

Television Genres

Television is an electronic medium that broadcasts many different kinds of programs, each of which can be classified as belong to a genre or, in some cases, mixed genres. The term “genre” comes from the French language and means “type” or “kind.” Douglas Kellner, a media theorist, offers a useful definition of “genre.” He writes, in his essay “Television Images, Codes and Messages,” that

a genre refers to as coded set of formulas and conventions which indicate a culturally accepted way or organizing material into distinct patterns. Once established, genres dictate the basic conditions of a cultural production and reception. For example, crime dramas invariable have a violent crime, a search for its perpetrators, and often a chase, fight, or bloody elimination of the criminal, communicating the message “crime does not pay.”

When we watch television we do not actually watch the medium of television, per se, but specific television programs—or, to use the term popular in academic circles, *texts*. All media are based on texts, which all fall into

various categories or genres. The scholarly interest in genres has developed in recent years because we have become concerned about how genres affect the creation of television programs, what the social, cultural and political implications of different genres may be, how genres begin and evolve and why some genres, such as the western, died out after years of great popularity.

We can say that genre studies started with the writings of Aristotle (384-322) who began his *De Poetica (Poetics)* with comments relating to genres:

Our subject being epic poetry, I propose to speak not only of the art in general but also of its species and their respective capacities...Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy...are all view as a whole, modes of imitation...Comedy is an imitation of men worse than average. Tragedy, on the other hand, involves the fall of a great person and is “essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery.” Aristotle’s rules for tragedies and comedies dominated the thinking of people for many centuries.

There is a philosophical problem relating to genres, which is dealt with in a book, Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobschak’s *An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film*, that is relevant to our interest in television genres. And that is, how do we “discover” genres. As the authors write (1989: 90):

essentially the problem is the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. One has to select a group of films prior to identifying them as a genre; however, the very selection process is shaped by a definition of the genre supposedly not yet arrived at.

What makes a critic talk about musicals as a group is some prior notion of what a musical is.

They point out that we identify genres by looking for similarities in texts relating to common themes, subject matter, settings, characters, conventions, plots, and important material objects (such as the white cowboy hat in westerns for good cowboys).

Television genres refer to a class of television programs and a given program is an example of that genre. The question is—do classes of anything exist? Or what is the status of a “class” of things? This question is an old one in philosophical thought and involves a debate between some thinkers who argue that only particular things exist, such as the show *60 Minutes*, while others argue that the class of shows called news programs is as real as any particular show. In philosophical parlance, nominalists deny the reality of classes of things while realists accept their reality. For our purposes, since we are dealing with a class of television programs called genres, we must accept the realist perspective. With few exceptions, the material found in literature and the popular arts is an example of some genre or mixed genre. We do not conventionally use genre to deal with serious novels but, rather, with popular arts found in the media.

In dealing with a mass medium such as television, keeping in mind Kellner’s definition of a genre, there are a number of focal points to be considered: the text itself, the creators and producers of the text, the particular qualities of the medium which affects what can be done with it, and target audience of the text, and the society in which the text is produced and which influences the kind of texts that can be created.

Art work or text	<i>CSI</i>
Artist	The writers and performers on the show
Medium	Television
Audience	Viewers of the show
America	Country where show is produced

Each of these focal points can be connected to one another since they all influence a given text, which is always a kind of program or genre.

The creators of television shows generally focus on a particular audience and adapt the conventions of a genre to their purposes. When a particular television show becomes popular, other television production companies start imitating it, hoping to cash in on the popularity of the genre. In some cases, television companies mix genres or create variations of traditional genres, such as the reality show *Survivor* which generated many imitations.

One thing we must recognize is that television is essentially a dramatic medium. As Martin Esslin writes in *The Age of Television* (1982:6,7):

the language of television is none other than that of *drama*: that television—as indeed the cinema with which it has much in common—is, in its essence, *a dramatic medium*; and that looking at TV from the point of view and with the analytic tools of dramatic criticism and theory might contribute to a better understanding of its nature and many aspects of its psychological, social, and cultural impact, both in the short term and on a long term, macroscopic time scale.

As Esslin points out, in a typical week the average viewer in America sees the equivalent of five or six stage plays a week. His figure might underestimate

the amount of drama seen on television since he wrote his book in 1982. By dramas Esslin means narrative fictions that generally involve conflict and the resolution of this conflict, often involving violence.

There is, one might suggest, a dramatic quality to other television genres that are not generally classified as dramas—texts such as new shows, sports broadcasts of football, baseball, and basketball, and other non-fiction television shows. There are also a large number of mixed genre television shows that have been developed, such as the docudrama and so-called reality television shows such as *Survivor*.

It is difficult, in many cases, to place a particular show in a category, since some of them could fit in several genres. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assign many shows to a particular television genre. Some of the more important formulaic broadcast television genres, and programs that can be placed in each genre, are:

Commercials. The television commercial is the most important genre found on television in the United States since our system of paying for television is based on money made by stations broadcasting commercials and, in effect, selling their audiences to corporations. The Macintosh “1984” commercial by Ridley Scott is one of the most celebrated television commercials.

News shows. Television broadcasts many hours of local news and usually a half hour of national network news, plus weekly news programs such as *60 Minutes*, *20/20* and Sunday news interview shows such as *Meet the Press*. News was originally seen as a public service but in recent years has become an important source of revenue for television stations and networks.

Documentaries are an important category of news programs and deal with political, social, cultural, economic and other topics of interest. The number of documentaries on commercial television stations has dropped considerably over the years, but there are still a number of documentaries found on public television and occasionally on the networks.

Situation Comedies. It is very difficult to create a good situation comedy, but television networks keep bringing new ones out every year since the payoff from a good situation comedy, in audience size, is considerable. Among the most important situation comedies of recent years are *Seinfeld*, *Frazier*, and *Friends*, each of which has gone into syndication and made enormous amounts of money for the creators and producers. Most situation comedies don't last very long and many are taken off the air after only a few weeks.

Sports Broadcasts. This genre broadcasts contests involving sports such as baseball, basketball, football, tennis, track, golf, and car racing. Sports have a dramatic quality to them because in many cases we cannot know what the outcome of the contest will be until the contest is over. Many games are decided in the final seconds of the game. Sports programs are one way that advertisers can reach male viewers, aged 18 to 45, who are important target audiences for products like beer, automobiles and sports equipment.

Crime Shows. These shows deal with the battle between the police and criminals of one kind or another and are generally extremely violent. Some of the more popular crime shows of recent years are *Crime Scene Investigation*, *CSI Miami*, and *Cold Case*. There is an important category of

crime show which might be called the classical detective show, which involves crime but generally is not violent and uses a detective who solves the mystery by exhibiting superior powers of observation and intellect.

Soap Operas. This genre produces programs that can last for decades. It is characterized by incredibly and never-ending complicated love relationships and family problems, generally with physically attractive romantic leads. Some soaps have young protagonists, such as *The O.C* (for Orange County), whose target audience seems to be adolescents, while others, like *Desperate Housewives*, focus on older audiences. Some programs, such as *Grey's Anatomy*, do not present themselves as soaps but are considered to be a soap opera by many critics.

Game Shows. These shows involve having participants guess the price of some object or answer questions on some subject, with those who are successful having the chance to win prizes and sometimes large sums of money. These programs are cheap to produce and attract good size audiences and, in some cases, huge audiences.

Children's Programs. These programs are designed specifically to entertain young children and often contain material that entertains and educates them. Some children's programs feature cartoons that are humorous but full of violence, leading many psychologists to urge parents to curtail viewing of this material. Some of the more important children's shows typically shown in the United States are *Sesame Street*, *Barney*, and a British import, *The Teletubbies*

Religious Programs. These programs deal with religious themes and feature various television evangelists and other figures who talk about the Bible and other religious texts and various topics relating to religion. Some of these shows are broadcasts of religious services.

Talk Shows. There are many shows, such as *Dr. Phil*, that involve an expert in some area, which are basically full of talk—by troubled individuals and families, who are given advice by Dr. Phil. An important subcategory of these shows are the late-night comedy talk shows, hosted by comedians such as David Letterman, who interview show business celebrities.

Reality Shows. These shows represent a new genre and in recent years have become very popular. They are relatively inexpensive to produce since they are not scripted. But they are highly edited and so aren't as “real” as many viewers think. They combine a number of different other genres and have elements in them of contest shows, travel shows, *Bay Watch*-like girlie shows and action-adventure shows.

Science and Education shows. These shows have an educational content to them and find ways of instructing viewers and entertaining them at the same time. *Nova*, which is broadcast on public television, is an example of a science show that also has dramatic qualities to it.

Cooking Shows. In San Francisco, on the public television station KQED, there are cooking shows from 9:00 AM until 2:30 PM on Saturdays. There

are also cooking shows on other stations at various times. In these shows chefs (many of whom have become celebrities) teach viewers how to make various dishes from a number of different cuisines.

Action-Adventure Shows. This category covers a wide range of dramas, some of which have elements of horror in them, others have supernatural elements in them, and others which are stories about people who face problems and find ways of dealing with them. In the fall 2006 season, programs with a supernatural aspect, such as *Lost*, *Heroes* and *Jericho* were popular, but the rate at which shows are taken off the air, when audiences stop watching them in the desired numbers, means that they may not be around for very long.

It is impossible to deal with all the different genres and subgenres shown on television. To further complicate matters, many movies—representing different genres—are shown on television every day, so at any given moment, there are a number of different genres of television programs competing with one another for viewers.

When people say “I think I’ll watch some television,” they mean they will watch some kind of program they like, such as a sports broadcast, a crime show, or news show. When writers and producers create television programs, they always have some genre, or combination of genres, in mind, which has certain conventions they will follow. These conventions make it easier for them to create new texts, since there are formulas they can follow, and for viewers to understand what is going on in the texts they create.

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