AS MEDIA STUDIES

INTRODUCTION TO GENRE IN FILM
THE CONCEPT OF GENRE IN FILM

Genre Introduction
Genre is a French word for ‘type’ or category. It is used to help categorise films, amongst many other things. This approach is useful as it gives us a basis for comparison and categorisation. From the outset it must be understood that genres are flexible, the films within the genres do not have to have identical components (or conventions) within them to fall within the same genre, indeed it is expected that these generic conventions will change over time. Consider Horror films for example, what was scary in the 1920’s – shadow-play and the like, certainly wouldn’t give a 21st century audience a fright, but the subject matter might well be similar.

We will look at a range of genres and ask you to identify their generic conventions. In this we will ask you to identify the conventions in several different ways.

*We would ask you to consider how a genre can be identified through a range of characteristics or conventions:*

**Characters.**
Some films are readily associated with certain characters, and whilst most films have heroes and villains, these can be paired down to clearly definable character types, or roles like the Gunslinger in a Western, a Soldier in a War Film, or a Masked Killer in a Slasher.

**Stars.**
Some stars get tied to certain genres, and they can help sell a film by their presence alone, but this can lead to typecasting which isn’t always a good thing. That said, some films can almost be pigeonholed into a genre by their stars, e.g. Jason Statham and Action movies.

**Iconography.**
In brief, this relates to objects, props and sometimes sounds, some films can be immediately identified as belonging to a genre because of distinctive mise-en-scene and soundtrack. For example space-ships, lasers and electronic music are often features of Science-Fiction films. Whereas Crucifixes and Gothic architecture are often found in Horror Films.

**Setting.**
Some genres have a distinct location or time period and are readily associated with these places, settings like graveyards conjure up associations of Horror movies. But with all generic conventions, these are not absolutes and can change.
Visual Style.
This refers to the way in which the film is constructed, how the camera shots and angles are used, how the editing, special effects, lighting and colour influence the way we read a film. For example the style of an 80s ‘Slasher’ movie with dark, shaky point-of-view shots is very different from that of British Romantic Comedy with its brightly lit shots of happy 30-somethings in London restaurants.

Narrative.
Most film narratives are concerned with issues of conflict or disruption. Narratives take on board the order in which the story unfolds and the elements within that story. Films can be identified by the way in which the narrative evolves or more easily the set-pieces scenes within a story, like car chases in Action movies, or gangland murders in Crime films.

Genre & Audience.
Genre is a useful tool not just for critics when it comes to deconstructing texts, but it is useful for audiences too. Audiences consciously, but often unconsciously watch films from particular genres. They go to films with sets of expectations about what they hope to see in a film, and are usually satisfied if that film fulfils their expectations. By the same token some people will avoid films that they believe fit into certain genres.

Increasingly producers are aware of this and try to combine different elements into their films to attract wider audiences, this practice produces hybrid films, e.g. Sci-Fi / Action like Aliens, or Action / Comedy like Bad Boys.

Genre & Institutions.
The concept of genre is not only useful to consumers its also useful to film producers too. In some ways producers, especially in Hollywood, see genres helping them to “create a recipe for success”. If certain genres are selling well then producers might be inclined to jump on the ‘bandwagon’ and exploit public interest. This wouldn’t work if all the films had exactly the same components and thus generic conventions change over time to sustain audience interest and to reflect changing contextual factors.