genre is dead – long live genre

Genre is a term all Media and Film Studies students are familiar with – it's at the heart of both analysis and production. But in a world where the Teen Horror Chick flick rubs shoulders with genre-bending sitcoms, is it still a useful concept? **Rob McInnes** puts **genre** on trial.

If you're a Media Studies student the chances are you've already 'done **genre**' at some point in your Media course. You'll therefore be aware that the media are dominated by generic production, and that it is thought to be very difficult for media products – from the new Black Eyed Peas CD to the next television crime series – to find an audience unless they can be marketed by **repeating and exploiting their familiar and reassuring features**. You might have studied soap operas or tabloid newspapers or teenage magazines. You might have described the **codes and conventions** of **Science Fiction** films, the **iconography** of **Horror** movies or the **typical narratives** of **Romances** across a range of media. You may have thought to yourself: 'This is pretty easy stuff – I've seen dozens of Horror movies, I know how they work. They all have *iconography*, that's Freddy, Jason and Dracula isn't it? Stakes; crucifixes; extraordinarily impressive fingernail grooming?' Put simply, surely, Horror films should attempt to horrify their audiences. If they don't, they're not Horror. So, genre – it's not exactly rocket science is it?

We are frequently encouraged to think of genres as self-contained entities, rather like biological classifications. In Biology, dogs are dogs, cats are cats and amoebae are, well, amoebae. Discrete, different, with some classifications close and capable of a degree of cross-fertilization, but with others forever separated by the rigid boundaries of species and genetics.

This analogy certainly seems to be reinforced in a great many textbooks in Film and Media Studies, which tend to discuss 'the Western' or 'Melodrama' within their own discrete terms of reference. Thus, a genre in any medium is likely to be conceived in quasi-biological terms. Genres can, by this consideration, be seen to 'evolve'; frequently becoming increasingly sophisticated as each new entry attempts to introduce new and innovative features while reworking key formulaic essentials. Certainly, many genres seem receptive to this approach, with the result that you can view *The Unforgiven* alongside *The Searchers* and conclude that both look and feel pretty much like **Westerns**.

Frankenstein – SF or horror?

Science Fiction has been a popular genre for years. Audiences seem to have a very clear idea of what constitutes a Science Fiction text. Consider the first sound version of *Frankenstein* made by Universal in 1930. Brian Aldiss considers the original novel to be one of the key early (indeed proto-typical) works of Science Fiction and, of course, the film has a **'mad scientist'** – undoubtedly a genre 'staple'. However, it is equally feasible to claim the film version as **Horror**, as it possesses an archetypal **'monster'** and is clearly designed to

produce **sensations of fear** in the minds of its audience. You might therefore conclude that as the early *Frankenstein* series made by Universal studios in the 1930s were considered to be and marketed as Horror, so *Frankenstein* should rightly be considered a **hybrid**. Or you might even take a view that after a clutch of sequels, there is little merit in discussing films such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* in terms of the Science Fiction genre, as the only discernable elements are of **Horror and Comedy**. By 1957, *I was a Teenage Frankenstein* sees the story remade as **Teen/Juvenile Delinquent** movie; and in 2004, Victor and his creature turned up in supporting roles in Stephen Sommer's *Van Helsing,* a film which took most of Universal's (and Hammer's) Horror characters (apart from *The Mummy* which he'd already done) and placed them in an **Action Adventure** that owed more to John Woo and James Bond than it did to Mary Shelley.
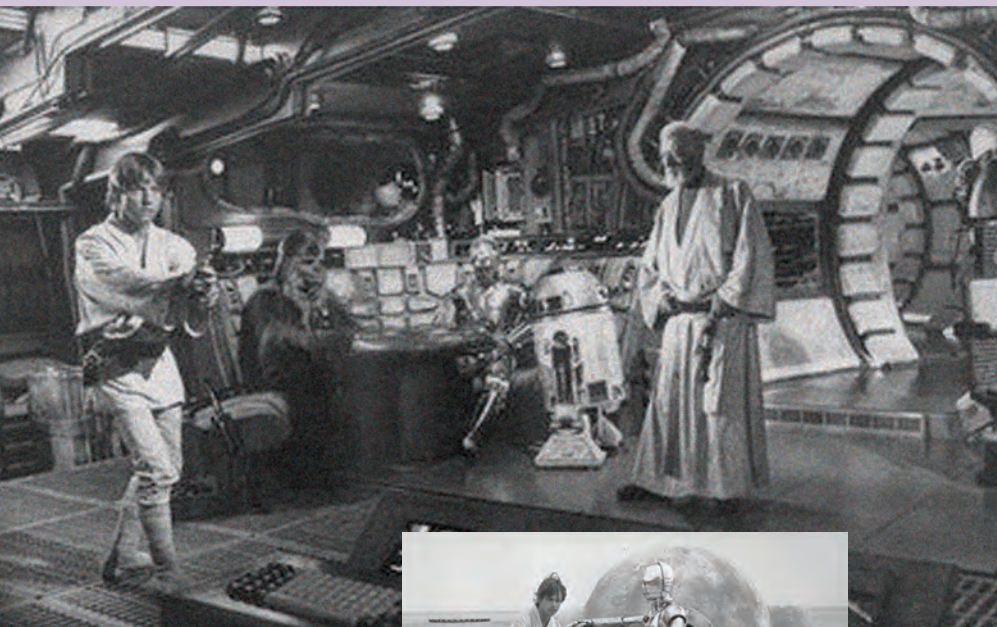
The strange case of *Star Wars*

If *Frankenstein* isn't Science Fiction, surely *Star Wars* is? Wasn't it the key Science Fiction text of the 1970s? The film kick-started an entire revolution in the field of special effects, which in turn came to be seen by studios as the main tool in providing audiences with production value. The burgeoning **special effects** industry boosted the genre's most traditional iconography: after *Star Wars*, films embraced robots, 'laser-blasters', space-ships and aliens like never before. Often, **this focus on the visual aspects of the entertainment was achieved at the expense of plot logic, decent characterisation and thematic depth.** The rush to 'emulate' *Star Wars'* success produced such genre classics as *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star-Crash* and *The Black-Hole* (no apologies to any lovers of these magnificent creations – there should always be room in our hearts for derivative pap – and *Battlestar Galactica* has latterly been reinvented as a dark and brooding post-*X-Files* mini-series!).

However, although *Star Wars* has a place in any serious discussion of the Science Fiction genre, it is, in some respects, questionable as to whether it should be there at

all. Lucas himself conceptualised the film as a combination of various **archetypal mythologies of heroic Action and the Samurai film**, ultimately viewing his modestly budgeted mythical hero's journey as, above all else, **a Fantasy film for children**. He 'borrowed' liberally from movie history to supply the film's most memorable sequences; from **Westerns** for the cantina scene in Mos Eisley spaceport; from **World War II movies** such as *The Dambusters* for the raid on the Death Star; from the **Historical epic** for the film's orchestral soundtrack and widescreen compositions; and from **1940s and 1950s Saturday morning Adventure serials** for the cliffhanging moments that punctuate the narrative. Most of the characters, however (Princess Leia, Obi Wan Kenobi, the evil Emperor) can be traced back to **fairy tales and legends**; the concept of 'the force' is clearly **quasi-religious** and indeed every film in the series is prefaced with the words 'A long time ago, in a Galaxy far away …' – Lucas's own spin on 'Once Upon a Time …'

Star Wars, then, can be seen as a massive generic pot-pourri, consciously infused by George Lucas with the generic equivalent of super-fertilized grow-bags and with its **'futuristic' iconography** used more for window dressing and narrative convenience than for its thematic significance. Interestingly, a sizeable segment of the Science Fiction audience rejected the film from 'their' genre altogether. For fans, the genre is organised into two distinct categories: **Sci-Fi** and **SF**.

■ **Sci-Fi** is a derogatory term used to refer to **'pulp' Science Fiction** – precisely the kind of 1930s literary and film serial 'space opera', that George Lucas had tried to emulate.

■ **SF**, on the other hand, refers to truly 'mature' Science Fiction. This emphasises the *speculative* rather than the *science* (indeed the term **Speculative Fiction** could more readily be attached to the initials). It refuses to be tied down to space ships and robots. Often, it rejects the traditional visual iconography and embraces the genre's ability to **stimulate intellectual thought and radical ideas**.

SF fans complain that *true* SF films are rarely made. Even worse, they claim, the infantile plot, character and situations
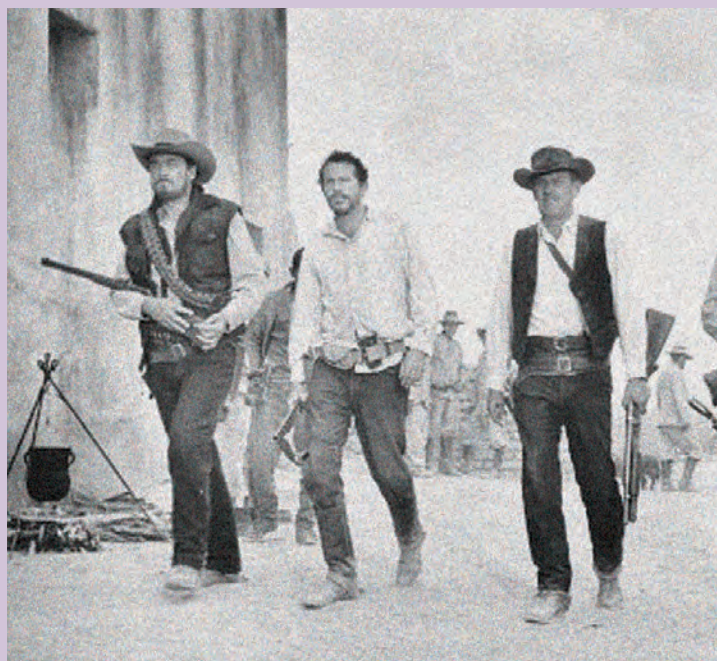
of *Star Wars* juvenilized the genre beyond repair, much as the film has subsequently been blamed for causing the juvenilization of Hollywood, as a whole.

So are *Star Wars* and *Frankenstein* rare or unusual in appearing to belong to more than one genre? Far from it: a growing number of critics and theorists have pointed out that the generic **'hybrid'** is far more common than many give it credit for. **Others argue that genres in the media have always been 'impure' formations,** marked by arbitrary definitions and contingent 'boundaries'. Genres span various media in complex webs and hierarchies of genres and sub-genres, unmanaged by any particular 'authority'. Generic terms are used in particular theoretical or institutional contexts in often diverse and conflicting ways. **Terms such as 'drama' mean fundamentally different things when used in the fields of literature, theatre, film or television.** Some film scholars would argue that, for

cinema, the term **'drama'** exists outside of genre altogether, whereas other media theorists believe that all cultural production is inevitably and inherently generic.

Within the music industry, the idea of genre has become increasingly fluid and difficult to categorise. **You can read a case study on the explosion of new musical genres in MoreMediaMag.**