

Chapter 3

What is the Purpose of Genres?

Classificatory or analytical logics, because they conceive of genre as a group of films displaying shared characteristics – whether or not these logics formalize the play of repetitions and variations they describe – by-pass the functional dimension of genre. However, as we have seen, a genre only exists if it is recognized as such by a community. To recapitulate the terms of the semantic-syntactic model proposed by Rick Altman, a genre comes into being and is recognized when it organizes a set of semantic features into a stable syntax – that is, when a filmic formula is put in place that is recognizable to a public audience, and to which films attach themselves through different levels of genericity. The establishment of a tacit agreement about this semantic-syntactic formula presupposes, then, that those who make a “genre film” (producers, directors, screenwriters, etc.) are able to conceive of it as relating to this genre, and that viewers are able to respond to it as such. Thus, it is necessary for an audience to recognize the genre in the film, identify it, and grasp the formula that is being offered in order for its success and lasting appeal to be assured. To understand the phenomenon of genre, therefore, one must pay attention to the “established formulas of communication” mentioned by Casetti in his definition of genre (which we accepted provisionally at the beginning of the preceding chapter). This, in turn, requires us to consider the economic, social, cultural, and communicative functions of genre.

A Production Tool

It is often asserted that genres give cinema an effective model for industrial production because they provide producers with a formula that precedes and determines what should be produced. By applying a tried and true recipe that will guarantee the success of a film to a new subject, producers minimize their risks and justify the production. This idea, currently fairly widespread, would seem to imply a rather low opinion of popular culture. It suggests that commercial or popular cinema, along with cartoons, television, or popular fiction, are only capable of endlessly and mechanically reproducing prefabricated models. Furthermore, this vision of mass culture is completely static: how could the changes and innovations that anyone can observe in reality possibly be born out of a system that is exclusively governed by a principle of repetition? This is why it is appropriate to invoke a dynamic conception of mass culture when dealing with the economic issues relating to genre – especially given that mass culture is afflicted by an internal contradiction between standardization, which allows for repetition and mass production, and innovation, which permits the system to renew itself, and allows “models” to be altered and varied (Morin 1962).

The standardization/differentiation dialectic

The production of film genres, which presupposes both a repetition of traits and a variation, takes place within a dialectic between standardization and differentiation. It is one of the combinations made possible by the interplay between a normative logic and an innovative logic that characterizes the production and consumption of the “cultural goods” of mass culture. This fact allows one to understand why the industrial organization of classical Hollywood cinema – which owes its success to its ability to integrate elements of differentiation, while simultaneously exploiting an effectiveness based on a normalization of production

– has produced a panoply of genres that are both varied and relatively stable. In effect, the “dream factory” is characterized by an industrialization of the cinematic mode of production: standardization allows for films to be produced more quickly and in a way that is more profitable, all the time observing a norm of excellence (a “standardized” product, well made), at the same time as innovation generates differentiated products by importing external elements and blending them into the standardized work. As Janet Staiger explains, at an economic level, a Hollywood film derives its competitiveness simultaneously from its conformity to a standardized norm and from its capacity to distinguish itself from other films (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, pp. 95–97). One should note that, from this point of view, the making, the conception, and the consumption of the “film-product” hardly differ from those of a non-cultural consumer good. When a firm plans to put a new washing machine on the market, it designs a machine that uses electricity, is manufactured at the least possible cost, and corresponds to certain technical criteria (electric norms, shape, energy consumption, programs for different washing cycles, efficiency, design, etc.). At the same time, it tries to create a machine that will distinguish itself, like a brand, from other makes of washing machines – by emphasizing the qualities that make its product different (a supplementary service, a choice of colors, a revolutionary system for eliminating creases, etc.). In Hollywood, then, genres are an efficient tool within a similar standardization/innovation dialectic – just as film stars are. Laurent Creton calls this dialectic a strategy of “progressive innovation”:

It is the expression of an approach that aims to avoid anything revolutionary, and to assure the preservation of the values that subtend the model, as well as its structures. Its success depends on how well the tradition/innovation dialectic is activated, and its capacity to embed, valorize, and integrate events that are different and unusual, and even contradictory. The recombination of existing elements and their reformulation thus forms part of this modality of progressive innovation. (2001, p. 40)

Genres, then, are only one of the possibilities of this system of progressive innovation. Other possibilities include cycles, series, national or transnational remakes, the reuse of successful scenarios, colorization, and – more recently, post-dating Hollywood classicism – technological retouching applied to older films, the insertion of new special effects, or of passages omitted from the initial montage into existing works, transfers from the small to the big screen, the invention of filmic stories for video games, etc.

In addition, during the era of classical Hollywood, the studio system presented an organization set up for rationalizing the production of genre films and minimizing their costs. With both the major companies and the lesser ones, their stores of sets, costumes, and accessories, and the contract system that tied actors, directors, screenwriters, and technicians to them – thus assuring a continuity of personnel, as well as a division of labor – facilitated a constant reinvestment of material, talent, and expertise in genre films. When all things are taken into consideration, none of the studios, whether large or small, can be properly said to have specialized in one genre alone. If Warner owes its trademark image to two genres (gangster films and social films), that fact should not obscure its contribution to musicals (with the films choreographed by Busby Berkeley in the 1930s), to war films, to adventure films (in which Errol Flynn was often the star, such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Keighley/Curtiz, 1938), to *film noir* in the 1940s, etc. (Gomery 1986, pp. 112–118). For the B-movie market, which had occasioned the founding of small companies, Republic Pictures, established in 1935 and active until 1957, offered three categories of feature films: *Jubilees* (westerns shot in 7 days with a very low budget), *Anniversaries* (westerns, action films, or musicals shot in 14 days), and *Deluxes* (more varied genre films shot in 21 days). To them should be added *serials* – produced at the rate of one episode each week – that were at the heart of Republic's production between 1935 and 1950. They were divided into five generic categories: westerns (*The Lone Ranger*, Witney and English, 1938), exotic adventures (*Jungle Girl*, Witney and English, 1941), science-fiction (*King of the Rocket Men*, Brannon, 1949), detective stories (*Dick Tracy*,

James and Taylor, 1937), and costume dramas (*Ghost of Zorro*, 1949) (Gomery 1986, pp. 182–187). Even though no studio had a monopoly over any one genre, and all the companies produced films in a variety of genres, the big companies, with their organization into production units, nevertheless had the advantage of specialized structures in which work was rigorously compartmentalized in such a way as to make them suitable for devoting themselves to one genre. This was the case with the unit supervised by Arthur Freed, which produced, among other films, *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) and musicals directed by Minnelli, or by the duo of Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly.

If the standardization/differentiation dialectic undoubtedly finds its homeland in the studio system of classical Hollywood, it also underpins the production of genre films outside of any geographical and/or temporal limits, especially in places where a studio system operated. The British company Ealing, for example, displayed a similar inclination to mix standardization with innovation. Strengthened by the distribution system made available to it by Rank in 1945, this firm launched itself into the production of films in a variety of genres before concentrating on social realist dramas and comedies. This last genre earned high distinction for Ealing's productions, and to make his films, Michael Balcon, the head of production at Ealing Studios, surrounded himself with actors like Alec Guinness, along with technicians, directors, and screenwriters whom he employed in film after film. Thus, *Whisky Galore!* (Mackendrick, 1949), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Hamer, 1949), *Passport to Pimlico* (Cornelius, 1949), *The Man in the White Suit* (Mackendrick, 1951), or *The Ladykillers* (Mackendrick, 1955) could be considered as variations on a form of comedy standardized by Ealing Studios: English humor.

More generally, the production of a genre film, if other films in the same genre have already been successful, minimizes risk-taking and allows the company to ride the wave of a perceived ground-swell. The success of *The Quatermass Experiment* (Guest, 1955), then of *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Fisher, 1957), enhanced the specialization of the British company Hammer in the fantastic genre and led to a decade of horror films created by the same

directors, assisted by the same cinematographers (like Jack Asher) and set designers (like Bernard Robinson), shot with the same actors (like Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee), before the successful formula was taken up and modified in Italy, notably by Mario Brava (Binh and Pilard 2000). In this case, therefore, genre, through its play of conventions, is also a means of making films at the lowest possible cost – to the point where the notion of “genre film” ends up being confused, as soon as one steps outside the context of Hollywood, with the concept of a *cinéma bis*, a popular form of cinema producing series of very low budget films.

The avoidance of generic ascription by Hollywood studios

While it is fair to say that in Hollywood genres are both an *effect* of the rationalization of production and also an efficient tool for making films that will be successful at the box office, the publicity practices of Hollywood show, paradoxically, that ascribing a film to a genre is not considered a good promotional tactic. Genre, because it is in the public domain and can therefore be advanced by any producer to characterize his or her film, does indeed assist *production*, but it does not allow a studio to put in place a marketing strategy that will distinguish the film from its competitors. Thus, genres, once they have become established and shared by several studios, cease to serve the particular interests of the studio that created them. The studio, in advertising the film, will want to be able to emphasize what is unique to it: its stars, who are under an exclusive contract to the studio, its cycles, or its characters that are protected by copyright. In evaluating the economic effectiveness of genre, therefore, one must not see it as depending solely on the facts relating to production, but also as a discursive activity pursued by studios to see what uses they can make of genres in their attempts to reach their audiences.

This is what Rick Altman does by distinguishing two different “voices” in the discourses maintained by the studios about the films they produce. The first voice reflects the studio as a

participant in the Hollywood system, and therefore does not hesitate to attribute simple generic descriptors to genre films. The second voice is that of the studio as a particular studio, concerned to defend its image and its interests. This voice seeks in its discourse to avoid everything that it shares in common with other studios in order to promote the aspects that make it distinctive (Altman 1999, pp. 200–222). This latter voice is often detected in the publicity, posters, and trailers of both the majors in the classical era and the large companies of today. In the classical context, when the majors controlled the distribution of first-run films on American soil (the equivalent, to a certain extent, of the advance screenings that are shown for several weeks in a circuit of the large urban theaters), the big companies seemed especially anxious to distinguish themselves from their competitors, as far as their prestige productions were concerned. After the double-program had become established and widespread (consisting of an A-grade prestige film and a relatively low budget B-grade film), studios more often than not reserved genre appellations for B films only. By way of contrast, small or independent companies, almost excluded from the system of first-run release in the prestige theaters, tried to identify their films clearly with a preexisting generic denomination in order to exploit the places available in the program and to speak directly to their potential clients (distributors and independent theaters).

The large Hollywood studios, just like their neo-Hollywood successors, preferred, then, in their marketing discourse, to rely on “brand names” in their exclusive possession as a means of assuring their audiences that they would encounter something relatively new, rather than a hackneyed genre that had become common property. This is what explains, in particular, the abundance of cycles in genre cinema. The first features about James Bond, *Dr. No* (Young, 1962) and *From Russia With Love* (Young, 1963), were presented by United Artists not as spy films, but as “the first James Bond film” and “the return of James Bond.” A similar thing happens with the cycle of *Tarzan* films made by MGM from 1932 or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981) produced by Lucasfilms, which used a “labeled” character for their promotion

(Tarzan, Indiana Jones), taking care not to evoke explicitly the genre of the "adventure film."

If companies only seem to promote a generic denomination when they can put forward a star, a character, or a cycle (that is, a resource uniquely possessed by the studio), they also seek to avoid restricting their audience, in mentioning a genre, to those who enjoy genre. Rick Altman has magisterially shown this by comparing the publicity prepared for the near-contemporaneous release of two biopics, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* and *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1999, pp. 57–58). The first film, made by Dieterle in 1940 and produced by Warner, recounts the life of the man who discovered the remedy for syphilis; the second, made by Cummings in 1939 and produced by Fox, depicts that of the inventor of the telephone. The success of two preceding productions, *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and *The Life of Emile Zola*, made in 1935 and 1937 by the same Dieterle, under contract with Warner, explains why the firm had chosen to exploit the biopic vein with Dr. Ehrlich. But if indeed it is the constitution of a biographical genre that makes possible the production of this third film – in accordance with the standardization/differentiation logic that we have seen earlier – neither the title nor the poster of the film foreground the work of the doctor (because of the delicacy of the subject), or the grounding of the film in the biopic genre. The "bullet" of the title is there to appeal to a masculine audience, the word "doctor" attracts the female audience, and the word "magic" completes the audience by suggesting a *tertium quid* that is not imbued with gendered sociological expectations. The text of the poster confirms this desire to address three different audiences: the first column refers to "the laughter of children . . . The love of a woman . . . the hope of a thousand men," while the second column, which foregrounds the face and name (in large letters) of the principal actor, Edward G. Robinson, does not mention the genre at all. Rather than circumscribing its subject (and potentially its audience) by including a generic designation, Warner Studios preferred to "cast a wide net" by saying nothing specific about the film.

Fox adopted the same strategy in *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*. Warner's publicity constantly mentions the names of the

characters Zola and Pasteur (Dr. Ehrlich is "another Zola" in certain posters where his name follows those of Pasteur and Zola in large letters printed in an identical typeface). The purpose of this is not to invoke a common genre, but to associate the film with a Warner cycle. In contrast, Fox, which did not have the benefit of such a cycle, had to specify the generic roots of *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* in order to cash in on the success of the biopic trend. To do so, Fox compared the film to other explicitly named "unforgettable" films made by a number of studios, including Warner's *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, *The Citadel* (the story of a London doctor) (Vidor, 1938), *The Life of Emile Zola*, *Anthony Adverse* (LeRoy, 1936), and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Lee, 1934).

Once created, a genre offers a limited commercial interest for the studios. A competitive situation that compels companies to distinguish themselves from one another by offering novelties while simultaneously mastering proven recipes establishes a standardization/differentiation dynamic in the commercial uses that producers make even of the notion of genre.

The Social Functions of Genre

If genres exist, that is, if films with shared semantic and syntactic characteristics are perceived as such by an audience and are produced in quantity over a relatively long period, it is because these films are successful, and because the audience is responsive to the genre. For that to happen, as Jean-Pierre Esquenazi signals, "a phenomenon of resonance needs to be generated between the world that pertains to a genre and the world that pertains to an interpretative community" (2001a, p. 43). This observation prompts very divergent hypotheses on the nature of this resonance. For some, genre expresses the desires, aspirations, and beliefs of the audience; for others, conversely, genre is a repressive structure of ideological containment that shapes and formats its viewers.

Genres and the production of stereotypes in contemporary culture

This opposition between the idea of cinematic genres as "cultural ritual – as a form of collective expression" (Schatz 1981, p. 13) – and genres conceived of as manipulative and reductive reflects a more fundamental split between two positions in contemporary culture – one valorizing mass production in popular culture, and the other devaluing such products as impoverished and alienating. These two attitudes give rise not only to two antagonistic conceptions of the social function of genre (the expression of social "truths"/constraining ideological enclosure), but also, as we shall see further on (see below, pp. 87–95), two ways of envisaging genre as a process of communication (a useful form of mediation/a blocking of interpretation). In other words, these attitudes reflect an essential ambivalence surrounding stereotyped products of mass culture.

One knows that the contemporary period is both the era of the stereotype, involving both the embracing and also the denunciation of it, and the era of its massive industrial distribution. In this context, art, for example, to be viewed as such must distance itself from the banal by distinguishing itself from it, while mass culture – from the serial novel to televised soap operas, Harlequin romances to commercial films, major cinematic genres to advertising pictures and slogans – sustains itself with stereotypes and collective forms. At the same time as the technical, ideological, and political conditions for a mass culture emerged in the West during the second half of the nineteenth century, the relationship between the *already said* and the *already seen* changed considerably. Commonplaces, which were formal categories of general argument integrated into *inventio*, stripped of all pejorative overtones before the end of the eighteenth century, became transmuted into stereotypes, in forms that were fixed, reductive, and reproducible. As Ruth Amossy signals, a "stereotype" is above all "a standardized product that is the outcome of mass distribution and consumption," leading to the design, in a cynical manner, of a "mechanization of cultural production" (1991, pp. 25–26).

In 1922, the notion appeared in the field of the social sciences with *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippman, who gave it a more neutral meaning that has remained fairly current since then ("pictures in our heads"). Arising out of this, analyses of stereotypical forms, including cinematic genres, have tended to pursue either of two opposed routes (Moine 1999). On one hand, analyses that adopt a pejorative conception of the stereotype attempt to demystify collective representations that serve to naturalize and promote power relationships through the dissemination of simplistic and repetitive images. Seeking to expose the *doxa* latent in the recurrent traits and banal images of these representations, such analyses make apparent the encoding, the hidden scripts, and the ideological hierarchies that are implicit in stereotypes. On the other hand, a study of the logic of stereotypes, even though it does not necessarily rehabilitate them, avoids investing them with a pejorative value. Instead, it focuses both on their usefulness (however partial or biased they may be) for explaining social factors, and also on their ability to provide interpretive cues for readers of a text or viewers of a film that help to make the work intelligible.¹

This ambivalent sense of the stereotype partly explains why many critics prefer to restrict generic designations to commercial films, and why, with respect to genre films made by filmmakers who are viewed as auteurs, they seek to show how the latter exceed or transgress the genre, how they exploit it in a way that is at some distance from the usual rules, clichés, and stereotypical motives of the genre, and how they pay homage to the genre, etc. I am not denying that some directors seize upon a genre in order to rework it in a parodic or original way, leaving viewers in no doubt about its divergence from the stereotype, rather than simply circulating it. This practice of incorporating or hijacking stereotypes is fairly characteristic of artistic creation since Flaubert. It is simply a question of emphasizing here that stereotypical practices (banal narrative outlines, impoverished clichés, simplified and conventional images of the world), unless they are carried out with a clearly signaled secondary intention, or in an individual style, cause the work and its creator to be relegated to the field of mass production.

An instrument of ideological repression

Genre can be regarded as an effective instrument for ideological containment that imposes on viewers, through recurrent stereotyped stories, solutions that conform to social norms. The regular showing of genre films serves the interests of the dominant classes, of which the cinema industry is a representative and an agent, because of the ways in which it lulls the public, leading it to share their own ideological positions. Genre thus guarantees a social and political status quo by reaffirming normative social values. Identification of this repressive and reactionary function of genre has been inspired both by the works of the Frankfurt School on media and cultural industries, and by Marxist reflections on ideology:

An ideology is a system (possessing its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an historic existence and role in a given society. Without entering into the problem of the relationships of a science with its past (ideological), let us say that ideology as a system of representations is distinct from science and that its practico-social function overpowers its theoretical function (or function of knowledge) . . . [The systematically organized representations] for most of the time are images, sometimes concepts, but it is primarily as a structure that they imposes themselves on the great majority of people, without passing through their "awareness." They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and act functionally on people through a process that is unconscious . . . In ideology, the real relationship [to the world] is inevitably invested in an imaginary relationship: a relationship that expresses a desire (conservative, conformist, reformist, revolutionary), even a hope or a nostalgia, that it might describe a reality. (Althusser 1966, pp. 238–243)

Viewed from this perspective, cinematic genres are carriers of an ideology to which their systems of representation give a form. This thesis, particularly invoked in cinema studies with regard to Hollywood genres, makes genres into structures through which

the dream factory can transmit its messages and values in a concealed way in order to deceive the viewer. For this reason we will not draw upon ideological readings here on particular individual genres, from America or elsewhere, but only on functional theories that regard a repressive function as being at the heart of, and as the pretext for, a genuine, normative system of genres.

One frequently reads, even though critics do not make explicit reference to neo-Marxist analyses, that musicals or adventure films are genres of evasion that divert viewers away from daily reality and social problems by drawing them into an imaginary or exotic world. Like Mia Farrow in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen, 1985) who forgets her social and emotional misery by returning incessantly to see the romance of the same name screened in the cinema, the viewer finds consolation in the magical spectacle of cinematic representation. Acceptance of the conventions of genre, which allows the audience to substitute a generic reality for an actual reality, and which licenses reverie and fantasy, explains this (temporary) fixation with stories of the marvelous.

It is, however, more interesting to focus on the displacement that is at work in genres which base their stories on "real" problems originating in other conflicts. The emergence of the fantastic film in Germany during the 1920s, or in the United States at the beginning of the 1930s, can be seen as resulting from a comparable desire (more or less conscious) to evacuate social and economic problems by transferring them to an imaginary level. The monster, under different guises, from *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) to *Dracula* (Browning, 1931), incarnates, crystallizes, and deforms sociological and ideological fears and tensions. Thus, *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) constructs itself around a double displacement of the Great Depression. At the beginning of the film, Carl Denham, a famous director, is searching through the streets of New York to find a young woman to play Beauty in a film of *Beauty and the Beast* he hopes to shoot on an island that has not yet been explored, on which lives a giant ape, Kong. He waits in front of the entrance of a refuge for women where unemployed young women are queued in line, and then intercepts a young, pretty thief, Ann, in the act of stealing an apple

from a shop display. While he comes to an agreement with the grocer to settle for this theft, Ann, weak with hunger, just about faints. Her face is then filmed in close-up and anchored in the subjectivity of Denham. The sight of this fainting fit, which is a symptom of starvation turned into an aesthetic object, convinces the director to hire the young woman.

The rest of the film presents the story of an expedition into a *terra incognita* that takes the human characters out of the geographically and historically identifiable real world. The ship chartered by Denham penetrates into a more and more distant "elsewhere," increasingly wild, and ever more remote in time: the ocean, then Kong's island, where one first discovers "primitives," and then a jungle populated with dinosaurs over which the giant ape rules. The film thus converts social danger (the crisis) into a sexual danger (the representation of the crisis exclusively involves a woman – Ann is a thief before becoming the catalyst for Kong's amorous passion). At the same time, it empties historical time of its actual culture (New York in the 1930s) in order to replace it with a mythical and imaginary world (the kingdom of Kong). It is not surprising that commentators and critics have often seen in the irruption of King Kong in New York the return, terrifying and phantasmagorical, of the repressed – whether psychic (the Other, desire, the all-powerfulness of impulses, etc.), or social (the Great Depression, the effects of which are quickly shown and evacuated at the beginning of the film, returning in the form of a monster that destroys everything in its passage) (Ishaghpour 1982, pp. 83–103).

Similarly, Anne-Marie Bidaud argues that the development of the disaster film in the 1970s should be seen as the staging of "diversionary fears that exorcise the fears of the public by placing the causes of them at a remove, outside of history" (1994, p. 220). The embroilment in Vietnam, the Watergate crisis, and the recession are thus hidden within, and displaced into, disasters that are caused by the natural elements: water in *The Poseidon Adventure* (Neame, 1972), fire in *The Towering Inferno* (Guillermin, 1974), earth in *Earthquake* (Robson, 1974), wild animals in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975). Moreover, in apocalyptic films,

just as in their science-fiction first-cousins that create futuristic worlds born of a nuclear explosion (for example, *Logan's Run*, Anderson, 1976), extreme destruction and danger often open out into hope or a rebirth. Not only is the ideological and political crisis in America during the 1970s replaced by other dangers, but a solution is also found for these displaced dangers that confirms and reinforces dominant social values and institutions.²

Judith Whright, in an article published in *Jump Cut* in 1974, an American journal that presented ideological readings during this period, successfully generalized this reactionary function to include all genres. She saw its aim as being to maintain the social status quo:

These films came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped to discourage any action that might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts. Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt. They serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts. When we return to the complexities of the society in which we live, the same conflicts assert themselves, so we return to genre films for easy comfort and solace – hence their popularity. (Whright 1995, p. 41)

Whright shows that four Hollywood genres – the western, the science-fiction film, the horror film, and the gangster film – dramatize conflicts that are not political, within a frame that is distanced from the social present, and in a micro-society that is reduced to a structure that is simplified to the extreme. In this carefully marked-out fictive space, each of these genres focuses on a central conflict for which it provides a solution. The western deals with violence and the conditions in which force can become legitimate; the horror film with the conflict between scientific rationalism and traditional beliefs; the science-fiction film

with problems posed by otherness, conceived of in this genre as a mode of intrusion; and the gangster film with the conflict between fear and the inherent desire to achieve social and economic success. From this last genre, for example, emerges the lesson that anonymity (that is, the common lot of the viewers) guarantees happiness. Success makes one vulnerable, by turning anyone who reaches the top into the enemy of all those who are also trying to succeed.

For Whright, the gangster film shows, then, that a pronounced elevation in the social hierarchy has catastrophic consequences. It justifies and confirms class boundaries. Her analysis starts with the observation that the world of gangsters, organized in a pyramidal structure in these films, is a true reductive model of the capitalist world (Whright 1995, pp. 47–49). A single man rules at the summit, and the films describe the rise, signposted with crimes and murders, of a man towards this coveted position. Rico in *Little Caesar* (LeRoy, 1931) eliminates all his rivals and takes total control of the gambling dens and black market in the city. In *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932) the young and ambitious Italian, Tony Camonte, becomes a body-guard of the gang-leader in the district of the south of Chicago, in 1920, dispatches all his rivals, and seizes both the position and the mistress of the boss. In *The Godfather: Part II* (Coppola, 1974), one follows the parallel rise of Vito Corleone, the old godfather, and of his son and heir, Michael Corleone. But these heroes pay a heavy price for this success. Rico is betrayed and killed by the police. In the first part of *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), Vito Corleone survives the attempted murder perpetrated against him by other members of the Mafia, but is greatly diminished. In the second part, his son Michael is left by his wife, has to cut down his own father, and must continuously defend himself against the enemies who surround him, the government, and the police. Death, solitude, and an endless struggle to stay alive and retain the position of godfather are the price he has to pay for success.

The character of the gangster embodies a dilemma: failure is a kind of death, but success reveals itself as dangerous and impossible. Moreover, gangster films implicitly maintain the capitalist

system by making the gangster a tragic figure. Genre does not relate this dilemma to social causes (the capitalist law of the jungle that also rules in the world of crime), but tends to make it a consequence of the psychological character of a hero who is unstable and devoured by ambition. This explains the string of "psychotic gangsters" such as Tom Powers (James Cagney) in *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931) who for no apparent reason crushes half a grapefruit into the face of Kitty, or shoots the stuffed head of a bear during the hold-up of a warehouse of furs. For Judith Wright, the spectacle of a gangster film removes from us the necessity of placing social hierarchies in question, conditioning us to believe that we should not leave our class for any price, and that we should remain content with our lot in life: it is better to survive, even though it may entail frugality and anonymity. The only alternative is to be a tragic hero.

A collective cultural expression

Other functional theories, diametrically opposed to the preceding one, assert that genres offer, via their fictive stories, solutions to real social problems and inherent cultural tensions. These theories, inspired by Lévi-Strauss's analyses of myth, often extend structural analyses of genre (cf. chapter 2, pp. 46–55) to make cinematic genre a form of collective cultural expression that enables the dramatization of the common values and fundamental cultural oppositions that structure a society, as well as more coincidental conflicts.

Genre films, then, are viewed as being like other versions of a myth, in that they express the particular system of oppositions and correlations that structure a culture. According to this hypothesis, a genre's success (the essential condition of its being) depends on its ability to reshuffle the trump cards of the culture and its social organization without changing the game, or, as Cawelti says, to produce "formulas" that give expression to cultural ambiguities and conflicts while proposing harmonious solutions for them (1976, p. 35). Just like myths, which exist in

a range of versions in any given culture (formed of repetitions, variations, and innovations around a single structure, with the same relationship between characters, the same spatial dispositions, etc.), genre films are engaged in a synthesizing activity – the product of a collective imaginary that puts the world and its elements into some kind of order.

Genres, conceived as myths or formulas, therefore, offer specific configurations that materialize structuring oppositions in characters, situations, and culturally significant, historically determined places. This can be seen in the western when it organizes its geographical and social space around a frontier that separates Wilderness from Civilization. Genre films thus create a narrative structure that materializes the mental structure of a social conceptualization (Wright 1975, pp. 185–194). Thomas Schatz, for instance, divides up the map of classical Hollywood genres into two structurally different groups in which each genre does no more than encode specific conflicts between fundamental cultural values through particular narrative structures (1981, pp. 27–30). In his view, the western, the gangster film, and the detective film delimit, within a space of particular actions, a “symbolic arena” governed by conventions, and by conflicts that are linked to the order and the control imposed by this space. In contrast, the musical, screwball comedy, and melodrama dramatize interpersonal tensions in non-specific spaces: how to reconcile one’s views with those of another? How to integrate oneself into a community? The genres in the first group dramatize struggles to dominate, organize, and impose order on a space, which explains the large number of iconographic conventions they employ, while genres in the second group are centered on conflicts that are more psycho-sociological than physical, and which are usually gendered. Each of these genres thus mediates particular cultural tensions. We need, however, to signal a major problem posed by this model. By making the specific social functions of genres derive from a divided classification, it simplifies each genre (the relations between men and women, for example, can play a role in the western), and it ignores the mixing of genres (how are the conflicts in musicals set in the

West organized?). Moreover, its explanatory value is singularly limited by the fact that it simply leaves to one side many Hollywood genres, such as adventure films, the biopic, the horror film, etc.

Adopting a more overtly myth-based perspective, the anthropologist Lee Drummond (1996) analyzes successful American genre films produced from the 1960s to the 1990s. The movies he selects are all fantasy movies, which he defines as "non-realist" films. These involve "space operas" (films with extraterrestrial beings), films with super-heroes, horror films (which are only fleetingly dealt with in his book), and films in which the main character is an animal. The fantasy movie category encompasses, then, all genres that explore, outside of reality, relations between human beings and creatures that are in- or non-human and traverse the shifting and complex limits of humanity. For Drummond, these films do not owe their success exclusively to the economic determinism of a powerful commercial strategy, but to the fact that they, like myths, provide a mechanism for defining human identity in its variability.

Contemporary fantasy movies present a world of virtual experiences to our view that are organized according to three semiotic dimensions. They correspond to continuous axes, determined at both ends by contradictory concepts, around which contemporary American culture structures itself and problematizes its representations of humanity. The first dimension consists of two poles, "Animal" and "Machine," and pertains essentially to fantasy film. The second dimension, involving a tension between "Us"/"Me" and "Them"/"the Other," generates relations of affinity, inclusion, identity and kind, exclusion, and alterity. Finally, the third dimension is organized around principles of creation and destruction, expressed as "Life Force" and "Death Force." Fantasy movies, from James Bond to *E.T.*, passing through *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, depict actual relations of conflict between men and machines (seen as ever more present, useful but alienating) by proposing *virtual models of relations* with machines.

Thus, James Bond, for Drummond, is before anything else a double-agent of the capitalist system in which one possesses and

employs machines. In fact, even though 007 makes use of machines, he exploits them. Unlike us, he is also the Master, since he controls or destroys them in the course of extraordinary adventures – as the mechanized pursuit-sequences in the prologues to each film demonstrate. An incomparable lover, he is also a technician of passion, thus displaying the prowess to successfully unite contraries (sensuality/technology). The *Star Wars* trilogy presents another variation on the relationship between men and machines. It includes in the *mise en scène* robots that are androids, but nevertheless a little bit human, robots that have a non-human appearance but which are rather more human, Masters of machines, fabulous animals, and creatures that combine human and mechanical aspects in their bodies in various ways. Luke, the hero, embodies different states of relationship with machines in the course of the episodes and his combats. Completely human at the beginning of the saga, little by little he becomes a Master of machines before “mechanizing” himself in his turn. The “light side” and the “dark side” of the Force, leit-motifs of the cycle (relating to the third “Life Force”/“Death Force” semiotic dimension), tend to converge to the degree that Luke’s body, more and more repaired, comes to resemble that of his father Darth Vader – totally mechanized. The success of *Star Wars*, the third episode of which abandons the epic of machines in order to focus in a more conventional way on a family epic, also derives from the trilogy’s imaginary exploration (both detailed and contradictory) of the distinction between human (“Us”) and non-human (“Them” and “Sexless creatures” – *It*). Finally, in *Jaws*, the shark is an animal that is wholly animal, unequivocally ranked in the group of “Them” adversaries, an inhuman predator that endangers the family of one of the protagonists, a destructive beast to hate. But this animal is also presented as a killing “machine.” As a distanced and mechanized creature, it prefigures the cruel dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*, the stars of a new biotechnological world – that nevertheless recover their animal nature when they reveal themselves, against all expectations, to be capable of procreating.

A conception of cinematic genre as myth leads inevitably to the attribution of a ritual function to the viewing of a genre film. By offering a representation of a society's value system codified in rules and functions that are known by all, a genre helps viewers to recognize themselves as members of that society. It thus permits the audience to share together both the common values and references that it offers, and also, at a symbolic level, mediations that can have the effect of resolving conflicts, thus assisting society to maintain itself. The regular consumption of films of the same genre is explained not only by the fact that a community sees itself in the genre, but also by the fact that it provides a periodic rendezvous capable, like rituals, of uniting a group through the shared pleasure of recognizing common values together. In this way, the repeated experience of watching westerns contributes to the construction of a national identity. This particular genre emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 1910s in the context of an Americanization of cinema in the USA that accompanied the larger development of a "New World" national identity (Abel 2002). Since this era, westerns have contributed to the formation of a "national imaginary community" by establishing symbolic representations of things to be included, and things to be excluded (Anderson 1991, p. 4). For decades, the American western has permitted "Americanness" to be clarified for diverse populations who had no opportunity to live through the actual winning of the West. These films establish a relationship of familiarity between recent immigrants and the past. Constituting a myth of origins that celebrates national roots and values, westerns thus become a commemorative ritual that puts a twentieth-century American in touch with the pioneer spirit of the past. For those who believe in the mythic and ritual function of genres, the appeal to a sense of community and the resolution of conflicts in the space of the western are neutral cultural operations, while for those who adhere to the view that the discursive strategies of the film industry have an ideological function, this appeal is a form of manipulation.

The limits of ideological and ritual functions

The main objection that one could formulate against the conception of genre as an ideological yoke, encircling the audience in the normative, soothing constraint of Hollywood's rhetoric, is that it presupposes a passive spectator who unquestioningly accepts the ideological prescriptions. Genre, in this conception, seeks to impose a univocal, universal reading upon those who view it, with viewers being regarded as a homogeneous group who are constrained to accept the interpretation thrust upon them. Serving as a true opium of the people, genre is presumed to anesthetize, as if by nature, all readings that are subversive, critical, or divergent, and all possibilities of multiple receptions.

The approach to genre as ritual presents an analogous problem. To say that a genre sorts out contemporary problems or cultural conflicts at a symbolic level, and that, in so doing, it responds to an audience expectation which is addressed in the form of a ritualized spectacle, is to postulate a homogeneous audience for this genre that shares the same values, and is aware of the same issues. One could certainly object that the audiences of Hollywood genres are targeted by gender, or that they are aimed at a young audience, like horror and science-fiction films after the 1950s, and that viewers, since they form a segmented audience, form a community that is united by similar cultural models. But the cultural world of viewers is also ordered by other determinants (for example, ethnic or social ones), which, for this reason, are liable to shift in their applicability to a particular genre. The definition of genre as ritual, therefore, is an ethnocentric explanation, insofar as it postulates the ritual function of a genre on the basis of filmic texts alone, neglecting the experience, the investments, and the interpretations of particular viewers. Even if genre is a structure that articulates a social sense, there are many different ways – the fruits of multiple decisions – in which this sense can be invested with meaning. How else to understand the success of Hollywood genres overseas – that is, outside of American culture? Viewers from France, Hong Kong, and America – to propose a selection which, in my view, is still too

homogeneous – undoubtedly do not recognize themselves in the same way in a western or a martial arts film.

It is equally important to stress that it is mainly the analysis of Hollywood genres that has given rise to these two antagonistic social functions and brought them into prominence. This preoccupation with Hollywood is prompted by the powerful presence of genres in this cinema, which has motivated attempts to devise general systematic explanations that can explain this presence. Nevertheless, without wanting to be too schematic, I would suggest that the economic organization and ideology of the Hollywood film industry, the cultural spearhead of capitalism, undoubtedly explains why Hollywood genres are instruments of control and ideological repression to a greater extent than in other cinemas that are less comprehensively structured into a unique system. Because Hollywood cinema is an industrial cinema funded by large groups of financiers, it is obliged to serve their economic and ideological interests. Finally, one should remember that American ideology is a non-conceptual ideology that insinuates itself through myths (Bidaud 1994, pp. 14–15). These myths make it possible for a vision of the world that is historically and politically conditioned to emerge from history and become naturalized.

This last point explains how ideological normalization and collective cultural expression can work together in genre films, rather than forcing a compromise between the two social functions. In fact, while myth proclaims the order of a social world, and ritual unites its participants around the values of this society in a codified collective ceremony, their worth and communicative functions also serve the interests of social permanence. Myth articulates an order that ritual works to sustain, with both expressing and assuring values in the same operation (Balandier 1988). By finding and imposing collective imaginary responses to real issues, myth depoliticizes and purifies conflicts in contemporary societies, rendering them harmless. Myth is not, therefore, a neutral category, a simple effect of structure. As Barthes (1957) demonstrated, myth is inscribed in an ideological intention.

One can, then, agree with Rick Altman that the success of a Hollywood genre results from a conjunction of the ideological interests of the studios and the cultural expectations of the viewers. The formula resulting from this reciprocal adaptation of Hollywood's pressing aspirations and the desires of the public – a semantic-syntactic equilibrium that stabilizes a genre – has the effect of masking the ideological framework (Altman 1989, p. 99). One can better understand, then, how genre films authorize their viewers to experience cultural transgressions vicariously in the course of the film, and to derive pleasure from doing so. The gangster film or the horror film, for example, allow the enjoyment of a generic, codified, culturally inadmissible pleasure by giving access to the witnessing of crimes and murders, while at the same time reasserting the cultural, social, and moral values of the law *in extremis*. The gangster or the monster go a little too far, they commit a heinous crime, and they end up being caught. Similarly, as Altman shows, the counter-cultural pleasure of the viewer in the musical *Top Hat* is at its height when Ginger Rogers, driven to distraction at night by the noise of the tap shoes of Fred Astaire (who is dancing in the room above), after having seen the manager of the hotel, goes herself in a state of undress to accost the perpetrator of the annoyance. In order for the film to fulfill the conventions of the genre, and for the amorous comings and goings to get under way, it is necessary for this meeting to take place, whereas morality would dictate that Ginger should again telephone the manager of the hotel from her room. Because she ascends to the room of her neighbor, she mistakes Fred Astaire, who has simply been invited there, for the hotel guest. The following day, she discovers that the man who has rented the room is none other than the husband of her best friend, whom she has not met before. The transgression of the code of propriety is necessary for activating a confusion surrounding the identity of the male protagonist (since Fred Astaire is not really the husband of Ginger's best friend). This confusion allows the film to present over an hour's worth of romantic misunderstanding, during which the pleasure of the genre completely overpowers any respect for social conventions. Even though she

hesitates, Ginger ends up dancing with Fred under a kiosk, then by dancing romantically "cheek to cheek" with him at a ball, under the eyes of her best friend! But all these transgressions are erased at the end of the film when the misidentifications are clarified. Morality is preserved, the infringements of good manners forgiven, and the pleasure of the genre made culturally harmless, since the whole business concludes with the marriage of the two principal protagonists.

Burlesque film employs yet another strategy to recuperate the ideological transgressions that are presented. Even though the laziness of the heroes of slapstick treads on the toes of the work ethic, and their larcenies and the damage they cause affront propriety, their inventiveness, their lack of restraint, and their acrobatic talents can beguile viewers. Nevertheless, their marginal status, their violence, and their inability to fit in with the world ensures that they cannot be accepted as models. One laughs heartily not only at their victims (policemen, matrons), but also at the transgressive heroes themselves. Burlesque disorder, carefully contained in this way, authorizes a counter-cultural pleasure without generating any social danger.

The Communicative Function of Genre

The communicative function of a genre is determined by the conventions according to which it is constructed and recognized. This means that in order for a film to be related to a genre, it needs not only to be classified – whether the generic designation be proposed by producers, critics, or viewers – but also to be "read" and interpreted. An awareness of the generic identity of a film allows its viewer to recognize "an established formula for communication" that serves to "organize its system of expectations," to use Casetti's terms (cf. chapter 2). To appeal to a generic category for the purpose of proposing, receiving, or thinking about a film, is to invest it with a "horizon of expectation," defined by Jauss as a "system of references capable of being objectively

formulated," which, with respect to each work at the moment in history when it appears, relates to three main factors: the audience's experience of the genre to which the formulation refers, the form and thematic preoccupations of earlier works of which it is presumed to be aware, and the opposition between poetic language and practical language, and between the imaginary world and daily reality (Jauss 1978, p. 53).

Generic "rails"

The assignation of a film to a particular genre, whether signposted or self-evident, is designed to trigger in the viewer a memory and awareness of the genre – to which he or she is disposed by regular viewing of genre films, or even, to a certain degree, because of a diffused cultural knowledge surrounding the genre. Genre constitutes a space in which experiences occur that determine the nature of the expectations and interpretation that the film is designed to elicit. As long as one considers it a communication pact, a promise, or an interpretive contract, genre organizes the frame of reference in which the film is viewed. Genre does not function, therefore, as a classificatory category, but as a familiar structure that is identifiable because of its play of conventions. This play of conventions makes possible the film's reception, and, consequently, its success. Moreover, in determining the expectations of the viewer, a genre intervenes in the anticipation that governs the perceptual and cognitive activity of the viewer. To produce a genre film, therefore, is to furnish the audience with a context for the interpretation of the film; to see a genre film, with an awareness of its generic origins, is to interpret the film in this context. But, in determining the interpretive framework for understanding the film, genre both opens and shuts various possibilities for appropriation and comprehension. That is why theorists sometimes emphasize the ability of a genre to help make the film intelligible, and sometimes its propensity to short-circuit interpretation by predetermining it. Thus Barthélemy Amengual violently condemns genre films because they extort a

"blank check" from the viewer, a "blank sheet of paper that they sign without determining the content," which offers them a "crutch," thinking for them, and setting them traveling down "rails" (1993, p. 202). The generic "rails" along which genre films roll can be considered either as useful guides or as an obligatory route that constrains the viewer. It is not surprising that this latter conception unites critics who, like Amengual, repudiate genre works (which, in their eyes, are the source of a mediocre consumerist pleasure) in favor of auteur works, and most of those who see genre as having an ideologically enclosing function (cf. see above, pp. 71-75).

A genre film proffers (or imposes) genre indicators to the viewer, which the latter receives and activates by relating them to his or her memory of the genre. These indicators, which are responsible for arousing generic expectations by exemplifying the established conventions of the genre, are not merely disseminated in the text of the film. They signal the communication of the film even before it is viewed. Reviews of the film, and the promotional discourse surrounding it, can emphasize one or more of its generic intentions, thus influencing not only the choice of the viewer, but also his or her attitude. Trailers, advertising posters, and the jackets of video-cassettes serve equally as indicators. Thus, during the past fifteen years, posters for French comedies have frequently presented several characters, most often dressed in vivid or contrasting colors, who stand out against a white background. Familiarity with this composition and this choice of colors, then, activates a specific generic expectation among viewers. The credits and the opening sequences also mark a contractual moment of entry into the fiction through which the genre film proclaims its affiliation. Thus, the graphic characteristic of the letters in which the title of *Rio Bravo* (Hawks, 1959) is written evokes the West. The name of its director, Howard Hawks, and the names of its stars, John Wayne and Dean Martin (who are closely associated with the western), the music, and the wide shot of a wagon train and horses advancing into the depths of a canyon are also emblems of the genre that condition the expectation of the viewer. Similarly, *Les Trois frères* (*The Three*

Brothers) (Bourdon and Campan), one of the greatest hits at the French national box office in 1995, arouses a comic expectation right from the opening credits by foreshadowing in writing that the work will be "a film about the Unknowns." For French viewers, this recalls the team of three comics nicknamed "The Unknowns" (*Les Inconnus*) who were very popular, first on stage and then on television, at the beginning of the 1990s. Because viewers would not necessarily realize the connection between the film and "The Unknowns" from the names of the actors/directors (Bourdon and Campan) alone, the film advertises its comic nature more directly by presenting and foregrounding "The Unknowns" as a label. The first three sequences of the film confirm its genealogical links with this comic trio, since the three main characters (the three brothers) are acted by the comedians who formed the team of "The Unknowns" on the stage and on television. Inherently, then, these sequences immediately confirm the comic intention of the film. The three brothers do not yet know one another, and they are each shown in their respective professional activities. One of them, having an ornate hoop with a pink bow on his head, is illegally hawking his wares, and extols the merits of a miraculous stain-remover that gets rid of, as he stutters, the "caca-, the cata-, the catastrophes." Another one of the brothers, a "suit," arrives with a smug air and false nonchalance at the business where he works, where all men are called "my chook," conversing familiarly among themselves with a hypocritical absence of hierarchy, kissing one another as a mode of greeting, and sporting ponytails. The third works under the orders of his future father-in-law operating the video-surveillance system in the shop, gluing his eyes on the women who are getting undressed in the changing rooms as soon as his boss turns his back. These three expository scenes thus clearly proclaim the generic intention of the film, which is to offer a comedy of manners. In the case of Hollywood films, the use of indicators that insistently draw attention at the opening of the film to its generic affiliation is part of a deliberate strategy: if a generic interpretive frame is firmly put in place early in the work, a wager is then laid, as Jacqueline Nacache signals, that "the viewer will

lose all awareness of the conditions under which the film is being experienced, owing to this narrative fluidity which delivers a Hollywood transparency" (1995, p. 17).

The metaphor of generic rails has the disadvantage of placing too much emphasis on the repetition and predictability of genre films. One knows that certain genre films, although strongly encoded (as, for example, the horror film or the thriller), like to frustrate the expectations of their viewers by offering unanticipated variations, as much for the sake of continuing to arouse fear in the viewer as to lead him or her through breathtaking unexpected or unforeseen twists in the action. Furthermore, as Casetti (among others) has emphasized, genre is only able to bind the spectator to the film through a *preliminary* communicative pact – a pact that opens up a space for negotiation when the film introduces new configurations and changes to the relationships in the system of conventions of the genre with which the viewer is already familiar (1998, pp. 29–36). The spectator is then led to “renegotiate” the generic communicational frame in which the film has been offered to him or her, and in which he or she is disposed to view it. If viewers are able to reconcile these departures with the “law of the genre,” if they regard them as an attribute of the semantic or syntactic systems of the genre, or if they update the generic communicative pact in the light of these changes, they continue to read the film in a generic perspective that is modified in due course. That is why, rather than speaking of a contract or pact which firmly binds the two main parties (the producer and the viewer), one can accept the proposition of François Jost, who views audiovisual genre as “a promise that brings expectations with it to the viewer, which the vision of the program [or of a film] puts to the test” (1997, p. 16). Such a conception, without denying the predetermination of the interpretation that generic anchoring imposes on a film, relativizes that very interpretation: promises only engage those who make them, or those who believe in them.

It is also necessary to emphasize that genre is not simply a static interpretive framework, but that a dynamic generic process accompanying the reception of a film can facilitate the

integration of exogenous elements. The semantic-syntactic arrangement that characterizes a genre film and gives it an interpretive context can reveal itself as an agent of integration. This function helps to explain, for example, the success of directors who have come from Hong Kong to the new Hollywood. Thus, in *Face/Off* (Woo, 1997), the codified texture of the encounter of a virtuous policeman and a psychopathological criminal, which can only end with the death of one of the protagonists, presents a generic frame familiar to western audiences in which the choreography and characteristic effects of Hong Kong swordplay films can come to be written. This integration is facilitated, furthermore, by the penchant of American cinema for exoticism, from *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1946) – from which *Face/Off*, moreover, imitates the famous mirror scene – to *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974).

Generic mediation

The communicative functions of genre have often been studied with respect to genre films – that is, with respect to stable semantic-syntactic formulas that follow a predictable schema. This approach considerably reduces the scope of the notion of genre, and fails to account for its effective uses, given that critics use the same generic designations for films by auteurs. Such an outcome derives chiefly from the way most studies regard producers and filmic texts as the only agents entrusted with registering a generic intention, to which the interpretations of viewers are supposed to conform. But, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer observes with respect to literary genres, a “readerly regime relating to genericity” also exists, which is present in all acts of reception – insofar as all reception implies an interpretation that could not take place without reference to a generic horizon (1989, p. 151).

In other words, a film’s horizon of generic expectation is determined by two regimes of genericity: an authorial regime that proposes, and a spectatorial regime that disposes. Sometimes, however, the spectatorial regime does not coincide with

the authorial regime. In the case of generic expectations, the frustration of those expectations makes interpretation of the film impossible unless they are replaced by another interpretive system. For example, some viewers of *The Thin Red Line* (Malick, 1998) – which appeared on the screen shortly after the success of the war film *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) – expected to see a genre film (a war film) because of the temporal proximity of one film to the other, and because the advertisement and theme of the film gave them reason to think so. As I myself was able to judge from the discontented and impatient reactions from those in the theater (the expected action had not eventuated), followed by the departure of many viewers, the management of the authorial and spectatorial regimes, which had been inadequate, had not been able to ensure that this alternative interpretive system could become established.

That is why one should define genre as one of the mediations that renders a film intelligible by permitting an audience (that knows and recognizes the generic category) to receive and understand it. It is probably the case that with genre film, generic mediation, which anticipates the pleasure of the genre, is one of the most important forms of mediation. But there are other “ferry-men,” such as the auteur, the stars, and even the type of theater in which the film is projected, who can play the role of mediator between the film and its audience. Genre is thus one of the possible ways of accessing a film, one of the possible conditions of its intelligibility, whether or not the film manifests a generic intention in other ways. This partly explains why we do not all ascribe the same film to the same genre, and why we are able to see *Stagecoach* as a western, as a John Wayne film, or as a film by John Ford, etc.

It also happens that generic mediation can lead to an interpretation that carries with it a precise, careful reading of a film. The system of expectations imposed by genre can be so oppressively laden with meaning for the viewer that it provokes him or her to reject what it proposes. This is what Jean-Pierre Esquenazi demonstrates in comparing the literal description of the fifth sequence in *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) – in which we first

encounter Madeleine, whom Scottie the detective must follow, in the restaurant – with descriptions given by commentators on the film (2001a, pp. 122–125). The camera, after a traveling shot that moves toward the outside of the door of the restaurant, then a fade-in shot of Scottie's face, swings around in an arc that makes an angle of 60 degrees in the direction of Scottie's gaze. This reverse traveling shot is accompanied by a panoramic shot towards the left, which causes the detective to disappear out of the frame. In the far distance there then appears a clear glimpse of a bare back in the field, on which the camera accelerates its reframing before moving forward, to the accompaniment of a slow, romantic musical theme, as far as the young blond woman with the naked back (Madeleine). After this shot, which lasts 40 seconds, Hitchcock returns to the gaze of Scottie, who is not alongside, but almost opposite. It becomes clear, then, that it is only the camera that is looking at the naked back of the Hitchcockian heroine, whom Scottie cannot physically see. Five shots later, we focus on the elegant profile of Madeleine, well set-off against the dark red décor of the restaurant, before returning to Scottie who is seated at the bar with his back turned to the young woman. Even though his face expresses a trace of emotion, it is still not possible for him to have seen the image of Madeleine that the camera has presented to us. Hitchcock, then, does not show us what the detective sees, since he twice separates the gaze of the camera from that of the character, even though he lets the effects of Madeleine's presence on Scottie be seen. Even though it is impossible to attribute the sight of the naked back and the profile of the young woman to the detective, all commentators situate these images within the subjective gaze of Scottie. As Esquenazi explains, this interpretation is only possible because it is constructed out of a habitual expectation that occurs in Hollywood cinema and, more particularly, in *film noir*. Indeed, in films of this genre, the *femme fatale*, imaged as a sublime, unattainable woman, appears and is immediately taken in charge by the male gaze of the hero, who will possess her by the end of the film. From *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941) to *The Woman in the Window* (Lang, 1944), *film noir* thus presents

the same "primitive scene" which links the fascinated gaze of a man to the body of a woman offered for display. Generic mediation, while it allows us to understand Scottie's fascination for the image of Madeleine, prevents us from seeing that in *Vertigo* he is preoccupied with an image that resides completely within the imagination of his character.

Two observations suggest themselves at the conclusion of this examination of the functions of cinematic genres. First, cinematic genre, whatever function one imagines it has, is both a good and a bad object. While it is useful for the industrial manufacture of films, this alone is not a particularly good selling point in the marketing of films. The ritual function of genres and their celebration of the values of a community are also a form of ideological repression. While they assist the viewer to form an expectation that makes the film receivable, they predetermine and block interpretations. On the other hand, while one can theorize the effects of genre on a viewer, each genre and each generic reading must be considered in its context of production and reception. While one recognizes an economic, ideological, ritual, or communicative function for genre, it only takes shape in historical and social contexts, and in the context of particular instances of reception.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, "Narrative Structures in Fleming," the lecture on James Bond published by Umberto Eco (1984) in *The Role of The Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, pp. 144–174.
- 2 On this subject, see Hélène Puiseux (1988) *L'Apocalypse nucléaire et son cinéma*, Paris, Cerf, 7^{ième} Art; Ignacio Ramonet (1980) "Les Films-catastrophes américains. Des fictions pour la crise," in *Le Chewing-gum des yeux*, Paris, Éditions Alain Moreau.