



genre and

Hollywood

Steve Neale

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GENRE AND HOLLYWOOD

In this important new book, Steve Neale provides a comprehensive introduction to genre and Hollywood cinema. He discusses all the major concepts, theories and accounts of Hollywood and genre, and the key genres which theorists and critics have tended to write about—from musicals to horror films, from action-adventure to the western. He also offers detailed revisionist accounts of melodrama and *film noir*, and puts forward new arguments about the place and importance of genre in understanding Hollywood cinema.

Neale argues that many existing accounts of genre and Hollywood have provided a partial and misleading account of Hollywood's output. He calls for broader and more flexible conceptions of genre and genres, for more attention to be paid to the discourses and practices of Hollywood itself, for the nature and range of Hollywood's films to be looked at in more detail, and for any assessment of the social and cultural significance of Hollywood's genres to take account of industrial factors.

Assessing the place of genre and genres in new and old Hollywood alike, Neale concludes that genre remains an important means of understanding Hollywood, its history and its films, but that only an expanded conception of genre can account for the variety and nature of its output.

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SIGHTLINES

Edited by Edward Buscombe, Southampton Institute and Philip Rosen,
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Cinema Studies has made extraordinary strides in the past two decades. Our capacity for understanding both how and what the cinema signifies has been developed through new methodologies, and hugely enriched in interaction with a wide variety of other disciplines, including literary studies, anthropology, linguistics, history, economics and psychology. As fertile and important as these new theoretical foundations are, their very complexity has made it increasingly difficult to track the main lines of conceptualization. Furthermore, they have made Cinema Studies an ever more daunting prospect for those coming new to the field.

Sightlines maps out the ground of major conceptual areas within Cinema Studies. Each volume is written by a recognized authority to provide a clear and detailed synopsis of current debates within a particular topic. Each makes an original contribution to advancing the state of knowledge within the area. Key arguments and terms are clearly identified and explained, seminal thinkers are assessed, and issues for further research are laid out. Taken together, the series constitutes an indispensable chart of the terrain which Cinema Studies now occupies.

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This book is dedicated to my parents, Ron and Doreen
Neale,
with love and thanks

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INTRODUCTION

After a lengthy period of neglect, there are signs of a significant revival of interest in the topic of genre and Hollywood. While this book has been in press, Rick Altman has published *Film/Genre* (1999), James Naremore has published *More Than Night* (1998), and Jonathan Munby has published *Public Enemies, Public Heroes* (1999). Altman explores a number of innovative ideas about genre in general. Naremore and Munby offer revisionist accounts of *film noir* and the gangster film respectively. All three take advantage of archival resources that were simply unavailable to those who pioneered the study of genre and genres in the 1960s and 1970s. And all three take on board some of the theoretical and ideological agendas that have been set since then. They show that genre remains as important and productive a means of thinking about Hollywood, its history, its audiences and its films as its pioneers and initial proponents always claimed. But because they each present new research and new thinking, they also help make the point that a fresh assessment of its strengths and weaknesses is long overdue.

In keeping with the other volumes in the *Sightlines* series, *Genre and Hollywood* is designed to review existing work and to present new ideas and new findings. Striking a balance between the two has not always been easy, particularly because I argue that the conventional wisdom embodied in many existing accounts is often open to question: that conventional definitions of genre are often narrow and restrictive, that traditional accounts of a number of genres are inaccurate or incomplete, that aesthetic and cultural theories of genre are prone to overgeneralization, and that accounts of the role played by genre and genres in Hollywood's practices, Hollywood's history and Hollywood's output are often partial and misleading. Like Richard Maltby (1995:107–43), my own view is that many of these accounts have been driven by critical and theoretical agendas rather than by a commitment to detailed empirical analysis and thorough industrial and historical research. It is also that these accounts are usually underpinned by received definitions of genre, that these definitions are open to question on theoretical grounds, and thus that conceptual and empirical enquiry need, here as elsewhere, to inform one another.

It is in conducting these arguments that existing accounts are presented and discussed, and here I have sought to be as comprehensive as I can. Some accounts focus on definitions of genre, some on individual genres, some on the

general characteristics of Hollywood's genres and some on the sociocultural roles they perform as a whole. Other accounts focus on their commercial and industrial basis and on their role in Hollywood's output, others still on combinations of them all. The topic of genre and Hollywood is clearly multifaceted. I have therefore divided this book into three distinct parts. The first deals with basic definitions and general concepts, the second with individual genres, and the third with theories, descriptions and industrially oriented accounts of Hollywood's generic array.

Part I contains two chapters. The first is concerned with definitions. It focuses on fundamental concepts and points of debate within the context of an historically oriented account of their emergence inside and outside Film Studies. Here the work of major figures like Alloway, Altman, Buscombe, McArthur and Ryall is presented alongside basic concepts like iconography. It is noted that genre, a word meaning 'type', a word which is therefore logically applicable to all kinds of cultural forms, tends here to be associated almost exclusively with Hollywood and with mass-oriented commercial culture in general. The origins of this thinking are outlined, and the revisionist ideas of Tudor and Williams in Film Studies and of those working on genre in philosophy, literature and linguistics are presented and discussed.

These discussions provide the basis for number of arguments. One is that genre is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, a phenomenon that encompasses systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and groups or corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all. Another is that genre is ubiquitous, a phenomenon common to all instances of discourse: there is a generic aspect to all texts; all texts 'participate', to use Derrida's term, 'in one or several genres' (1992:230). These two arguments dovetail with a third, which is that the concept of genre in Film Studies should logically expand to include categories, corpuses and terms like 'feature film' and 'documentary' as well as 'science fiction', 'horror' and 'western', and that on these grounds alone most films are multiply generic. The ramifications of these arguments for the traditional notion of 'the genre film' are explored and examined at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 looks in more detail at some of the dimensions of genre identified in **Chapter 1**. Beginning with the concept of verisimilitude, a concept which focuses on audience expectations and textual norms, **Chapter 2** is concerned with the institutional role played by Hollywood and its 'inter-textual relay' (Lukow and Ricci 1984) in the generation of expectations, in the provision of generic images, labels, names, and hence in the provision of evidence as to the existence of genres, as to their prevalence in Hollywood's output at any particular point in time, and as to the meaning, application and use of genre terms. The term 'inter-textual relay' refers to the discourses of publicity, promotion and reception that surround Hollywood's films, and includes both trade and press reviews. It is argued that the role of this relay is a crucial one, and the issues raised here are explored by looking at the early westerns and the terms used to describe them,