

CHAPTER ONE

Detonation!

Upon its release *Last Action Hero* (1993) was regarded as something of a joke.¹ Unexpectedly, however, an act in one of its scenes served to highlight a fundamental issue in genre theory: namely the question of how a film can be immediately recognised as belonging to a particular genre. Made as a tribute to the perceived formulaic nature of the action genre, the premise of *Last Action Hero* revolves around a ‘knowingness’ of the codes and conventions of action films. The main source of this ‘knowingness’ is a precocious brat, Danny (Austin O’Brien), who produces the majority of the film’s continual self-conscious references and gags. An action genre obsessive, Danny’s sole boast is, ‘I’ve seen this Slater six times.’ Conveniently, his encyclopaedic awareness enables him to accurately predict the various outcomes of the *Jack Slater* action movie series. This is particularly important given the turn of events, in which during a very exclusive screening (he is the only one in the audience), Danny’s ‘magic ticket’ mysteriously fires up its powers to transport him into the *Jack Slater IV* movie. The twist that *Last Action Hero* offers is that rather than going through the motions of deciding whether or not if this is a dream, or going through the process of trying to work out the distinctions between his everyday reality and the movie world, Danny is immediately sensitive to the fact that he is now a character in the film-within-the-film. But how does he understand this? This immediate understanding of a particular structure is one of the central issues underlying film genre theory.

Identifying Genres

Throughout the discussions of film genre, there is persistent reference to an assumption that genres are identified by apparently simple recognition. While there

¹ At the time, reviews across the board were negative, see for instance: Jonathon Romney, review of *Last Action Hero*, directed by John McTiernan, *New Statesman & Society*, 30 July 1993, 34–36; and Brian D Johnson, review of *Last Action Hero*, directed by John McTiernan, *Maclean’s* 106.26 (1993), 49.

is much confusion and debate over the classification of genres, opinion regarding the recognition of genres themselves is matter epitomised by Rick Altman's statement that "we all know a genre when we see one."² The idea behind Altman's observation reoccurs frequently in various guises throughout genre theory: exemplified, for instance, in Andrew Tudor's remark that "genre is what we collectively believe it to be";³ or by Thomas Sobchack's comment that genre films are "bound by a strict code of conventions, tacitly agreed upon by the filmmaker and audience."⁴ Endeavours to define the precise constitution of this recognition only serve to highlight the difficulty of formulation. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson summarise, "genre is easier to recognize than to define."⁵ Though the acknowledgement of genre recognition may be a common ground for theorists, naturally they are inclined to be suspicious of a 'knowingness', which, in effect, serves only to provide an essentially subjective basis for defining particular genres.

The wariness of this 'knowingness' is illustrated in Linda Williams's dismissal of Justice Stewart Potter's statement defining the essence of a 'hard core' genre amounted to a variation on the assumptions observed by Tudor, Altman, Sobchack and, Bordwell and Thompson, where on his encounter with pornography, he stated, 'I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it.'⁶ Williams is quick to point out the inherent subjectivity of such pronouncements, observing that it was "a middle-class white male Supreme Court justice" who enunciated "these famous words."⁷ For Williams, in defining the genre of pornography, "we need to...get beyond merely reacting to these gut responses."⁸ This desire to attain to a definition that reaches beyond 'gut responses' is not just limited to pornography. The many articles on genre, especially with respect to musicals, westerns and melodrama, testify to the

² Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 26.

³ Andrew Tudor, 'Genre', in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 7.

⁴ Thomas Sobchack, 'Genre Film: A Classical Experience', in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 102.

⁵ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 6th edn (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 94.

⁶ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

⁷ Williams, *Hard Core*, 5.

⁸ Williams, *Hard Core*, 5.

pervasive need to transcend subjectivity for an objective approach appropriate to all genres.

The pursuit of objectivity in classifying textual grouping has generated endless lists attempting to identify the particular traits of a generic category.⁹ For early genre theory, lists of a genre's qualities and features developed to be an integral part of genre study, as Jeanine Basinger's summation highlights:

Almost anyone you ask to define a genre such as the Western will come up with a list—the saloon girl with heart of gold, the school teacher, the good guy in the white hat, the bad guy in the black hat, the Indians who try to buy rifles, the sheepherders who try to fence off the cattlemen's grazing land, and the inevitable final shootout. A simple test for any genre is whether or not you can, in fact, generate such a list. If you can, it's a genre. If you can't, it probably isn't.¹⁰

While some theorists realising the problems of providing a neat schema deftly bypass this need to define,¹¹ Richard Maltby observes that studies on genre frequently “suggest a cartographer's concern with defining the exact location of the boundary between one genre and another.”¹² Genre theorisations have thus been plagued with mapping challenges and difficulties, which has resulted in Bordwell's assertion of genre theory's failure inasmuch as “theorists have been unsuccessful in

⁹ Some examples of lists, definitions and attempted resolutions can be found in Christine Gledhill's identification of the five features of film *noir* [Christine Gledhill, 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, revised edn, (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 14–19]; in Maurice Yacowar's attempt at categorising of the eight types of disaster films [Maurice Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre', in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 261–279]; in Jeanine Basinger's groupings of war films—wartime films, military background films, training camp films and military biographies [Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986)]; and in Edward Buscombe's solution of the identification of genres via their “inner and outer forms” [Edward Buscombe, 'The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema', in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 11–25].

¹⁰ Basinger, 15.

¹¹ As is the case with Sobchack (102), when he states that “in light of the difficulty of accurately defining the individual genre, I would rather sidestep the problem by considering the fictional genre film as a single category that includes all that is commonly held to be genre film—i.e., the western, the horror film, the musical, the science fiction film, the swashbuckler—in order to show that all of these films have a common origin and basic form.”

¹² Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 107.

producing a coherent map of the system of genres, and no strict definition of a single genre has won widespread acceptance.”¹³

The emphasis on the dissection and classification of genres and their borders has resulted in the production of numerous attempts of over-determined exactitude. In particular, genre theorists of the seventies sought to distinguish genres through the creation of formulae that clearly acknowledged the boundaries and distinctions of each genre based on textual readings. As Christine Gledhill points out, the analytical concepts of early genre theory “were largely formal, designed to explore how generic films produced their aesthetic and ideological effects.”¹⁴ However, the move away from focusing on the textual properties alone produced additional problems inasmuch as there is an assumption, as Altman argues, that “the generic corpus is assumed to be a given, pre-defined by industrial fiat,”¹⁵ and that film genre theorists accordingly “systematically assumed a quasi-magical correspondence between industry purposes and audiences’ responses.”¹⁶

The practice of early film genre theory in pinpointing generic boundaries through themes, myths, icons and settings to offer (cultural or ideological) readings was, according to Neale, “driven by critical and theoretical agendas rather than by a commitment to detailed empirical analysis and thorough industrial and historical research.”¹⁷ As Tom Ryall points out, such accounts and works on generic definitions gave attention to “concepts such as ‘convention’ and ‘audience expectation’ which are central to any account of genre, and presented persuasive specifications for genres such as the western and gangster film.”¹⁸ To Altman, the arguments produced by early genre theory all revolved around questions of

permanence and coherence: What do these texts have in common? What shared structures permit them to make more meaning as a genre than the sum of their

¹³ David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 147.

¹⁴ Christine Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold-Hodder Headline Group, 2000), 224.

¹⁵ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute publishing, 1999), 16.

¹⁶ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 15–16.

¹⁷ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

¹⁸ Tom Ryall, 'Genre and Hollywood', in *American Cinema and Hollywood: Critical Approaches*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 106.

meaning as individual texts? What forces explain, and what patterns reveal, generic longevity?¹⁹

Genre recognition thus was reduced to the one dominant recurring feature, as Tico Romao's comment illustrates, "Like the song and dance numbers of musicals or the gun-fights in westerns, car chase sequences are one of the most readily recognisable elements of action films."²⁰ It is now a cliché in genre theory to plead reference to the possession of identical themes, settings, iconography, motifs, intention and tautological labels, as the defining points of a generic corpus. This is to say that, supposedly, one can identify a western through the presence of cowboys and horses, a musical by its elaborate song and dance numbers, a melodrama through the excess of tears, or a horror through its intention to horrify.

The subsequent fashion of pointing out the limitations and failures of interpretations of borders, however, has also become equally clichéd. The exhaustive inventory of faults begins with the complication that there is little agreement on the meaning of the term genre within film studies. The concept of genre originated in literary theory but its relation to film theory is fraught with ambiguities. While much of the terminology (icon, conventions, genre) is derived from literary theory, this does not necessarily apply to the intended meanings. Indeed, a sore point of film genre theory is the use of terminology which is meant to provide the foundation of a genre's definition. For instance, Edward Buscombe's use of the term 'iconography' is to Neale problematic, as he points out that the term is simply used "as a synonym for 'visual convention'",²¹ a concept which itself is vague and unqualified. So while genre theory's background belongs to literary theory, this heritage is perceived by Altman and Neale to be a cursory one. For Altman this divide is attributed to film theory's departure from literary theory:

Clearly, much that is said about film genre is simply borrowed from a long tradition of literary genre criticism. Nonetheless, there are significant differences between film genre criticism and its literary predecessors...In short, film genre study has over the last two decades established itself as a field separate from literary genre film study. As such, it has developed its own assumptions, its own *modus operandi*, and its own objects of study.²²

¹⁹ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 50.

²⁰ Tico Romao, 'Guns and Gas: Investigating the 1970s Car Chase Film', in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 130.

²¹ Neale, *Genre*, 11.

²² Altman, *Film/Genre*, 13.

For Neale however, film genre theory's supposed literary traditions are an empty tribute, "while the existence of literary theory was explicitly acknowledged, it was in practice usually ignored."²³ In any case, the assumptions that are brought into the realm of film theory are fraught with confusion,²⁴ for as Edward Buscombe states, "*Genre* is a term much employed in film criticism at the moment, yet there is little agreement on what exactly it means."²⁵

Despite the illusion of straightforward definitions such as Barry Keith Grant's, "genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations,"²⁶ nevertheless, because of the various expectations that these repetitions and variations produce, genre films resist classification. Genres, to Neale,

consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding.²⁷

The inherent differences, hybridity and similarities of genre films mean that this 'recognition' is where the vast majority of difficulties in identifying genres arise. Further, there is the double bind of a genre theory based on that 'recognition', as Altman points out,

[In] universally assuming that genres are broadly recognised public categories, film critics regularly find themselves faced with a tricky problem: if the existence of a genre depends on general public recognition rather than individual spectator perception, then how does that public recognition come about?²⁸

Here, then, we arrive at the question which theorists have struggled with, namely: What defines a genre?

Defining Genres

Attempts to classify genres are consistently met with catalogues of refutations. The idea that a genre's identity depends on its subject matter meets with Bordwell's

²³ Neale, *Genre* 19.

²⁴ A detailed account of the origins of the term genre can be found in Altman, *Film/Genre* 1–28.

²⁵ Buscombe, 11.

²⁶ Barry Keith Grant as quoted in Neale, *Genre* 9.

²⁷ Neale, *Genre* 31.

²⁸ Altman, *Film/Genre* 15.

retaliation that “any theme may appear in any genre.”²⁹ Assertions of all-encompassing textual categories consistently stumble at inconvenient texts that, on inspection, either resist or reveal inconsistencies in textual assumptions. Inherent in the majority of methodologies is the capacity to gloss over overlaps. As Thomas Sobchack notes, there are “categories within categories and categories which overlap and are not mutually exclusive.”³⁰ This drawback is highlighted in the encounter of unwieldy films, especially those which incorporate distinct categories, such as song and dance—that is, a musical—with another genre, like the western: as in *Calamity Jane* (1953) and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), both musicals set in the west. As Bordwell points out, there is the problem that certain films resist categorisation. Quite simply, he asks, where does one fit the (hypothetical) film which is a “science-fiction musical Western, in which Martians visit Billy the Kid and everyone puts on a show?”³¹

Amongst the concerns regarding overlaps and ill-defined borders, another point of contention regarding genre theory is the focus on the uncertainties of genre itself. In her discussion of the *noir* film, Joan Copjec observes that “doubts about the existence of the category itself or about whether or not an individual film belongs to it fuel the critical discourse surrounding all genres.”³² Thus lists of a genre’s qualities can be seen as a defence against the apparition of genre, to the extent that lists provide a way of grasping the tangible elements of a genre. Rather than solidifying beliefs and dispelling doubts about a genre’s existence, lists have the opposite effect, somewhat akin to Basinger’s ‘Kilroy Test’:

A signature appears which everyone recognizes and accepts. In accepting it, we give credence to its having been written, and since it says ‘Kilroy was here,’ there must be a Kilroy. Later we write ‘Kilroy was here’ ourselves on the wall, and not only does that mean we believe in Kilroy, but we have accepted his reality to the extent of being willing to take up his burden and write his name on the one wall he seemed unable to find. Genre is like this. No one film ever appears that is quintessentially *the* genre. A group of films with very similar characteristics emerge, blend, and become one film in memory. When later, filmmakers create films of the same type...They make the memory of the accumulated film. They take up Kilroy’s burden, and if challenged about the characteristics tell you in effect that there is, too, a Kilroy; they saw him. At

²⁹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 147.

³⁰ Sobchack, 102.

³¹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning* 148.

³² Joan Copjec, introduction, *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), x.

least they saw his name on the wall. We live in times when names appear on walls, all put there by believers in a phantom Kilroy.³³

The inability of lists to capture what exists only retroactively in imaginations results in “the Catch-22 of defining any genre,” in that “you must define it before you can define it.”³⁴ This is, of course, what Tudor identifies as the “empiricist dilemma,” where a genre is classified “according to a priori criteria,” or based on “a common cultural consensus,”³⁵ which is then analysed in detail. Theorists are thus caught in a “circle that first requires that the film be isolated, for which purpose a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films.”³⁶

Confronted with the ultimate in theoretical traps, and as a way of resolving the difficulties of genre boundaries and lists, one practice is to attempt to immobilise or narrow the borders of classification. With respect to the western, Jim Kitses notes that some theorisations are grounded in the attempt to “freeze the genre once and for all in a definitive model of the ‘classical’ western,”³⁷ while other models, according to Altman, reduce an enormous body of work to a “narrow corpus.”³⁸ In short, Neale argues, “conventional definitions of genre are often narrow and restrictive”³⁹. The immediate challenge of this practice, Neale continues, is that

traditional accounts of a number of genres are inaccurate or incomplete, that aesthetic and cultural theories of genre are prone to overgeneralisation, and that accounts of the role played by genre and genres in Hollywood’s history and Hollywood’s output are often partial and misleading.⁴⁰

Similar attempts to manage the potential overlaps of genres reside in simply concentrating on films made by a particular director or studio, or the inclusion of films generating substantial profits. The effect of such limitations deliberately retains the neatness and reinforces the ideals of the boundaries surrounding a genre, which is

³³ Basinger, 18.

³⁴ Basinger, 11.

³⁵ Tudor, 5.

³⁶ Tudor, 5.

³⁷ Kitses, Jim ‘Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western’, in *The Western Reader*. 2nd edn. edd. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 63.

³⁸ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 17.

³⁹ Neale, *Genre*, 1.

⁴⁰ Neale, *Genre*, 1.

why the same films are repeatedly used as examples to retain this organisation. As Alan Williams comments,

“the same films, the same categories come up again and again. Do you need a Western? You’ll find a discussion of the films of John Ford. A Musical? Look for the Freed Unit. Don’t seek Gene Autry or *The Singing Fool* unless you’re fairly adventurous.”⁴¹

Films that do not fit are often reduced to a smaller grouping, and broad genres, as Altman points out, are simply subdivided “into smaller units.”⁴²

The more recent method to settle the difficulties of genres is to step away from genre textuality and to focus on a historical reading, which is based on what Gledhill identifies as “locatable origins and singular meanings—[which] according to Neale, Maltby, and Altman [are] more authentically found at the site of production.”⁴³ The historical resort of identifying genres by tracing the early marketing categories is exemplified in both Richard Abel’s and Ben Singer’s attempts to contextualise the origins of the contemporary action genre. As Yvonne Tasker summarises, though the action genre,

has come to stand metonymically for the post-classical Hollywood blockbuster in contemporary criticism, one strategy for thinking about action and/as genre involves positioning it precisely within an historical perspective, emphasising not so much its difference from but continuities with earlier patterns of filmmaking.⁴⁴

To Abel, the early incarnations of the action film were regarded as ‘sensational melodramas’ or ‘thriller melodramas’:

the principal object of concern during the early 1910s was what the trade press labelled *thriller melodramas* or *sensational melodramas*. In a survey of film releases during the month of July 1910, for instance, the *Mirror* classified 52 out of a total of 241 titles as ‘thriller melodramas’, with Cowboy and Indian subjects making up nearly half of them.⁴⁵

Like the contemporary action film, Singer argues, the ‘sensational melodrama’,

⁴¹ Alan Williams, 'Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?' *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 9.2 (1984), 122.

⁴² Altman, *Film/Genre*, 17.

⁴³ Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', 225.

⁴⁴ Yvonne Tasker, Introduction in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

⁴⁵ Richard Abel, 'The "Culture War" of Sensational Melodrama 1910–1914', in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 31–32.

delivered abundant rapid action, stimulating violence, spectacular sights, thrills of physical peril, abductions, and suspenseful rescues. On a narrative level, film melodramas relied on very similar stories emphasising pure villainy and heroism catalysed by the villain's jealousy and/or greed and often relying on extraordinary coincidences and sudden revelations and twists of circumstances.⁴⁶

The advantage of the consideration of the similarities of such categories is that it debunks the rigidity of genre boundaries and acknowledges the fluidity of naming categories. As Altman points out,

In the 20s, virtually every film was identified as either a melodrama or a comedy; in the 40s films were regularly identified by multiple designators (such as comedy melodrama, juvenile comedy, or comedy-fantasy); by the 70s an entirely new set of generic types was available (road film, big caper film, disaster film, and the like). Instead of considering that changes in terminology modify the generic identity of previous films, however, critics have always assumed that new terms should have no effect on already existing films and that generic identification is a once-and-for-all affair.⁴⁷

If in focusing on the spectacle of early cinema key elements of the action film have brought attention to the background of action then, as Tasker points out, "critics have increasingly drawn comparisons between contemporary action movies and the silent cinemas which pioneered key cinematic elements such as the chase scene."⁴⁸ Further, like early cinema features, the contemporary Hollywood action blockbuster "is undeniably a spectacular, star and effects led cinema."⁴⁹ The key with such approaches is that they rely on an emphasis on, "action as a spectacular rather than a narrative cinema."⁵⁰ In other words, to uncover the action genre's identity it is supposedly necessary to overlook features of the action blockbuster, such as the focus on overcoming obstacles, the emphasis on power and the one-liner. However, the real danger generated from attention to the historical resemblances of the action genre, is that in distilling the action simply to speed and spectacle the implication is that the contemporary action film can be reduced to a vague summary that is too broad to grasp an identity. In doing so, Gledhill argues that the historicist remedy

⁴⁶ Ben Singer, 'Child of Commerce! Bastard of Art: Early Film Melodrama', in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 52.

⁴⁷ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 19.

⁴⁸ Tasker, Introduction, 7.

⁴⁹ Tasker, Introduction, 6.

⁵⁰ Tasker, Introduction, 7.

points out that “Ultimately, reliance on industrial and marketing categories threatens to return us to the taxonomic trap”.⁵¹

In any case, the gravitation to the ideal that all films within a textual grouping will have identical relationships to the conventions assumed of a particular genre misses a vital aspect of genre films. Maltby points out the error of the illusion that genre films share similar features with other films of the same groupings, arguing that, “Genres may appear to be bound by systems of rules, but an individual genre movie inevitably transgresses those rules in differentiating itself from other movies in the same genre.”⁵² One of the main difficulties resulting from list making, Neale argues, is that the imprecision of the process of list making is permeated by an inability to recognise “that elements are capable of performing a number of different and distinct functions.”⁵³ The difficulty of lists extends to the fact that they

can only deal with structure at the expense of structuration, with the enounced at the expense of the enunciation, with static listable entities rather than elements whose constitution as relatively ‘stable’ generic components is a result of their function in a constant process of repetition and difference.⁵⁴

Accordingly, lists of generic qualities are treated with caution or, as Linda Williams puts it, “lists of visual content are only the first step to understanding genre; though helpful as descriptions of the elements of generic structure, such lists do not begin to address the dynamics of structuration.”⁵⁵ In this focus on the ‘dynamics’, there is an implied acknowledgement that something indefinable necessarily escapes excessive inventories.

This limit of prescribing to lists is also demonstrated in Altman’s example of the conflict between Elvis films and the musical. For some reason the two categories are clearly separate entities, although listing features and traits fails to distinguish a difference apart from the man himself. Altman illustrates the difficulty by means of an imagined conversation:

‘I mean, what do you do with Elvis Presley films? You could hardly call them musicals.’

⁵¹ Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', 225.

⁵² Maltby, 109.

⁵³ Neale, *Genre*, 12.

⁵⁴ Neale, *Genre*, 13.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Hard Core*, 128.

‘Why not? They’re loaded with songs and they’ve got a narrative that ties the numbers together, don’t they?’

‘Yeah, I suppose. I guess you’d have to call *Fun in Acapulco* a musical, but it’s sure no *Singin’ in the Rain*. Now there’s a real musical.’⁵⁶

As Altman points out, a musical is only *not* a musical, “When it has Elvis Presley in it.”⁵⁷ There is something about the presence of Elvis Presley that taints what usually consists of a musical.⁵⁸ Despite all the similarities, Elvis is a distinct mark that entitles Elvis films to their own genre. In short, there is an undefinable quality that resists articulation.⁵⁹

Notwithstanding the failure of pivotal conventions or certain expectations to appear, it is this unknown element which determines why some films are classified and accepted as being part of a particular generic corpus. As Bordwell’s example illustrates,

The processes by which people construct a fuzzy category do not define it but rather provide a loose set of more or less central, more or less strongly linked expectations – default hierarchies – that are taken to hold good unless contradicted by other information. Musicals are typically comic, but *A Star is Born* (1954) causes us to revise our expectations, not redefine the musical.⁶⁰

In spite of the impact of alterations and differences that individual films may achieve, the clutches of a designated textual category remain powerful. Regardless of the failures of lists, nevertheless genres are still recognisable. It is this consideration which returns us to the problem of how, in spite of revisions, action, western, musical, science fiction and other films are to be understood and regarded in terms of genre categories. In other words, how is it possible to recognise something that is unable to be articulated and defies lists that describe linking qualities?

One way to understand this recognition of genre is encountered in Danny’s unexpected plunge into the film-within-a-film in *Last Action Hero*. When the powers of a ‘magic ticket’ thrust Danny into another dimension, significantly he immediately comprehends that a different mode of operation is at work. The action film that

⁵⁶ Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach', 27.

⁵⁷ Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach', 27.

⁵⁸ In other words, Elvis is the stain (or blot) of the Musical.

⁵⁹ Though this undefinable quality may resist articulation simply because it does not exist. If so, then we return to the circular identification process: how does an audience recognise a genre film belonging to a particular category?

⁶⁰ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 148 (my emphasis).

Danny explores is like a universe; a circumstance that is particularly apparent in the differences between the framework of Danny's 'real' world and the movie universe that Jack Slater (Arnold Schwarzenegger) occupies. In Danny's 'real' world, there are certain rules which determine that opening your front door after a request not to open it, is an invitation for intruders to beat you up; that children who sneak out of their homes at midnight are mugged; that ugly homeless people sleep in run-down cinemas; and that parents are always overworked and tired. In contrast, the movie universe is a paradise for chauvinistic cartoon cats, the mathematically challenged (everyone has virtually identical telephone numbers), the beautiful (unattractive women do not exist), and is a place where people can only function without rude words. As Danny points out, it *has* to be a movie because in the real world small annoying boys are not promoted as police detective partners, but rather they receive special attention from social workers. The final irrefutable proof that this is a different world comes in Slater's hesitation to kill Danny. Danny only makes Slater the offer to shoot him, despite Slater's obvious temptation, because of his blind confidence in the logic of the action universe: 'You do not kill kids in the movies.' *Last Action Hero* presents a structure that is accepted as a universe complete with its own discursive intersubjective network.

There is nothing novel in suggesting that genre films provide their own framework of reality. This acknowledgement is peppered throughout film genre theory. Sobchack suggests that, "the genre film provides the experience of an ordered world."⁶¹ Similarly, Tom Ryall notes that it is a "mistake to regard genres as pigeon-holes into which films must fit, rather than elements in a flexible conceptual world."⁶² In Martin Flanagan's view, the action genre presents, "static, 'finished' worlds, broadly drawn, non-specific backdrops constructed according to the purely physical requirements of the action;"⁶³ furthermore, "the world of the action film, as expressed in time and space, is essentially *always the same*."⁶⁴ Altman also similarly concludes that the discussions on genres treat each genre

As if [it] were itself a complete and closed universe...film genre fans regularly evoke other genre films rather than the real world. Implicitly, each new genre

⁶¹ Sobchack, 102.

⁶² Ryall, 107.

⁶³ Martin Flanagan, "'Get ready for Rush Hour': The Chronotope in Action", in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 110.

⁶⁴ Flanagan, 110.

film ingests every previous film, a process often literalised by the recycling of popular titles.⁶⁵

The concept of verisimilitude also draws on the notion of genres providing a certain frame of reality. Verisimilitude, as Maltby states, is based on “what is appropriate”⁶⁶ in a given narrative. Neale’s discussion of the “regimes of verisimilitude”⁶⁷ focuses on the specific factors—generic and cultural verisimilitude—that construct a genre’s frame of reality presented as a totality. In this respect there is a parallel between genres and universe.

Whilst the ‘universe’ implies a set which, when encountered singularly, is a complete formation, inherent to its structure is the impossibility of providing a singular perception. The universal, as Jacques Lacan states, “always presents itself as whole, as forming a universe all by itself—and even constituting the universe as such, as distinct from the world.”⁶⁸ Consequently, due to this lack of a totality it is presumptuous to assume an ability to distinguish. As Slavoj Žižek points out,

trans-cultural universal features...form features that are specific to particular cultures and periods... the elementary counter-argument to it is that the very relationship between trans-cultural universals and culture-specific features is not an ahistorical constant, but historically overdetermined: *the very notion of a trans-cultural universal means different things in different cultures.*⁶⁹

Genres, like the universal, demand difference, which may explain the resistance of genres to conform to neat definitions and why all-encompassing definitions of genres fail from the outset. Accordingly, as Maltby observes, “different audiences will use a genre in different ways at different times.”⁷⁰ Likewise, as Peter Wollen remarks, “the film director must create his own images...by imposing his own style, his own

⁶⁵ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 25–26.

⁶⁶ Maltby, 109.

⁶⁷ Following Tzvetan Todorov’s proposal of the make-up of genre, for Neale, the logic of a genre is based on both cultural verisimilitude and generic verisimilitude, namely the need to follow the “*rules of the genre*: for a work to be said to have verisimilitude, it must conform to these rules,” Todorov cited in Steve Neale, ‘Questions of Genre’, in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 160–161.

⁶⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954 – 1955: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, with notes by John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 30.

⁶⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Friction of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, (London: British Film Institute publishing, 2001), 17.

⁷⁰ Maltby, 108.

interpretation.”⁷¹ Simply equating genres with universes is, however, unable to answer precisely the question of how Danny recognises this frame of reality.

The response that *Last Action Hero* provides is ultimately Lacanian: Danny’s recognition of this action movie universe is not dependent on the presence of the ‘iconographic’ Arnold Schwarzenegger,⁷² nor does he have resort to the ridiculous Hollywood practice of proclaiming that ‘I must be dreaming!’ The moment of realisation for Danny occurs when he is able to recognise the action film’s conventions: “The bad puns, the voice, the hard rock...this is really happening!” In exposing the action genre’s conventions, *Last Action Hero* offers an explicit example of the recognition of a symbolic universe. However, in this instance it is of significant note that it is *only* when Danny uses the sum of conventions that he is able to grasp their signification. To put it simply, for Danny, each signifier, or convention, is in isolation meaningless; rather, the signifiers are only comprehended in their totality. Encountered in this circumstance is a precise illustration of Lacan’s definition of the signifier, in which, “a signifier is that which represents a subject...for another signifier.”⁷³

This Lacanian response offers a basic understanding of the action universe, which is constructed by the totality of signifiers rather than by individual features, for within

the domain proper to the human order...this order constitutes a totality. In the symbolic order the totality is called a universe. The symbolic universe from the first takes on its universal character. It isn’t constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols.⁷⁴

The operation of the signifier is dependent on the presence of other signifiers. When a signifier is taken out of context it is indecipherable, as illustrated by Lacan’s imagined scenario where, alone in a desert,

you find a stone covered with hieroglyphics. You do not doubt for a moment that, behind them, there was a subject who wrote them. But it is an error to believe that each signifier is addressed to you—this is proved by the fact that

⁷¹ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg in association with the British Film Institute, 1969), 137.

⁷² See Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 97, who observe that Schwarzenegger figures as iconography for action films.

⁷³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis Four Fundamentals*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 198.

⁷⁴ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 29.

you cannot understand any of it. On the other hand you define them as signifiers, by the fact that you are sure that each of these signifiers is related to each of the others.⁷⁵

The totality of a structure extends to the determination of a signifier's meaning. In other words, a signifier alters according to its universe (or genre) and its signification is dependent on the textual framework. For example, the significance of an object like a gun translates according to the genre in which it appears. Thus, in the action genre, the gun functions as an all-powerful weapon that is incessantly used in the quest for control, in a melodrama, however, the presence of a gun regularly identifies the villain and its appearance marks the moment when the world changes.⁷⁶ By contrast, the perversity of horror lies in the diminished value of the gun: what is usually an infallible device is reduced to an insubstantial piece of equipment. As Carol Clover states, "in the hands of the killer, at least, guns have no place in slasher films. Victims sometimes avail themselves of firearms, but...guns fail in a pinch."⁷⁷ This shifting of meaning according to the discursive network in operation is also apparent in the modes of an actor's performance across various genres, hence Richard DeCordova's comment that "performance manifests itself so differently in different genres."⁷⁸ What is accepted as 'realistic' does not necessarily translate to another genre. Usually there is a direct coincidence between the performance and the genre, as Žižek illustrates,

The characters included in the diegetic reality always react as if they knew in which genre of film they were. If, for example, a door creaks in a horror film, the actor will react by turning his head anxiously towards it; if a door creaks in a family comedy, the same actor will shout at his small child not to sneak around the apartment.⁷⁹

The comparable inability of a generic convention to 'stand alone' sheds light on the failure of lists and the mapping of generic boundaries, which have a tendency to

⁷⁵ Lacan, *Four Fundamentals*, 199.

⁷⁶ I.e. in *Titanic* when Rose rejects Cal. Upon his realisation, he goes berserk and chases the lovers with a pistol. At this moment it is not the iceberg that poses the imminent threat to change the world of Jack and Rose, but rather the gun.

⁷⁷ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: British Film Institute publishing, 1992), 31.

⁷⁸ Richard DeCordova, 'Genre and Performance: An Overview', in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 129.

⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: October Press/MIT Press, 1992), 111.

concentrate on the ‘bits’ of a genre (motifs, symbols, conventions) rather than on the dynamics. The complexity of using conventions as a point of generic identification, as we have seen, arises from the circumstance that it is an empiricist trap. Moreover, conventions do not automatically equate a particular genre, nor do they necessarily relate to a genre classification in the same way.

The Functions of Conventions

Rather than resorting to the outdated practice of using conventions as a means, in Gledhill’s words, to “survey the terrain of the world, identify its dramatic personae, iconology, locations, and plot possibilities, and establish the rules of narrative engagement and permutation,”⁸⁰ the focus of this thesis is primarily on *why* certain conventions recur. Accordingly, this thesis begins with an examination of the conventions that have made ‘Hollywood logic’ famous; a logic which determines in action films that if the hero has a psychological and/or physical problem which has prevented him from effectively dealing with external challenges, this problem will disappear at an opportune moment.⁸¹ Hence the hero’s stripping to the waist will make him invulnerable; supervising police officers will always threaten suspension to their star detective if he does not drop the case, the corollary being that it is only after the detective has been suspended that he can properly ‘crack’ the case; when men drink whiskey, it is always in a shot glass, and they always drink it in one gulp—if they are wimps, they will gasp for air and have a coughing fit, but if they are macho, they will wince briefly, flashing clenched teeth.⁸² Such random examples of logic are not used as part of a mapping process, they are used as part of a Lacanian based inquiry to understand the logic at work in these films. As Copjec observes,

⁸⁰ Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', 223.

⁸¹ Throughout the thesis, the word 'hero' is confined to male heroes, and 'heroine' is used for women. The exclusivity of these terms is generic and serves to highlight that within the Hollywood action universe male heroes dominate and women are an aberration. For the majority of Hollywood action films, the male hero is thought of as the norm and his heroism is implicitly understood and accepted from the outset; whereas for a woman who assumes the heroic role, her ‘maleness’ is a process that needs to be explained or justified for her heroism to be accepted.

⁸² These clichés and many others are noted on the website compiled by Giancarlo Cairella, *The Movie Cliches List* <<http://moviecliches.com/>>.

We pay too much attention to the established terms and their relation without ever inquiring into the principle by which they are established. In virtue of what, we neglect to ask, is this particular organization instituted?⁸³

Both Neale and Bordwell argue that action films have their own particular logic, complete with own rules. According to Neale, a genre regime “entails rules, norms and laws,”⁸⁴ while Bordwell elaborates, “genres are in one respect certain kinds of stories, endowed with their own particular logic that does not contest psychological causality or goal-oriented action”—for example, in the western the hero seeks revenge, the chorus girl in the musical seeks a big break—and accordingly, “each genre creates own rules”.⁸⁵ What the logic of the action commonly aims at is highlighting the masculinity at its core. The action thus revolves around the celebration of the powerful and the bypassing of physical, mental, visual and other limitations. However, the narrative also depends on emphasising the impotence of the hero. The resulting tension produces a logic particular to the masculine. It is this kernel that commonly offers a rather obvious point of recognition in terms of defining the action genre.

Close attention to the small details also detects a subtle shift in the structure of some action films; namely, there is a noticeable difference in the relationship between the action film and the masculine. The collapse of masculine logic in some action films not only questions action’s defining point of recognition, but also produces a distinct structure of action films that challenge and play with the expectations produced by the classical action’s logic. This shift of structures is discernable only through examinations of the relationship to the signifiers, or conventions, of the action film. The entwined relationship between structure and signifier is one that Lacan elaborated from his proposition: “There is no structure except through language.”⁸⁶ In other words, the way to uncover the logic of the action film is to explore its discursive structure, which is impossible to ignore. For Lacan, “the notion of structure is by itself already a manifestation of the signifier...To be interested in structure is to be unable to neglect the signifier.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Copjec, Introduction, xi.

⁸⁴ Neale, *Genre*, 32.

⁸⁵ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 20.

⁸⁶ Jacques Lacan, 'Television', *October* 40 (1987), 11.

⁸⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955–1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 183–184.

Differences in structure in genre theory, however, are usually dismissed as part of a process of regulated difference or as simply how a film may relate to the genre. The problem here is that it is often difficult, beyond parody and self-referentiality, to distinguish the differences between films related to a particular genre. Every generic corpus is littered with examples when conventions have been revered, rejected, parodied or even defied. Such variations have produced a particular vernacular within genre theory, as summarised by Neale:

On occasion the term 'sub-genre' has also been used, generally to refer to specific traditions within these genres (as in 'romantic comedy', 'slapstick comedy', 'the gothic horror film' and so on). And sometimes the term 'cycle' is used as well, usually to refer to groups of films made within a specific and limited time span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes.⁸⁸

The explanation for the difference and variations of conventions within a textual category usually arrives in the suggestion that this process is due to the genre's cycle. Thomas Schatz, for example, proposes that a "genre's formal internal evolution...does seem to follow a rather consistent pattern of schematic development."⁸⁹ That is, within a particular textual corpus, individual films supposedly all undergo a progression "from transparency to opacity—from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism."⁹⁰ This neat progression is rejected by Alan Williams, largely because of the presence of other films undermining Schatz's argument as "one can find self-conscious Westerns, such as Fairbank's *Wild and Woolly*, as early as the late teens. In fact the entire mid-to-late silent cinema seems remarkably 'formalistic'.⁹¹ According to Altman, the weakness of the 'cyclic' schemas offered, whether the 'biological evolution' or the 'life cycle' approaches, is that both modes

offer precious little elbowroom. Like a train, genre is free to move, but only along already laid tracks. This tendency to subordinate history to continuity by restricting change to prescribed limits help us to understand the sleight of hand whereby genre history can regularly be written without contradicting genre's transhistorical nature. Like railroad tracks, teleological history assures that

⁸⁸ Neale, *Genre* 9.

⁸⁹ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981) 37.

⁹⁰ Schatz, 38.

⁹¹ Williams, "Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?": 123 – 124.

genres will be free only to shuttle back and forth between experimental and reflexivity.⁹²

Alternatively, film theorists have discussed ‘rebel’, ‘subversive’, and ‘progressive’ texts, but the proposal of a generic text’s rebellion has also been criticised on the grounds of the nullifying qualities of difference in genre. For all the apparently identical traits of genre films, genre is a system in which difference is inherent. Overt differences in certain films within a generic body can therefore be pinned to the Hollywood practice of regulating difference. As Barbara Klinger remarks, “the notion of difference, even a staunchly innovative one, seems firmly entrenched within the vicissitudes of the system.”⁹³ In this thesis, however, rebellion is read slightly askew.

Rebellion, within the action genre framework, can be conceived simply as a challenge against the masculine logic that dominates this universe. One of the main characteristics of the kernel of the action universe is its unambiguous relation to power: the attention placed on power is unveiled in the explicit quest of the hero to gain or to regain power, the battles between good and bad, and, finally in the hero’s mental and physical strengths. But what happens in the instance when the core of action films—namely power, the force that retains the universe’s consistency—is questioned, played with, or cheated? Is it possible for an action film to renounce this kernel, but nevertheless remain in the generic category?

The stumbling block of genre theory over the years has been the inability of theorists to pinpoint the particular cause of its recognition. In as much as ‘Post-theorists’ such as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Richard Maltby resist Lacanian filmic readings because of the psychoanalytic tendency towards intangibility, recognition of genres rests on precisely something that remains indefinable.⁹⁴ The advantage of a Lacan-based investigation is that it takes specifically what cannot be articulated as its starting point. Through Lacan, the focus

⁹² Altman, *Film/Genre* 22.

⁹³ Barbara Klinger, ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism Revisited: The Progressive Genre’, in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 88.

⁹⁴ David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s *Post-Theory* offers a collection of essays which are all based on the outright rejection of “doctrines from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, Post-Structuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian Marxism.” David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiii.

on the symbolic orders (universes) within the action genre allows exploration of the impact and effect of the shifting relationships to the conventions of the action genre.

In the third chapter I have discussed why there is so much action in action. In Chapter Four, I will explore what happens when the action loses its defining point of masculinity. To this end I will examine action films which depart from, or reject, this kernel and look at what happens when the assumed defining point of action is lost or perverted. While the two distinct structures presented are otherwise identical (in terms of Classical Hollywood style), it does revise the question of how these structures are to be identified. Accordingly, I will attempt to articulate the differences between these structures by applying Lacan's schema of the four discourse