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The Symbiotic Relationship Between Genre Theory and Film Marketing

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Abstract:

This article explores the symbiotic relationship between genre theory and film marketing, emphasizing how the integration of genre conventions into marketing strategies enhances audience engagement and box office success. Drawing on Thomas Schatz's theory of cultural ritual, the study examines how genres function as cultural frameworks that reflect and reinforce societal norms. By understanding these frameworks, film marketers can create targeted campaigns that resonate with audiences' expectations and cultural contexts. The paper highlights the dynamic interplay between production, film, and audience, illustrating how recurring genre conventions guide both creative and marketing efforts. Through case studies such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Netflix's "To All the Boys I've Loved Before," the article demonstrates the practical application of genre theory in crafting compelling marketing strategies that balance tradition and innovation, ensuring the ongoing relevance and appeal of cinematic genres in a global market.

Keywords: *Genre Theory, Film Marketing, Conventions, Cultural Ritual*

1. INTRODUCTION

Film marketing is often seen as a crucial link between films and their audiences, bridging the gap between products and consumers by connecting the commodity to its target market. From this perspective, marketing acts as an interface and can be understood in two distinct ways. The first, more favorable view, perceives marketing as a provider of information about films, a crucial role in an increasingly crowded marketplace. In this view, marketing is meticulously crafted, competitive, and enticing, but essentially, it serves as a provider in the information economy.

The second interpretation views marketing as inherently deceptive, consistently promising more than it can deliver. Marketing conceals its intent to sell behind assurances of personal benefit. It focuses on the nuanced differences in multicultural, pluralistic societies, but this is merely a facade for products that genuinely fail to address social diversity.

This article will focus on the more favorable notion that connects marketing and genre theory. By understanding and applying genre theory, marketers can effectively navigate the complex landscape of the film industry, ensuring that their promotional strategies resonate with the intended audience and drive box office success. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the theory of the genre and its effect on film marketing.

Genre theory is a crucial idea in film studies and marketing since it aids filmmakers, marketers, and audiences in comprehending and classifying films according to their subject and artistic components. Film classification has a pivotal influence on the marketing and reception of movies by audiences.

2. INSIDE GENRE THEORY

2.1 Genre Definition

Genre theory is a pivotal concept in film studies, serving as a lens through which films can be categorized, analyzed, and understood. It encompasses a range of approaches and frameworks developed by scholars to explore how films are grouped based on shared conventions and how these groupings affect audience expectations, cultural significance, and marketing strategies. This paper examines the foundational elements of genre theory, focusing on contributions from critical theorists such as Rick Altman, Robert Ray, and Thomas Schatz, and explores the implications of genre theory for film marketing.

The study of genre in film began to take shape in the mid-20th century, drawing from literary theory and semiotics. Early genre studies were primarily descriptive, focusing on identifying and classifying the common elements of specific film types. Over time, genre theory evolved to incorporate more nuanced and critical perspectives, examining the social, cultural, and ideological functions of genres. After a period in which interest in cinema had receded about its theoretical approach and focused on its purely commercial and popular part, an attempt was again made to redefine film genres (Kartalou, 2002).

The question that arises is what exactly constitutes a genre in cinema. What can be the factor that unites and places a set of films under the umbrella of a particular genre? The common thread among most scholars is the assumption of the impossibility of defining a genre clearly and in a specific context. Since the creation of a film is not a process detached from space and time, changes, both in social and cultural contexts and from era to era, may influence it. Therefore, as David Bordwell and Christine Thompson argue in their book *Introduction to the Art of Film*, 'it is easier to identify than to define a genre' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009, p.76).

Therefore, if we attempt to define a genre, we will find that all we can point to by studying the films themselves is, as Bordwell and Thompson put it, a shared identity, which, they argue, is based on 'common ideological conventions

that reappear from one film to the next' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009, p.78). According to Bordwell and Thompson, these conventions may be related to 'certain plot elements,' film themes, 'specific film techniques,' or 'conventional iconography' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009, p.78). In contrast, Richard Maltby argues that no specific rules characterize a film genre, only certain 'expectations' that the producers of a film share with the audience (Maltby, 1995, p.109).

Thomas Schatz, in his book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and The Studio System*, attempts not only to define the cinematic genre but also to time it to the early efforts of Hollywood's early filmmakers to satisfy as significant a portion of the audience as possible. In the same context, Robert Ray, in his book *A Certain Trend in Hollywood Cinema*, speaks of the 'dependence of American cinema on the mass audience' (Ray, 1985, p.67) while ruling out any success of a film if it 'deviates radically' from what he calls 'a specific trend in American cinema' (Ray 1985: 20), namely the imposition of the 'master plot' (Ray, 1985, p.9).

2.2 An implicit agreement

Schatz explicitly references the distinction between a film's quality and its effect on the audience. As he points out, "producers may not know much about art, but they know what sells and how to produce it systematically" (Schatz, 1981, p.4). Making use of the term 'sociological event' first used by François Truffaut to describe a film that is a commercial success, Schatz attempts a retrospective look at the efforts of early Hollywood filmmakers to create such sociological events by reaching an increasing number of viewers (Schatz, 1981, p.4).

Based on the tripartite relationship between production - film - and audience, early filmmakers shaped the trends of the Hollywood industry, resorting to the standardization of themes and trends that attracted the interest of the mass audience. A standardization that grew because of the economic benefits it brought. The public supported the film industry financially but acted as the primary shaper of the currents influencing film production in its genesis. As a result, the producers combined the tried and tested recipes that had already yielded significant financial benefits with the necessary innovation to attract the public's attention. As Schatz aptly observes, 'the successful product is intertwined with conventions because its success inspires repetition' (Schatz, 1981, p.5).

According to Schatz, the admittedly successful system of feedback of the product, so that it contains minor variations within the framework of "a familiar narrative experience," is the basis of the film genre that emerged from the studios of Hollywood but also influenced the filmmaking of other countries and the film technique of great auteurs (Schatz, 1981, pp. 6-7).

3. RECURRING CONVENTIONS

The standard and recurring conventions that characterize a cinematic genre constitute a single, shared identity and can be narrative and morphological-physiological. Narrative conventions refer to the plot and common thematic motifs of films belonging to a film genre. In contrast, morphological or stylistic conventions refer to the common elements that characterize the style of a movie, which are usually technical. The costumes, sets, locations, character development, musical score, and technical details (such as the inclusion of guns in a Western movie) are morphological conventions that play a crucial role in defining a film genre (Gheli, 2014).

Roughly the same distinction of conventions can be seen in Schatz and Altman. Thomas Schatz speaks of common "morphological" and "narrative" elements in film products (Schatz, 1981, p.10), while Rick Altman distinguishes film conventions into "semantic" and "syntactic," stressing that "the semantic method overemphasizes the foundations of the genre, while the syntactic view reinforces the structures in which they are classified" (Grant, 1995, p.30).

Altman argues that genres can be understood through their semantic elements, the building blocks of the genre, such as characters, settings, and iconography. For instance, the semantic elements of a Western include cowboys, saloons, and desert landscapes. Beyond these surface features, Altman introduces the syntactic dimension, which refers to the deeper structures and themes that organize these elements into a coherent genre. In westerns, this might involve themes of law versus chaos and individualism. Altman's framework provides a versatile and dynamic comprehension of genres, highlighting their evolution and the ability of particular films to belong to numerous genres concurrently (Grant, 1995).

The common elements of a genre film, either narratively or morphologically, essentially contribute to forming an intimate environment with standard references that will allow viewers to become part of the cinematic experience in the most direct way. Logically, the viewer's first contact with the product of a cinematic genre is a probing process. However, when the viewer repeatedly encounters films of the same genre, gradually, the narrative and morphological conventions that are repeated create similar 'expectations,' and as Robert Warshaw states, this results in the viewer forming their own 'field of reference' (quoted in Schatz, 1981, pp.10-11). Of course, the re-release of a film that has been a commercial success takes on a different significance, as a new cinematic product will emerge from the processing it will undergo on a narrative and morphological level and will again aim at audience acceptance. This process will continue to be repeated until the film product becomes a spatial and thematic model of familiar acts and relations, eventually forming a cultural ritual (Schatz, 1981).

3.1 The formation of a ritual

The foundation of this theory is around the notion of feedback, namely the reception of the film by the audience, which subsequently leads to its commercial success. The producer then utilizes this success to develop a new product of equal popularity. Consequently, it is evident that the audience is implicitly tasked with determining the prospect of a sequel based on their engagement with the film and their overall impression of it. If the film receives the collective

acceptance of the audience, the producer assumes an implicit consensus as to the repetition of the film, to which he will apply the necessary variations and re-circulate it to the audience (Gheli, 2014).

Based on the implicit producer-audience contract to which we have referred, what emerges is that film genre theory is intertwined with the audience's cultural expression. Schatz highlights that each film genre's 'cultural context,' shaped by many formal and thematic conventions, now creates an 'intimate social community.' Familiar context encompasses more than simply identifying a familiar place or character and associating it with a particular genre. The concept revolves around a novel cultural domain where "intrinsic thematic conflicts" of familiar characters are exposed, take place, and are finally resolved (Schatz, 1981, p.21). In line with the above statement, it becomes clear that genre-specific film products embody a distinct cultural community, technically organized by the production studios and significantly enhanced by the audience, who not only experience a prominent cultural experience but also contribute to and reinforce the system. Schatz refers to this process as a 'culture ritual,' recognizing it as a clear manifestation of mass and communal expression (Schatz, 1981, p.12).

Thomas Schatz's ritual genre theory profoundly explains how genres serve as cultural rituals, reflecting and shaping societal values. They provide a narrative framework through which audiences can explore cultural anxieties and desires. This theoretical framework has significant implications for film marketing since it stresses the role of genre films in reflecting and shaping cultural identities and values, providing filmmakers and marketers with crucial insights into audience expectations and cultural contexts (Gheli, 2014).

Understanding genres as cultural rituals gives marketers deep insights into what audiences expect from certain types of films. When a genre film is marketed, the promotional materials can exploit the ceremonial aspects that resonate with audiences. For instance, marketing a superhero film emphasizes themes of heroism, justice, and the battle between good and evil, which are central to the cultural rituals surrounding this genre. By recognizing the cultural contexts that genres address, marketers can tailor their strategies to align with current societal values and concerns. Schatz's theory highlights that successful genre films often resonate because they address contemporary issues in a familiar framework. For example, horror films usually gain traction by tapping into current societal anxieties, such as pandemics or technological advancements, as seen in movies like "Contagion" and "Black Mirror."

Genre theory, which categorizes films based on shared characteristics and conventions, is influential in shaping effective marketing strategies. Marketers can craft campaigns that resonate deeply with target audiences by understanding and leveraging the expectations associated with specific genres. This approach not only enhances engagement but also drives box office success.

3.2 Genre as an ideological approach

In his book *A Certain Trend in Hollywood Cinema*, Robert Ray acknowledges audience participation in genre films but argues that formal and thematic conventions serve a particular ideology. Reinforcing this view, he quotes Jean-Luc Godard's dictum 'that when a great film becomes a commercial success, some mistake must have been made,' wanting to emphasize that the popularity of a film is directly related to the dominant ideology and is not solely up to the cultural expression of the audience (Ray, 1985, p.20). Ray emphasizes the ideological dimension of genres, arguing that they reinforce dominant cultural ideologies. For example, classical Hollywood cinema often reinforces individualism, heroism, and the American Dream. Ray suggests that genres establish a social contract between filmmakers and audiences, wherein certain expectations and norms are met. This contract allows genres to perpetuate specific ideological messages (Ray, 1985).

In his book, *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman cites the above views on the function of genres, the "ritual approach" and the "ideological approach," emphasizing that these are two dominant trends. According to the 'ritual approach,' the audience appears as the dominant exponent and shaper of the genre. In contrast, in the 'ideological approach,' the genre film becomes a vehicle for conveying the dominant ideology (Altman, 1995, p.27).

Furthermore, André Bazin's thesis on classical American cinema suggests that it can portray society in a manner that aligns with its idealized self-image. This forms the foundation for the theoretical framework of the cinematic genre, as quoted by Schatz in 1981. This perspective incorporates both the operation of the studio system and the prevailing ideology it promotes, as well as the essential role of the audience. The audience indirectly contributes to and sustains the system by participating in a cultural ritual.

While Ray's approach to genre theory may appear contradictory to the premise that genre and marketing are interconnected, this is inaccurate. In fact, Ray's approach underscores the importance of understanding the ideological work that genres perform, which can be a crucial consideration for marketing strategies aimed at appealing to or challenging these ideologies.

Marketers can recognize and categorize their target audience by considering common values and cultural affinities, as well as the ideological statements present in various genres. For instance, war pictures that evoke feelings of patriotism may resonate with older viewers who possess fervent nationalistic sentiments. In addition to demographics, marketers could create profiles of potential audiences by considering their attitudes, interests, and beliefs that are in line with the fundamental principles of a particular genre.

Furthermore, marketing campaigns can emphasize a film's thematic and ideological elements that resonate with contemporary cultural issues. For instance, a dystopian sci-fi film might be marketed by highlighting its commentary on current political or environmental crises. Aligning marketing efforts with cultural events, holidays, or societal trends can enhance the film's relevance and appeal. Releasing a socially charged drama during a significant political event can amplify its impact and engagement.

It is intriguing to observe at this point how the connection between genre theory and film marketing is illustrated in actual films. For this reason, we will explore two case studies, the superhero exploits of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the contemporary teen romantic comedy "To All the Boys I've Loved Before." Each of these examples demonstrates how genre theory can be applied to create cohesive and compelling marketing strategies that align with audience expectations and cultural contexts, resulting in both critical and commercial success (Johnson, 2012; Wasko, 2001).

4. Case Studies

4.1 Case Study 1: The Marvel Cinematic Universe

Genre and Marketing Strategy

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a perfect example of how genre theory can be leveraged in order to develop effective marketing strategies. The MCU has become synonymous with the superhero genre, characterized by specific conventions such as heroic journeys, superhuman abilities, and battles between good and evil. These genre elements provide a familiar framework that guides audience expectations and marketing efforts (Burke, 2016).

Marketing Tactics

1. **Consistent Branding:** Marvel is a memorable and recognizable brand, and it has been one of the most consistent brands for several years. The consistency includes trailers, designs, characters, and promotions (Lähdesmäki, 2016). Each MCU film is marketed with a consistent visual and thematic style, ensuring audiences immediately recognize the genre. The use of iconic characters, uniform logo designs, and a cohesive narrative universe reinforces the superhero genre conventions.
2. **Cross-Promotions and Merchandise:** The MCU utilizes extensive cross-promotional strategies and merchandise, including toys, apparel, and video games, which align with the genre's appeal to both younger and older demographics. These products often highlight key genre elements, such as heroism and adventure, further embedding the superhero narrative in popular culture. Moreover, entertainment marketing focuses on selling an experience and convincing customers to purchase into the event. According to Lieberman and Esgate, this particularly requires creating a "Wannasee" reaction in consumers who are overwhelmed with options (Lieberman & Esgate, 2014)
3. **Teasers and Trailers:** The marketing campaigns for MCU films are meticulously timed, with teasers and trailers, sneak previews, reels, TikTok videos, and YouTube shorts all released strategically to build anticipation. These promotional materials emphasize action-packed sequences, special effects, and dramatic stakes, all hallmarks of the superhero genre. By focusing on these elements, the marketing campaigns ensure audiences are excited about the film's adherence to genre conventions.

Impact on Audience and Box Office

The consistent application of genre theory in marketing has resulted in a dedicated fan base eagerly anticipating each new MCU release. This strategy has contributed to the MCU's unparalleled box office success, with films like "Avengers: Endgame" becoming among the highest-grossing movies ever. Furthermore, Marvel Cinematic Universe was, as of August 2021, the highest-grossing movie franchise worldwide, with a box office revenue of 22.93 billion dollars (Navarro, 2021). The alignment of marketing strategies with genre expectations ensures that each film not only meets but often exceeds audience anticipation.

4.3 Case Study 2: Netflix's "To All the Boys I've Loved Before"

Genre and Marketing Strategy

"To All the Boys I've Loved Before," a film based on Jenny Han's novel, is a prime example of how genre theory can be utilized in film marketing. The film falls within the teen romantic comedy genre, characterized by themes of young love, personal growth, and emotional dilemmas. This case study explores how genre theory has been effectively applied to market "To All the Boys I've Loved Before," aligning marketing strategies with audience expectations and genre conventions. The teen romantic comedy genre typically includes elements such as high school settings, relatable young protagonists, romantic entanglements, and humorous situations. These conventions create a predictable and comforting viewing experience, attracting a specific target audience (Vidolova, 2020).

Marketing Tactics:

1. **Targeted Trailer Releases:** The trailers emphasized the film's romantic and comedic elements, highlighting the relatable and endearing personality of the protagonist, Lara Jean. By showcasing key moments that align with the genre's expectations, Netflix attracted its target demographic of teenagers and young adults.
2. **Social Media Campaigns:** Social media played a crucial role in marketing "To All the Boys I've Loved Before." Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok were used to reach the film's primary audience—teenagers and young adults. The marketing team shared clips, behind-the-scenes footage, and interactive content that resonated with the target demographic. The use of hashtags like #ToAllTheBoys and interactive content such as quizzes and fan art contests tapped into the romantic comedy fan base (Vidolova, 2020). This strategy leveraged the familiarity and relatability of the genre, creating a buzz that attracted fans of teen romantic comedies. Particularly, the use of social media tapped into the everyday lives of teenagers, much like the high school setting of the film. By engaging with

audiences on platforms they frequently use, the marketing campaign mirrored the social environments depicted in the genre.

3. **Relatable and Attractive Protagonists**

The film's protagonists, Lara Jean Covey and Peter Kavinsky were central to the marketing strategy. Promotional materials, including posters and trailers, highlighted the chemistry between the leads and their relatable personalities. This approach ensured that potential viewers could see themselves in the characters and their experiences. Teen romantic comedies often rely on charismatic leads to draw in viewers (Vidolova, 2020). By emphasizing the relatable and endearing qualities of the protagonists, the marketing strategy aligned with genre expectations, making the film more appealing to its intended audience.

4. **Strategic Release on a Streaming Platform**

"To All the Boys I've Loved Before" capitalized on the platform's extensive reach and accessibility upon its release on Netflix. The streaming service provided immediate global access, catering to the viewing patterns of its target audience, who are more inclined to consume content online. The choice of platform reflects the consumption patterns of the film's demographic, aligning with the teen romantic comedy genre's focus on contemporary and relatable settings. Netflix's recommendation algorithms also helped reach viewers who enjoy similar genre films (Vidolova, 2020).

Impact: The marketing strategies, deeply rooted in genre theory, led to the film's widespread popularity and critical acclaim. "To All the Boys I've Loved Before" received critical acclaim and developed a dedicated fan base, resulting in multiple sequels. The alignment of marketing efforts with genre expectations ensured that the film resonated with its target audience, leading to high viewership numbers and sustained interest. It not only garnered millions of views within the first month but also sparked a resurgence in interest in teen romantic comedies. The successful marketing campaign emphasized the importance of understanding and utilizing genre conventions to meet audience expectations effectively. These case studies highlight the strong relationship that exists between genre theory and film marketing. Film marketers may create strategies that truly connect with target audiences, increase engagement, and propel box office success by comprehending and utilizing genre norms. Aligning marketing efforts with genre expectations has proven to be a winning formula in the film industry, whether it is the superhero adventures of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the magical adventures of Disney's animated films, or the romantic entanglements of American teenagers in Netflix's "To All the Boys I've Loved Before."

5. **CONCLUSION**

To summarize, this article investigates how genre theory might be utilized in film marketing to influence viewer expectations, guide production choices, and enhance marketability. Genre significantly bridges production and consumption, linking marketing strategies with audience understanding. One of the most insightful methods for studying film marketing involves focusing on genre. In the dynamic world of the film industry, genre theory and marketing share a symbiotic relationship that significantly impacts both the creation and promotion of movies. Genre theory categorizes films based on shared characteristics, providing a framework marketers leverage to craft compelling promotional strategies.

Genre theory is a cornerstone of film studies. It focuses on classifying films into distinct genres such as horror, comedy, drama, and action. These genres are identified by a set of conventions that audiences recognize and anticipate. The theory not only helps in categorizing films but also in understanding the cultural and social functions of these categories. One of the primary ways genre theory aids in film marketing is by shaping audience expectations.

Genre theory has a direct impact on the choices made during the creative process. Many filmmakers strategically adapt their movies to align with popular genres in order to optimize their commercial viability. For instance, the revival of superhero movies can be ascribed to their demonstrated marketability. By sticking to the norms of successful genres, producers can mitigate financial risk and attract established fan bases. The Marvel Cinematic Universe demonstrates a clear strategic alignment by adhering scrupulously to the traditions of the superhero genre, resulting in a continuous ability to attract large audiences.

Marketing campaigns heavily rely on genre conventions to craft their messages. Trailers, posters, and promotional materials are designed to highlight key genre elements, making it easier for audiences to identify the type of film being promoted. For instance, horror movie posters often use dark, ominous imagery, while action films emphasize explosive scenes and high-energy sequences. This genre-specific marketing enhances the film's visibility and appeal. As stated by Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and The Studio System* (1981), using genre as a marketing tool helps streamline promotional efforts and tap into existing audience interests.

Additionally, studios and directors can establish a powerful brand identity by ensuring that genre production remains consistent. Studios have the capacity to establish a loyal audience by consistently producing films within a particular genre. In order to attain long-term success in the film industry, it is imperative to possess this level of brand loyalty (Schatz, 1983).

The interplay between genre theory and film marketing is a testament to the strategic importance of genre classification in the film industry. By shaping audience expectations, guiding production choices, and enhancing marketability, genre theory provides a robust framework that marketers can exploit to maximize a film's commercial success. As the film industry continues to evolve, the relationship between genre theory and marketing will undoubtedly remain a pivotal aspect of how movies are promoted and received.

More specifically, Thomas Schatz's ritual genre theory offers invaluable insights for film marketing by framing genres as cultural rituals that reflect and shape societal values. This theoretical approach enables marketers to craft strategies that align with audience expectations and cultural contexts, creating campaigns that resonate emotionally and culturally with viewers. By leveraging the dynamic nature of genres and their ritualistic elements, marketers can enhance the appeal and success of their films.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) leverages the superhero genre's conventions to build a cohesive and highly recognizable brand, ensuring that each film meets audience expectations through strategic marketing campaigns that emphasize heroism, superhuman abilities, and moral conflicts (Johnson, 2012). Furthermore, "To All the Boys I've Loved Before" exemplifies how the teen romantic comedy genre can be marketed effectively by tapping into relatable character dynamics and emotional themes, thereby resonating deeply with its target demographic.

The case studies mentioned underscore the effectiveness of aligning marketing strategies with genre conventions and audience expectations, demonstrating how genre theory and Schatz's concept of cultural rituals can enhance both critical and commercial success in the film industry. By understanding and utilizing these theoretical frameworks, marketers can create compelling and culturally resonant campaigns that ensure films reach their full potential in engaging and captivating audiences.

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