

Understanding Film Genres

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Overview

1. Preliminary Activity
2. What is a Genre?
3. Survey of Genres
 - a) *Romance*
 - b) *Science Fiction*
 - c) *Horror*
 - d) *Comedy*

Preliminary Activity

In your assigned groups, come up with a premise for a movie set in Hong Kong based on the genre assigned to you.

Genre	
Musical (Sample)	Based on the novel by Gaston Leroux, <i>The Phantom of the Opera</i> tells the story of Christine Daaé, a musical prodigy, who becomes the obsession of a masked genius living in the sewers of the Paris Opera House. Things become more complicated when Christine's childhood friend Raoul enters the scene as the opera's donor. The Phantom's obsession leads to tragedy, death, and catastrophe.
Romance	
Horror	
Comedy	
Science Fiction	

Genre

- **Etymology:** From French *genre* which in turn is derived from the Latin *genus* (“type, kind”) (where we also get the term “gender”)
- Has to do with classification and groupings associated based on patterns, structure, and conventions

Film Genre (according to Altman)

- **Blueprint:** a formula that has to be followed
- **Structure:** a formal framework
- **Label:** a category that is helpful for distributors
- **Contract:** an “agreement” between the film and its audience

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. British Film Institute, 1999.

Blueprint and Structure

Writers are provided with existing character types and narrative tropes that they can duplicate, adapt, or even challenge.

- Examples of character types: The femme fatale in noir films, the redeemed and reformed villain
- Example of narrative tropes: The cowboy/Western films

Label

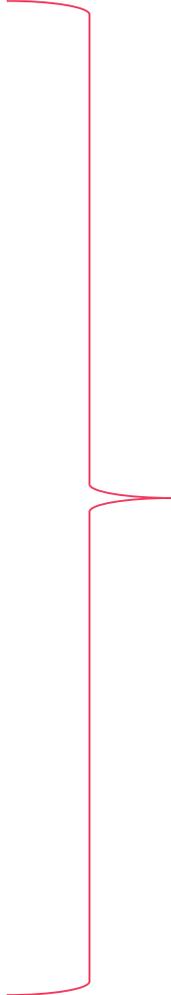
- Genres as marketing categories
- For the convenience of distributors and movie houses

Contract

- Genre as a way of viewing and as a framework for interpretation

Different types of Film Genres

1. Romance
2. Science and Speculative Fiction
3. Horror, Gothic, and Crime
4. Comedy
5. Fantasy
6. Family / Children's Film
7. Noir
8. Drama / Melodrama
9. Action and Adventure
10. Musical



Multi-genres can be a permutation of these genres

Romance

Romance Films

- Focus on intimacy, attraction, and love between two (or more) individuals
- Do not always have to be too erotic or sexual

Subgenres of Romance Films

- Teeny Boppers
- Romcom (romantic comedy)
- Coming-of-age
- Melodrama
- Period dramas
- (... even action films usually have a romantic subplot)

Origins of the Romance Mode

- At first referred to Romance Languages that emerged from the *Roman* language (e.g. French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese)
- Eventually referred to stories originating from these places that focused on adventures and chivalric love
- Romance was also initially contrasted with Realism:
 - Romance: Emotional, sublime, fantasy
 - Realism: Ordinary, everyday, tangible

Characteristics and Conventions of Romance Films

- Usually Escapist
- Character-driven
- Sentimental and often dramatic
- Usually set in domestic, private settings (as originally women's stories)

The Rise of the Novel and Women's Literature

- Modern novel: primarily written by middle-class women for women
- Something to pass the time by
- Topics related to marriage, family life, and domestic propriety

- Just like any story, it is the conflict that makes the romance story.
- These conflicts are not only sources of tension but they can also offer certain social commentaries that the films can make.
- This can often be seen in how they are able to prevail or fail to overcome their obstacles.

Sources of Conflict

- A rival / competition
- Society
 - Class
 - Race
 - Social norms
- The environment
 - Disasters
 - Physical distance
- The protagonists' own issues or problems
- Combination of the above

Some Common Romance Film Tropes

1. Two People from Different Worlds
2. Unrequited Love
3. Love Triangle
4. The Secretly Rich Boyfriend / Girlfriend
5. Friends to Lovers
6. Enemies to Lovers
7. Forbidden Love
8. Second Chances
9. Fake Relationships

Two People From Different Worlds

- *Cinderella... Pocahontas ... Beauty and the Beast...* actually a lot of Disney films
- Roger Michell (dir), *Notting Hill* (1999)
- Kenny Ortega (dir), *High School Musical* (2006)
- Richard Curtis (dir), *Love Actually* (2003)
- Damien Chazelle (dir), *La La Land* (2017)

Unrequited or Unconsummated Love

- Richard Curtis (dir), *Love Actually* (2003)
- P. J. Hogan (dir), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997)
- Baz Luhrmann (dir), *The Great Gatsby* (2013)
- Wong Kar-wai (dir), *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The Love Triangle

- Jon Turteltaub (dir), *While You Were Sleeping* (1995)
- P. J. Hogan (dir), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997)
- Adam Shankman (dir), *The Wedding Planner* (2001)
- Baz Luhrmann (dir), *The Great Gatsby* (2012)
- Catherine Hardwicke, Bill Condon, David Slade, and Chris Weitz, *The Twilight Saga* (2008-2012)

The Secretly Rich Boyfriend / Girlfriend

- John Landis (dir), *Coming to America* (1988)
- Jon M. Chu (dir), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

Friends to Lovers

- Rob Reiner (dir), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)
- Will Gluck (dir), *Friends with Benefits* (2011)
- *Spiderman* movies (Peter Parker and MJ) and *Harry Potter* movies (Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger)

Enemies to Lovers

- Nora Ephron (dir), *You've Got Mail* (1998)
- Joe Right (dir), *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)
- A classical storyline in many Boys Love (BL) stories

Forbidden Love

- James Cameron (dir), *Titanic* (1997)
- John Madden (dir), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998)
- Ang Lee (dir), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

Second Chances

- Nora Ephron (dir), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)
- Giuseppe Tornatore (dir), *Cinema Paradiso* (1988)
- Chookiat Savkeervakul (dir), *The Love of Siam* (2007)

Fake Relationship (that becomes real)

- Gary Marshall (dir), *Pretty Woman* (1990)

Some Criticisms of Romance Films

- Upholding anti-women or patriarchal views on women and heterosexuality
- Unrealistic
- Sugarcoating real and painful social realities

Teaching Exercise/Activity: Analyzing Romance Films (on a Macro Level)

Suggested guide questions for essay writing:

1. What trope(s) is/are being used in the film? Does the film follow this/these trope(s) or does it seek to challenge or modify them?
2. What obstacles are set in place in the film? What deeper social commentaries are being made by the film through the obstacles and the resolution of such conflicts?
3. How do the various cinematic elements (scene composition, music, background, etc) enhance the romance?

Teaching Exercise/Activity: Match the Trope

Column A

1. Unrequited Love
2. Love Triangle
3. Forbidden Love
4. (etc)

Column B

(Trailer or poster or
screenshot of a defining
scene)

Teaching Exercise/Activity: Creative Writing: Your Own Love Story

- Write your own romance story set in Hong Kong. Details include:
 - Character Profile Description
 - Trope to Use
 - Soundtrack for Music
- Pretend to be filmmakers and writers presenting your proposal to a movie studio

Teaching Exercise/Activity: Film Clip Analysis

Examining how the different narrative and cinematic elements enhance the romance:

- *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)
- *Noting Hill* (1999)

Some suggested answers

Setting (highlighting the conflict that the characters experience):

- *Notting Hill*: The Press Conference highlights how Anna's fame became a problem for them
- *Crazy Rich Asians*: Nick entering and bumping into people in the Economy class highlighting the social divide between him and Rachel

Camera shots:

- Meant to establish the contrast between the lovers and their dispositions (Nick and Rachel processing their experience while walking down a crowded aisle in the Economy class → no longer bothered by class issues; William and Anna staring at each other, no longer bothered by how the world perceives them)
- Cameras as bystanders witnessing the romance

Science Fiction

Definition of Science Fiction

Science Fiction refers to a literary or film genre that utilizes fantastic and speculative phenomena to explore human conditions and society.

Fantastic and Speculative Phenomena

- Refers to theories, ideas, and realities not accepted/ discovered/ realized **OR** not yet accepted / discovered/ realized by scientists
- Fantastic = fantasy, beyond today's reality
- Speculative = speculate, "what if..."

Common Phenomena and Situations in Sci-Fi Films

- Space Travel
- Alien Life
- Time Travel
- Super human abilities / immortality
- Human Cloning
- AI: Artificial Intelligence
- Utopian (“Perfect” societies) or Dystopian (Post-Apocalyptic societies)

Speculative Worlds, Real Issues

- Fantastic elements correspond to something already in the real world
- Examples:
 - Space Travel = people can have limited travel outside of the normal atmosphere
 - Cloning = Cloning of animals/stem cell

Science fiction as a modern genre

- Science fiction was “born” during the Industrial Age:
 - Rise of cities
 - Discovery and invention of new technologies
 - Man started working in factories
 - Capitalism
- Explores therefore how modern life has changed and continuously changes humanity (for better or for worse)

Speculative/ Fantastic Phenomena
+
Human Condition Highlighted
=
Science Fiction

Some Popular Themes in Sci-Fi Films

Theme	Sample Films / TV Series
Colonialism and Imperialism	David Lynch (dir), <i>Dune</i> (1984) Denis Villeneuve (dir), <i>Dune</i> (2021 & 2024); James Cameron (dir), <i>Avatar</i> (2009 & 2023)
Genetic Engineering and Eugenics	Andrew Niccol (dir), <i>Gattaca</i> (1997); Steven Spielberg (dir), <i>Jurassic Park</i> (1993)
Social class	Andrew Niccol (dir), <i>Gattaca</i> (1997); Bong Joon-Ho, <i>Snowpiercer</i> (2013)
Man and Machine – What does it mean to be human?	Ridley Scott (dir), <i>Blade Runner</i> (1982); Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski (dir), <i>The Matrix Trilogy</i> ; Steven Spielberg (dir), <i>AI: Artificial Intelligence</i> (2001)
Social Control	Alex Proyas (dir), <i>Dark City</i> (1998); Steven Spielberg (dir), <i>Minority Report</i> (2002); George Nolfi, <i>The Adjustment Bureau</i> (2011)
Human Exploitation	Michael Bay (dir), <i>The Island</i> (2005); Mark Romanek (dir), <i>Never Let Me Go</i> (2010)
Social Darwinism / Survival in Extreme Situations	Yeon Sang-ho (dir), <i>Train to Busan</i> (2016) and other Zombie movies; Hwang Dong-hyuk (dir), <i>Squid Game</i> (2021),
Mortality and Human Limitations	Robert Zemeckis (dir), <i>Contact</i> (1997); Christopher Nolan (dir), <i>Interstellar</i> (2014); Denis Villeneuve (dir), <i>Arrival</i> (2016)

Dune (1984; 2021; 2024)

- Colonialism and Imperialism
 - The Imperium as an Empire
 - Exploitation and pillaging of resources
 - Ecological destruction resulting in imbalance
- Colonialism and Religion
 - Paul Atreides as the White Messianic Savior
 - Religion as a colonizing tactic

Guide Questions: Analyzing Science Fiction

1. Apply the formula (Speculative/ Fantastic Phenomena + Human Condition Highlighted)
2. How do the various cinematic elements highlight the film's issues?
3. What do these sci-fi films tell us about our world today?

Teaching Exercise/Activity:

Black Mirror: Nosedive (2016)

- What human conditions are highlighted here?
- What real life technology is featured here? How is it turned into science fiction?
- Lastly, how do the cinematic elements help illustrate the themes?

Black Mirror: Nosedive (2016)

- Possible issues highlighted: Social media, the social credit system but also the quantification of human life
- **Utopia/Dystopian elements:** A seemingly objective way to rank people
- **Cinematic technique:** Pastel colors to elicit false positive emotions and highlight the seemingly perfect world or the perfect self

Teaching Exercise/Activity: World Building

- World building is an important concept in science fiction (and also fantasy like *Lord of the Rings*)
- Invite students to present and justify their choices

Horror

Horror Films

A genre of films that brings about feelings of fear, terror, or disgust from the audience to explore the dark side of humanity and human life.

Why Terror and Horror?

- The pleasure of being surprised and shocked... like a roller coaster ride!
- Purgation and Catharsis
 - Release of negative emotions
 - Horror as a kind of a roller coaster ride
- Confirming social mores by depicting evil in a supernatural and inhumane way

Subgenres of Horror

- Ghost Films
- Monster Films
- Dark science fiction
- Slasher
- Psychological

Ghosts Films

- Films that feature spirits
- May also be based on folk, mythological, or cultural elements
- Examples:
 - Tobe Hooper (dir), *Poltergeist* (1982)
 - James Wan (dir), *The Conjuring* (2013)
 - Hideo Nakata (dir), *The Ring* (2002)

Monster Films

- Related to fantasy
- But unlike fantasy, the monsters elicit more emotions of terror
- Examples:
 - Andrés Muschietti (dir), *It* (2017)
 - John Krasinski (dir), *A Quiet Place* (2018)
 - Jordan Peele (dir), *Nope* (2023)

Dark Science Fiction

- Presents the dark and horrifying side of scientific discovery and progress
- Examples:
 - Kenneth Branagh (dir), *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994)
 - Jordan Peele (dir), *Get Out* (2017)

Slasher

- Usually involves a killer going around on a killing spree
- Exceptionally gory and bloody
- Slasher = blade as the conventional weapon of the killer
- Examples:
 - The Scream and Halloween film series

Psychological

- May not involve monsters or ghosts or any other supernatural elements and are not quite slasher
- May also belong to the thriller genre
- Examples:
 - Wes Craven (dir), *Red Eye* (2005)
 - Alfred Hitchcock (dir), *Psycho* (1960)

Tell Me Who Your Monsters Are

- Often use the supernatural to highlight the dark side of our humanity
- When there is light, there are shadows

Some “dark side” issues highlighted by horror films

- Greed, obsession with power and fame
- Psychological issues and trauma (and what happens if they are left untreated)
- Marital Problems (e.g. infidelity)
- Real crime (e.g. murder, theft)
- Racism and prejudice

The Gothic Novel

- One of modern horror's antecedents
- Emerged during the 19th century along with Realism
- The notion of the “double”
 - The evil “Other”
 - We all have an “evil twin”

Horror as Reality's Evil Twin

- What do the monsters/ghosts we create say about us?
- In what sense are we the real monsters or terrifying creatures?

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1896)

- One of the earliest works of science fiction
- Reflects the repressed nature of modern man

Dracula (1897)

- A novel about a Transylvanian vampire named Count Dracula who arrives in London and terrorizes the residents there
- True horror: Dracula as a foreigner invading England and “contaminating” the blood of natives

Modern Example: Ghost Stories

- The return of the repressed
- “Haunting” as the core horror device → the ghost keeps coming back
- Haunting is often caused by a human flaw or crime → It is the crime that is fatal
- The haunting often stops when the crime/flaw is corrected
- “Cursed” as the cause
 - Primarily a story about order and disorder: something is wrong or not right
 - Usually the curse is caused by a crime, a transgression, or sometimes a mistake

Modern Example: Slasher Films

- Often about the breakdown of the American family
- The killer is usually a man who has deep psychological issues after a traumatic, family experience
- The victims are often women:
 - The Last Female Trope = a woman usually survives, the survivor as the eyes of the audience
- It also mirrors the prohibitions on sex because of the HIV pandemic in the 1980s. In the film, the characters who have sex often get killed.

American Horror Story, Season 1: Murder House (2011)

- Premise: Dozens of people who move into a new house get killed and remain in the house as ghosts
- Setting: The 2008 housing crisis in the US
- Theme: Rising property prices and the unliveable conditions of living in the US

Teaching Exercise/Activity: Analyzing Horror Films

- What subgenre does the film belong to? What key features in the film show this?
- What dark side of humanity (of our reality) is being highlighted by the film?
- How did the horror elements (such as the supernatural elements) as well as the different cinematic elements help reinforce this?

Teaching Exercise/Activity: Make Your Own Monster/Ghost

- Conceptualize your own monster or ghost for a film set in Hong Kong
- Design a movie poster for the film and present the poster in class
- Explain why this is a monster or ghost that can be found in Hong Kong and what aspect of Hong Kong life is being highlighted here
- How does one slay or overcome the monster or how can the ghost be banished?

Comedy

Comedy Films

- Primarily humorous and whose objective are to make the audience laugh
- Social critiques in many cases (poke fun at real social and political realities)
- Except for black comedies, which usually have happy endings

Characteristics of Comedies

- Humorous
- Mostly happy endings
- Focus on the common everyday man/woman
- Main characters are usually ordinary people

History & Precursors of Comedy: Comedy Plays in Ancient Greece

- In ancient Greece, people watched three tragedies and one comedy (Trilogy of tragedies → satyr plays and comedies)
- Meant to help defuse the emotional tensions brought about by the three tragedies
- Feature the story of the common folk (in contrast to tragedies)
- Tend to be farcical, ridiculing real-life political and social affairs

Shakespearean Comedy

- 16th century playwright and poet
- Common themes in his comedies that are still found today:
 - Mistaken identity
 - Reason vs. emotion
 - Fate vs. fantastical
 - Separation and reconciliation
- Tension between order and disorder

Silent Films

- Did not have sound (because of the limitation of the technology)
- Relies mainly on slapstick comedies that were similar to vaudeville acts
- The first comedy film: *L'arroseur arrose'*

Common Comedic Devices & Tropes

Common Comedic Devices & Tropes

1. Stereotyping
2. Surreal / Absurd Humor
3. “A Series of Unfortunate Events”
4. Wrong Identity (Mistaken or Undercover)
5. Switching of Identities
6. Breaking the Fourth Wall

Stereotyping

- Simplified generalizations about certain groups (e.g. dumb blonde, Asians with broken English)
- Often reveal certain racial prejudices at the time

Surreal/Absurd Humor

- Surreal/absurd humor: a form of humor that violates any sense of reason or is seen as illogical
- Examples: Mel Brooks and Leslie Nielsen films
- *Top Secret!* (1984)

A series of Unfortunate Events

- Based on a series of unexpected and comical events that characters have to face

Wrong Identities

- Cases of mistaken identities or undercover
- *White Chicks* (2004)

Switching Bodies

- Stories that have to do with characters (especially with opposite personalities) switching their bodies to hilarious effects

Breaking the Fourth Wall

- Refers to moments when the movie and its characters become aware that they are in the movie
- Some “Breaking the fourth wall” gimmicks: getting their script, commenting on what is NOT supposed to happen, addressing the audience
- *Deadpool* (2016)

Some subgenres of Comedy

SlapStick

- Relies on exaggerated and impossible (from real life) situations
- Examples: *Charlie Chaplin* movies, *Mr. Bean* episodes and movies

Nonsense Comedy

- A special kind of slapstick comedy popularized by Stephen Chow
- A distinct feature and legacy of Hong Kong cinema
- Strongly grounded on Hong Kong culture as it parodies and pokes fun at different aspects of Hong Kong culture and cinema

Parody or Spoof

- Parodies or spoofs poke fun or satirizes other more serious genres and films
- Presented through slapstick humor, stereotyping, or making references to what they are poking fun at
- Examples:
 - *Mission: Impossible* series
 - *Shrek 2* (2004); *Shrek Honest Trailer*

Mockumentaries

- Use the documentary format with fictional or a mix of fictional and real-life people to poke fun at fictional or real issues
- Often used to criticize real issues

Romcoms (Romantic Comedies)

- Films that blend love stories with humorous scenes

Social Functions of Comedy

Comedy as Self-Reflexivity

Comedies may be used to critique aspects of Hollywood culture, celebrity life, and the entertainment industry as a whole.

Slapstick as an Exaggeration of Reality

Exaggeration and absurdity may be used to highlight a prevailing social issue.

Comedy as Political Satire

- Often used as medium to criticize serious political and social issues
- The idea of comedy as “speaking truth to power”

Comedy as a Philosophical Reflection on Social Realities

- *Free Guy* (2021)
- Some issues:
 - The concept of free will and social control
 - Corporate greed
 - Copyright Infringement

Analyzing Comedy

1. What subgenre of comedy does the film belong to? Does it follow the conventions? Or is it trying something new?
2. What comedic effect do the tropes and devices attempt to achieve? Are they successful? Why or why not?
3. What social or real-life issue is the film poking fun at? What is its resolution?
4. How did the other cinematic elements (background music, special effects, setting/scene composition) enhance the storytelling?