



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context & Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Beyond the media boundaries: Analysing how dominant genre devices shape our narrative knowledge

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Transmedial analysis
Intermediality
Film
Comics and graphic novels
Social semiotics
Genre

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the hypothesis that genres are social-cultural categories that surpass the boundaries of media and shape our narrative expectations. In this pursuit, it proposes analytical methods for analysing significant genre dimensions such as characters' motivations and event developments. Several studies have shown how many aspects of television and cinema exhibit a reliance on genre and how genres operate within industry, audience and cultural practices. By applying the analytical methods of event and motivation in film, comics and novels, this paper unravels just how narrative patterns across these media have some shared generic identity, fitting into well-entrenched generic categories or incorporating similar forms of genre hybridity.

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1. Introduction

This article investigates the hypothesis that genres are social-cultural categories that surpass the boundaries of media and shape our narrative expectations. Several studies have shown how many aspects of cinema or television exhibit a reliance on genre and how genres operate within industry, audience and cultural practices (Neale, 2000; Mittell, 2004). This article extends the hypothesis about genres from moving images to a broader comparison between the media of film, comics and novels. It first reviews the ongoing debate of genre analysis in audio-visual media since the last century and then proposes to approach genre with a complex, multi-level framework. In particular, this article employs *discourse methods* to analyse the dominant genre devices, namely, the methods developed based on the analytical level of discourse semantics within the broader social semiotic theories, such as analytical methods for analysing *narrative event types* (Tseng, 2013a) and *characters' motivations*. The discourse analysis will unravel just how visual, verbal and audio-visual texts across these media have some shared generic identity, fitting into well-entrenched generic categories or incorporating similar forms of genre blending.

In a nutshell, the article can be seen as a contribution to methodology of genre analysis of cross-media narratives, which can effectively address the much debated issues, such as how generically dominant elements are understood in similar or different ways across different media. This will be demonstrated in this article through using concrete analysis of several examples from a film, a graphic novel and a novel.

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Section 2 provides a necessarily brief historical overview of the perennial conundrum, namely how to systematically analyse genre in filmic texts, particularly the dilemma of tracing the changes and mixtures of genres in films. Section 3 then links the issue of genre analysis to the more recent discussion of media evolution, tracing the boundaries and connections between media change and genre change. This section is then followed by the presentation of discourse methods developed on the basis of empirical social semiotic theories. It presents three significant genre dimensions—(1) characters' event developments, (2) motivational relations between the events, and finally, (3) types of value and motivation involved in the motivational relations.

The example analysis on the basis of the methods will explicitly show how to empirically and systematically approach the long-debated challenges of genre expectations and media evolutions.

2. Perennial dilemma of analysing genre of filmic texts

Despite several theoretical efforts in the past decades, the issue of genre analysis in filmic texts has been a difficult one. Even within those genres most frequently discussed, including drama, science fiction, thriller and action, no single film can ever exhibit the full range of criteria typifying the genre, and therefore it is difficult to find uniform parameters for genre delimitation.

The discussion of how to approach film genre can already be seen at the beginning of the last century, in the essays written by the Russian Formalists (cf. Eagle, 1981) as an expansion of their literary criticism. For them, cine-genre is a useful *comparative* tool for examining space, time, people, objects, narrative sequences in film and the meanings they create. For example, Piotrovskij (1981)

distinguishes and compares certain cine-genres (e.g. cine-novel, cine-short-story, comedy), by broadly looking into how film formal elements and narratives are manipulated. In other words, in the formalist framework, genre is regarded as an 'umbrella notion' covering a complex range of the meaning patterns created by filmic devices.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the major question at issue was how genre conventions shape the form and the meaning of individual films (cf. Alloway, 1963; Buscombe, 1970; McArthur, 1972). Genre can be identified through *iconography*, using the 'visual conventions' such as settings, costume, the typical physical attributes of characters and the kinds of technologies available to the characters (cf. Langford, 2005: 13).

However, iconographic analysis has a confined applicability. The materials published on the basis of the iconographic approach were mostly about well-established and familiar genres such as the western and gangster film (cf. Buscombe, 1970; McArthur, 1972), which are particularly suited to iconographic interpretation. Other genres (e.g. comedy, horror, thriller, detective films) do not necessarily have well-defined visual cues. This limitation reveals the fact that there are no uniform parameters for genre delimitation, and any genre film can easily 'cross-breed'. As Bordwell and Thompson (1993) observe, 'you can have a musical Western ... a melodrama that is also a mystery (*The Spiral Staircase*), a combination of science-fiction and horror (*Alien*)'.

In the 1990s, it was precisely this mixture of features found in most film genres, that drove the proposals for a multifaceted approach to genre analysis and genre evolution. Some proposals emerging from this body of work are by Altman (1998, 1999) and Neale (1990, 2000).

Altman (1984, 1999) draws an analogy between cinema and language, sketching a *semantic/syntactic/pragmatic* approach. This approach is a significant step toward combining multiple strengths of genre dimensions. First, he distinguishes two types of approaches to genre as the *semantic* and *syntactic* approaches. The former defines genre in terms of certain signs, that is, the semantic elements or 'lexical choices'. For example, take the *Western* again, the iconographic interpretation—namely identifying conventional visual elements—is a semantic approach: genre is classified according to identifiable elements (the guns, horses, wagons) present in a film. The syntactic approach takes into account the structural and symbolic relationships between the semantic elements. For instance, Cawelti (1975) and Kitses (2004), define *Western* according to how a dialectic between different value systems is constructed throughout a film, for example culture and nature, community and individual, future and past. Apart from semantic cues and syntactic structures, Altman goes on to add a pragmatic dimension to his model (Altman, 1999: 208), that is, the dimension for examining how and when the same textual (semantic/syntactic) patterns can be construed differently according to different contexts and audience groups because 'the meaning of each (textual) level is assured only through its use at a higher (cultural) level' (210). This proposal can already be seen as echoing the Russian Formalist view of combining textual and contextual expectation in genre films.

Neale (1990, 2000) further argues for a complex genre model in delineating *genre evolution*, studying how the dominant properties of filmic genres develop across time. He treats each individual genre as being placed within wider generic and aesthetic formations. Dominant aesthetic features, which identify these genres are constantly changed and displaced in the process of genre evolution. For instance, a genre film with its typical dominant device (e.g. drama with dominant emotional pursuit) can embed other new devices (typical action patterns in horror films), which then become the simultaneously governing devices in this genre film or become a newly emerging genre. This kind of blending of dom-

inant devices from two different genres will be exemplified in the analysis of the film *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016) in a later section. According to Neale (2000), the focus of genre analysis should rest substantially on highlighting the dynamic configuration of these *dominant devices* within one film and on comparing the degrees of dominance of these devices to show how certain dominant patterns attain the status of being generically significant.

On the basis of Altman's and Neale's multidimensional and dynamic views of film genre analysis, I proposes a social semiotics-based discourse approach to film genre (Tseng, 2013b). The strength of the discourse approach within social semiotics rests on its potential for bridging lower-level film devices and higher-level meaning patterns, which can reflect dominant genre devices. At the analytical level of discourse, I formulate two methods for co-patterning film elements and for constructing generically significant patterns: *cohesion*, or systematically tracking and patterning characters, objects and settings throughout a film, and *event types*, patterning actions according to functional semantic categories. Employing these methods, I (Tseng, 2013a, 2013b) have demonstrated how this bottom-up co-patterning of lower-level elements dynamically reflects patterns of genre differences—for instance, how different event configurations of war films and Western films can emerge directly from data analysis in a large film corpus by using these discourse methods (Tseng, 2016).

Following Neale's (2000) multidimensional view of dominant genre devices, and drawing on my previously proposed multi-level genre framework of film, this article will expand the level of discourse to include another discourse method for analysing characters' motivations, which I considered generically-significant device, as we will see in a later section. Fig. 1 maps out the multi-levelled, substantially bottom-up framework for filmic genre analysis. The discourse methods of *characters' motivation* proposed in this paper, along with my previously formulated methods of *cohesion* and *types of event and action* are located at level III, namely the dominant devices of generically significant patterns. It needs to be noted here these dimensions in Fig. 1 are three of the generically significant features that can still be expanded to more dimensions.

In other words, according to this framework, genre expectations should be *modelled dynamically* by at least the three discourse dimensions. Dynamic modelling of genre refers to an analytical method for comparing the generic significant patterns, for example, patterns from the film discourse dimensions outlined in Fig. 1. The method of dynamic modelling in visual texts is first comprehensively mapped out by Bateman (2008) in the analysis of printed documents. This article can be seen as a further expansion of dynamic modelling of genre to filmic texts.

In Fig. 1, each of these generic significant dimensions are complex patterns constructed from the co-patterning of narrative elements at level II, such as characters, objects, settings and different kinds of actions. These narrative elements are realised and manipulated in filmic media through different materials at level I, including different kinds of visual, verbal or audio devices. For instance, a character can be called by name or seen on screen as a human or animal; a character's name can be written on screen; an object can be heard (e.g. a slamming door); different camera movements can suggest the (re)appearance of characters. These materials are employed according to the media affordances, and one kind of material manipulation (e.g. a close-up of a child) can co-pattern with different other devices (e.g. melodramatic music or background voice calling the child's name) and fulfil different discourse functions (e.g. showing the child's psychological state/emotion or showing the identity of the child) depending on how these materials are contextualised. This resonates well with what Altman (1999) advocates: a filmic textual element functions builds on the way it is contextualised. This also links directly to another

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