

Studying Genre

The word **genre** comes from the French meaning **type or category**. Its roots are in the Latin word *genus*, a word which is now used to describe classification in biology. Using the concept of genre in relation to the moving image serves much the same purpose. Approaching films in relation to genre inevitably means treating individual films not as unique works of art but as members of different categories or groupings.

There are two major approaches to film genre: The Descriptive Approach and The Functional Approach.

The aim of the **descriptive approach** is to place a large number of films into a small set of groups based on common characteristics such as theme or visual style. This means concentrating on the formal and stylistic qualities of films. Try the following introductory exercise to familiarise yourself with this approach:

The **functional approach** to genre, focuses instead on the role genre plays in society itself. The Functional approach examines film and the viewing of films as a shared, social ritual, with different audiences sharing common expectations and experiences. In relation to genre in particular, try the following exercise to gain an insight into the expectations and perceptions of your friends and colleagues.

Genre Classification

The main identifying characteristics of a film will inevitably fall into one or more of the following categories, or "repertoire of elements".

- **Iconography**
- **Setting**
- **Characters**
- **Narrative**
- **Style**
- **Theme**
- **Audience Response**
- **Genre hybrids**

Despite often clearly definable characteristics, however, it is important to remember that genres are not fixed entities, but are instead constantly evolving. Often the boundaries between genres

become blurred. In most cases films represent a “genre hybrid” – or a combination of attributes from several different genre backgrounds. Studying genre reveals a pattern of repetition and difference. In other words, some films do have identifiable similarities, but they also contain new elements or similar elements used in new ways. Try the following exercise to find out more about the fluid and complex nature of genre classification.

Genre and Production

Of course Genre isn't just a useful tool for classifying and criticising films. Genre acts as both a gauge of shared target audience expectations and preferences and as a useful guide for film producers.

In their ongoing attempts to find “formulae” which will bring guaranteed box office success, producers frequently play on audience familiarity with genre characteristics, both in the making and promotion of their films. The rationale behind this approach, is the belief that product recognition makes it easier to sell a product. (see Film Industry).

Film producers are obviously interested in what characteristics make a film successful. By identifying formulae and refining them, they are contributing to the ongoing construction and development of different genre categories.

Viewing Extract - A Personal Journey through American Movies: (00:22:15 – 01:10:53)

The introductory section of the BFI DVD 'A Personal Journey through American Movies with Martin Scorsese' provides a useful starting point for the study of genre. Beginning with the section 'The Director as Storyteller', Scorsese discusses how the genre system developed in the earliest days of the Hollywood Studio System. He then proceeds to explore three of the principal genres of Hollywood filmmaking: the Gangster film; the Western and the Musical.

[This clip is not available to view on the website but is available from the bfi](#)

Viewing Extract - Mortice : Clip mortice1

[This clip is available to view in the 'archive' section of the website](#)

An example of the Horror Genre. An unfortunate couple find themselves locked in a cellar with a creepy landlord and become terrified believing that they are about to become his next victims. This turns out not to be the case, however, as the director is parodying the genre for comic effect.