



UCLA'S JOURNAL OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

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## 11. To what degree can genre studies shed light on the current political climate? Do certain genres, such as low-budget horror movies or the recent resurgence in superhero escapism, offer a contemporary political commentary?

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**Miller:** I assume you refer here to hermeneutic readings—these can excite many academic audiences in the way they draw on a paranoid form of critique to explain the relationship between the popularity of fiction and contemporary society, but the payoff seems limited beyond that occasion. Such accounts require blending with a wider social critique.

**Tryon:** Genre studies can offer a useful approach for thinking about the role of media texts, both TV series and films, in offering a contemporary political commentary; however, it is important to recall that the ideological underpinnings of genres (or even individual genre films) are often laced with contradictions and/or mixed messages. At the same time, audiences may be drawn to films that have little to do with their manifest or latent political content. While *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* are two of the biggest blockbusters in recent memory, they were also relentlessly promoted by high-powered marketing machines, and their status not merely as meaning-making machines but also as money-making machines should not be forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the imperative to produce a film that is both profitable and capable of preserving the franchise for future updates ensures that few radical political messages will be given voice in the new blockbusters. As a result, most Hollywood films deploy a carefully crafted political neutrality, blunting controversy in order to avoid boycotts and other actions that might depress a film's box office. Thus, in *The Dark Knight*, Batman could be read as a Bush-inspired lone crusader protecting Gotham against the dangers of terrorism, as exemplified by the antics of the Joker. Or, simultaneously, the film could be read as a critique of the Patriot Act, specifically, and of the escapist tendencies of superhero films more generally. Both readings are almost equally supportable by the text, leaving the viewers' beliefs virtually unchallenged. This does not mean that we should not treat genre films politically or ideologically, but we should be aware of how the films will be used and how they will intersect with other texts in the ongoing negotiation of meaning.

**Nichols:** Yes. It is always there for the interpreting.

### Notes:

1 In this sense, I am reversing Thomas Elsaesser's formulation, although these two activities are essentially two sides of the metaphorical coin. See "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, but Not Everything Goes." *The End of Cinema as We Know It*. Ed. Jon Lewis. New York:

New York University Press, 2001. 11-22.

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