The Formation and Social Function of Popular Film Genres: A Ritualist View
Michael Schock
Reed College

As film critic André Bazin noted in 1957, any serious inquiry into commercial

American cinema must inevitably take account of the practice of genre filmmaking.[1]

This critical pathway is unavoidable as, since its inception, Hollywood cinema has

defined itself as a cinema of recognizable categories or types. This has no doubt

contributed to Hollywood's reputation as a producer of empty spectacle, as many

viewers commonly assume genre films to provide little more than meaningless pop

entertainment.

However, film theorists in what is known as the Ritual school assert that genre

films are anything but meaningless. According to the Ritualist view, cinematic genres

present textual networks coded with sociocultural meaning engaged in a constant,

though largely hidden, discourse with their audiences. By asking simple questions such

as why genres exist, why one type of story develops into an enduring genre but not

another, and, most significantly, why popular genres draw audience interest again and

again, Ritual theorists have identified social functions within Hollywood genres which

allow genre films to participate in the dialectical formation of cultural attitudes and

beliefs.

This paper explains some basic theories on the origin and social functions of

cinematic genres according to the Ritual School, as best expounded by John Cawelti,

Thomas Schatz, and Rick Altman. While certainly not the only school of thought on genre theory,[2] the Ritual school is noteworthy for its implied elevation of Hollywood genres to the status of contemporary mythology, whereby uses of symbol and metaphor mediate cultural conflicts and ease social anxieties. This process is particularly noticeable during the formation of new genres, which typically occurs during periods of social crisis.

Inspired by structural anthropologists, particularly the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Ritual school firstly contends that popular artifacts such as feature films have replaced formal religious myths and rituals as the primary means through which modern secularized societies express and reaffirm core values and beliefs. While Hollywood cinema is frequently derided by critics for its commercialism and dependence on narrative formula, the Ritualists maintain that it is precisely these qualities which transform Hollywood movies into reflections of contemporary socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs. Simply put, since Hollywood filmmaking is a commercial enterprise dependent upon "giving audiences what they want," Ritualists claim that audiences exert an indirect control over the types of stories produced for their consumption. By responding to audience demands, Hollywood produces narratives that conform to prevailing cultural attitudes and beliefs or address social conflicts considered important or meaningful.

The industry, however, does not perform this task through direct or even intentional effort. The mechanisms behind the process are in fact surprisingly pragmatic—indeed, capitalistic—as best summarized by what Rick Altman calls the "Producer's Game" (*F/G* 38). Film producers, always in search of commercial success, locate a hit film (that is, a film which received an enthusiastic response from audiences as indicated by high ticket sales) and try to identify what elements generated the film's appeal. A new film reproducing the identified elements is then made, and the success or failure of the strategy is further evaluated. The process continues again and again; and over time, through hits and misses, successful formulas begin to emerge. In other words, producers scrutinize what audiences continually "want" or "like" and then refine narrative patterns to provide the desired elements again and again. This process of formula generation represents the incipient stage of genre formation.

Ritual theorists are keen to note how the profit-chasing motive of the commercial film industry has the unrecognized effect of molding narrative formulas into expressions of the collective cultural psyche. In the long process of many representative audiences voting yea or nay on what topics they find "interesting," what characters they "like," or what conclusions they find "satisfying," formulas slowly come to reflect the generalized values, attitudes, and beliefs of the viewing culture as a whole. As such, John Cawelti concludes that "Formula is [. . .] cultural; it represents

the way in which a culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form" (9).

As this quote indicates, Cawelti's stance on cinematic formulas parallels, in many ways, that of Claude Lévi-Strauss on pre-modern myths. Lévi-Strauss stated that myths entail "a society speaking to itself" through a network of stories designed to address contentious issues and existential questions surrounding the society's identity or institutionalized systems of actions or beliefs (Schatz, *Hollywood* 262). Richard Slotkin complements such observations by defining a mythology as: "a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors" (6). Such parallels between mythologies and modern cinematic formulas have led Ritualists like Thomas Schatz to conclude that formulas—and, by extension, the genres constructed from them—represent the narrative archetypes of a modern mythology; or more specifically in terms of Hollywood cinema, a modern American mythology (*Hollywood* 263).

However, the culturally-constructed formulas described by John Cawelti (4-12, 132-36) do not fully explain why certain story types develop into enduring genres while others do not. What is it, then, about a genre's *particular* formulas that audiences of a certain culture find so compelling that they are drawn to such stories for continual review and reexamination?

An answer may again be found with reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss saw myths to be orientated around "bundles of oppositions" (431). By this he meant deeply-rooted conflicts or contradictions in the ways cultures perceive themselves, their values, the world, or their place within the world. According to Lévi-Strauss, myths use symbol and metaphor to give such oppositions material form, or as Lévi-Strauss scholar Edmund Leach summarizes, "the expression of unobservable realities in terms of observable phenomena" (Schatz, "Structural Influence" 115). The physical outcomes depicted in mythic narratives then temporarily resolve the cultural or ideological oppositions, either by showing one side defeating the other, or by achieving a state of synthesis, balance, or compromise. Therefore, it may be said that the social function of myth is to resolve potentially-disruptive incongruities in cultural thought, perception, or practice; to smooth over rifts and ruptures, and thus reaffirm a culture's prevailing system of beliefs or collective identity. However (and here is an important point relating to film genres), Lévi-Strauss concedes that if a conflict is indeed irresolvable, a culture may theoretically create an infinite number of myths on the underlying discord, each with differing events, outcomes, and implied solutions (443).

Thomas Schatz recognizes Lévi-Strauss' oppositional dynamic within Hollywood genres. Schatz locates in every Hollywood genre a certain irreconcilable cultural contradiction or source of anxiety within contemporary American society.

Generic formulas then may be considered templates designed to create dramatic scenarios to give these contradictions or anxieties representational form. Audiences find the conclusions of such genre narratives pleasurable because they resolve, at least temporarily, the underlying source of social discord with a reaffirming statement of cultural values or beliefs. Schatz thus concludes that genre narratives perform "problem-solving operations: They repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts (opposing value systems) within a certain cultural community, suggesting various solutions through the actions of the main characters" (*Hollywood* 24).

As any viewer knows, every film genre is easily recognized—and differentiated from others—by its repeated use of a unique collection of physical conventions; such as common settings, props, character types, or forms of dramatic action (which Rick Altman, borrowing terms from the field of linguistics, calls the genre's "semantics"). Yet the films of each genre also regularly engage with similar thematic issues, social conflicts, or ideological contradictions (which Altman calls the genre's "syntax"). The reason the former becomes attached to the latter is that the "semantic" conventions of the genre provide suitable (and highly dramatic) metaphors to continually explore the thematic "syntax" in an entertaining way (Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic" 684-87). In other words, a genre's material conventions provide a consistent lexicon of symbols and metaphors to be arranged and manipulated in a continual exploration of particular sociocultural conflicts, presented under the guise of popular entertainment.

A simple example may be found in what many critics consider the most American of genres, the Western. On a plot level, all Westerns dramatize conflicts between characters in the indeterminate space between the lawless wilderness and rule-bound civilization. Translated into thematic terms, Westerns present stories where the freedom of unrestricted personal action—that is, *liberty*—collides with the inescapable need for *social order*. Liberty and social order have both been prized American values since the nation's beginnings. However, these values are by nature contradictory. Greater social order will by necessity limit personal liberties. Greater liberty, on the other hand, may destabilize social order. This liberty/order opposition thus presents a deep-rooted cultural contradiction. Generally speaking, the quest for a feasible balance between the two values has historically informed the US Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and subsequent developments which have constituted America's unique brand of democracy. However, the liberty/order debate has never been conclusively settled. Therefore, it should be no surprise to find the continual presence of this debate in American narratives.

Historically, the Western has provided a highly-suitable arena for such metaphorical discourse, as these films depict a time and place where the conflicts between liberty and order were most active, visible, and pressing upon daily life. Settlers moved west in search of greater liberty but faced dangers due to the lack of order. Yet as civilization encroached upon the frontier, the promise of total liberty

came under threat. In the Western film, conflicts between liberty and order are typically resolved by a heroic protagonist acting as a mediating figure whose actions impose a suitable balance between the two values; either by bringing greater order to the lawless frontier, or conversely by fighting to retain personal liberties against the potential tyrannies of forces representing restrictive systems of modern order.

Yet despite the clear-cut resolutions which tend to end Western films, the liberty/order contradiction remains irreconcilable in social reality. Thus, in concordance with Lévi-Strauss' observations, Hollywood has produced one Western narrative after another, all wrestling with the same liberty/order conflict, yet depicting and resolving this conflict in an endless number of ways.

Here we find the greatest social benefit of cinematic genres. Cinematic genres provide a convention-bound arena where unresolvable conflicts or anxieties can be continually explored and debated from countless contexts or perspectives. Since the films of a genre all share the same physical conventions, genre films can engage in an ongoing discourse, with their audiences as well as with other films, though a shared metaphorical "language."

The Western explores an ideological conflict which predates the invention of cinema, while other genres are built upon contradictions that are virtually timeless (such as the conflicts between masculine and feminine attitudes on love and sex found in the Romantic Comedy, or humanity's fear of and simultaneous fascination with

death in Supernatural Horror). However, periods of drastic social change may create new and unprecedented contradictions or anxieties which then may spawn new genres to address them. For instance, Thomas Schatz notes how the birth of the Gangster genre coincided with the Great Depression; a time when many began to doubt whether the "American Dream" could truly be achieved through honest hard work (84). Similarly, the advent of the Action genre followed a dramatic surge in gun violence, gang activity, and the drug trade in American cities during the 1970s and early 1980s.

The most dramatic examples of genre formation in response to sociopolitical crises can be found in two historical contexts: the sudden birth of the Sci-fi genre during the early stages of the Cold War; and, most recently, the post-9/11 consolidation of the superhero film into an independent genre orientated around a contemporary political syntax.

Prior to the 1950s, science fiction—a story type which had existed in literary form since the mid-nineteenth century—had rarely been seen on movie screens save a handful of fantasy-adventure serials for children. Yet with the advent of the nuclear age and the global Cold War, stories of interplanetary conflict and the destructive consequences of unchecked scientific or technological advancement quickly became a Hollywood staple. From a Ritualist view, the sudden rise of Hollywood Sci-fi represented the formation of a new system of American mythology created in

response to Cold War anxieties. With its fantastic spectacles of science-bred monsters, alien invasions, and journeys into the cosmic unknown, the Sci-fi film metaphorically addressed nascent Cold War hopes and fears in ways that more realistic narratives could not—or dare not—do directly (Hantke 12-16).

To illustrate, it is worth noting the specific types of Sci-fi narratives Hollywood produced during the genre's early decades. In its literary form, "science fiction" covered a wide variety of styles and content; from the utopian to the deeply cynical, from philosophical works to those of high adventure. Yet the popular Sci-fi films of the 1950s were largely limited to three types: #1) tales of destructive monsters created by the irresponsible use of science—typically the result of atomic energy or other attempts to tamper in areas beyond human control or understanding; #2) stories of alien invasion, either by external attack or internal infiltration—relatable to fears of Soviet attacks, as well as the paranoia over subversives generated by the McCarthy-led Red Scare; and on a lighter side, #3) tales of space colonization—which film historian Stephen Hantke links not only to the burgeoning space race, but also the Cold War neocolonialism which saw the US and Soviet Union pushing their influence into the newly-dubbed "Third World" for the sake of global ideological domination (40).[3]

As this evidence suggests, the cinematic Sci-fi genre was born from the fears and aspirations of 1950s Cold War America. It selected the most appropriate tropes pre-existing in the genre's literary traditions and then tailored them to suit the psycho-

social needs of contemporary audiences. The same process may be used to explain the sudden rise to box office prominence of the superhero genre in the aftermath of 9/11.

Though superhero-protagonist films had existed before the events of September 11, 2001, these sporadically-produced spectacles did not yet meet the critical criteria of a formal genre. To reiterate Rick Altman, a true cinematic "genre" must demonstrate two attributes: a consistent collection of physical conventions (the "semantics" of the genre), and a unified mode of thematic/ideological discourse (the "syntax" of the genre) ("Semantic/Syntactic" 685-86). Early superhero films lacked a consistent semantic-syntactic pairing, and in fact differed wildly in terms of style, narrative form, and themes. Yet in the years after the attacks of September 11, and the subsequent responses by the Bush administration, Hollywood superhero films began to gravitate toward a consistent style and form. Just as the Sci-fi films of the 1950s selectively implemented the tropes of science fiction literature as direct or indirect references to Cold War anxieties, post-9/11 superhero films selectively reshaped narrative conventions long-established in superhero comics; particularly, the thematic exploration of questions regarding the moral and responsible uses of power; into analogous representations of contemporary political debates on national security, civil liberties, the nature of "American" values, and other topics of immediate concern (Brown 64-65, McSweeney 8-9). From a structural standpoint, the period following

9/11 marks the short span of time in which superhero films acquired a stable ideological syntax, as well as a consistent use of semantics, thus transforming this once loose collection of fantasy-action films into a formal, independent genre. Thus, we may say that the "genrefication" of the superhero film occurred in response to the unique conditions created by the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001. Superhero films unified their narrative conventions around a contemporary political syntax in response to a social need for a genre which could adequately address the issues of the day.

To conclude, by implementing the Ritualist view of genre theory, genre films are revealed to be more than frivolous acts of commercial entertainment. Instead, genre films are the artifacts of ongoing cultural discourses aimed at mediating unresolvable social conflicts or anxieties, thus presenting the narrative archetypes of a modern mythology. As a result, an historical analysis of genre films may yield insights on how cultural attitudes have transformed over time, while an investigation into the most popular genre films of the present can shed light on the particular questions and concerns troubling our society today.

END NOTES

1 André Bazin "La Politique des Auteurs" in *Cahiers du cinéma* 70 (1957), reprinted in Peter Graham (ed) *The New Wave*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1968: 137-155.

2 The Ritual school is chiefly rivaled by the Ideological school of criticism. Following the example of Marxists like Louis Althussar, the Ideologists see Hollywood films as tools through which political and commercial entities manipulate audiences in their own interests. Ideologists claim that popular films—genre films especially—deceive viewers about the causes of social problems to placate them with impractical solutions (Altman, *F/G* 26-27). Both schools of thought have their merits and limitations. This paper however shall focus on Ritualist concepts as the Ritual school is orientated toward long-term trends, while the Ideological approach is better suited for the analysis of individual films.

3 As J. Hoberman notes in *An Army of Phantoms*, some of these films, like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *Red Planet Mars* (1952), explicitly address fears of Communism and nuclear annihilation. Others, like *Rocketship X-M* (1950) or *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), use cleverly-crafted allegories to tap into Cold War anxieties without direct mention.

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