

Genre Elements

This section will look at **Iconography, Setting, Characters, Narrative, Style, Theme and Audience Response**. There are specific examples looking at

- **the Gangster;**
- **the Western;**
- **the Horror and;**
- **the Science Fiction Genres.**

Iconography

Iconography is a term from art history which refers to the classification of art based on common or recurring images or icons. Films and moving image products can also be identified by the key images or icons contained within them. These images or iconic elements are usually immediately recognisable. For example, a central iconic image of classic Hollywood gangster films is the machine gun, in this instance a film prop. Types of costume, sound and music also function as iconic features within other genres.

Setting

Many genres, particularly the Western and Gangster genres, have a distinct location and time period associated with them. The use of temporal and spatial settings can therefore make a film immediately recognisable within a particular genre or sub-genre.

Characters

The story of a film is most often told through characters. A film's main protagonist or "hero" encounters a variety of obstacles which he must overcome within the story. These obstacles are usually caused by some kind of adversary or "villain". Different genres become associated with different heroes and villains. Over time, these particular characters achieve the status of a "generic type".

Narrative

Narrative refers to the different types of story structure that films of different genres employ, in addition to the narrative or story-telling devices and narrative moments which they are associated with (e.g. chase sequences, shoot-outs, romantic kisses etc). Narratives are all based on some form of conflict (see Narrative). Different genres therefore focus on different types of conflict. Genres can

therefore also be differentiated by how they each represent conflict and resolution in their own distinctive ways.

Style

Iconography refers to actual objects or sounds in a film or moving image product, whereas style specifically refers to how these are presented. This category mainly relates to use of camera, lighting, colour and both audio and visual tone.

Theme

Genre films are often underpinned by universal themes, which increase their appeal to audiences. These themes, underpinning a film's narrative are most effective when they are based on binary oppositions. For example, Jim Kitses used anthropological studies of folklore as a basis for identifying a number of key underlying themes in the Western genre; East v. West, Garden v. Wilderness, Industrialism v. Agrarianism.

Audience Response

Some genres are most easily identified by their target audience. Every film has a "mode of address", a particular way in which it speaks to a target audience. Horror films intend to "horrify" audiences, action films deliberately set out to make an audience feel tense. Some genres of film soon become associated with a particular audience, though this may not always be justified by audience statistics e.g. action films are regarded as ideally suited for male audiences though recent action films have proven very popular with female audiences. Two distinct genres have evolved by depending heavily on audience response, however; youth pictures or "teen pics" and "women's pictures."

Identifying Genre Elements

The Gangster Film

Iconography – the overcoats with turned up collars, broad-brimmed hats, pistols, machine guns

Setting – the concrete jungle of the city

Style – montage sequences for violent action

Narrative – basic conflicts show gangster anarchy challenging the social order, leadership struggles, gang warfare against rival mobs, the internal struggle of the hero as he chooses his destiny. Resolution comes through the hero getting his just desserts in the gutter or as a reformed

character; the social order is restored and the values of decency and respect for law and order reaffirmed.

Characters – the brutal gangster hero with loyal or over-ambitious henchmen, women as sexual ornaments, respectable mothers and sisters upholding traditional values.

Themes - the (usually) ethnic gangster rises from a poor working class environment to social prominence through illegal and brutal means, only to slide back into destitution or fall to authorities or to a rival gang through his arrest or violent death.

Audience response - The gangster's obvious appeal to his audience. The gangster is a highly attractive figure, charismatic in his animal magnetism and in his physical and economic aggressiveness. He appeals to our sense of mayhem and license that would disrupt the social order

His economic aggression is in the best American tradition of rugged individualism. In aping the corporate ways of American capitalism, the gangster exposes the ruthlessness and greed that lie behind the American Dream of material success.

Gangster movies have **a powerful mythic resonance for audiences**: one of the appeals of the gangster hero is as a Robin Hood figure protecting the weak and poor against the rich and powerful.

The Western

Iconography – cowboys, Indians, half-built towns, gunfighters, six guns

Setting – the landscape of the American West, the wilderness, the desert, mountains such as Monument Valley where most of John Ford's Westerns were set

Style – long shots of the landscape, close-ups of the main character in gun duels (Sergio Leone), the use of slow motion for violent action (Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*)

Narrative – basic conflicts show the battle between good and evil, the lawman against the outlaw; the cowboy as outsider, as a lone, heroic figure fighting the forces of anarchy (Shane) ; revenge plots

Characters – the lone gunfighter, the villain, the saloon singer, the loyal wife

Themes - the Western explores the frontier myths of America – the battle to tame the wilderness and bring law and order to the West. The genre explores how gun law operated in the West and how personal revenge and the individual ethic of 'a man's go to do what a man's got to do' came up against the values of the community.

Audience response – Like the Gangster film, the Western has a powerful mythic resonance for audiences. The Western has a strong romantic appeal to America's sense of its self as a nation of pioneers and self-made individuals. The Western's code of rugged individualism and its simple morality of good triumphing over evil appealed to cinema, and later television, audiences. It is only in more recent times that this myth has been called into question in films such as *Unforgiven*.

The Horror

Iconography – Christian imagery and symbols, haunted castles, graveyards, ruins

Setting – Transylvania, haunted houses, small town America

Style – sequences of suspense, fright and terror (sometimes using the point-of-view shot to make us see through the eyes of the killer/monster)

Narrative – Monsters terrorising communities, vampires preying upon the living, encounters with the supernatural, hauntings, possessions (*The Exorcist*)

Characters – vampires, supernatural beings, demons, *The Devil*, ghosts, monsters, werewolves, zombies, psychotic killers, female victims, teenagers in peril

Themes – Horror movies explore the dark side of the humanity - the struggle between good and evil (*Dracula*); the evils of science and playing God (*Frankenstein*); civilisation versus superstition; the invasion of the body by supernatural forces. Horror movies often deal with the afterlife and therefore explore Christian themes and the meaning of religion (*The Exorcist* deals with the demonic possession of a young girl).

Audience response – Horror movies make a direct appeal to our emotions – the fear of and desire to be frightened, to be taken to the edge of our cinema seats. Horror movies have therefore been popular with adult audiences and have a particular appeal to young people

Science Fiction

Iconography – technology, spaceships, rockets, ray-guns, computers, time travel machines, teleporters

Setting – The key word for Science Fiction is displacement; we are taken away from our familiar contemporary society. Sci-fi is commonly thought to be set only in the future, but it can also be set in the past (or *Jurassic Park* where past life is recreated). Locations include other planets ("in another

galaxy long, long ago" as in Star Wars), thus creating a sense of isolation and insecurity so far away from home.

Style – Special effects sequences recreating outer space, aliens, terminators, etc

Narrative – The central drive to all science fiction narratives is the contentious relationship between technology and society, and in this way it encapsulates the universal central narrative of good versus evil. Action includes typical action and war movie moments such as chases in futuristic transport and alien landscapes (The Matrix), one-to-one combat (Star Wars, Terminator 2, The Matrix) and mass battles (Mars Attacks, Independence Day, Star Wars). Other key action motifs involve extended space travel and incidents on board confined spaces such as spaceships. One of the most notable characteristics of Sci-Fi narratives is the use of scientific language in the dialogue.

Characters – Sci-fi is particularly rich in generically typical characters such as robots, cyborgs, mad scientists, monsters, extra-terrestrials and alien life forms. There are obvious generic links here with horror and fantasy. There are cross-genre characters such as the hero, the female romance interest and the villain, which can be exceptionally traditional, harking back to folk stories or mythology as in Star Wars. Psychologically developed characters and relationships are not typical of Science Fiction.

Themes – Science Fiction distances science and society in time and place in order for us to see our contemporary society more clearly. The fear of science is a major theme such as the futuristic vision of the Terminator movies in which we are no longer in control of what we have created. Man is punished for transgressing the laws of nature and interfering in natural processes (Jurassic Park).

Audience response – The 'distance' of Sci-Fi films generates pleasure for an audience in the escapism of fantasy and entertainment – the all-enveloping immersion in another world. There are very obvious pleasures for an audience in sci-fi cinema whether it be the spectacle and wonder of man meeting other life forms in utopian films such as 2001, Close Encounters of the Third Kind and ET or the special effects extravaganzas of the dystopian visions of the Terminator and Matrix movies where the few survivors of the human race battle the machines.