categories indicates how individual celebrities are rarely restricted to a single medium now. Traces of it remain, however, and are evident in a story George Clooney told in an interview (Vincent, 2003) about being familiarly greeted by fans who felt his regular presence in their homes (in ER) meant he was one of them compared to Mel Gibson who was respectfully left alone.

### 3.2 By genre
A second categorisation which operates on the ‘type’ of text involved is genre. Most writing on genre looks either at literature or film, yet it can equally be used for other media. In the following reading, Steve Neale places much importance on what he calls ‘intertextual relay’, where links between a number of texts are made explicit, for example by the marketing of cultural products. In this way the expectations of viewers and readers are channelled; they can therefore come to recognise in advance what type of text they will encounter.

#### Reading 2.2 Activity

Now read the following extract from Steven Neale, ‘Questions of genre’ (Reading 2.2). As you read consider the following questions and pay particular attention to what Neale says about the ‘intertextual relay’, since this will be discussed below.

- Genres are not just texts, what else are they and why is this important?
- Why are genres useful?
- What does ‘verisimilitude’ mean? What are the two main types of it?
- What does the term ‘narrative image’ refer to?

#### Reading 2.2

**Steve Neale, ‘Questions of genre’**

**Expectations 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 hypothesise 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’. 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 likely to occur, it is bound to.) As Tzvetan Todorov, in particular, has insisted, there are two 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’.

[...] 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.

[...]

**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?’

Ellis, 1981, p.30
The discourse of film industry publicity and marketing play a key role in the construction of such narrative images; but important, too, are other institutionalised 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 ‘intertextual relay’ (Lukow and Ricci, 1984). 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 characterise the genre as a whole.

[…]  

**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 (Cohen 1986, pp.205–6; Jauss, 1982, p.80; Neale, 1980, p.19), genres are, nevertheless best understood as processes. These processes may, for sure, be dominatied 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 characterise 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; 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
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.

Jauss, 1982, 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. [...]  

*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?
A 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 Mark 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’ [...] (Vernet, 1978).
[...] 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.

Notes


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

References


Reading source

Neale, 1990, pp.45–66