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Genre and Australian Film

> The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there was no context established for them.   Frye 1957: 154

> When we examine literature from the point of view of literary genre, we engage in a very particular enterprise: we discover a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is unique about each of them.   Todorov 1975: 19

Why Genre?

The aim of this book is to promote the study of Australian feature films in terms of genre. As Todorov suggests, genre is synonymous with the idea of kind, a subspecies of the totality of a particular cultural output. While his and Frye's remarks are developed in relation to poetry, drama and prose rather than to cinema, nevertheless many elements to do with these genres are also, broadly, applicable to film genre. Indeed, one significant linguistic development in the past thirty years has been the everyday adaptation of the French term 'genre'. In times past, film genres had been popularly recognized only in their specificity: this film is a comedy and that one is science fiction. Now, there is a common term that identifies film types such as comedy and horror as belonging to a larger class or kind. The French term genre has become an ordinary, taken-for-granted word in the English language used as an immediate way to designate a film kind or type. That said, one might still ask just what are the advantages of investigating Australian films in terms of genre? Several significant advantages come to mind.

First, such a method provides an overview of the system or corpus that is Australian feature film output while also facilitating insight into a particular film within that oeuvre. Hence, one might ask about favourite genres within Australian cinema, not only among authors but also on the part of film

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makers, financing bodies, audiences, critics, teachers and students, not to mention the public at large. Why, for instance, is social realism so promoted while the genre of the epic seems entirely absent? What is preventing more musicals being produced here? In addition, this emphasis enables one to deal with new films as they appear, noting how these fit into, cross or even call into question the different subtypes of Australian film.

Yet another benefit to this way of understanding is the fact that it connects with the fashion by which feature film is understood in the community at large. Video and DVD hire, retail outlets, popular film reviewing and so on are all organized according to generic schema so that the approach of this book has something in common with these practices. That said, it is immediately worth adding that this book hopes to enrich and increase generic insights beyond some of their present-day, commonplace understandings and applications, not least by examining how particular films consolidate and extend the range of generic possibilities.

A third benefit is the fact that genre criticism helps steer the reader towards those Australian films that are among the pivotal and richest examples of particular genres. Not surprisingly many films are mentioned once whereas others turn up frequently and in different chapters, thus highlighting their range and variety. The ambition of the book has been to be comprehensive and exhaustive, not so much in terms of accounting for all Australian feature films since the Revival but rather in terms of developing an explanatory system that is reasonably thorough and complete.

Fourth, this emphasis also steers one towards some of the more marginal instances of particular genres. Put another way, this kind of study can direct attention to some of the specific filmic elements that have been either impossible to sustain in a specific genre, or else more occasionally and less frequently grasped.

Yet another useful outcome provided by this focus is the fact that it enables the researcher to remain alive to evolution and transformation both within and beyond the Australian feature film. This approach sharpens the sense of how particular genres are developing and changing. Hence, for example, grappling with a generic understanding of *Lantana* (2001) highlights the ways in which the Australian art film has remained the same and the extent to which it is different to what it was in the period cycle in the 1970s and early 1980s. Furthermore, although it is not a path that is embarked on here, a generic inquiry into film might also stress possible broader cultural and social shifts in the society at large in terms of marriage, relationships, sexuality, family, class and policing.

A sixth gain from the genre approach is the fact that it cuts through the Gordian knot of whether specific films have sufficient Australian credentials

to be considered worthy of inclusion in a local canon. In the early years of the Revival, there was little doubt of what was the new Australian feature cinema. Now the matter is far more perplexing. Should Movie of the Week co-productions made over the past ten years at the Warner film studios on the Gold Coast be included in discussion? Do Hollywood films that use Australian film artists count? Are Australian telemovies relevant? While the answer to all of these is a provisional 'yes', the more important point is that focussing on genre bypasses these dilemmas. It also supersedes fixated emphasis on the Great (New) Australian Film.

Finally, genre criticism in the case of Australian feature films is by no means restricted to only the more obvious and commercially sanctioned types of film such as adventure, crime and comedy. A glance at the titles of succeeding chapters reveals the presence of several genres not usually found in discussion of more aggressively market-oriented cinema. Of course, the introduction of some of these types – such as the social realist film – is not new to the discussion of Australian feature film. Nonetheless, including them here again emphasizes the extent to which many different generic types and models are at work across the landscape that is Australian feature cinema.

Generic Difference

To put all this another way, one can suggest that approaching Australian cinema through the notion of genre is significant for an understanding of particular films and for a grasp on that cinema as a whole. However, before examining certain genres that offer more specific constructions within the totality of Australian feature film, it is necessary to look in more detail at the notion of film genre. Several conceptual distinctions are in order before we examine the generic system in more detail.

First, the fact is that specific theoretical boundaries apply to the concept of genre. Todorov has differentiated between complex and elementary genres (1975: 12). The latter is that type constituted by one structural feature, an invariable element. When a particular ingredient is not present then a text (including the filmic one) does not belong to the elementary kind of genre. Later in this chapter, for example, it is noted that the World War II combat film has been designated as a Hollywood genre. Obviously, this class or type would seem to constitute an elementary genre along the lines outlined by Todorov. If a particular war film happens to concern a war other than that of World War II or does not involve combat, then the film does not belong to this genre. By extension, complex genres are those composed

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of multiple elements and register in terms of numerous combinations of elements. Again, the book notes several instances of these, kinds that have also been called major genres. One that includes several subtypes – for instance, the action-adventure film – leans towards this second class of genre. The important point about a complex genre is that no particular text can possibly display all the genre's elements. Only an Ur-text, an abstraction from all specific instances, both historical and imagined, can encompass such a range.

Several writers on film have suggested that certain universal divisions operate between different films. Hence, Bordwell and Thompson distinguish between narrative and non-narrative formal systems of film (1979, 1996: 41–141). More accessibly, Nichols has differentiated between narrative, documentary and avant-garde films as three broad types of cinema (1981: 3–9). In other words, whatever labels are applied, there are important modes of film that lie outside the domain of story telling. In this book, the discussion is restricted to genres within the range of Australian narrative cinema. To do otherwise is to invite problems having to do with the incommensurability of classes. This is illustrated in an early book concerning the New Australian cinema (Murray and Beilby 1980). The editors include avant-garde alongside other narrative genres such as action and comedy. While, as will be seen, some narrative genres of Australian cinema do share borders with components of non-narrative, nevertheless there is more than enough generic variety within Australian narrative cinema to make recourse to these other types unnecessary.

In fact, complex and elementary genres constitute a continuum rather than two polar types. Genres exist at several different levels. As Todorov, quoting Tomashevsky, puts it:

> Works are divided into large classes which are subdivided into types and species. In this way, moving down the ladder of genres, we move from abstract classes to concrete historical distinctions. (Todorov 1975: 5)

Todorov also distinguishes between what he calls evanescent genres and autonomous genres. The former type is at the frontier of other genres, usually at least two, and may merge into another. He provides the example – taken up again in this book in the chapters on horror and science fiction – of the fantastic, a literary genre that 'hesitates' between the uncanny and the marvellous and can dissolve into one or the other (1975: 14–19). Similarly, following Derry (1988: 55–69) and Neale (2000: 71–85), three closely related types of Australian feature cinema are discussed – the detective film, the crime film and the suspense thriller. These are sibling genres, types that are closely related, sharing adjacent borders. What is common to all three

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is the subject of crime but each concentrates on a different moment and setting. By contrast, the autonomous genre – perhaps the action-adventure film or the musical film – displays much more stability and fixity. Standing apparently alone, the autonomous genre exhibits no particular tendency towards becoming another genre.

Another way of making much the same point involves the notion of the subtractive genre (Anderson 1988: 331). This is a class or type whose designation is, in part, arrived at negatively by a process of designating what it is not. Todorov adopts this procedure in defining the fantastic story as one located between the magical and the strange or bizarre. Similarly, in picking out the suspense thriller in Chapter 12, it is located generally within a broader category called the crime film, although neither the figure of the gangster nor that of the detective is as central in this variant of the general type. This way of arriving at definition is methodological and, of course, usually not exhaustive. Todorov does not leave his designation at the point of saying what it is not and neither is one content to halt the investigation of the suspense thriller at the point of noting that it is different to both the detective film and the crime/gangster film.

One other general distinction – that between historical and theoretical genres – is worth mentioning. Historical genres are the result of an observation of filmic phenomena such as the ocker comedy cycle of the 1970s and 1980s. This type of the historical genre rises and falls, appears and disappears. In other words, such a type or class has strong material roots in particular economic, political, social, cultural and other circumstances. On the other hand, theoretical genres are deduced from a theory of cinema. Hence, Bordwell and Thompson in discussing the area of non-narrative cinema arrive at four logical types: namely, Categorical, Rhetorical, Abstract and Associational (Bordwell and Thompson 1979, 1996). And although these authors find specific films to illustrate each of these types, the point is that these types only exist as conceptual even ideal genres and have no necessary connection with the history of film genre. Meanwhile, to resume another distinction, everything suggests that historical genres are a subgroup of complex theoretical genres (Todorov 1975: 155–9; Bordwell 1989: 249–54).

Finally, given that this study occurs within the class of Australian narrative cinema, it is necessary to specify those elements that serve as components of film genre. Hence, among the ingredients variously emphasized in this book are structural, stylistic and ideological. In particular, narrative, character, imagery, setting, soundtrack, themes and thematic discourse are emphasized. Of course, not all these elements will be commensurate with particular film genres. Different historical genres may be strong or weak in terms of certain of these elements. Soundtrack is usually more significant and

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more complex in a musical than in a western. Nonetheless, these elements are sufficiently limited in number to allow the tracing of their combination and transformation in the different Australian film genres. This, of course, begs the obvious question of what are the local film classes or types and this problem frames the last part of this chapter.

Identifying Australian Film Types

In seeking to identify a larger system of local narrative screen types, an Australian film genre taxonomy, one is – for the most part – on barren ground. As Turner has noted, genre has frequently been seen as antithetical to the project of an Australian feature film culture (1993: 102–11). In the cultural politics that lies behind a volume such as the *Oxford Companion to Australian Film* (McFarlane, Mayer and Bertrand 1999), this kind of denial leaves its mark. Specific Australian film genres such as the action-adventure film, the war film, social realism, the musical and other types are all denied specific entry in the volume. And while another genre such as comedy is given space in its own right, the editors' main way of dealing with this absence is through single essays on genre both before and after World War II.

Nonetheless, there are a handful of inquiries that are worth outlining here as part of a process of deciding on the generic framework for this study. Three local attempts at taxonomies of Australian feature film should be mentioned. The first book to analyse the new Australian feature cinema proposed no fewer than nine genres as follows:

- Social Realism
- Horror & Suspense
- Fantasy
- Loneliness & Alienation
- Personal Relationships & Sexuality
- Comedy
- Action & Adventure
- Historical
- Children

Source: Murray and Beilby 1980

As will be seen, this listing is less expansive than that of several other writers, suggesting either that there are fewer genres at work in the new Australian cinema or that in the first nine years there were insufficient films to call other genres into play. In any case, Murray and Beilby's categorization raises doubt as to whether the editors and the contributors have not in some cases confused subject matter with genre. For example, two of the last three types – Personal Relationships and Sexuality, and Loneliness and Alienation – seem to be film themes rather than genres. Both types might, arguably, belong to a larger category already indicated, namely that of social realism. Several

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other familiar genres appear to miss out altogether, including the art film, crime, and the erotic film, even though by 1980 there was a good deal that could be written about these different types.

A similar problem involving another private, idiosyncratic schema arises with a more recent morphology of Australian feature films (Stratton 1990). The intention of this volume was to collect a series of the author's reviews of Australian feature films that appeared between 1980 and 1990. These are grouped into 11 different genre-like categories as follows:

- True Stories
- Lovers & Other Strangers
- Author! Author!
- Gun Crazy
- Come Up Smiling
- The Children Are Watching Us
- The Big Country
- A Walk on the Wild Side
- And Justice For All
- Them!
- The Kid Stakes

Source: Stratton 1990

Unfortunately, despite the thoughtful insights provided at the level of individual films, this categorization turns out to be less useful than that of Murray and Beilby. The reversion to authorial categorization (Author! Author!) can be put to one side, thereby reducing the list to ten film types. In addition, the last two seem to concern children, suggesting that these might be grouped together, thus yielding a breakdown of nine types. While some of these might be translated into more familiar generic classes such as Crime for Gun Crazy and Comedy for Come Up Smiling, one is hard put to understand common elements operating with other categories such as The Big Country and True Stories. Indeed, Stratton's cinematic archness and referentiality in using past film titles as names for his categories would seem to be self-defeating. This impression is reinforced when one examines any particular chapter, where there is little general analysis and argument to support a particular label.

The most ambitious and sustained attempt to discuss Australian feature films in terms of type or kind is that represented by Dermody and Jacka (1987, 1988). Their work is an industry-based genre account of output where the major strategy is to see film types as derivatives of particular government agencies and policies. Hence, in their investigation of the Revival, these authors stress the period from 1975 up to 1988 as one in which the principal film agency, the Australian Film Commission, helped create a kind of mainstream or paradigmatic film which they define as the AFC genre film (1987: 49). In turn, several other types are then identified next to this kind including the social realist or social problem film, the 'purely commercial', and a large group of others. Among the latter, they further identify the

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Australian gothic, films portraying sexual identities including the male ensemble film, 'interiors', and a rump that they label as 'eccentrics'. This final kind includes generic hybrids, isolates, films sensitive to local settings, as well as others not easily accommodated within their other types (1988: 28–74).

There is no doubt about the completeness and the intelligence of this analysis. Dermody and Jacka bring together an exhaustive list of features made over a twenty-year period and offer useful accounts of very many films. Some of their analytical groupings and discussions, such as those concerning the Australian gothic and 'interiors', are highly suggestive and valuable. However, from the point of view of this book, the designation of their two main types of film, the AFC genre and the 'purely commercial', is, in its own way, a private set of categories, like those chosen by Stratton. And although Dermody and Jacka's genres are not as arbitrary as Stratton's, nevertheless these types are most intelligible and accessible only within the context of the author's prior examination of the Australian feature production industry. In other words, even though this book refers to particular points in their inquiry in the pages that follow, nevertheless, one is forced to go elsewhere in terms of developing a repertory of useful and practical genres for the investigation of Australian films.

Genre in Hollywood

Hence, to overcome this lack of foundation for this study, this chapter turns briefly to the generic investigation of the American film industry. This is so not because of any bias on the part of the authors suggesting that Australian cinema necessarily reproduces the genres operating in Hollywood, but rather because there is more of an English-language tradition of genre study in relation to Hollywood cinema. In fact, as has been pointed out, the scholarly inquiry into genre in Hollywood begins on the other side of the Atlantic. Despite incidental essays concerning specific film genres by US writers such as Warshow and Ferguson in the 1940s and early 1950s, the systematic generic analysis of Hollywood films began in France as early as the 1940s and had spread to the UK by the 1960s (Anderson 1988: 346; Neale 2000: 9–13). It comes as no surprise then that of four studies of Hollywood examined, two are British in origin while a third draws in part on the work of French and British writers.

Of the four, Pirie's analysis (1981) occurs in the more general context of a study of the Hollywood film industry in the present and in the past. To handle box-office data and other materials, he restricts himself to the following nine dominant genres of feature production:

- Westerns
- Romance
- Musicals
- Science Fiction
- Drama

- Thrillers
- Comedy
- Horror
- Action-Adventure

Source: Pirie 1981: 204–94

These are all general kinds and might be seen as corresponding to Todorov's labelling as complex rather than elementary genres. Indeed, Pirie's last genre, Drama, carries a name that is so sweeping as to present particular problems so far as setting generic boundaries is concerned. In other words, Pirie's listing seems restricted and conservative and there is worth in developing a more extended taxonomy.

More specialist genre studies of Hollywood commend themselves to one's attention. Three recent inquiries are especially relevant. First, beginning in the mid 1970s, Grant (1977, 1986) established an anatomy of major genres that consists of twelve types as follows:

- Comedy
- Disaster
- Erotic
- Horror
- Science Fiction
- War

- Crime
- Epic
- Gangster
- Musical
- Sports
- Western

Source: Grant 1977, 1986

In addition, his bibliography furnishes references for at least a further dozen more minor genres including adventure, mystery, romance, black, paranoia, exploitation, hot car, prison, *film noir*, kidpix, romantic drama and women's films (1986: 370–92). Clearly, what is happening is that the editor is operating with both smaller and larger, lower-order and higher-order, minor and major genres. This is a very useful path that will be followed even though Grant's taxonomy must be varied for application to Australian cinema.

Gehring has been even more liberal in his analysis, identifying eighteen different genres at work in the American cinema. His group is comprised as follows:

- Adventure
- Gangster
- World War II Combat
- Populist Comedy

- Western
- *Film Noir*
- Screwball Comedy
- Parody

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- Black Humour
- Horror
- Fantasy
- Melodrama
- Biographical

- Clown Comedy
- Science Fiction
- Musical
- Social Problem
- Art Film

Source: Gehring 1988

Again, like Grant's, such a listing runs the gamut from the very specific (such as the World War II combat film) to the much more general type (represented by adventure). Gehring also suggests that there are a number of super or meta genres that comprise several of the more specific genres listed. (One is reminded again of Todorov's useful distinction between elementary and complex genres.) These more expansive types enumerated by Gehring are action-adventure, the fantastic, comedy, and song-and-soap. There is also a kind of left-over grouping that he labels non-traditional (1988: 305).

Although there is some overlapping of names among the more local and the more global of these genres, nevertheless Gehring's conceptual point is clear. He would, for instance, insist that in a real sense the genre of comedy is a higher-order one, an abstraction, perhaps a theoretical genre (1988: 105–210). His point is that it makes sense only to speak of the type in the plural and in terms of a series of more specific genres such as screwball comedy, black humour comedy and parody. All the same, Gehring's example is extremely useful in alerting one to the potential variety of generic kinds in general, thereby helping to expand the range of genres to be looked for in the case of Australia.

Most recently, Neale has listed a total of 16 major genres currently operating in Hollywood feature films (2000: 51–151). In his discussion, he devotes the greatest amount of attention to two especially problematic genres, those of *film noir* and the women's film/melodrama. His list runs this way:

- Action-Adventure
- Comedy
- Detective
- *Film noir*
- Musical
- Social Problem
- Teenpic
- War

- Biographical
- Crime/Gangster
- Epic
- Horror
- Science Fiction
- Suspense/Thriller
- Women's Film/Melodrama
- Western

Source: Neale 2000