Richard Nowell

Film Genre and the Industrial Mindset: More Work Needed

A Brief Exchange with Peter Hutchings

Peter Hutchings is Professor of Film Studies at Northumbria University, UK. He is the author of *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (1993), *Terence Fisher* (2002), *Dracula: British Film Guide* (2003), *The Horror Film* (2004), and *The Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema* (2008), along with numerous articles and chapters on horror, science fiction, and British film and television history. He agreed generously to answer a series of questions on the topic of genre and the movie business.

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Genre Studies was widely seen to have been "reconfigured" and rejuvenated by a body of work published mainly in the late 1990s and early 2000s by scholars such as Steve Neale, Janet Staiger, Rick Altman, James Naremore, and Jason Mittel. What do you see as having been the most important interventions of that period — important in the sense that they genuinely required scholars conceptually and pragmatically to rethink the ways in which they approached genre and its study?

What might be seen as "the discursive turn" in genre studies was, if not inevitable, at least a way forward from what was looking increasingly like a dead end. In particular, attempts authoritatively to define genres or to present genre as a kind of closed circuit between industry and audience failed before the sheer, undeniable heterogeneity of genres themselves. In other words, the more genre films you saw, the harder it became to lock down generic categories, either in themselves or in terms of their likely functions. An increasing emphasis in critical work on the historical and institutional contexts of both specific genres and film genre in general often revealed previous definitions of genres as overly abstract. This was probably frustrating for some inasmuch as it rendered genre, which was meant to be the self-evident and obvious category, as opposed to the hermetic world offered by auteurism, to be surprisingly difficult and elusive. I would say that the most positive aspect of work on film genres since the 1990s is a dispelling of certainty and an acknowledgement that genres are constructed in different ways for different reasons by dif-

ferent groups and that there is not always consensus within this process. Raphaëlle Moine has used the term "genre jungle" to describe this; I think it's a good term. One outcome of this way of seeing things is a tendency to shy away from the more abstract notions of genre and instead focus on specific parts of a genre — for example a genre defined by a particular historical period. One also sees sometimes a separation of what are deemed industrial versions of genre from critically defined genres such as film noir, although it is not always easy to separate out such things, and in any event this division often begs the question of whether the term "genre" itself operates similarly in both contexts. I believe more work remains to be done on how notions of genre operate within the industry. So far, academics have focused on the films themselves and on marketing strategies and journalistic responses, partly because this material is readily accessible, but more research into how notions of genre operate in relation to production decisions, if they do at all (at least in the way that academics understand genre) is needed to underpin this whole area of study.

Some of the most important genre scholarship of the last ten years has focused on the ways conceptions of categories, corpora, and textual properties shape reception practices and reception cultures. In what ways do you think the integration of reception studies approaches might enrich industrially-oriented work on genre?

A desire to integrate reception studies into work on the industry sounds a little like an attempt to reinstate a genre-based closed circuit between industry and audience. For me, the most productive aspect of the new genre studies is its shattering of any possibility for a transcendent or idealist or even just a confidently expressed model of genre that binds together industry and audience in a cohesive manner. We're back to the genre jungle again — something that is not organized, that has its contingencies and areas that just do not connect with each other. Of course there are connections between audience and industry — for example, fans interacting with film and TV program makers — but these are historically and contextually specific phenomena best addressed in terms of that specificity rather than in terms of genre in general. I also have to say that industrially-orientated work on genre should primarily be enriched by work on the industry itself; I think there is a long way to go before that particular area is exhausted.

Given that genre frameworks continue heavily to shape industry practice, to what extent do you think industrially-oriented film scholarship has been supported by a full, adequate, and theoretically-informed appreciation of genre?

Do genre frameworks shape industry practice? Have we really established that? We've established that labeling of films is important, with this labeling connecting a particular film with other films. Do creative figures in the industry see beyond those labels into something that genre theorists might think of as genre, or instead are these people operating in a much more short-term, pragmatic, and localized way, connecting their films to something that was recently successful in the market or to more intuitive ideas about what makes a good film that do not relate to any specific genre? To reiterate a point I made earlier, we need to be engaging more with the mindset and language of film industries. To what extent are our understandings of genre their understandings of genre? This goes beyond the division I have already mentioned between critical and industrial notions of gen-

re, which ultimately is probably a facile division inasmuch as it often suggests that industrial definitions of genre are self-evident whereas our current understanding of them is nowhere near as nuanced as it might be.

The sustained attention now starting to be paid to the dynamics of cycles of cultural production has brought into sharp focus a pivotal question in genre studies, which is of particular relevance to the industrially-oriented approaches on show in this edition of Iluminace: the issue of whether, to what extent, and in what ways, extra-industrial socio-cultural factors determine the textual models used by the culture industries as well as elements of content mobilized to furnish those models. Where do you stand on this issue?

I think an awareness that film genres do not exist as self-defining, self-regulating entities goes hand in hand with seeking specific relationships between different areas of culture and particular connections with "social factors" (however these might be defined). I also believe that a historical approach is probably best suited to mapping out generic configurations, which might involve specific connections between different cultural and industrial areas — for instance, there are connections between horror cinema, horror television and horror literature but these exist in some periods and not others and they are arranged very differently in, say, the 1970s than they are today. How do you make sense of this? Do you try to generalize from it and make some broad point about the nature of a genre or genre itself, or do you accept that the horror genre is fractured and disorganized and that the network of industrial and non-industrial factors that support it in one period are replaced by entirely different configurations in other periods? In other words, the overall history of this particular genre is broken, in pieces, non-continuous, whereas, by contrast, other genres might have more continuous patterns of development. Ultimately, it depends on the genre.

Are there certain directions you would like to see Genre Studies take in the future?

I would like to see more work on the ways that genres in certain circumstances exist across different media forms, and in particular critical engagements with the question of how specific generic elements move through and are sustained or refashioned by these media and how the cultural industries involved in this think about generic categories and labels.