

## **A2 Media Studies essay on Genre**

### ***To what extent can generic conventions be seen to restrict film-makers or to provide a recognisable template in which creativity can flourish?***

Conventions of many genres were established during the Hollywood Studio system of the 1930's, where it is argued that 'pure' genre films were made. In this period generic conventions proved to be a huge help to film studios, as they could produce films easily, cheaply and quickly, churning out films like a car factory. It was also useful that studios each had a specific genre linked to them (MGM - musical, Universal - horror) so that film-makers could use the same actors and equipment for each film they made, while studios could control the whole process of film-making by having vertical integration - owning the production, distribution and even cinemas where they showed the films.

Once genre had been established in this period, the audience began to rely on genres to help them choose the films they wanted to see, and so film-makers had to continue making genre films to make sure they did not lose their audience. Once this happened, genre did start becoming a little restrictive for film-makers, the conventions acting like a toolbox from which directors had to include elements, making it extremely difficult to make a film that is both wholly creative and yet successful. Producers, however, have always enjoyed and will continue to enjoy the effects of generic conventions, as they provide an existing market to aim films towards, minimising the financial risk of film production.

It is also important to note that although directors can be creatively restricted in a genre, there is still creative freedom within that genre with which to experiment. For example, the 'Western' has developed since the Hollywood Studio system due to directors using generic conventions as the background for their film's context, but having narrative as a force that may also explore the limits of a genre.

Will Wright defined this development of the genre in 3 stages - the 'classic' Westerns between 1920-49, the 'transitional' Westerns of the 1950's, and the 'professional' Westerns of the post 1960's. Since then, the 'revisionist' Western has also been brought about by films like 'Unforgiven' (1992). Here, director Clint Eastwood reacted against some of the traditional generic conventions of the Western to make a successful film by introducing new elements, reactivating a genre which had lost touch with a modern audience wanting special effects and fast paced action. In the 1980s, adherence to generic conventions had proved restrictive for Westerns, failing to meet the expectations of a contemporary audience, thus leading to a major decline in this genre.

Eastwood, however, questioned the values present in the Western conventions by using 'Unforgiven' to show a different side to people of the time. The Indians were not presented as the antagonists, and a black protagonist (Morgan Freeman) was included to make sure the film was both appealing to the widest audience and demonstrating current attitudes to race. The representation of women also changed reflecting changes in ideology since the 'golden age' of Westerns, 1960's. Women were presented in the film as active as well as in traditional roles, and they are seen to react against their accepted role in society.

To remain a Western, the film did have to include the iconic signifiers of a western - hats, guns, and whiskey, the setting - 19<sup>th</sup> century America, and the star attraction of Eastwood as the anti-hero - a protagonist with a rough edge. It is difficult to evaluate whether these will have helped or restricted the director, he may have felt reluctant to conform to the conventions, or pleased that they were there to be used as a reminder of the era of the Western for the section of the audience able to remember them. Whatever the case, these factors were similarities to older Western films such as 'The Searchers' (1956). It is also argued that 'Unforgiven' is an 'auteur' film - Eastwood using genre as a backdrop for his own innovative visions, which may mean the genre only formed a basis to help Eastwood with.

Steve Neale describes genre films as being 'instances of repetition and difference' - a film has to both conform to its genre and have a unique twist to become successful with an audience not wanting to become bored with the same repetitive elements. 'Unforgiven' certainly does this, and accordingly was met with critical acclaim, and so is a good example for genre providing a director with the

foundations for a film, but allowing enough creative freedom to be original and therefore successful, so perhaps even today generic conventions still help film-makers more than they restrict them.

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**Teacher assessment**

This essay was completed within a time limit of 40 minutes, the required format for answers in the OCR A2 'Issues and Debates' paper.

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Clear and coherent, the student raises many key issues. Historical context is relevant whilst some illustrative material could be included. The innovation: repetition debate is addressed although further references to specific film sequences would be valuable. A discussion of 'Unforgiven' could raise issues around morality and dominant ideology which have evolved since the westerns of the 1960s. Useful reference to Neale is made whilst issues of auteur status are raised but not fully addressed. This essay would attract a grade on the A/B borderline.