

"THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENRE"
MPF 035 Essay

Grant Patten 042797167

Prepared for: Jean Bruce
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Leo Braudy's *The World in a Frame* attempts to point out the significance of genre films, arguing that they are just as artistically valid as films that have the "quality of uniqueness." (pg. 663) Certainly, the importance of genre films should not be discounted as they tend to carry just as much meaning as the more explicitly intellectual films... if not just as much, then more.

We often forget that genre films have only come into existence due to our own human impulses and desires... these types of films have lasted so long that they've managed to become known as a category in and of themselves. Surely, this counts for something: as Braudy put it, the survival of a genre can only be possible by "expressing themes and conflicts that preoccupy audiences." (pg. 667) And certainly, archetypes and representations come into being only for very good reasons. Just like real-life stereotypes, there tends to be a core essence of truth underlying the foundation upon which the stereotype is built, however exaggerated certain elements of it might be.

In other words, cinematic genres would not have come into being if not for certain real world realities that have inspired them into being. And it is through the existence of multiple genres that the medium of film is able to do such inventive things as integrate genres together, for instance. This is no trivial act, as it's essentially the equivalent of taking two facets of our real world reality and blending them together to see how they can or cannot interact with one another. One of the prime examples of this narrative technique of genre blending is surely David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. There, Lynch took the by-then firmly established moralistic family film genre in the Frank Capra vein and thrust it against the infinitely more controversial noir thriller genre. These two genres were embodied in the film by the protagonist and antagonist, respectively. The Jeffrey

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Beaumont character portrayed by Kyle MacLachlan is the archetypal boy next door, completely innocent and wholesome in appearance and demeanor. He could be even likened to Jimmy Stewart's George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life." On the other hand, the Frank Booth character portrayed by Dennis Hopper couldn't be more of a contrast – menacing, homicidal, amoral, and obviously sociopathic. Booth could easily be likened to practically any one of the completely unethical criminals in Stanley Kubrick's "The Killing," a prototypical noir thriller. ✓

When this genre-blending technique works well, it works well because of the *reinforcement*. The most integral elements from each genre begin to reinforce one another, complimenting and enriching each other. A genre would not come into being if not for having certain powerful cinematic elements that enabled it to become a genre in the first place. Essentially, each genre has a visceral connection to certain audience members, those who consider themselves "fans" of that particular genre. Whether it be individuals who enjoy watching large vehicles implode or explode in action genre movies or individuals who enjoy watching physical slapstick in comedy genre movies, the cinematic appeal tends to be a wide-ranging one. Therefore, a deft combination of genres (even two as disparate from one another as film noir and family comedy) can ideally lead to a result that cleverly combines "the best of both cinematic worlds," if you will.

Rather than looking at genre films as unoriginal and trite, perhaps they should be looked at as films that were executed within a closely-defined framework. Working within a framework has surely been a staple of all the arts for centuries. One, for instance, could even say that every Shakespeare work is a genre piece. Certainly, the films that tend to be considered more original and imaginative than genre films are also executed

within some kind of a framework; however, they also have the capacity and freedom to move *outside* of that framework on a whim. Genre films are not blessed with this kind of freedom of mobility, and that certainly poses more of a challenge. With genre films, the framework is more closely and rigidly defined. There is a certain amount of respect that should be given to films that manage to earnestly live up to these genre guidelines with complete sincerity, without any deviation into the ironic subversions or post-modern commentaries that seem so tempting in our cynical modern age. Living up to a traditional standard with the utmost sincerity is certainly an admirable accomplishment, perhaps these days more than any other time.

Braudy talks about the familiarity that genre films employ, and the fact that they can be twisted into subversive angles, surprising audiences. (pg. 668), Braudy lists the Paul Newman starrer "Hud" as a great example of this, in which the movie annotates the classic western guidelines that "Stagecoach" exemplifies. Familiarity and the concept of *audience anticipation* can be looked at as definite merits of the genre form. Audiences know what they are coming into the theatre to experience, and in that regard the film necessitates less storyline exposition and background explanations on characters, settings, and/or situations. This leaves room to just immediately jump right into the essence of the thing, as audiences will quickly recognize the aforementioned archetypes and therefore immerse themselves into the world of the genre film much more quickly than a film that deals with less well-developed and established territories.

This notion of living up to audience anticipation is also often very beneficial for the genre film in that – when the particular genre in question has been faithfully adhered to – it tends to be very satisfying for that audience. This is especially true when it comes

to “hardcore fans” of a particular genre; take science fiction, for instance. Usually, it is not very easy at all to please these individuals who are intensely fascinated by the genre and take it quite seriously. Therefore, when a science fiction genre movie lives up to these always difficult-to-live-up-to audience expectations, it immediately satisfies a much larger core of people than even a very well-made film that is not associated with any one particular popular genre would.

And certainly the popularity element of the genre film ought not to be discounted in terms of its importance. This trait of being clearly and easily recognizable on a large scale is a very positive one in that the genre film therefore has the opportunity to impart certain images and ideas of worth to audiences more easily. Perhaps certain genre films do not make attempts at this as often as they should, but when a genre film attempts to instill some thoughtful ideas into its core, it often turns out quite effectively. For instance, one might look at the aforementioned “Hud” to illustrate this idea: it is a film that technically falls into the western genre in that the main characters are all cowboys, and the setting is a ranch in Texas. But rather than focusing on gunfights, it takes on more of a character study perspective, delving into the deeper thoughts and emotions of these manly, alpha male-type characters that other westerns up to that point certainly did not to such an extent. “Hud” therefore became less of an entertainment and much more of a poignant film than western audiences were used to, but at the same time it was and still is considered a very meaningful *genre* film.

Therefore, Braudy is correct in his apparent belief that genre films are just as relevant as the more elite, highly regarded works of cinema. He notes that “all art must exist with relation to forms of the past,” (pg. 665) and this is certainly a valid point. All

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movies are about other movies; referencing is inevitable, even when filmmakers attempt to avoid it. Genre films are upfront about their histories and their referencing. They are referring back to cinematic elements that were so effective that they have since become known as elements of a genre.

Genre films are well-developed constructions that have become so due to their survival over time. They are then able to exist within their own cinematic worlds, with their own personal set of characteristics. If a side effect of being so effective is – over time – becoming thought of by a certain amount of moviegoers as mere containers for stereotypes, then so be it. That does not reduce the truth of the genre's effectiveness.

WORK CITED

Brady, Leo. 2004 "Genre: The Conventions of Connection from The World in a Frame."
In Film Theory and Criticism. Pp. 663-79. New York: Oxford University Press.

Grant,

This is an interesting and thoughtful analysis of Brady's text. Your interpretation of Genres is detailed and well organised

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