saxton's *Illusions of Grandeur: The Representation of Space in the American Western* (University Microfilms Inc: Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1988)

40 Cohen *op cit*, p 203

41 Terry Threadgold 'Talking about genre: ideologies and incompatible discourses' *Cultural Studies* vol 3, no 1 (January 1989), pp 121-122

42 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Popular Culture' *New Formations* no 2, Summer 1987

In many ways, it seems to me, Williams is right about this. However, apart from the fact that, as he himself says, it is 'probably too late' to change things, there is an important qualification to be made.

As Ralph Cohen has pointed out, the term 'genre' is a nineteenth century term.⁴⁰ Thus, although the concept is clearly much older, the term itself emerges precisely at the time that popular, mass-produced generic fiction is making its first appearance (its genres, incidentally, just as susceptible to Williams' strictures). At the same time, also, there began to emerge a distinct shift in the value placed on generic literature by 'High Culture' artists and critics. As Terry Threadgold has explained, prior to the advent of Romanticism 'it was *literature* that was generic',

The rest, the 'popular culture' of political pamphlets, ballads, romances, chapbooks, was not only *not* literature, but also *not* generic; it escaped the law of genre, suffering a kind of rhetorical exclusion by inclusion in the classical distinction between high, middle, and low styles. It was seen as a kind of anarchic, free area, unconstrained by the rules of polite society and decorum, by *genre* in fact.⁴¹

With the emergence of new technologies, new capital, mass production, new means of distribution (notably the railway), with the formation of a relatively large, literate (or semi-literate) population (with the formation, therefore, of a market), and with the commodification of all forms of leisure and entertainment, the equation is reversed. Now it is 'popular culture', mass culture, that is generic, ruled as it is by market pressures to differentiate to a limited degree in order to cater to various sectors of consumers, and to repeat commercially successful patterns, ingredients and formulas. By contrast, 'true literature' is marked by self-expression, creative autonomy, and originality, and hence by a freedom from all constrictions and constraints, including those of genre.

It is at this point absolutely crucial to disentangle a number of assumptions and conflations, for it is at this point that a great deal of 'genre theory' (indeed 'popular cultural theory' in general) tends to go astray. Firstly, of course, it has to be recognized that no 'artist', in whatever sphere of aesthetic production, at whatever period in history, in whatever form of society, has ever been free either of aesthetic conventions and rules, or of specific institutional constraints (whether he or she has reacted against them or not). Secondly, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has recently re-emphasized, *all* cultural and artistic production in Western societies is now, and has been for some time, subject to capitalist conditions of production, distribution and exchange, hence to commodification.⁴² (This means, among other things, both that High Cultural art that still draws upon 'traditional', pre-capitalist genres like lyric poetry, and High

Cultural art that eschews both 'traditional' and modern, 'popular' genres is still itself 'generic' insofar as it is thereby still engaged in catering for a sector of the market, still involved in a form of product differentiation).⁴³ The third point is that it is indeed, therefore, the case that mass-produced, popular genres have to be understood within an economic context, as conditioned by specific economic imperatives and by specific economic contradictions – in particular, of course, those that operate within specific institutions and industries. That is why it is important to stress the financial advantages to the film industry of an aesthetic regime based on regulated difference, contained variety, pre-sold expectations, and the re-use of resources in labour and materials. It is also why it is important to stress the peculiar nature of films as *aesthetic* commodities, commodities demanding at least a degree of novelty and difference from one to another, and why it is necessary to explore the analogies and the distinctions between cycles and genres in the cinema, on the one hand, and models and lines in the field of non-artistic commodity production, on the other.

Failure to recognize these points results in approaches to genre which are inadequate and simplistic. It is worth specifying two such approaches here. The first is what Altman has called the 'ritual' approach, and Thomas Schatz (along with Will Wright and John Cawelti, a pioneer of this particular approach) once again serves as an example.⁴⁴ Here is Williams' summary

The repetitive nature of genre production and consumption produces active but indirect audience participation; successful genres are 'stories the audience has isolated through its collective response'. Hence genre filmmaking can be examined as 'a form of collective cultural expression' (pp. 12–13) (Williams, p. 123)

Quite apart from the doubtful assumption that consumer decision-making can be considered a form of 'cultural expression', and quite apart from the tendency of such an approach to conflate the multiplicity of reasons for consumer 'choices' and a multiplicity of readings of these 'choices', the 'ritual' theory of genres is open to question on other grounds. Principal among these is that it ignores the role of institutional determinations and decisions, by-passing the industry and the sphere of production in an equation between market availability, consumer choice, consumer preference, and broader social and cultural values and beliefs. This is an equation open to challenge on its own grounds. During the studio era, for instance, Westerns were regularly produced in large numbers, despite the fact that, as Garth Jowett has shown, such market research as was conducted at this time indicated that the genre was popular only with young adolescent boys and sectors of America's rural population, and that it was *actively disliked* more than it was liked by the viewing population as a whole.⁴⁵

⁴³ For a discussion of this in relation to the cinema see Steve Neale *Art Cinema as Institution* *Screen* vol. 22 no. 1 (1981)

⁴⁴ Cawelti, *op cit*; Schatz *op cit*; Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley University of California Press 1975)

⁴⁵ Garth S. Jowett *Giving Them What They Want: Movie Audience Research Before 1950* in Bruce A. Austin (ed.), *Current Research in Film: Audience Economics and Law* vol. 1 (Norwood New Jersey Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985)

Second, objections can also be made to what Altman calls the 'ideological approach' to genre, an approach which recognizes the capitalist nature of the film industry, and the status of its films as commodities, but which treats genres simply as vehicles for 'capitalist' (or 'the dominant') 'ideology'.⁴⁶ This approach is open to the charges of reductivism, economism, and cultural pessimism.⁴⁷ It tends to presume, in the final analysis, that representations reflect their social and economic conditions of existence, that institutions and social formations necessarily secure their own reproduction, and, in Colin MacCabe's words, that 'the meanings of texts are always finally anchored in a class struggle which is not to be understood in cultural terms'.⁴⁸ As both MacCabe and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith have each, in their different ways, insisted, 'stressing the capitalist character of modern cultural production is in itself neither optimistic nor pessimistic'.⁴⁹ The ideological significance of any text – or any genre – is always to be sought in a context-specific analysis. It cannot simply be deduced from the nature of the institution responsible for its production and circulation, nor can it ever be known in advance.

Both these theories, for all their differences, suffer from the fact that they pay little attention to aesthetics – for them form is always, and only, a wrapping for the cultural or ideological content in which they are almost exclusively interested. Insofar as they do discuss form, they tend to stress the repetitive, 'stereotypical' aspects of genres, setting aside the differences within and between them in order to provide themselves with a stable corpus, and in order to substantiate their underlying premise that the reasons for the popularity and longevity of genres are relatively uniform, as are, aside from a few Levi-Straussian antinomies, the genres themselves, the meanings they convey, and the culture (or ideology) that underpins them. While it may be the case that repetition is important, it is also the case, as we have seen, that variation and difference are crucial. Equally, while it may be the case that Hollywood genres are in most instances best considered as sub-genres of 'narrative film', and while these sub-genres may not be marked by the kinds of apparent discursive peculiarities that tend to differentiate the narrative film from documentary or the structuralist avant garde, there is still a great deal of scope for the investigation of specific discursive characteristics. Aside from my own attempt, in *Genre*, to explore the ways in which different genres exploit in different ways the features and characteristics of the narrative film (an attempt somewhat marred by an over-schematic approach, by a lack of attention to hybridization, and, above all, by a lack of attention to history), the basis for an approach can perhaps be found in the Russian Formalist idea that genres can each involve a 'dominant' (or dominating) aesthetic device (or ideological element).⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Altman *op cit* p 94

⁴⁷ Possibly the worst example I have come across is Judith Hess Wright's article, 'Genre Films and the Status Quo' in Barry Kersh Grant *op cit*

⁴⁸ Colin MacCabe, Introduction to MacCabe (ed.) *High Theory/Low Culture: analysing popular television and film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) p 4

⁴⁹ Nowell-Smith *op cit* p 88

⁵⁰ See Tynyanov *op cit*

On this basis, particular genres can be characterized, not as the only genres in which given elements, devices and features occur, but as the ones in which they are dominant, in which they play an overall, organizing role

Approaches to individual genres – and to individual genre films – that draw centrally on the notion of a generic dominant are few and far between. However, it could be argued, for example, that the epic is marked by the dominance of spectacle; that the thriller and the detective genre, especially as discussed by Dennis Porter and Kristin Thompson, are dominated by the devices of suspense, narrative digression, and hermeneutic delay;⁵¹ and that, as the Russian Formalists themselves have argued, melodrama involves the subordination of all other elements ‘to one overriding aesthetic goal the calling forth of “pure,” “vivid” emotions’.⁵² In doing so, however, emphasis again must be placed on the fact that dominant elements are not necessarily exclusive elements, elements that occur only in the genre concerned. Clearly, spectacle, digression, suspense and the generation of passion and emotion are properties common to all Hollywood films.

By way of conclusion, I would like to stress the need for further research, further concrete and specific analyses, and for much more attention to be paid to genres hitherto neglected in genre studies, like the adventure film for example, the war film and the epic. In stressing this, I can do no better than to quote, for the last time, from Williams. In his own summation, he calls for a ‘return to film history’, for ‘genre studies with real historical integrity’.

This would mean 1) starting with a genre’s ‘pre-history’, its roots in other media, 2) studying all films, regardless of perceived quality; and 3) going beyond film content to study advertising, the star system, studio policy, and so on in relation to the production of films. (Williams, p. 124)

I would merely add that the scope of this investigation needs to be extended beyond individual genres to encompass specific generic regimes both inside, and outside, the cinema.

51 Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) esp. pp. 49–66.

52 Daniel Gerould, ‘Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama’, *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1978), p. 154.