

INTRODUCTION TO FILM GENRES

ENGFLM 532 / Summer Session I / MW 6-9:50

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Genre is a mode of categorization. If I say a film belongs to a genre, I'm suggesting that it's of a type: it tells a story that feels like other stories, following certain rules and fulfilling certain expectations. In this course, we'll survey four established film genres – science fiction, romantic comedy, the secret agent movie, and the musical – with an eye toward how genre works. We'll explore the origins of genre categories and how they change over time, thinking through genre's relation to audience, technology, and promotional practices. The goal is to understand the benefits and limitations of viewing film through genre: what it helps us to see, and what it keeps us from seeing. As part of the class, you'll research and become an expert on a genre of your own choosing.

ASSIGNMENTS

There are two major assignments for this class: a *10-page final paper* (or comparable production project) and an *annotated bibliography*. Both will develop out of the research you do on your chosen genre. You'll also complete smaller assignments of three types: *weekly responses* (300 words) aimed at helping you work toward your final paper, *informal writings* (150 words) thinking through the films and readings we discuss in class, and *production experiments* exploring genre through the practices of filmmaking. (No prior production experience required.)

You will, in other words, do a lot of writing. This class carries a W credit, so I expect serious, sustained engagement with writing and revision. Paying attention to writing also means being a careful reader: complete all assigned readings and bring them with you to class (either printed or as digital copies).

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Final Paper/Project: 30%
Annotated Bibliography: 20%
Weekly Responses: 20%
Class Participation: 20%
Production Experiments: 10%

CLASS BOX FOLDER

As students at Pitt, you have a Box account (<http://pitt.box.com>). I'll post all course materials – this syllabus, readings, updated schedules – in our class Box folder. I'll also post digital copies of the films we watch (which means I expect you to rewatch and give specific details on anything you're writing about). You'll turn in your weekly responses here as well.

THE R RATING

Some of the assigned films are rated ‘R’ or unrated: there is violence, language, and sexuality that could be considered objectionable. If a film makes you uncomfortable, you’re free to leave the room, but be aware that “mature content” will often become part of our discussions.

ATTENDANCE

Because this is a seminar, discussion is central to the work of the course. Come to class on time, prepared to take part in conversation. While you should try to attend every class, *you’re permitted one absence. A second will affect your grade, and a third is grounds for failure.* That said, I understand that life doesn’t always respect class schedules: come talk to me *before you miss class* if you expect to have a problem with this policy. If you miss class, you’re responsible for finding out about and making up any missed work. You’ll be considered late to class if you arrive more than five minutes after the start of the class period. Three late arrivals count as one absence.

LATE WORK

This is a condensed class, so you’ll be turning in assignments every week. *If you submit something late, your grade on it drops by a full letter each day it is late.* You also won’t get feedback on that assignment.

OFFICE HOURS

My office hours are Mondays 4-6PM in CL435; I encourage you to take advantage of them. You can also contact me by email to set up an appointment at another time. I’m happy to talk about readings, films, project ideas, or anything else you have questions about.

PLAGARISM

Cite your sources, even when paraphrasing. MLA style is the default for this class – ask if you’re unsure how to cite properly. *All instances of plagiarism will result in no credit for the assignment and a report to the Dean.*

THE WRITING CENTER

Located in 317-B Student Center, 4024 O’Hara St., the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to correct your papers for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your essays. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/

OTHER SERVICES

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me (your instructor) and the Office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, 412-228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Pitt offers free personal and academic counseling at the University Counseling Center (412-648-7930). Specialized counseling services are available to victims of sexual assault; you can contact the sexual assault services coordinator via the main UCC phone line during weekday business hours or at 412-648-7856 (after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). In a crisis situation, university police can also connect you with an on-call counselor affiliated with the UCC.

SCHEDULE

(updated 6/20)

WEEK 1 – SCIENCE FICTION

Read: Grindon, “Cycles and Clusters: The Shape of Film Genre History,” 42-59

M 5/16, ‘50s Invasions

Screen: *The War of the Worlds* (1953, 85 min)

Write: What elements of *The War of the Worlds* feel familiar or “generic”? Where else have you seen them? What feels particular to the time (or to this film)? (Like all informal writings, this should be 150 words, brought with you to class Wednesday.)

Note: One moment in the Grindon reading you’d like to talk about.

W 5/18, Blockbuster Sci-Fi

Screen: *Alien* (1979, 117 min)

In-class: Design a set based on a genre’s iconic location.

Response 1: Pick a genre for your semester-long project and begin sketching out your thoughts about it. How do you know your genre when you see it? What societal problem (or problems) might it be responding to? Can you break it down into cycles and clusters? Due Friday 5/20 by 11:59PM posted to Box.

WEEK 2 – ROMANTIC COMEDY

Read: Deleyto, *The Secret Life of the Romantic Comedy*

Rubinfeld, *Bound to Bond: Gender, Genre, and the Hollywood Romantic Comedy*

M 5/23, The Classic Rom-Com

Screen: *What Women Want* (2000, 127 min)

Write: The scholars we’re reading this week have significantly different understandings of the romantic comedy. How would you describe that difference? What kind of attitude does each take toward the genre?

Find: One scholarly article about your genre outside the class reading. Bring it to class Wednesday.

W 5/25, Queer Romance

Screen: *Saving Face* (2004, 91 min)

In-class: Redesign a movie poster, switching your film’s genre.

Response 2: Describe one common trope, device, or plotline in your genre that you find particularly interesting. What’s the significance of it? Why do you think it’s so common? For this response, cite one scholarly article outside the class reading. Due Friday 5/27 by 11:59PM.

WEEK 3 – GENRE & PRODUCTION

M 5/30, Memorial Day

No class; annotated bibliography due by 11:59PM

W 6/1, Production Workshop; meet in CL435

Screen: assorted video essays

In-class: Make a 60-second video compilation highlighting a formal trend in your genre.

Response 3: What are your genre's distinctive formal elements? How does it use color, sound, and editing to create a particular tone? Be sure to use a specific example from a film in this response. Due Friday 6/3 by 11:59PM.

WEEK 4 – THE SPY MOVIE

Read: Packer, *Secret Agents: Popular Icons Beyond James Bond*

M 6/6, Bondsploitation

Screen: *Live and Let Die* (1973, 121 min)

Write: Based on this week's reading, how would you define parody? What's at stake in the "exorcism of parody" (22) from Bond?

W 6/8, Self-Aware Spies

Screen: *Spy* (2015, 120 min)

In-class: Design a spy gadget and imagine the kind of spy who would use it.

Response 4: Write an abstract for your final paper or project. You should outline your argument, the media objects you plan to work with, and how you'll go about analyzing them. Due Friday 6/10 by 11:59PM.

WEEK 5 – THE MUSICAL

Read: Turim, "Gentlemen Consume Blondes"

M 6/13, The Studio Musical

Screen: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953, 91 min)

Find: An audio file of music or a sound effect that you associate with a genre. Post it to Box in the folder titled "Sound Files" before class on Wednesday.

Bring: A piece of writing or video you want to include in your final to class Wednesday. This can be something from a previous assignment or entirely new material. If you're using writing, bring 3 printed copies.

W 6/15, Musical Television

Screen: *Glee*, "Pilot" & "Britney/Brittany"

In-class: Design a genre-based soundtrack for stock footage.

Response 5: What media other than film does your genre exist in? Are there books? Comic books? Video games or theatrical plays? What's the relationship between these other forms and the cinematic versions of your genre? Due Friday 6/17 by 11:59PM.

WEEK 6 – GENRE FUTURES

Read: Brooker, "Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the 'Cinematic,'" 122-128.

M 6/20, The Videogame Movie

Screen: *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014, 113 min)

In-class: Design a video game level based on your genre.

Prepare: Your presentation. Think of this as an opportunity to share something cool you've learned about your genre with your classmates. Your presentation can come from your final or be completely separate from it. Aim for 2 minutes – I'll cut you off at 3. If you want to project media, post clips/links/etc. to the "Presentation Media" folder on Box.

W 6/22, Student Presentations

Final papers/projects due Saturday