1 APPROACHING FILM GENRE

Genre and Popular Culture

Although central to film, genres far exceed the cinema. As Rick Altman observes: 'Of all the concepts fundamental to literary theory, none has a longer and more distinguished lineage than the question of literary types or genres' (1999: 1). The western was already established in literature before the invention of cinema, while the musical took much from pre-existing theatre forms and conventions. Providing a useful overview of the historical debates surrounding literary genres, Altman argues that Aristotle, the first genre theorist, initiated the unfortunate tendency of genre analysis to restrict discussion to textual analysis. Nevertheless, in his *Poetics* Aristotle did address two major concerns of film genre study. First, in distinguishing between the very different kinds of endings in comedy and tragedy, Aristotle anticipated the descriptive attempts of film genre study to enumerate the formal properties of genres, the common elements that allow a number of films to be grouped together and conceived as a category. Second, Aristotle's notion that tragedy is achieved through a psychological affect (catharsis, the purgation of fear and pity aroused through identification with the actions of a tragic hero) prefigures the critical attention given to the ways in which genre films address spectators as well as the particular pleasures and experiences offered to viewers by different genres. Already Aristotle was considering the fundamental question of why people like genre works – a particularly thorny question given their formulaic, repetitive qualities.

Classical literary theory assumed differences between literature and popular writing; such judgements were based on underlying assumptions of aesthetic value. This distinction continued in the modern era as a debate between 'true' art and popular culture, art and trash, high-brow and low-brow. If good art was original, distinctive and complex, 'the best that has been thought and said', as Matthew Arnold put it (1960: 6), then popular art was formulaic and unsophisticated. Popular culture (including, of course, film) has often been criticised for lacking originality or authenticity. In the 1930s and 1940s, cultural theorists associated with the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research dismissed popular art as industrial products of a capitalist economy that inculcates false consciousness. Most influentially, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1997) argued that popular culture – the culture industry, as they termed it – had turned folk art into commodities of mass culture, and that generic formulas functioned simply to control the masses of consumers by organising and labelling them like the films themselves. Later, in the United States, Dwight Macdonald argued that modern industrialisation had eroded the earlier distinction between high art and popular art, resulting in the rise of mass cult, which he derided as formulaic at every level (1964: 14). Traditional critical thinking consigned genre art in whatever form to the realm of the popular and, for the most part, excluded it from the canon.

Although such cultural distinctions are still upheld by many, high culture and popular culture in fact had merged long before Mickey Mouse shook hands with orchestra conductor Leopold Stokowski in Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). In 1915 literary critic Van Wyck Brooks wrote about the split in American culture between high-brow and low-brow, and suggested there was 'no community, no genial middle ground' (1970: 18). But already he might have looked to the movies, where popular, formula-driven motion pictures were even then gathering large and faithful communities of spectators across the United States. Movies were central to the American ideal of the melting pot, for they were an inexpensive entertainment that introduced newly-arrived immigrants to the American way in visual stories that transcended the barrier of language.

Indeed, because of the importance of genre movies within culture, and because they are collaborative efforts that require the work of many individuals, genre movies have been commonly understood as inevitable expressions of the contemporary *zeitgeist*. This is true not only of individual

genre movies, but also of the changing patterns and popularity of different genres and of the shifting relationships between them. For whether they are set in the past or in the future, on the mean streets of contemporary New York or long ago in a galaxy far away, genre movies are always about the time and place in which they are made.

Today, with entertainment in its myriad forms controlled by an increasingly small number of transnational corporations, popular culture is largely mass culture in the derogatory sense that Macdonald claimed. However, many politically-oriented critics understand the importance of studying popular culture, if for no other reason than to expose the ideology of its artefacts. But they also argue that works of popular culture offer empowerment to various cultural groups and are sites of ideological struggle rather than mere purveyors of the status quo. Taking a more inclusive view of cultural production and avoiding the value judgements of high-brow critics like Macdonald, John Cawelti suggests that all art be thought of as existing on a continuum between invention and convention (1985: 27–9). Such a perspective allows for a greater appreciation and understanding of genre texts and how they work.

Whatever their politics, genre movies are intimately imbricated within larger cultural discourses as well as political ones. As Steve Neale points out, within popular culture genres always exceed simply a group of films or other texts. Neale emphasises the importance of advertisements, publicity photos and studio stills, reviews and so on in keying and shaping viewers' expectations even before they see a film by promoting its 'generic image' (2003: 164). These instances of 'institutional' and 'industrial' discourse reveal how audiences perceived films when they were released, and also help us understand how genres have changed over time. As an example, Neale notes that most histories of the western film begin with *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), but when released it was promoted not as a western but marketed for its relation to the then-popular genres of the chase film, the railroad film and the crime film; at that time, there was no recognised genre known as the western into which to categorise it.

The Classic Studio System

Early filmmaking in the US was located in and around New York City on the east coast, near the nation's urban, industrial centres. But southern

California quickly proved more appealing, and film pioneer D. W. Griffith and many others moved west. The area around Los Angeles was attractive to film companies for a number of reasons. Geographically distant from the controlling power of the monopolistic Motion Pictures Patent Company, founded in the east in 1908, the region's more hospitable climate also offered more varied topography and provided greater opportunities for location shooting. Labour and land were also less expensive than in the east, and incoming film companies were able to buy large tracts on which to build their studios for interior shooting. Thus, the American film industry became concentrated in a relatively small area, Hollywood. Dubbed the 'dream factory' by anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker in 1950, Hollywood produced appealing fantasies in an industrial context that millions of people have watched, as if in dreams awake.

Regularised film exhibition developed as a result of the popularity and rapid growth of nickelodeons, the first venues devoted exclusively to cinema exhibition. The steady demand for new films made year-round production schedules necessary and provided the impetus for the development of a factory-based (Fordist) mode of production. As movies were made in a competitive, profit-motivated context, the Hollywood studios developed a production system that supplied 'product'. In the Studio Era (roughly 1920s–1950s), all members of the cast and crew were workers under contract to the studio, and the different kinds of work (for example, script, editing, music) were divided into departments. Very few directors were able to choose their own projects, but were required to direct movies as the studio heads and producers dictated.

Hollywood movies have become so dominant throughout the world that the terms 'Hollywood style' or 'classic narrative style' are often used interchangeably to refer to the style of narrative filmmaking that emphasises the crisp and seamless flow of the story combined with high production values. Film historians have argued convincingly for a view of Hollywood cinema as 'a distinct mode of film practice' with its origins dating as early as 1917 (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985: xiii). Within the context of Hollywood's industrial mode of production, genre movies are dependable products.

Genre filmmaking developed early, with producers seeking maximum acceptance at the box office through the repetition and variation of commercially successful formulas. Seeking to balance standardisation and

differentiation, filmmakers combined sameness and difference. The formulaic qualities of genre films meant that studios could turn them out quickly, and audiences could understand them just as quickly. In their catalogues, producers loosely grouped films in generic categories.

Genre movies allow for an economy of expression through conventions and iconography. Colin McArthur provides a vivid example of the shorthand of generic expressivity in his comparison of specific shots from two gangster films from different periods, *Little Caesar* (1931) and *The Harder They Fall* (1956). Both films offer an image of three men in doorways wearing 'large hats and heavy coats' and standing in triangular formation, the dominant character at the front and flanked by two underlings behind. As McArthur notes, the repetition of certain visual patterns in genre movies allows audiences to know 'immediately what to expect of them by their physical attributes, their dress and deportment. It knows, too, by the disposition of the figures, which is dominant, which subordinate' (1972: 23). This system of signification, developed over time and with repetition, served well the fast pace of classic narration in films intended to be shown as part of a double bill that changed frequently.

In the classic studio system, genre movies are like Ford's assembly line cars with interchangeable parts. The James Bond series continues because of the formula – lots of action, fancy gadgets, beautiful women and colourful villains – despite the changes in directors, writers and even the actors playing Bond himself. Individual genre films may lift elements from one genre and put them into another, as *The Band Wagon* (1953) incorporates film noir and the detective film into the climactic 'The Girl Hunt' ballet. In the western *Red River* (1948), a young and softly-spoken cowhand on the cattle drive gently admits that if the drive succeeds his goal is to buy new shoes for his wife; when he is the first casualty during a stampede, audiences recognise a convention borrowed from countless war movies. Recombinant genre movies like *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) and *Billy the Kid vs. Dracula* (1966) mix elements from seemingly disparate genres. More recently, movies like *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003) and *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), both of which are simultaneously recombinant movies and sequels, show the same process at work despite the end of the studio era.

By the 1930s the Hollywood studios had achieved vertical integration, controlling distribution and exhibition as well as production. In response,

the federal government initiated anti-trust proceedings against the major studios (MGM, Paramount, RKO, Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Bros.), which culminated in 1948 with the US Supreme Court ruling in what has become known as 'the Paramount Decision' which decreed that the studios were engaging in monopolistic practices and had to divest their exhibition chains. The studios eventually diversified by concentrating on the new medium of television as well as on film production, and on establishing themselves as the major national exporter of films around the world, but the practice of block booking and the steady output of dependable B features soon ended. With the breakdown of the studio system came the end of the Production Code, the self-monitoring system of censorship established by the Motion Picture Association of America in 1930 as a response to growing criticism from conservative forces within American society, which was replaced by a ratings system in 1968.

Yet despite its constraints, the studio system did provide a stable context for filmmakers to work with consistency and to be expressive. As Robin Wood notes, Hollywood is one of the few historical instances of a true communal art, 'a great creative workshop, comparable to Elizabethan London or the Vienna of Mozart, where hundreds of talents have come together to evolve a common language' (1968: 9). The justly famous opening scene of Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959) tells us almost everything we need to know about the heroes played by John Wayne and Dean Martin well before the first word of dialogue is spoken. Hawks uses the conventions of the western to express his sense of professionalism, heroism and self-respect, which would not have been possible without the established conventions of the genre as his raw material (Pye 2003: 213). As André Bazin observed long ago, 'the American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable ... the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition', which he praised apart from the achievement of individual films and directors (1968: 154).

Elements of Genre

Whether they are expensive epics or egregious exploitation, genre movies are composed of certain common elements. However we may define specific genres, the films that we choose to include in any generic category necessarily share certain of those elements. Yet generic description must

always avoid slipping into evaluation by reifying generic patterns of a historical period as norms. 'Classic' should refer to a particular type of western but, confusingly, in common parlance it also denotes greatness, which is a judgement of value. Altman rightly observes that traditional film genre criticism has the unfortunate tendency to emphasise 'genre fixity', to think of genres as permanent (1999: 50). Both Bazin and Robert Warshow are guilty of this in writing about the 'classic' western, and although they may be forgiven because they lacked both a critical tradition and the historical vantage point we have today, many other critics have fallen into the same trap.

conventions

In any art form or medium, conventions are frequently-used stylistic techniques or narrative devices typical of (but not necessarily unique to) particular generic traditions. Bits of dialogue, musical figures or styles and patterns of *mise-en-scène* are all aspects of movies that, repeated from film to film within a genre, become established as conventions. In anarchic comedies like *Duck Soup* (1933), Groucho Marx addresses the camera directly, breaking down the cinematic equivalent of the proscenium or 'fourth wall'. Such moments are violations of convention analogous to those normative values lampooned in these films' narratives. Despite the obvious breach of realism in such a convention it is accepted by audiences within its generic context, contributing to the pleasure we derive from genre movies.

Conventions function as an implied agreement between makers and consumers to accept certain artificialities, but such artificialities work in specific contexts. In musicals the narrative halts for the production numbers wherein characters break into song and dance; often the characters perform for the camera (rather than for an audience within the film) and are accompanied by non-diegetic music that seems suddenly to materialise from nowhere. Like the direct address to the camera in comedy, this convention of the musical is fundamentally anti-realist. For this reason it is not as readily acceptable in the context of dramatic genre films, which typically invite spectators to suspend their disbelief and invest in the exciting illusions of reality they construct. Thus the opening of *West Side Story* (1961) seems momentarily jarring when Russ Tamblyn and his gang of Jets, apparently in a teen film about juvenile delinquency, begin to pirouette and dance on the concrete streets of New York City.

Conventions also include aspects of style associated with particular genres. For example, melodrama is characterised by an excessively stylised *mise-en-scène*, while film noir commonly employs low-key lighting and narrative flashbacks. Horror films often rely on tight framing, preparing for the inevitable hand that suddenly reaches into the frame for someone's shoulder. Even the graphic style of opening credits may be conventional, as in the case of the 'Wild West font' often found at the beginnings of westerns, evocative of the rough-hewn wood of pioneer homesteads, or the scrawled and edgily kinetic credit style of serial-killer films like *Seven* (1995) that suggest a psychological disturbance haunting the killer.

Mainstream cinema also features numerous aural conventions on the soundtrack involving dialogue, music and sound effects. Film scoring in all genres often featuring Wagnerian leitmotifs associated with particular characters or places is commonly used to enhance a desired emotional effect in support of the story. This convention is parodied in Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974) when the black sheriff (Cleavon Little) rides through the desert accompanied by the incongruous tune 'April in Paris', and then passes by Count Basie and his Orchestra inexplicably present, playing one of their signature tunes in the wilderness. Different types of musical accompaniment are conventional in particular genres. Sweeping strings are common in romantic melodramas, while electronic music or the theremin is used in science fiction for its futuristic connotations.

The familiarity of conventions allows for parody, which becomes possible only when conventions are known to audiences. As discussed in Chapter 2, much of the humour of Mel Brooks' film parodies depends upon viewers being familiar with specific genre films. Conventions can also be used by filmmakers for disturbing purposes precisely because viewers expect them. George A. Romero's undermining of numerous conventions of the classic horror film in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), also discussed later, is one of the main reasons the film had such a powerful effect on audiences when first released.

iconography

The term 'iconography' derives from art historian Erwin Panofsky's discussion of Renaissance art, wherein he suggested that themes or concepts were expressed by symbolically-charged objects and events. Genre critics such as Lawrence Alloway adapted the idea of iconography – that familiar

symbols in works of art have cultural meaning beyond the context of the individual work in which they appear – to the medium of cinema. Icons are second-order symbols, in that their symbolic meaning is not necessarily a connection established within the individual text, but is already symbolic because of their use across a number of similar previous texts. While Alloway's discussion of violent American crime films focuses more on story, theme and cinematic style than on objects within the *mise-en-scène*, Ed Buscombe (2003) concentrates on the iconography of the western in drawing a distinction between a film's inner and outer forms. For Buscombe, inner form refers to a film's themes, while outer form refers to the various objects that are to be found repeatedly in genre movies – in the western, for example, horses, wagons, buildings, clothes and weapons.

In genre films, iconography refers to particular objects, archetypal characters and even specific actors. In the western, the cowboy who dresses all in black and wears two guns, holster tied to either thigh, is invariably a villainous gunfighter. This is the iconographic wardrobe of a generic type, bearing little relation to historical reality. Just as religious icons are always already infused with symbolic meaning, so is the iconography of genre films. In a horror film, when the hero wards off the vampire with a crucifix, religious iconography works in support of film iconography: symbolically, such scenes suggests that the traditional values embodied in Christianity (and, by extension, Western culture generally) are stronger than and will defeat whatever threatening values are assigned to the monster in any given vampire film.

Iconography may also refer to the general *mise-en-scène* of a genre, as in the case of low-key lighting and Gothic design in the horror film or the visual excess of the melodrama. Gunbelts, Stetson hats and spurs are icons of the western, just as chiaroscuro lighting is iconographic of film noir. Like conventions, iconography provides genres with a visual shorthand for conveying information and meaning succinctly. Pinstripe suits, dark shirts and white ties define which side of the law characters are on in the gangster film as typically as black hats and white hats differentiate hero and villain in the western.

Of course, while the icons of genre films may have culturally determined meanings, the interpretation or value attached to them is hardly fixed. Rather, the particulars of their representation in each genre film mark the relation of outer form to inner form, and are indicators of the film's atti-

tude and theme. Although a crucifix in a horror film is an icon of Christianity and dominant ideology, the film itself may either critique or endorse that ideology. In the western, the town always represents civil-isation, but every film will have a different view of it. The town in, say, *The Gunfighter* (1950) has children and domestic spaces, representing the familial stability that Gregory Peck's ageing gunman can only long for, while in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) the town springs up around a muddy, makeshift brothel, suggesting that base desire is at the core of civilisation. Even more pointedly, Sam Peckinpah put a gallows in the centre of town in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), indicating the propensity towards violence at the heart of civilisation.

Buscombe clearly shows how Peckinpah criticises modern society through the careful manipulation of the iconography of the town in the opening scene of *Ride the High Country* (aka *Guns in the Afternoon*, 1962). As the film begins, a visibly ageing Joel McCrea (star of over a dozen earlier westerns, including the 1946 version of *The Virginian*), rides into town during a Fourth of July celebration. American civilisation has advanced on the frontier, as signified by the brick buildings rather than the conventional clapboard structures of the typical western movie town. A uniformed policeman instead of the singular sheriff with a badge suggests institutionalised law, while the lampposts and automobiles tell us that historically the period of the Wild West is over. People are cheering and McCrea thinks the cheers are for him, but in fact they are cheering for riders in a race between horses and a camel. As Buscombe notes, 'a horse in a western is not just an animal, but a symbol of dignity, grace and power. These qualities are mocked by having it compete with a camel; and to add insult to injury, the camel wins' (2003: 23).

The deflating treatment of the horse as icon is emblematic of this film's general subversion of the genre's typically positive view of civilisation. The town may be commemorating the birth of the nation, but Peckinpah questions the gospel of progress that is so visibly evident there. The celebration of the nation's founding is depicted in the film as a carnival, a decadent display complete with exotic dancing girls, hardly the expression of social and spiritual bonding that such celebrations are in John Ford's westerns. McCrea is almost run over by a car – a 'horseless carriage' – as he begins to cross the street, while the policeman, calling him an old-timer, shouts at him that he is in the way. The western hero is an anachronism as the film

starts (later we see in a close-up that his shirt cuffs are frayed). Civilisation in *Ride the High Country* boasts technological progress, but Peckinpah ironically depicts it as morally retrograde. He shows the carnival from a high angle, as if judging from above, looking down in disapproval from a higher moral ground – the high country of the title.

setting

The physical space and time – where and when a film's story takes place – is more a defining quality of some genres than others. Musicals, for instance, can take place anywhere, from the actual streets and docks of New York City in *West Side Story* and *On the Town* (1949) to the supernatural village in *Brigadoon* (1954). Romantic comedies and dramas, like some science fiction, may span different eras, as in *Somewhere in Time* (1980) and *Kate and Leopold* (2001). In the gangster film the city weighs down on the protagonist – 'not the real city', as Warshow observes, 'but that dangerous and sad city of the imagination which is so much more important, which is the modern world' (1971a: 131). Warshow claims that gangsters dwell exclusively in the city, yet while most gangster films do take place in urban settings, important gangster movies like *The Petrified Forest* (1936), *High Sierra* (1941) and *Key Largo* (1948) do not.

When science fiction movies located in the future use contemporary architecture for settings rather than construct sets in the studio or with computer imaging, they suggest a more disturbing continuity between the present and the future, as in *THX 1138* (1971) which uses the San Francisco subway system, and the actual mall setting of *Logan's Run* (1976). Similarly, horror movies often use isolated and rural settings, and old dark houses with mysterious basements for psychological effect; but films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Dark Water* (2005) work by violating convention and setting stories in contemporary and familiar locales rather than in exoticised foreign spaces like Transylvania or Haiti.

By contrast, the western by definition is temporally restricted to the period of the Wild West (approximately 1865–1890) and geographically to the American frontier (broadly, between the Mississippi River and the west coast). Movies that change this setting to the present, such as *Lonely are the Brave* (1962) and *Hud* (1963), or 'easterns' like *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1936, 1992), are considered exceptions to the norm, westerns for some viewers but not for others.

Yet movies such as *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) and *Crocodile Dundee II* (1988) that import elements of the western into the contemporary urban east are generally not thought of as westerns.

The relative fixity of the western setting allows the landscape in the genre to assume thematic weight. It may function as an objective correlative to the spiritual state of individual characters, as in Anthony Mann's westerns, or of society more generally, as in Ford's repeated use of Monument Valley. Don Siegel's *Two Mules for Sister Sarah* (1970) begins with a montage cutting between a cowboy (Clint Eastwood) riding through the wilderness and various animals in the environment: an owl, a rattlesnake, a cougar and a tarantula, the last of which is squashed by Eastwood's horse as he rides by. The animals are predatory which suggests the film's harsh view of life on the frontier, borne out in the plot which begins with three men preying sexually upon a woman and involves a French colonial army oppressing the Mexican people.

Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) contains a famous scene in which Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) and Clementine Carter (Cathy Downs) join a dedication celebration for the partially-built church with the people of Tombstone. The scene deftly uses generic iconography to depict what John Cawelti calls 'the epic moment' of American history – that pivotal moment when civilisation comes to the wilderness (1985: 39). As Douglas Pye notes, Earp and Clementine walk down the main street of Tombstone, their linked arms roughly centred in the frame, as if down the aisle at a wedding, church bells solemnly tolling. Behind Earp lies the wilderness of Monument Valley, while behind Clementine are the town's buildings, representing community, commerce, civilisation (2003: 210–13). Their coupling here suggests the integration of the individualist western hero into the community. Christianity and nationalism provide the literal foundation of Ford's mythic American society, as the church floor is flanked by twin American flags on one side and the church steeple on the other. With these values, the film suggests, the church can be completed and the nation soundly built.

stories and themes

Most genre films, as instances of classic narrative cinema, are structured according to the principles outlined by David Bordwell in his discussion of standard Hollywood practice (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985). They feature a common dramatic construction, focusing on an individual hero

who must overcome obstacles to achieve a goal. A problem is introduced that creates a disturbance or 'disequilibrium' in the world of the story, and that must be resolved by the story's end. According to Bordwell, this primary dramatic arc of the classic narrative film, with its rise and fall action, is entwined with a secondary one that focuses on a heterosexual romance. Such stories also contain narrative closure, in which all plot strands are brought to resolution. For example, in many science fiction movies of the 1950s, such as *Gog* (1954) or *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), the hero combines masculine prowess with technology to defeat the monster, after which he wins the scientist's lovely assistant or daughter, along with the paternal blessing of the elderly scientist.

Genre movies take such social debates and tensions and cast them into formulaic narratives, condensing them into dramatic conflicts between individual characters and society or heroes and villains. Thomas Schatz observes that 'all film genres treat some form of threat – violent or otherwise – to the social order' (1981: 26). The gangster, the monster, the heroine of screwball comedy all threaten normative society in different ways. Some genre theorists argue that the overriding theme of genre films is some version of the individual in conflict with society, and that this tension represents the ongoing negotiation we all make between desire and restraint (what Freud called 'civilisation and its discontents'). This struggle is ongoing, hence the reason for both the popularity and the repetitiveness of genre films. Schatz distinguishes between what he calls genres of 'determinate' and 'indeterminate' space: the former involve a physical conflict in a convent-ionalised arena of conflict (main street at high noon in the western, the city's mean streets in the gangster film) and address social integration, with the physical threat to society forcefully eradicated; while the latter (the musical, melodrama, romantic comedy) are concerned more with social order, coding the conflict within the tribulations of a heterosexual relationship.

The extent to which a genre film achieves narrative closure is an important factor in reading its political implications. Closure – usually in the form of an upbeat or happy ending – is, like all conventions, artificial, since life, unlike such stories, continues. For this reason a lack of closure, suggesting that the lives of the characters carry on after the film ends, is associated more with realist films like *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves,* 1947) than with genre movies. Because films with closure

leave the viewer with no unanswered questions about the fate of the major characters or the consequences of their actions, they are viewed as providing tidy but unrealistic solutions to real problems. Yet while closure may be provided by a film, it can be ironic, thus undercutting its own pretense at resolution. This may be the case in *Psycho* (1960), where the psychiatrist's concluding explanation of Norman Bates' mental illness reduces him to a mere 'case' but cannot possibly contain the universal dark impulses the film has succeeded in encouraging in the audience (Wood 1989: 149–50).

In the wake of European art cinema definitive closure has become less common in Hollywood film today than in the past, but the reasons for this are as much historical as aesthetic. In the horror films of the studio era monsters were almost always defeated in the end, providing reassuring and confident messages to the audience, just as in the westerns of the period the cavalry came to the rescue when necessary. True, the occasional movie like *The Blob* (1958) leaves its ending tantalisingly ambiguous, since the gelatinous creature, seemingly invincible, is frozen and dropped in the Arctic; but this ending seemed motivated more by the possibility of a sequel than a social critique. By the late 1960s, however, with the mounting horrors of the Vietnam War and domestic violence escalating, many horror films tended to be open-ended, as in *Night of the Living Dead*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *It's Alive* (1974). Popular cinema at the time avoided addressing Vietnam directly and instead expressed the anxiety of an uncertain victory and increasing divisiveness on the home front coded within the context of genres.

characters, actors and stars

Discussing characters in literature, novelist E. M. Forster distinguished two kinds of fictional characters: flat and round. Flat characters, which also may be 'types' or 'caricatures', are built around one idea or quality; it is only as other attributes (that is, 'depth') are added that characters begin 'to curve toward the round' (1927: 67). In genre movies characters are more often recognisable types rather than psychologically complex characters, like black hats and white hats in the western, although they can be rounded as well. The femme fatale is a conventional character in film noir, like the comic sidekick, schoolmarm and gunfighter in the western. Ethnic characters are often flat stereotypes in genre movies: the Italian mobster, the

black drug dealer, the Arab terrorist, the cross-section of soldiers in the war film's platoon. While flat characters are usually considered a failure in works that aspire to originality, in genre works they are not necessarily a flaw because of their shorthand efficiency.

In genre movies, character types often provide similar kinds of actions and purposes within the story. Structuralist critic Vladimir Propp refers to these repeating appearances in generic narratives as 'functions', which he defines as the acts of characters in relation to their 'significance for the course of the action' (1968: 21). So, for example, both Yoda in the *Star Wars* films and Kesuke Miyagi (Pat Morita) in *The Karate Kid* (1984) are 'donors' who provide the hero with both a test and help in his quest. Another way of thinking about characters in the context of genre is offered by Northrop Frye's concept of modes. As Frye identifies them, there are five modes of fictional narration: from myth (the hero is superior to other men and his environment, a super-hero or god), romance (the hero is superior in degree, marvellous but mortal, like Hawkeye or Batman), high mimetic (the hero is superior in degree to other men but not to his environment, as with all tragic heroes), low mimetic (the hero is superior neither to other men nor to the natural world, but is one of us) and ironic (the protagonist is an anti-hero, inferior to ourselves in terms of power or intelligence). In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) is a romantic hero because he succeeds in his quest against all odds (although at times he verges on mythic status, as when he manages to hang onto a submerged German submarine crossing the Atlantic Ocean); by contrast, the unfortunate protagonist of *Detour* (1945) is an ironic anti-hero who, trapped by circumstances beyond his control, finds himself a doomed murderer.

Of course, characters are embodied by actors, all of whom have distinct physical characteristics. The hard-boiled detective Philip Marlowe is different as played by Dick Powell (*Murder, My Sweet*, 1944), Humphrey Bogart (*The Big Sleep*, 1946) or Elliott Gould (*The Long Goodbye*, 1973). Some actors (for example, Paul Muni and Johnny Depp) are known for chameleon-like performances, but many, whether they are featured stars or supporting actors, often play variations of a type. For this reason, they are often cast in similar films within the same genre and become associated with it. Fred Astaire is always thought of in relation to the musical, Cary Grant with screwball comedy and, of course, John Wayne with the western,

even though all these actors also appeared in other kinds of films. Clint Eastwood's strong association with the western lends added depth to such non-western roles as the tough detective Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971) and its sequels.

Character actors contribute to the look of particular genres, populating the worlds of genre movies and becoming part of their iconography. Often they are known to viewers as vaguely familiar faces rather than by name. Richard Jaeckel, Jack Elam, Chill Wills, Paul Fix and Slim Pickens all appeared in countless westerns, so when they are in the same cast and many of them die in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, the film may be read as being as much about the death of the genre as it is a story about particular characters. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, following from the theatrical tradition of *commedia dell'arte* where actors perform types rather than individual characters, developed an approach to casting which he called typage. Eisenstein cast actors according to physical qualities that provided the audience with visual cues about them: so, for example, in his films capitalists are always overweight fat cats, a sign of their material acquisitiveness and greed. The iconographic casting in mainstream genre movies is not unlike typage, for actors are often cast in variations of roles because of their physical attributes. Arnold Schwarzenegger's body determined that he would star in action films; the incongruity of the muscular actor appearing in a different generic context provides the comic premises for *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) and *Junior* (1994).

Stars embody in concrete, physical form society's values at particular historical moments. Raymond Durgnat writes that 'the stars are a reflection in which the public studies and adjusts its own image of itself ... The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars' (1967: 137–8). Of course, the same might be said about the genre movies in which stars appear. Indeed, stars and genres reinforce each other.

Actors sometimes offer definitive performances that forever associate them with a particular role, as we might associate Anthony Perkins with Norman Bates, no matter in which films he subsequently appeared. Sometimes these roles assume iconographic proportion, as in the case of Bela Lugosi's portrayal of Dracula. Actors who succeed at playing a certain generic type are often trapped by such roles, fated to be typecast as similar characters. Dick Powell began as a romantic ('juvenile') lead in several Warner Bros. musicals in the early 1930s, but managed to reshape

his image entirely in the following decade, playing a tough guy in such film noirs as *Murder, My Sweet*, *Cornered* (1945) and *Pitfall* (1948).

Some actors become icons because of their performances in genre films, their faces and bodies instantly recognisable in the culture. John Wayne had such a strong iconographic presence as the rugged American individualist and western hero that the death of his character, Will Anderson, at the hands of villainous Bruce Dern in *The Cowboys* (1972) is as shockingly unexpected as Marion Crane's death in *Psycho*. Also, since Anderson is killed in full view of the group of adolescent boys in his charge without sacrificing his dignity, his death becomes a statement about the death of the classic western hero. This theme is even more explicit in Wayne's last film, *The Shootist* (1976), in which he plays a gunfighter who is dying of cancer, as was Wayne himself at the time.

Because actors may become typecast, they can be cast in genre movies against type, as in the case of William Holden playing the leader of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) or Tom Cruise as a hit man in *Collateral* (2004). In the famous opening of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), a Mexican family enjoying a pleasant picnic meal in front of their hacienda is suddenly and brutally gunned down by unseen assailants. In a long take, the killers ride in from the distance and eventually we are able to discern that the leader is a grim-faced, blue-eyed Henry Fonda – the same softly-spoken man who was Abraham Lincoln in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). The moment has a greater emotional impact than it would if the actor had been a familiar Hollywood heavy.

viewers and audiences

Genres are dependent upon audiences for both their existence and meaning. Well before the first scholarly writing on film genre, the idea of genre circulated in public thinking. Almost from the beginning movies have been promoted in the media primarily through their generic affiliations. They signal to prospective viewers the type of story as well as the kind of pleasure they are likely to offer and assist them in choosing which movies to see. For example, some viewers dislike horror films because they do not enjoy being frightened or because they disapprove of violence. Some people prefer different genres at different times, wanting to watch a comedy, say, if they have had a bad day. Fans of particular genres comprise what Rick Altman calls 'constellated communities' of readers (1999: 161 ff.).

Fans of horror films, for example, form a distinct subculture, with their own fanzines, memorabilia, websites and discussion lists.

Genre films work by engaging viewers through an implicit contract. They encourage certain expectations on the part of spectators, which are in turn based on viewer familiarity with the conventions. As Robert Warshow observes, the familiarity of viewers with generic convention creates 'its own field of reference' (1971a: 130). Spectators appreciate the climactic fight in *Terror in a Texas Town* (1958) in which the hero, a former whaler, meets the villainous gunfighter at high noon in the centre of town with his harpoon instead of a pistol, only because of the westerns they have seen. Familiarity with a generic field of reference allows spectators to enjoy variations, however slight, in a given film. Warshow also writes that for viewers of genre films 'originality is to be welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it' (ibid.), although this claim does not adequately explain the popularity of revisionist or 'anti-genre' films. The act of reading genre films implies active readers who bring their generic knowledge to bear in watching movies. A postmodern horror pastiche like *Scream* (1996) depends upon its viewers being generically literate.

The opening of Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974) offers an instructive example of how spectator knowledge can be mobilised by a genre film to generate complex meaning. Set in Mexico, the film begins with an idyllic scene of a young woman sitting peacefully by a tranquil pond with swans. But the scene is abruptly interrupted as the girl is informed that her father wants to see her, and she is escorted to him. Surrounded by armed men and watching women, the girl's stern, authoritarian father demands to know who has made her pregnant. When she refuses to answer he orders one of his men to break her hand, after which she reveals the man's identity to be Alfredo Garcia. The father then makes the demand for revenge that serves as the film's title. Until this point Peckinpah has carefully inserted numerous icons of the western (boots, horses, guns, spurs) and included nothing that is clearly contemporary. We are prompted to read the film as a western – a reading also encouraged by knowledge of Peckinpah's previous films, almost all of which were westerns. Then, immediately upon the father's enraged demand, Peckinpah cuts to shots of cars and motorcycles roaring out of the ranch and a jet screaming on a runway, after which it is clear that the story has a contemporary setting.

Because of its western elements, the film has led us to think about how cruelly patriarchal the world was in the past; then we are caught up short with the sudden, grating intrusiveness of technology, revealing that the story is in fact a contemporary one and that, according to the film, such abuse is equally true today.

Problems of Definition

Fundamental to defining any genre is the question of corpus, of what films in fact constitute its history. Janet Staiger suggests that there are four ways to approach genre definition, each with its own limitations. The *idealist method*, which judges films against a predetermined standard, is proscriptive in that certain films are privileged over others to the extent that they remain close to the chosen model; the *empiricist method* involves circular logic in that the films selected already have been chosen as representing the genre; the *a priori method*, in which common generic elements are selected in advance; and the *social convention method*, which is problematic in how cultural consensus is determined (2003: 186–7).

The empiricist method is perhaps the most common. Andrew Tudor explains a major problem of genre definition, which he terms 'the empiricist dilemma':

> To take a genre such as a 'western', analyse it, and list its principle 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 'principle characteristics' which can only be discovered *from the films themselves* after they have been isolated. (1973: 135)

Tudor's solution to this problem of definition is to rely on what he calls a 'common cultural consensus', that is, to analyse works that almost everyone would agree belong to a particular genre, and generalise out from there. This method is acceptable, he concludes, because 'genre is what we collectively believe it to be' (1973: 139). Tudor's solution offers a pragmatically useful approach that has been taken up by many genre critics.

Nevertheless, a problem with the various genres that have been established by common cultural consensus, as several scholars have noted, is

that different genres are designated according to different criteria. Such genres as the crime film, science fiction and the western are defined by setting and narrative content. However, horror, pornography and comedy are defined or conceived around the intended emotional effect of the film upon the viewer. Linda Williams (2003) has referred to horror, melodrama and porn as 'body genres' because of the strong physical response – fear, tears and sexual arousal, respectively – elicited by each. The extent to which films of these genres produce the intended response in viewers is commonly used as a determining factor in judging how good they are.

But however defined, generic categories must be useful. Categories such as narrative, documentary and abstract or experimental, while they do cover the range of possible types of filmmaking, are too broad to be very useful for genre criticism. Both Stuart Kaminsky (1974: 9) and Tom Leitch (2002: 1–18) acknowledge the difficulty of defining the genre of crime films, since it includes gangster films, detective and mystery films, action films, police films and heist movies. Kaminsky, however, goes on to discuss comedy as a genre, even though the category might be said to include such different forms as the screwball comedy, romantic comedy, slapstick, black comedy and parody.

Jim Collins has argued that since the 1980s Hollywood movies have been characterised by an 'ironic hybridisation' that seeks to combine elements from previously pure or discrete genres. As examples, Collins cites *Back to the Future III* (1990), a western and science fiction film, as well as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) (1993: 245). However, Janet Staiger has convincingly countered the notion of genre purity, arguing that 'Hollywood films have never been "pure" – that is, easily arranged into categories. All that has been pure has been sincere attempts to find order among variety' (2003: 185). She cites *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), a film emblematic of Hollywood studio practice in that Universal Studios was recycling the conventions of its earlier genre films to fit with its new stars (2003: 192). Staiger, as in her earlier work with Bordwell and Thompson (1985: 16–17), concludes that nearly all Hollywood films were hybrids insofar as they tended to combine one type of generic plot – a romance – with others, a point with which Steve Neale heartily concurs (2003: 172).

Clearly genre movies have always been hybrid, combinative in practice. *Stagecoach* (1939), one of the most famous and important westerns ever

made, was described as a '*Grand Hotel* on wheels' on its release, and it also contains elements of the road movie and disaster film as well. Vivian Sobchack notes that the monster movie sits uneasily between the horror film and science fiction (1980: 47). Movies such as *The Thing* (1951), *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958) and the film on which it was in part based, *Alien* (1979), all combine elements of science fiction and horror, visually turning spaceships and laboratories into the equivalent of haunted houses.

Case Study: The Strange Case of Film Noir

Film noir (literally, 'black film') is a generic category developed initially by critics rather than the industry. It was French critics who first used the term to describe a number of dark and stylised Hollywood movies that began to appear after World War Two and into the 1950s. These movies featured corrupt characters in the ruthless, fatalistic world. Many film noirs were B movies, which ironically added to rather than detracted from their expressiveness, as their frequent lack of high production values tended to emphasise the seemliness of their fictional worlds. Their downbeat vision and expressionist stylisation constituted a remarkable divergence from the traditional optimism and plentitude of Hollywood.

The visual conventions of film noir include such expressionist elements of *mise-en-scène* as chiaroscuro lighting, contrasts of dark and light in the image, imbalanced compositions that suggest powerlessness and geometric compositions that imply entrapment and doom. Most noirs are set in the city, its impersonal and alienating qualities reflecting the decadent and cynical world they depict. In noirs such as *The Naked City* (1948), the city is a palpable presence, taking on a menacing quality that threatens to overwhelm the individuals who dwell in it. The opening shot of *Force of Evil* (1948) shows a church dwarfed and crowded by skyscrapers – an image that, in sharp contrast to the church scene in *My Darling Clementine*, bespeaks the secular motivations of greed and desire that have squeezed out spiritual or religious values in the world of noir. Film noir's iconography includes puddles, rainwater, mirrors, windows and blinking neon lights, all reflecting the darkness of the souls within the asphalt jungle. As Paul Schrader notes, the location photography of many noirs would seem antithetical to the stylisation of noir, but 'the best noir technicians simply made

Figure 1 *T-Men:* the expressionist style of film noir

all the world a sound stage, directing unnatural and expressionistic lighting onto realistic settings' (2003: 233).

Plots in film noir frequently involve some variation of a man lured into a criminal act, often murder, by an attractive but dangerous woman, ultimately leading to mutual self-destruction (Damico 1978: 54). Narrative construction is frequently complex, as in *The Big Sleep*, which features multiple storylines and murders. The interweaving of characters and their motives is so layered that the film's director, Howard Hawks, confessed he was unable to figure out the perpetrator of one of them. Often told in voice-over with flashbacks, noir narratives suggest a fatalistic, entrapping world in which action has already been determined, as in *Out of the Past* (1947). Protagonists are often caught in a web of circumstances beyond their control, as exemplified by the unfortunate drifter who inadvertently commits murder in *Detour*. In *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) the protagonist narrator is already dead when the story begins, telling his story from beyond the grave, and the poor salesman in *D.O.A.*(1950), after being fatally poisoned with a radioactive isotope, seeks to capture his own killer before expiring in the final scene.

Noir protagonists are almost exclusively male, and many critics have suggested that they reflected the disturbances to traditional notions of masculinity and gender roles caused by the war and post-war readjustment. The period was particularly fraught in this regard, as popular culture sought to reposition the proper place of women in the domestic sphere, which they had been encouraged to abandon, to join the home front work force; this new empowerment for women is expressed in the stark dichotomy of noir's representation of women as either domestic and bland or as sexualised femmes fatales. Frank Krutnik (1991), for example, argues that film noir expresses a crisis in masculinity that reveals male anxiety about loss of power in a post-war society, while feminist critics see some women in film noir as smart, independent, active characters who inevitably are punished within the films' narratives for their independence.

Noir is commonly explained as the result of several converging influences, most significant being the influx to Hollywood preceding and during the Nazi rise to power in the early 1930s of many directors, actors, cinematographers and others involved in German expressionist cinema. Also, there was a renewed interest in realism during and after World War Two, inspired by war reportage and Italian neo-realism. This influence is apparent in the location photography in such noirs as *House on 92nd Street* (1945), *Kiss of Death* (1947) and *The Naked City*. The American or 'hard-boiled' style of detective fiction by such writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain provided many of the stories adapted by noir. It has been said as well that film noir also depicted a sense of post-war disillusionment that was in part a delayed reaction to the enforced optimism of popular culture during the Depression and the war years, as seen in the noir films about returning veterans discovering unfaithful wives or suffering from war trauma, such as *Cornered*, *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) and *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947) (Schrader 2003).

David Bordwell argues that noir was not a genre because the term did not exist in popular discourse: 'Producers and consumers both recognise a genre as a distinct entity; nobody set out to make or see a film noir in the sense that people deliberately chose to make a western, a comedy or a musical' (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985: 74). Not alone, Bordwell sees noir as a style, not a genre. Like the broad category of comedy, the noir style seeps into any genre, including westerns (*Pursued*, 1947; *Rancho Notorious*, 1952) and even comedy – most famously, when George Bailey

Figure 2 *Pursued*: noir style in the western

(James Stewart) imagines what the town of Bedford Falls would be like if he had never been born in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). The expressionist conventions of the noir style can be found in several other genres, including caper films, detective films, gangster films and thrillers.

Another argument against defining film noir as a genre is that it had a specific time span, conventionally seen as extending from John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 to Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* in 1958. Certainly by the late 1950s, the evolving production values of Hollywood cinema undermined the noir style and the look of Hollywood movies changed. Techniques such as widescreen and colour, introduced to combat a dwindling audience because of the growing popularity of television, provided a look that was antithetical to that of noir: the vivid intensity of colour processes such as Technicolor countered noir's black-and-white chiaroscuro lighting, while widescreen images opened up its entrapping *mise-en-scène*. Further, a contributing industrial factor was that B films were no longer guaranteed distribution as the bottom half of a double feature, but were now threatened by Hollywood's move toward the single-feature epic or blockbuster.

But in 1974 the commercial and critical success of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* – a paranoid thriller about a utilities conspiracy set in 1930s Los Angeles, the city and time associated with the classic 'hard-boiled' detective novel – brought about a renewed interest in film noir and spurred the production of a cycle of neo-noirs beginning with the British versions of *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975, a remake of *Murder, My Sweet*) and *The Big Sleep* (1978, original 1946), both starring noir icon Robert Mitchum as Chandler's private detective Philip Marlowe, and *Body Heat* (1981), with a steamy but doomed romance indebted to *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). Later, the remakes of *D.O.A.* (1988) and *The Big Clock* (1948, remade as *No Way Out*, 1987), as well as the science fiction noirs (techno-noir) *Blade Runner* and *Dark City* (1998), in which a noirish world is constructed on an asteroid for unaware humans as an alien experiment, show that noir remains a vibrant generic tradition. Some directors such as Joel and Ethan Coen (*Blood Simple*, 1984; *Fargo*, 1996; *The Man Who Wasn't There*, 2001) and John Dahl (*Red Rock West*, 1992; *The Last Seduction*, 1994) are associated with neo-noir. Furthermore, the 1990s cycle of erotic thrillers, beginning with the box office success of *Fatal Attraction* (1987), employs elements of noir in the tradition of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (remade in 1981). The return of film noir after more than a decade suggests that it was not temporally bound, and some critics have made a convincing case for noir as a genre with distinct narrative and visual conventions.