1. Genre

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Auteur originated in film criticism of the recent past; genre had a lengthy pedigree in literary criticism long before the advent of the cinema. Hence the meaning and uses of the latter term vary considerably, and it is very difficult to identify even a tenuous school of thought on the subject. For years it provided a crudely useful way of delineating the American cinema. The literature abounds with references to the western, the gangster movie, or the horror film, all of which are loosely thought of as genres. On occasion it becomes almost the end point of the critical process to fit a film into such a category, much as it once made a film “intelligible” to fit it into, say, the French “nouvelle vague.” To call a film a western is thought of as somehow saying something interesting or important about it. To fit it into a class of films suggests we presumably have some general knowledge about it. To say a film is a western is immediately to say that it shares some indefinable “X” with other films we call westerns. In addition, it provides us with a body of films to which our film can be usefully compared—sometimes the only body of films. The most extreme, and clearly ridiculous, application might be to argue that it is necessarily more illuminating to compare, say, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (John Ford, 1962) with a Roy Rogers short than with The Last Hurrah (Ford, 1959). It is not that the first comparison might not be instructive; merely that it is not necessarily the case. Extreme genre imperialism leads in this direction.

Now almost everyone uses terms like “western,” the neurotic critic as much as the undisturbed cinemagoer. The difference, and the source of difficulty, lies in how the critic seeks to use the term. What is normally a thumbnail classification for everyday purposes is now being asked to carry rather more weight. The fact that there is a special term, genre, for these categories suggests that the critic’s conception of “western” is more

Note: This chapter is excerpted from a longer essay published previously.
complex than is the case in everyday discourse; if not, why the special term? But in what way critical usage is more complex is not entirely clear. In some cases it involves the idea that if a film is a western it somehow draws on a tradition—in particular, on a set of conventions. That is, westerns have in common certain themes, certain typical actions, certain characteristic mannerisms; to experience a western is to operate within this previously defined world. Jim Kitses tries to isolate characteristics in this way by defining genre in terms of such attributes: “... a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux.” 1 But other uses, such as “horror” films, might also mean films displaying certain themes, actions, and so on, or, just as often, films that have in common the intention to horrify. Instead of defining the genre by attributes, it is defined by intentions. Likewise with the distinction between “gangster” movies and “thrillers.”

Both these uses display serious problems. The second (and for all practical purposes least important) suffers from the notorious difficulties of isolating intentions. In the first and more common case the special genre term is frequently entirely redundant. Imagine a definition of a western as a film set in the western United States between 1860 and 1900 and involving as its central theme the contrast between garden and desert. Any film fulfilling these requirements is a western, and a western is only a film fulfilling these requirements. By multiplying such categories it is possible to divide all films into groups, though not necessarily mutually exclusive groups. The usefulness of this (and classification can only be justified by its use) depends on what it is meant to achieve. But what is certain is that just as the critic determines the criteria on which the classification is based, so he or she also determines the name given to the resultant groups of films. Our group might just as well be called “type 1482/9a” as “westerns.”

Evidently there are areas in which such individually defined categories might be of some use: a sort of bibliographic classification of the history of film, for instance, or even an abstract exploration of the cyclical recurrence of certain themes. The films would be simply defined in terms of the presence or absence of the themes in question. But this is not the way in which the term is usually employed. On the contrary, most writers tend to assume that there is some body of films we can safely call the western and then move on to the real work—the analysis of the crucial characteristics of the already recognized genre. Hence Kitses’ set of thematic antinomies and four sorts of genre conventions. Or Bazin’s distinction between classic and “sur-western,” assuming, as it does, that there is some independently established essence of the western that is distilled into Stagecoach (Ford, 1939). 2 These writers, and almost all writers using the term genre, are caught in a dilemma. They are defining a western on the basis of analyzing a body of films that cannot possibly be said to be westerns until after the analysis. If Kitses’ themes and conventions are the defining characteristic of the western, then this is the previously discussed case of arbitrary definition—the category becomes redundant. But these themes and conventions are arrived at by analyzing films already distinguished from other films by virtue of being “westerns.” To take a genre such as a western, analyze it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the “principal characteristics,” which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. That is, we are caught in a circle that first requires that the films be isolated, for which purposes a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films. This “empiricist dilemma” has two solutions. One is to classify films according to a priori criteria depending on the critical purpose. This leads back to the earlier position in which the special genre term is redundant. The second is to lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a western and then go on to analyze it in detail.

This latter is clearly the root of most uses of genre. It is this usage that leads to, for example, the notion of conventions in a genre. The western, it is said, has certain crucial established conventions—ritualistic gunfights, black and white clothing corresponding to good and bad distinctions, revenge themes, typed villains, and many, many more. The best evidence for the widespread recognition of these conventions is to be found in those films that pointedly set out to invoke them. Shane (George Stevens, 1953), for example, plays very much on the stereotyped imagery, contrasting the stooping, black-clad, sallow, gloved Palance with the tall (by dint of careful camera angles), straight, white-buckskinned, fair, white-horsed Ladd. The power of this imagery is such that the sequence in which Shane rides to the showdown elevates him to a classically heroic posture. The point is reinforced by comparing Stevens’s visualization of his characters with the very different descriptions offered in Schaefer’s novel. The film “converts” the images to its own conventional language. Other obvious examples are provided by the series of Italian westerns. The use of Lee Van Cleef in leading roles depends very much on the image he has acquired over two decades of bit-part villains. Actors in the series—Van Cleef, Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach, Jack Elam, Woody Strode, Henry Fonda, Charles Bronson—perpetually verge on self-parody. The most peculiar of the films, Once upon a Time in the West (Sergio Leone, 1969), is a fairy-tale collection of western conventions, verging on self-parody and culminating in what must be the most extended face-off ever
filmed. Indeed, the most telling suggestions as to the importance of conventions are to be found in the gentle parodies *Cat Ballou* (Elliott Silverstein, 1965), *Support Your Local Sheriff* (Burt Kennedy, 1969), and *The Good Guys and the Bad Guys* (Kennedy, 1969). Without clear, shared conceptions of what is to be expected from a western, such humor is not possible. One of the best sequences in *Cat Ballou* encapsulates the importance of the imagery, the sequence in which Lee Marvin is changed from drunken wreck to classic gunfighter. Starting very humorously with Marvin struggling into a corset, the transformation not only alters him but brings out a response in us as piece by piece the stereotyped image appears.

In short, to talk about the western is (arbitrary definitions apart) to appeal to a common set of meanings in our culture. From a very early age most of us have built up a picture of a western. We feel that we know a western when we see one, though the edges may be rather blurred. Thus in calling a film a western the critic is implying more than the simple statement “This film is a member of a class of films (westerns) having in common x, y, and z.” The critic is also suggesting that such a film would be universally recognized as such in our culture. In other words, the crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating. And unless there is world consensus on the subject (which is an empirical question), there is no basis for assuming that a western will be conceived in the same way in every culture. The way in which the genre term is applied can quite conceivably vary from case to case. Genre notions—except the special case of arbitrary definition—are not critics’ classifications made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be.

It is for precisely this reason that notions about genre are potentially so interesting—but more for the exploration of the psychological and sociological interplay between filmmaker, film, and audience than for the immediate purposes of film criticism. (Given that it is not entirely possible
to draw a clear line between the two, this is really an argument for using a concept in one area rather than another.) Until we have a clear, if speculative, notion of the connotations of a genre class, it is difficult to see how critics, already besieged by imponderables, could usefully apply the term, certainly not as a special term at the root of their analyses. To use the concept in any stronger sense it becomes necessary to establish clearly what filmmakers mean when they conceive themselves as making a western; what limits such a choice may impose on them; in effect, what relationship exists between auteur and genre. But specific answers to such questions must tap the conceptions held by particular filmmakers and industries. To methodically analyze the way in which a filmmaker utilizes a genre for his or her own purposes (at present a popular critical pursuit) requires that we clearly establish the principal components of that filmmaker’s conception of the genre. But this is not all. The notion that someone utilizes a genre suggests something about audience response. It implies that any given film works in a particular way because the audience has certain expectations of the genre. We can meaningfully talk of, for instance, an auteur breaking the rules of a genre only if we know what these rules are. And, of course, such rule-breaking has no consequence unless the audience knows as well. Now, as I have suggested, Shane may well take on its almost “epic” quality because Stevens for the most part sticks to the rules. In a similar way, Two Rode Together (Ford, 1961) and Cheyenne Autumn (Ford, 1964) are slightly disconcerting because they break the rules, particularly vis-à-vis the relation between Indian and white man. And, most obviously in recent years, Peckinpah’s westerns use such elements to disturb the conventional universe of this genre—the much-remarked opening scene of Ride the High Country (1962) with its policeman and motor cars; the cavalry charging the French army in Major Dundee (1965); the car in The Wild Bunch (1969). Now you, the reader, may agree that these are cases of deliberate rule-breaking, and such agreement reflects that there is, in America and in Europe as well, some considerable consensus of what constitutes the characteristic “language” of a western. But this could well be a special case. To infer from it that all genre terms are thus easily employed is hardly justified.

This is not to suggest that genre terms are totally useless but merely that to employ them requires a much more methodical understanding of the working of film. And this in turn requires that we specify a set of sociological and psychological context assumptions and construct explicit genre models within them. If we imagine a general model of the workings of film language, genre directs our attention to sublanguages within it. Less centrally, however, the genre concept is indispensable in more strictly social and psychological terms as a way of formulating the interplay between culture, audience, films, and filmmakers. For example, there is a class of films thought of by a relatively highly educated middle-class group of filmgoers as “art movies.” Now for present purposes genre is a conception existing in the culture of any particular group or society; it is not a way in which a critic classifies films for methodological purposes, but the much looser way in which an audience classifies its films. According to this meaning of the term, “art movies” is a genre. If a culture includes such notions of genre, then over a period of time and in a complicated way certain conventions become established as to what can be expected from an “art movie” as compared to some other category. The critics (the “posh” critics, in this case) are mediating factors in such developments. But once such conventions develop, they in turn affect a filmmaker’s conception of what he or she is doing. Hence the “art movie” category is commercially played up.

Let me take an impressionistic example, bearing in mind that much more extensive work would be needed to establish this in anything more than an intuitive way. At the beginning of the 1960s the general conception of an art movie revolved around the films of a group of European directors. Bergman was already established with, in particular, The Seventh Seal (1956) and Wild Strawberries (1957). The first year of the new decade had seen Antonioni’s L’Avventura (1960), Resnais’s Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959), and Fellini’s La Dolce Vita (1959). These four directors—though perhaps Resnais less than the others—served to define the “conventions” of the developing art movie genre: deliberately and obviously intellectual (there is nothing more deliberate than the final scene of La Dolce Vita), with extremely visible individual stylistic characteristics. Bergman’s silhouettes, puritan obsessiveness, and grunting Dark Age meals; Antonioni’s minimal dialogue, grey photography, and carefully bleak compositions; and Fellini’s self-indulgent surrealistic imagery, partly in La Dolce Vita but much more clearly in 8½ (1962), circumscribed what was expected of an art movie. Increasingly, European films, whether “deliberate” copies (a sub-Antonioni example is Giuseppe Patroni Griffi’s 1963 film Il Mare) or later films made by the original directors, were based on the conventions that the earlier films had established. Antonioni’s Il Deserto Rosso (1964), Fellini’s Juliet of the Spirits (1965), and Bergman’s Winter Light (1963) and The Silence (1963) are almost stylistic parodies of each director’s earlier films. Juliet of the Spirits becomes the ultimate in color-supplement art movies, a combination of the earlier films and the newly established conventions of the genre.

This should serve to illustrate the way in which notions of genre might constructively be used in tapping the sociopsychological dynamics of film, although it is not designed to convince anyone of the particular case of “art movies.” To properly establish such an argument would require detailed research on the changing expectations of art-movie audiences (per-
haps via analysis of the “posh” critics), on the genre conceptions (and self-conceptions) held by individuals and groups in various film industries, and on the films themselves. Now there does not seem to me to be any crucial difference between the most commonly employed genre term—the western—and the art-movie category that I have been discussing. They are both conceptions held by certain groups about certain films. Many of the theoretical problems of using genre terms have, however, been overlooked in the case of the western. It has become so much a part of our cultural patterning that film criticism has tended to use it as if it were possible to assume common agreement in all the respects on which research would be necessary in the art-movie case. It may be that there is such common agreement on the western; but it does not follow that this would be true of all genre categories. Anyway, it is not at all clear that there is that much consensus on the western. It seems likely that for many people the most western of westerns (certainly the most popular, if revivals are any indicator) is John Sturges’s The Magnificent Seven (1960). On the other hand, in the 1940s the same position might be filled by My Darling Clementine (Ford, 1946), in the 1950s by High Noon (Fred Zinneman, 1952). Conventions change, often for reasons entirely out of the control of filmmakers and film critics.

In sum, then, genre terms seem best employed in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited. That is, it is a term that can be usefully employed in relation to a body of knowledge and theory about the social and psychological context of film. Any assertion we might make about a director’s use of genre conventions—Peckinpah uses the contrast between our expectations and actual images to reinforce the “end of an era” element in Ride the High Country and The Wild Bunch—assumes, wrongly, the existence of this body of knowledge. To labor the point, it assumes (1) we know what Peckinpah thinks; (2) we know what the audience thinks about the films in question and about westerns; (3) Peckinpah knows what the audience thinks; and so on. Most uses of genre effectively invent answers to such questions by implicitly claiming to tap some archetypal characteristic of the genre, some universal human response. This depends on the particular context of the assumptions employed and on a more general notion of film language. To leap in with genre immediately is to put the cart before the horse.

Notes
