

Genre, Revisionism, and Postmodernism

GENRE (*timeless*)

In French, “type” or “kind.” Genres typically tell stories that share settings, conflicts, character types, and iconographies. Iconography includes all the visual motifs that appear in genres (so, cowboy hats and boots, spurs, “tough guys,” etc. in westerns). Westerns, gangster films, and musicals are a few examples. Embedded within genres are historical mythologies particular to a nation or culture — and thus ideologies (value systems that we learn to take for granted).

FILM NOIR (*1940s – 1950s is the classic period; noir and neo-noir have existed since, though*)

Assuming film noir is a kind of genre, we note that noir often: takes place at night in urban spaces (and usually in the western part of the U.S.); is shadowy and involves crime; is cynical and fatalistic (heroes are flawed and doomed and often suffer or die by end); is sexual; features the femme fatale; employs voice-over; is hardboiled in language and style.

GENRE REVISION (*timeless to a certain extent, but became popular in Hollywood during the 1970s, after Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement, for instance*)

Reworking and revising genres, in an effort to update their (his)stories and to critique their myths and ideologies. Since genres are made up codes and conventions, genre revision involves tinkering and subverting those conventions in ways that speak to later generations.

POSTMODERNISM (*generally 1960s - present*)

A shift in production practices and viewing habits that connects with historical, economic, and societal shifts. Postmodern art and production often operates at the level of “surface,” reworking, spoofing, quoting, and referencing past works and genres. (Think *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Scream*). Postmodern texts blend genres, styles, and tones (happy and sad, violent and funny — think Tarantino, Coen brothers). Lifestyles and viewing practices can be postmodern, too. Fragmentation is another hallmark of postmodernism, creating a mélange of styles, ideas, and images. Consider how we watch TV now or surf the web, switching across 100s of channels and websites; even a single channel breaks up the screen into multiple information blocks — think of our news channels, with split screens, headline ticker scrolling along bottom, stock exchange numbers on another track, etc. The notion of “truth” is challenged in the postmodern context.

“ALTERNATIVE (AND CRITICAL) CRIME” MOVIES (*generally post-1960s, but there are examples of critical crime films, including films noirs, well before the 1970s*)

A byproduct, in many ways, to genre revisionism and postmodernism, alternative crime films blur the lines between good and bad, hero and villain, replacing moral/legal resolutions with moral/legal ambiguity. As in postmodern texts, the idea of truth is contested, undermined, and unresolved.