GENRE-ALIZATIONS: GENRE THEORY IN FILM STUDIES

Peter Lunenfeld

Peter Lunenfeld, a Ph.D candidate at the University of California at Los Angeles in the School of Film and Television, works in and writes about the field of New Media.
I am told that, in 1927, a Louisiana lawmaker (haunted by the ghost of Pythagoras, no doubt) introduced into the legislature of that state a bill that would have made the value of pi equal to precisely three.

I. Before Genre, a Digression

There is something profoundly unsatisfying about a complex fraction of infinite length: 3.1415926536+. It is that “+” that so bothers us. pi is not merely an irrational number; in mathematical parlance it is described as a “transcendental number.” Both the irrational and the transcendental are affronts to solid problem solving, to rigorous systems building. That plus sign dismisses attempts to answer questions completely. How can any representation of truth that depends in part or in whole upon an irrational number inspire trust? Yet even at only ten places, pi is of sufficient accuracy to calculate the circumference of a sphere the size of the earth within an error ratio of an eighth of an inch. To forty decimal places, the error in calculating circumference of the visible universe would be impossible to see even with an electron microscope. Of such “gee whizisms” are the popular accounts of the hard sciences constructed. I include them here merely to drive home the point that (mercurial as it is) pi has its practical uses: we approximate circumferences, volumes, and arcs only through its irrational and transcendental powers.

II. After a Digression, Genre

I invoke pi because the transcendental number and the notion of genre share a basic characteristic: both display the utility of the indeterminate. On the one hand, genre has proven its worth to theorists in need of grouping bodies of work; on the other, these same writers have had concurrent difficulties defining exactly what texts constitute a genre, and how to delineate a cohesive theory of genre.

This article examines contemporary thinking about genre, especially as it relates to, or can inform, film studies. From the first, film study imported the idea of genre from literary theory, but recently theorists have adapted paradigms from other fields to aid in their analyses of the cinema. After outlining classical theories of genre, and reviewing contemporary work on genre within film studies, I will heed this issue’s focus on “dangerous liaisons” by concluding with a call to broaden film theory’s models of genre by looking to other fields—particularly cognitive psychology and art history.

III. A Categorical Imperative to Categorize

Experimental psychologists Edward Smith and Douglas Medin make a point about the basic cognitive function of categorization: “If we perceived each entity as unique, we would be overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of what we experience.” When Aristotle begins the Poetics with the line, “let us discuss the art of poetry and its species,” he evades critical chaos by breaking down Greek literature into discrete categories. But for Aristotle, genre is more than mere categorization—it is prescription. Aristotle has two purposes in delineating the lyric, epic, and tragic modes of poetry. First, he creates a scientized taxonomy of art. Second, he judges these modes the finest literature has to offer, and from them, generates a list of rules for the artist to emulate. The split between these two agendas, the categorical and the prescriptive, remains with us to this day.

IV. Film and Genre

We now emulate a logarithmic function, leaping from Hellenic poetics to Hollywood productions, giving greater attention to the past four decades than to the 24 centuries preceding them. When Robert Warshow and Andre Bazin initiated genre discourse in film theory in the 1940s and ’50s with their work on gangster films and westerns, they were dealing with the products of an emphatically mass culture. The cinema, due to its particular industrial and cultural posi-
concentrating instead on genre criticism’s power to categorize the culture’s psyche. Much of the most interesting work on genre films has addressed the remarkable staying power of genre, and the way audiences continue to be drawn to them. Selected genres repeatedly left for dead surge back to life; the western’s renaissance with Dancing With Wolves is only the latest example.

In 1953 Andre Bazin assessed the western—the dominant film genre of his generation: “Those formal attributes by which one normally recognizes the western are simply signs or symbols of its profound reality, namely the myth.”

The word myth and its associated vocabulary is vital, dogging film theory in all its guises and levels of complexity: from Marjorie Rosen’s title Popcorn Venus to Jean-Louis Baudry’s invocation of Plato’s myth of the cave in his apparatus papers. Will Wright’s Six Guns & Society: A Structural Study of the Western draws on Bronislaw Malinowski’s and Claude Levi-Strauss’ work in anthropology to buttress an argument that film genres, particularly the western, serve a function “similar to that of myths in other society.”

As interesting as this myth-based criticism is, genre theory can and must move beyond its boundaries. In his 1957 Anatomy of Criticism, literary theorist Northrop Frye called for a broadening of genre criticism beyond both Aristotelian taxonomies and later myth-based models: “the purpose of criticism is not so much to classify as to clarify traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of ... relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.”

Following Frye’s lead, genre criticism in film studies has expanded its discourse beyond the constraints of the cinematic object itself. At its best, genre study is a meta-critical methodology allowing the film theorist to situate the cinema within its broader socio-cultural context. In theorizing the “classic” western, the genre critic can draw upon Frederic Remington’s sculptures, the narrative structure of the penny dreadful, and Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal, though often disputed essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”
V. The Case of Film Noir

To my mind, the most interesting works on film genres have come from just such intertextual investigations, with the case of film noir being particularly salient. When Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton published their Panorama du Film Noir Americain in 1955, they began the task, as yet unfinished, of defining film noir. In comparison to later writers, their work may seem somewhat unsophisticated, but they were writing at a time when noir films were still being made, and thus did not have the advantage of dealing with a pre-extant corpus of films. Their inquiry also crossed the standard lines of genre as defined by the American movie industry and the vast majority of the critical community which dealt with its product.

The debate over whether film noir is a "true" genre continues to this day. One of the most emphatic denials of film noir's status as a genre comes from Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger's The Classical Hollywood Cinema: "What is film noir? Not a genre. Producers and consumers both recognize a genre as a distinct entity; nobody set out to make a film noir in the sense that people deliberately chose to make a Western, a comedy, or a musical." This quick dismissal of an ongoing debate is typical of the totalizing discourse that The Classical Hollywood Cinema adopts too easily on complex issues; but Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson are simply following the film industry's delineations of the boundaries of genre.

Many of the critical proponents of film noir, including Raymond Durgnat, actually agree with The Classical Hollywood Cinema's position that noir is not, in fact, a genre in the classical sense but they do so without falling prey to over-reliance on intentionality and market determination. A way to reconcile all parties involved is to take the approach embodied by literary theorist Paul Hernadi. Hernadi argues that "genre concepts should be employed and transcended rather than ignored, codified, or rejected." Paul Schrader's 1972 article, "Notes on Film Noir" embodies this attitude. Schrader concentrates on the "subtle qualities of tone and mood" which distinguish film noir, rather than becoming mired in endless debates over the exact definitions and delineations of genre. Schrader's article, and others like it on noir, were harbingers of a greater openness to expanded notions of genre.

VI. Contemporary Influences on the Theories of Film Genres

Concurrent with the expansion of its definition, genre made a comeback as a subject of critical inquiry in '70s and early '80s film theory. There have been numerous attempts to define a set of analytical tools specific to the genre study of the narrative cinema. These theorists wanted to isolate those elements of the sound/image matrix that are unique to the study of film genres. The first section of Barry Keith Grant's Film Genre Reader reprints many of these articles and serves as a solid introduction to the debates. In 1970 Edward Buscombe wrote "The Idea of Genre," wherein he posited a lumbering (and somewhat counter-intuitive) binary opposition between "outer form (specific metres and structures)" and "inner form (attitude, tone, purpose)." Thomas Sobchack built his 1975 article, "Genre Film: A Classical Experience," around the facile distinction between mechanisms of plot and visual iconography. Stephen Neale reinvigorated genre theory in 1980 with a short book, simply entitled Genre. Neale drew heavily from Louis Althusser's ideas on the socio-economic context of ideology. Other strong influences of the period included Freudian influenced psychoanalytic theory and rereadings of Jacques Lacan's work from a feminist perspective. Applying insights gleaned from these discourses,
film theorists analyzed the relationship between genre and spectatorship. In this theoretical context, genre was used as an entry point into the processes by which conventions are established and manipulated, as well as into the appeal of certain formalized narrative tropes held/held for a mass audience. Examples of this kind of post-structuralist feminist and psychoanalytic work include E. Ann Kaplan’s Women in Film Noir, and Mary Ann Doane’s The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s.

In 1984, Rick Altman wrote “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” the most fully functional delineation of genre in the cinema, in which he appropriated paradigms and methodologies from linguistics. Although Altman’s article is limited by its intent to “scientize” the creation of genre categories, its methodology can be useful in establishing the stylistic similarities and thematic continuities within a linked body of films. Semantic elements include the traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, shared within the genre. These are the archetypes, especially visual ones, from which the filmmaker builds the film. The way these semantic elements inter-relate constitutes the syntactical structure of the genre. For Altman, the syntactic relies on defining “the constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders—relationships that might be called the...fundamental syntax.” To date no other work in film theory so successfully outlines a methodology for the analysis of cinema genres.

VII. Surfing the Wundt Curve
From the first, film scholars have pointed to the material basis for genre production in the economies of scale that mass film production encouraged. The “production/feedback/conventionalization” loop mentioned earlier was a feature of a mode of production no longer current, however. At its height, during the 1930s and 1940s, the studio system produced between 400 and 700 films a year for distribution. Mass production on this scale encouraged the production of genre films because they economized on production costs. Concurrently, a reliable mass audience encouraged the studios to promote genre films because they became familiar products with familiar promotions.

These material preconditions for the production of genre films, based on vertically inte-
grated studio practices, have largely vanished over the years. The economies of scale that drove the gangster pics and the westerns of the "Golden Age" of studio filmmaking are no longer in effect. Contemporary Hollywood has essentially a post-studio system, although names such as Warner Brothers and Paramount survive. Stars, their agent-packagers, and independent producers are the dominant players in today's industry, which now releases as few as 250 films a year. In this, the era of the pitch meeting, there is no production-driven reason for genre films. Yet, despite all, genres persist. How are we to explain the longevity of entertainments that promise to offer audiences the same thing only different, film after film, decade after decade? I offer two different approaches to this question.

First: anecdote. In 1938, MGM producer Hunt Stromberg said, "holding the balance between formula and showmanship is a problem in itself;" 'formula' defined here as making work that the audience expects, and showmanship as, in Stromberg's words, "something novel, something truly 'different.'" 30 "Holding the balance" is the essence of genre filmmaking, but the means to achieve this "balance" remain as mystical in Hollywood as transubstantiation does in Vatican City.

Second: science. To understand how genre films maintain their hold over audiences, and how their authors negotiate the wilds between formula and showmanship we can turn to cognitive psychology and the Wundt curve. Named for German experimental psychologist Wilhelm Max Wundt, the curve demonstrates the relationship between a phenomenon's usefulness and its perceived newness to the user. In the lingo of the social sciences, the "Wundt" curve [see illustration, p. 10] is the graphic representation of the parabolic utility response to "subjective novelty." 31 One of the major aspects of cognition that the Wundt curve concretizes is the human preference for intermediate degrees of novelty. 32 I propose to apply this insight to the study of film genres.

Designating the (x) axis as that of "generic mutation" and that of (y) as "audience response" [see illustration, p. 11], we can see that there is a response hump—here the shaded area. In essence, this area is where the utility of the film to its audience—its likability—is at its height. If the film is overly familiar, response is muted—the
audience has seen it too many times before. If the film is too innovative, it is alienating. Genre films, which offer a neverending flow of new twists on the same theme, are thus ideally situated within the response hump. A novel take on a narrative cliché attracts attention and heightens arousal, yet the more unfamiliar the stimulus, the more likely it is to induce fear and aversion—translating into lower ticket sales.

This article is merely the prolegomenon to a more rigorous study of the Wundt curve’s applicability to the study of film genres. Statistical analysis needs to be performed not only on audiences, to gauge their responses at the box office, but also on the reactions of production executives in pitch meetings. Interviews with concerned parties, after the fact, can offer film scholars solid data on why certain genre productions are greenlighted while others languish in this post-studio era. Yet adopting the social science conceit that statistics offer deeper insight than “mere theory” would be a misstep. I harbor no such illusions, and offer the Wundt curve as merely another crowbar for the scholar’s toolbox.

VIII. Still Lives

Film scholars do not give birth to their theories of genre sui generis—they are influenced by ideas and methodologies currently in fashion, and appropriate from them, as I have just done with the Wundt curve. Look at just three of the writers we have already discussed: Will Wright drew upon anthropological myth analysis in writing about the western; Doane applied feminist theory to the woman’s film of the 1940s; Rick Altman based his approach to the musical on linguistic models. Regardless of their disparate theoretical debts, these writers still have deliberate criteria for what constitutes a genre per se, and strict requirements for those individual films which qualify for membership.

What film study as a discipline lacks is a more open-ended way of grouping diverse objects from a multitude of media that do not constitute genres in the classical sense, but that do share common features. Where are the new methods or approaches film study can embrace to open up its discourse on genre? One place to start is with art historian Norman Bryson’s work on still life.
painting, *Looking at the Overlooked*. Bryson points out that no discussion of a group of diverse objects or cultural creations can exist outside of critical discourse and that discourse itself can come from any number of communities: audience, producers, or theorists. Properly understood, genres are in no way inviolate Platonic ideals. Rather, they are the creations of communal discourse, and therefore, only what we make of them.33

Bryson takes on the negative connotations associated with genre, its pseudo-scientism for example34, and proposes that we retain the best qualities of genre, while jettisoning the word itself. He recommends the word “series.” Bryson’s definition: “The series has no essence, only a variety of family resemblances. And it is not a linear series, like successive generations of computers or atomic reactors; rather the series (plural) regroup themselves around the individual work, the boundaries of the series fluctuate around each new case. It is a category, in other words, not only within reception and criticism, but within the historical production of pictures.”35 In theorizing the series, Bryson schematizes numbers 19 and 20 of sculptor Sol Lewitt’s seminal “Sentences on Conceptual Art” from 1969:

19. The conventions of art are altered by works of art.
20. Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions.36

This notion of the infinitely malleable, fluctuating series strongly resonates with contemporary, dare I say postmodern, culture. In late industrial capitalist America, entertainment delivery systems proliferate and interconnect. We are bombarded by media—the cinema, broadcast television, cable TV, video tape, laserdiscs, radio, compact discs, DAT, CD-I, CDTV, journals, comics, zines, books, computer-driven multimedia—the list goes on.

In the 1990s we have achieved such a surfeit of media that Roland Barthes’ aphorism has been realized: “the Text cannot stop... its constitutive movement is that of cutting across.”37 To wrest insight from our constant exposure to these media we need a conceptual framework to achieve what psychologists call cognitive economy. Although Bryson designed the series to allow for the study of genre painting over the centuries, this notion can be well-adapted to the analysis of the intertextuality and hyper-accelerated speed of contemporary mass culture. The discourse around film noir, the genre forever under dispute, has proven its worth over the years. We must expand the notion of genre to include series and cycles of
contemporary films and media which do not compose genres in the classical sense, but which logically must be considered in groups.

In a very different time from our own, the Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky noted that genre demarcation is “always historical...it is correct only for a specific moment of history.” Our era demands systems of categorizations that are open to heterogeneous discourses, and mutation from within. Work such as Bryson’s become valuable as film theory embraces a critique of the culture as a whole, rather than simply the cinematic object. In this post-modern age of post-certitude we can look to genre as a prototypical meta-narrative. We do best by not granting it too much power of prescription, using genre theory instead as a tool rather than as a rule.

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2 In 1882 Ferdinand Linderman demonstrably proved that \( \pi \) cannot be expressed as the roots of algebraic equations with rational coefficients, thereby proving it to be a transcendental number.
3 One final observation about the relationship between mathematics and aesthetics. Pythagoras and his Order first developed their mathematic theorems from their investigations into intervals in music, it was from these that they abstracted and generalized a numerical explanation for the world.
5 Translated by A.E. Wardman.
6 For Aristotle, the criterion by which to group literary works is by virtue of what they are imitating. The Poetics presents a systematic theory of the particular genre of the tragic art.
Sarris acknowledged that one reason to rank directors was "to establish a system of priorities for the film student." Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929 - 1968* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985) 27.

Bazin, "The Western: or the American Film Par Excellence," 142.


According to David Bordwell, Jean-Pierre Chartier was actually the first to use the term *noir* to refer to American films with the publication in November 1946 of "Les Americains Aussi Font des Films 'Noirs'," *Revue du Cinema*, no. 2. Cited in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1985) 75.

Bordwell et al., 75.


Here, Altman is following the model of Tzvetan Todorov who maintains that critical study of cultural forms "are to be undertaken with the same serious-