Similarity and Difference in Genres

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1 INTRODUCTION

Genre as a term is often understood as the overall writing style a specific piece of media reflects: fantasy, romance, mystery, and horror among others (CanLit Guides, 2016). John Fiske's (2010) definition of genres is that of the attempt to organise the large variety of available media content for the convenience of both producers and consumers. This, however, indicates that the ambiguous descriptions of genres may not give full insight into what a particular piece of media is about. The issue is further worsened by the ever-growing amount of genre labels that media-driven products have defined over time which makes specific genres harder to identify. Steve Neale argues that genre-based categories are not fixed commodities and genres are identified by more features than just the writing style and are often defined by the qualities of similarity and difference (Dixon, 2019). This report focuses on identifying how these qualities are prevalent in media genres and what effect it has on audiences.

2 Similarity and Difference in Genres

2.1 Similarities

When identifying products of the same genre it is important to know what aspects to look for. There are similarities shared across products of the same genre that can help in pinpointing their correct genre definition/-s. These similarities can be obvious, but sometimes they are less apparent. Neale identifies multiple factors as being crucial in distinguishing resemblances between products of the same genre. These include levels of verisimilitude, narrative similarities, character-driven motifs, iconography, audience targeting, and representational effects (Dixon, 2019).

The first identifier – how closely the media reflects real life, is very useful in identifying the genre it belongs to. For example, *Lincoln* (2012) retells the history of the 16th US president's final months in office. As a biography, it has a rather high level of verisimilitude being well received by historians (Pinsker, 2013). Similarly, *tick, tick… BOOM!* (2021)is based on Jonathan Larson's autobiography and reflects real-life events even if some details are dramatized such as musical numbers taking part in an everyday setting. Science fiction pieces, on the other hand, offer reduced levels of verisimilitude. Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) both portray futuristic events taking place on other planets, with fictional creatures such as gigantic sandworms existing on them, which does not reflect real life.

Narrative similarities also give insight into the appropriate genre label. Works falling under the category of crime novels such as Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) usually follow a detective and narrate the story from their point of view. This way the audience sees the same things as the protagonist and is given enough details to solve the mystery just like the detective would.

Many popular genres also have staple characters that meet the requirements of character-driven motifs. Superhero movies often have the main antagonist, an evil mastermind with either supernatural abilities, great intellect, or great influence in their universe who poses a threat to the wellbeing of the protagonist and their principles. This character is defeated as the plot progresses. An example of this is Green Goblin from *Spider-Man* (2002). The same way many superheroes have a romantic interest such as Mary Jane (Spider-Man, 2002).

Iconography is another important factor shared across elements of the same genre. Action/Science fiction pieces like *The Matrix* (1999) and *Inception* (2010) both use weapons and have portrayals of futuristic technology like dream-sharing in *Inception*.

Lastly, audience targeting and representational effects can be in common for products of the same genre. Romantic comedies are often marketed towards women (McDonald, 2007) while superhero movies tend to mostly cater towards men (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell, 2013). Superhero movies also tend to have male leads; however, the representational effects of the superhero genre have changed in recent years with more female superheroes gaining popularity (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell, 2013). This partly relates to genre differences.

2.2 Differences

While repetition allows the audience to recognise genres they are interested in, too much of it can diminish the appeal of a piece of media to the consumer. Reusing elements is great for attracting

audiences but it is the originality of the content that makes a product memorable. Neale resists the suggestion that genres deliver stable products for any length of time. He argues that all genres are subject to change in the course of time and claims audience needs and economic and contextual influences are the main factors that impact this (Dixon, 2019).

Audiences gain interest in a piece of work by recognising genres and the characteristics that they enjoy. However, to fully enjoy the piece, there must be something unique to it. This can be storytelling that deviates from the conventions of the genre like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) having a nonlinear timeline and focusing on characters rather than action which was new for the gangster genre (Miller, 2014). It can also be something unique relating to the production of the film like *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001) being the first feature film to use motion capture to create characters (Zakarin, 2016).

Contextual and economic influences are also what make genres have differences over time. The success of Marvel has increased the popularity of superhero movies (Dixon, 2019). Because of this more superhero movies are being produced or elements from them reused in other genres. This relates to genre hybridity.

Genre hybridity is the deliberate combination of elements of more than one genre. This enables the author to create more unique products that meet the audience's needs, appeal to more people, are relevant to the current trends while feeding on nostalgia at the same time by reusing elements from declined genres (Dixon, 2019). A recent example of genre hybridity is *The Batman* (2022) – combining superhero and crime/mystery genres.

3 CONCLUSION

Genres are not constant – they change over time. Many aspects influence this the main being audience needs, contextual and economic influences. This offers the audiences new products over time and draws their interest. However, audiences also gain pleasure from recognising well-known genre conventions that they enjoy, therefore the best way to approach creating a new genre-based product is balancing genre similarities and differences – not following a set recipe to meet the requirements of a genre but deviating from its narrow definition and creating something unique.

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