

2. Have we seen the emergence of what could be categorized as a new genre (or genres) in the last decade or so? If so, how would you describe it or delineate it?

Mittell: My approach to genre focuses on the processes of categorization rather than the texts themselves. Thus over the last decade, the most robust categorization has been around reality television. The features of such programs have been prevalent for decades, but only in the last ten years has the category started to cohere, infringing on some more traditional categories like talent show, game show, and documentary. But any delineation is by necessity temporary—it is always a category in flux rather than solidly defined.

Ruston: In terms of new cinematic genres, I think the trends in analysis over the past few years have primarily been in recognizing and exploring hybrid genres, as well as theorizing the fluid boundaries of genre—aesthetically, thematically, nationally, etc.

What is more evident to me, however, is the application of genre terminology in new media studies. This is particularly evident in the field of video game studies, where genre analysis has played a significant role. For a relatively young field, this makes sense as one of the key values of genre articulation and exploration (above and beyond its analytical use as a tool to unpack meaning, ideology, transmedia flows, etc.) is in the construction of a common frame of reference and common lexicon allowing for a more productive discourse.

In my own work on mobile media narrative projects, I often struggle to explain to newcomers what characteristics and features these projects possess since they are relatively little known. Often, when discussing mobile game projects, I am queried with “Well, is it like an MMOG?” or “That sounds like a First Person Shooter.” These generic terms, borrowed from video game studies, provide a common reference point to begin to construct a sense of how an unfamiliar media object operates. It is a natural cognitive strategy to organize and comprehend new concepts or objects by comparison and grouping with known quantities, and that is one of the driving forces behind the existence and continued relevance of genre.

Shary: Trying to identify “new” genres is always treacherous. Does anyone think lambada movies are relevant anymore? (That’s my favorite example.) In the last decade, I would say that “sensitive guy” movies have become more popular, since we like to laugh at losers initially but ultimately want them to succeed. And “horror porn” has gained odd visibility in the mainstream, likely in response to people being more desensitized to dehumanization as a result of access to Internet porn and the U.S. use of torture and perfidy in its recent wars. Still, chances are that, as with most genres, current genres will not be identified and appreciated for another 10-20 years.

Shetley: Genres are ways of organizing the production, distribution, consumption, and understanding of cultural materials. Categories like romantic comedy and horror perform this function, but so do categories like “half-hour sitcom” and “feature film.” If we think of genre in terms of these broad categories, rather than in terms of specific narrative formulas, we have certainly witnessed the development of new genres in recent years. One would be the brief video designed for web distribution, another would be the podcast, another the DVD box set of television programming. It may seem strange to refer to DVD boxes as a genre, but I think they make available a new kind of viewing experience that significantly alters the meaning and function of the original material. If the viewers I know are at all representative, it’s common to view DVD box sets in marathon binges, burning through a whole season of a particular show in a couple of days; in many cases, such viewers are willing to watch shows in this way that they would never follow on a weekly basis. Genre theory may offer us some useful tools for thinking about this new way of viewing.