Introduction

Genre has long been used in literary and later film criticism before its adoption in television studies in the 1970s (Newcombe, 1976). Analyzing generic forms proved one of the earliest methods used to identify texts possessing shared properties and norms, from visual features and narrative tropes to setting and character, as well as differences between groupings. Of such a theoretical endeavour, Feuer describes, ‘Genre theory has the task both of making ... divisions and of justifying the classifications once they have been made’ (1992: 138). But genre is more than rhetorical categories notes Neale: it instead involves coherent ‘systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between industry, text and the subject’ (1980: 20). Any one genre is a system based on perceived similarities and differences and on a set of expectations and assumptions shared by the reader/viewer.
When talking about TV genre, what emerges is a notoriously contentious and hard to define concept. Turner outlines key problems involved in studying genre and television as 'conditioned not just by the formats and forms of television itself but also by the history of genre as a concept, the uses to which it has been put, and the other art and media forms to which it has been applied' (Creeber, 2003: 3). ‘Radio, film, written fiction, theatre, journalism, music and other art and media forms have all played an important part in television and its history’ (Creeber, 2003: 3), and for Turner these influences are further complicated by the ‘ways in which genre has figured in these forms, and in the theories and debates that have surrounded them, [which] has had an important effect on theories and debates about genre and television itself’ (Creeber, 2001: 3).

A key issue is that of definition: How do we define genre? What in fact counts as a genre within a media aimed at the broadest constituency possible? How do we begin to apply generic groupings to programmes increasingly seen as examples of postmodern hybridisation? And how exactly does the television industry account for and use generic categories? Taking our examples from contemporary American television, this chapter identifies various theorizations of genre in television, focusing on major trends, approaches and critical methodologies as we attempt to address the question: How useful is it to study television in terms of genre?

**Genre: origins and developments**

Before looking at television genre – what it is and how it is used, it is important to first trace genre’s intellectual and historical roots to give a sense of why and how particular methods are used, and to situate such thinking within broader intellectual traditions. Put simply, it is important to grasp how the different theories and approaches to genre used today not only evolved from previous work, belonging to much longer histories, but also must be situated within changing intellectual and industrial contexts.

The intellectual roots of genre can be traced back to 300BC and the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who identified some basic principles for understanding dramatic forms like comedy and tragedy. Literary theory owes an enormous debt to Aristotle’s thinking, as it concentrated in the beginning on producing defining characteristics for particular genres based on historic usage. It took a structuralist approach, deconstructing the structural elements to find patterns and repeated motifs in how stories are told. Offering at least a provisional notion of what constitutes a genre, literary criticism provided the new field of
television studies with an established approach to analyzing a text; but in adopting methodologies from a more reputable discipline, television studies enhanced its credibility in its bid for academic legitimacy.

Despite its initial usefulness, Feuer identifies a problem with how literary criticism defines certain generic forms as ideal, implying that meaning never changes but instead remains somehow static, timeless and universal. For a start, such an approach is blighted by the problem of justifying ‘aesthetic and cultural value’ (1992: 138) rather than merely applying theoretical and objective modes of classifying a text. She claims that taking generic category names from literature’s ‘ideal types’ are far too broad to be successfully applied to television, insisting instead on the historically transitional and culturally ephemeral nature of the medium (1992: 139). To this end, she suggests that we need to search for more apposite ways of classifying television forms and formats, as in her view ‘attempts to measure the … forms of mass media against the norms of drama are doomed to failure’ (1992: 140).

What can be concluded from these attempts to categorize a particular genre is the role played by the critic or theoretician. Feuer aptly summarizes the difficulties involved in such theoretical endeavours. ‘The methodology that the analyst brings to bear upon the texts determines the way in which that analyst will construct the genre. Genres are made, not born. The coherence is provided in the process of construction, and a genre is ultimately an abstract concept rather than something that exists empirically in the world’ (1992: 144).

**Genre and the audience**

**Box 12.1 British cultural studies**

*British cultural studies* is rooted in thinking developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (established in 1964). Growing out of poststructuralist approaches to theorizing ideology (Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Barthes and semiotics, Lévi-Strauss and myth), and combining theory with the political, cultural studies found new ways of thinking about how ideology produced meaning in, and constituted individuals as subjects within, cultural institutions, texts and practices.

*Continued*
Textual analysis combined with an acute awareness of the specific historical and socio-cultural context defines this inter-disciplinary methodology.

Anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss worked to understand rules governing kinship relationships as well as the function of myth within traditional (or ‘primitive’) societies. Stripping away the surface layer of myth led him to expose the contradictions at work in any given social structure.

Neale (2003) points out that generic norms and conventions may be recognized and mutually understood by the academy, but they are also familiar to and generally accepted by audiences, readers and viewers. Hans Jauss (1982) focuses on the ‘horizons of expectation’ aroused through genre; while Altman talks about the ‘generic audience’ as a way of defining those ‘sufficiently familiar with the genre to participate in a fully genre-based viewing’ (1996: 280). Genre frames audience expectations, whereby viewers bring a set of assumptions with them and anticipate that these will somehow be met in the viewing experience. Genre thus operates as ‘an important means of communicating information about the television text to prospective audiences ... [through] its inscription in publicity, in the listings in the TV guide, in the repertoires of cultural knowledge around individual personalities and other intertextual experiences’ (Turner in Hilmes, 2003: 5). But how to theorize this relationship between genre and the television audience would become a central concern for television studies.

Attempts made by scholars to theorize the audience profoundly shaped the television studies’ agenda, and was made possible through a wider engagement with the burgeoning field of British cultural studies. Such discussions marked a broader shift away from the text as a fixed site of meaning, often associated with authorial intent, to a polysemic one open to multiple interpretations. Here the text only has meaning in the act of reading. Much of the ethnographic work trained attention on television viewing pleasures and consumption, and aimed to understand the context in which a text was produced and consumed. Genre as a popular cultural form played a key role here. Given that British cultural studies was rooted in a post-Marxist concern with the subversive capabilities of cultural practices and reclaiming the experience of those not normally represented (working class, women, ethnic minorities) and given that genre had long
been a derided form associated with mass production, commercialization and being formulaic; it seemed the perfect form for re-evaluation.

Feminist scholars in particular looked to genre to question gendered pleasures, television consumption and the interplay between reality and fiction. Modleski (1979; 1983), for example, sought to understand the relationship between daytime television soap opera and women’s everyday lives. Reclaiming a generic form previously dismissed as trivial, her analysis identifies the rhythms of television as similar to those of domestic labour. Patterns of distraction and disruption are replicated within the episodic, multi-linear narrative form of soap opera she argues. Ang’s 1985 ethnographic study of Dutch viewers watching American top-rated soap opera *Dallas* offers an alternative interpretation of the text-reader relationship, defining it as active, critical and selective. Such work has led the way for further studies that combine an understanding of audience pleasures with genre analysis: Stempel Mumford (1995) interrogates her own pleasures for the soap genre that displays various oppressive tendencies like racism, class-ism and hetero-sexism; while Spence’s multi-disciplinary study (2005) examines the varied critical and creative ways in which women viewers use soap operas in their lives.

**Genre and the industry**

So far discussion has focused on theoretical concepts and audiences, and the interplay between generic structure and readership is often far removed from how the institution of television uses generic forms and formats within its commercial practices. Genre, in fact, guides industrial procedures – how it organizes itself, how it appeals to viewers and how commercial stations deliver audiences to advertisers. Turner contends that genre ‘is a means of managing TVs notorious extensiveness as a cultural form’ (Creeber, 2001: 5). Developing this idea further, genre not only contributes to understanding how individual texts are classified and produced but also works within the schedules. ‘Critics have argued that perhaps the unit of coherence for television is found at a level larger than the program and different from the genre’ argues Feuer (1992: 157). So, for example, all possible generic programmes are pitted against each other to match competition, where a comedy may be pitched against a drama on a different channel. Combinations of programmes can be sampled within the same schedule, as with NBC’s Thursday night ‘must see-TV’ line-up or HBO’s Sunday evening showcasing of its original programming.
Key to limiting risk when scheduling diverse programmes finds the broadcasting companies depending on generic forms and formats, building on proven formulas to predict future success and launch new programmes. Genre also enables the production teams working on particular series to produce them quickly and more coherently.

Curtin (1995) describes three stages – innovation, imitation and saturation – characterizing the American networks’ reliance on genre as they try to attract viewers through a strategy of ‘least objectionable programming’. Mittell suggests that it may be overstating the case to identify innovation, as television innovation is less about originality than about recycling old formulas (Cited in Hilmes, 2003: 48). Even the beginnings of television reinterpreted an established cinematic genre like the western to draw audiences to the new medium. More recently, Deadwood (HBO, 2003–6) has referenced a longer history of filmic and televsional westerns to create a new, more gritty and profane form than ever before.

Feuer offers further insights on institutional uses of genre, suggesting that the advent of the remote control and multi-channel TV has resulted in a zap culture. This has led to programs being customized to attract an increasingly fragmented audience (1992: 157). But it also has further implications for transmission, whereby genre has increasingly become an important institutional indicator. Entire channels like Comedy Central, Paramount Comedy and Sci-Fi are devoted to particular genres; and the proliferation of cable and pay-TV has been structured around branding and marketing to niche audiences interested in generic types such as sports, lifestyle programming and documentaries.

Industrial dimensions expand generic categories beyond pure theoretical definitions. The demands of commercial practices necessitate that generic forms must somehow ‘guarantee meaning and pleasure’ in order to locate and retain a sizeable audience to justify a return on substantial investment. But, if as Neale says, ‘As far as genre is concerned, expectations exist both to be satisfied, and, also, to be redefined’ (1983: 54), then it follows that generic forms must necessarily develop and evolve to keep pace with audience interest. Consider the example of House, M.D. (NBC, 2004–present), it has rejuvenated the medical drama through invoking awareness of a rich generic legacy including M*A*S*H (CBS, 1972–83), St Elsewhere (NBC, 1982–8), Chicago Hope (CBS, 1994–2000) and E.R. (NBC, 1994–present), but also referencing the new aesthetic innovations associated with the ratings winning procedural dramas from the Crime Scene Investigation franchise – CSI (CBS, 2000–present), CSI: Miami (CBS, 2002–present) and CSI: New York (CBS, 2004–present).
Genre: contemporary redirections

Concepts of genre considered above identify the term as about 1) the structural analysis of the text; 2) the audience and how they interpret generic forms and formats; and 3) commercial practices and institutional demands. Taking these three concepts and adapting Altman’s classification of socio-cultural theories of genre (1984; 1987; 1996; 1999), Feuer summarizes an approach to studying genre using three categories – the aesthetic, the ritual and the ideological. ‘The aesthetic approach includes all attempts to define genre in terms of a system of conventions that permits artistic expression, especially involving individual authorship … The ritual approach sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which culture speaks to itself … [and] The ideological approach views genre as an instrument of control’ (1992: 145). Emerging is a theory for studying TV genre that considers the complex and ever evolving interaction between criticism, historical and cultural specificity, audience expectations and industrial demands.

Mittell’s recent contribution to the debate has been to argue for genre as not only a theoretical tool but also a methodology. Key to his argument is the notion that analyzing any given genre must take into account ‘specific issues and historical moments’ as well as ‘how genres work at the micro-level of media practice’ (2004: xv). He makes the case for suggesting that studying genre is more than about identifying rhetorical similarities and differences, but instead concerns meticulous analysis into the various methods by which television is produced, consumed and theoretically studied.

Genre and hybridity

Box 12.2 Flexi-narrative

‘Flexi-narrative’ is a term identified by Nelson, which he defines as ‘a hybrid mix of serial and series forms derived from a prose fiction, distinctive to the majority of TV output today. Flexi-narratives are mixtures of the series and serial form, involving the closure of one story arc within an episode (like a series) but with other, ongoing story arcs involving the regular characters (like a serial). This hybrid form maximizes the pleasures of both regular viewers who watch from week to week and get hooked by the serial narrative, and occasional viewers who happen to tune in into one episode seeking the satisfaction of narrative closure within that episode’ (Creeber, 2006: 82).
In Feuer’s opinion it is pointless to insist on generic purity in relation to television. Television genre and programming forms and formats are instead notoriously hybridized. Looking at contemporary TV drama, Nelson develops his concept of hybridity in relation to *intertextuality*, ‘flexi-narrative’ and a media-savvy audience. Operating on several levels, television serials like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) defy easy genre classification. Instead the series mixes generic influences, cinematic and televisual, as well as building on audience knowledge of popular culture, and past media and generic forms. Audience pleasure comes from these intertextual references, in which the text works to assure those watching that they are viewing something that they will like; to make them ‘feel superior because they know how this textual genre works and to add an element of playfulness ranging from spotting the allusions made through to a full *post-structuralist* awareness that textuality is all’ (Creeber, 2006: 83).

**The Case of *The Sopranos***

To illuminate the above we offer *The Sopranos* as a case study. Played out each week in the credit sequence is a meta-narrative that reinvents the gangster type for a media literate television audience. Iconographically Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) immediately codes a more recent generic past, from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) to *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), more violent, far bloodier than before. The centre of operations has shifted from the city to the hinterland, a place of transience, a no-man’s land where bodies are dumped and no questions asked. Chomping a cigar, sporting chunky gold jewellery and a designer Polo shirt he inherits the mantle of the post-classical Hollywood hard man. His bulk never seems to fit the frame, signalling a character larger than life, but also how his authority works – often unseen but always potent. Set up here is a series of iconic conventions already known to an audience based on accumulated media knowledge. But such knowledge also provides an opportunity for disruption. As with the jittery camerawork and jump cut editing style which signals that the gangster’s power might not be as assured as first imagined. Quite soon it reveals that our latter-day mobster is seeing a psychotherapist because he feels that his life is spinning out of control. Tony acknowledges his generic crisis early on when he tells Dr Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), ‘Lately I’ve been getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over’ (‘Pilot’, 1: 1). As Creeber stresses, ‘Tony’s depression is symptomatic of a character who unconsciously feels he exists at the wrong end of a long and illustrious tradition
(literally in the form of the Mob and metaphorically in the form of the gangster genre)' (Lavery, 2002: 126). Of the self-reflexive referencing of past generic influences on The Sopranos he continues that it ‘implicitly critiques the “televisionization” of the gangster genre – parodying its gradual development ... from cinematic epic to standard video or television fare’ (Lavery, 2002: 125).

Looking further at the credit sequence gives us insight into how generic hybridity has gendered implications. Driving away from the city signals a departure from the traditional urban space where the gangster is most closely associated, a movement from a male generic space to the more female generic territory defined by the leafy New Jersey suburbs where the Soprano family live. It signals a series where the mobster finds himself in unfamiliar generic territory characterized by mundane chores and domestic worries, with women playing an important role in referencing the new generic spaces through which the Mafia don progresses. Long denied an authoritative voice within the self-contained cinematic world of male violence and defined action (Sacks, 1971: 9; Warshow, 1962), women subtly shape the serial arc. Using strategies associated with soap opera and family drama (Feuer, 1984; Seiter, 1982) – listening and confession, gossip and silence, talking-heads and inter-personal skills – women like Livia Soprano (Nancy Marchand) and Carmela Soprano (Edie Falco) may be constantly negotiating Tony to carve out authority for themselves within uncompromising (male) generic conventions and (patriarchal) narrative worlds that tell them they have none. But the feminising forms rejuvenate the filmic gangster genre brought to television.

Critics have long identified the difficulties involved in demarcating one generic form from another, yet the generic hybrid functions to exploit repetition and regulate difference in the same product around audience pleasures and industrial expediency.

**Genre and the politics of representation**

Box 12.3  **Second-wave feminism, post-feminism and third wave feminism**

*Second-wave feminism*, politically motivated, and identified with consciousness-raising women’s groups, is interested in how ideology works to construct gender and the idea of woman as Other.

*(Continued)*
Post-feminism is a hotly contested term. One definition is that post-feminism speaks of the 1980s’ right-wing media backlash against feminism and feminist activism; another sees feminism as no longer relevant, arguing that gender equality has been achieved; scholars like Lotz (2001) contest that academic post-feminist thought is marked by ‘confusion and contradiction’, partly due to changing theoretical contexts (second-wave feminism, post-feminism, third-wave feminism), partly because of competing labels (liberal feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism), and partly because of confusion over terminology (one woman’s feminism is not necessarily another’s); and others such as Hollows (2000), and Moseley and Read (2002) understand post-feminist contradiction as about articulating the ‘experiences of being female, feminist, and feminine in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries’ (2002: 240).

Third Wave feminism – sometimes labelled post-feminism – is often described as a movement of young feminists who grew up with a sense of feminist entitlement, and who not only confront but positively embrace political and personal contradiction. Offering their definition, Heywood and Drake explain it as follows: ‘Third wave feminists often take cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle, seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice’ (2003: 4).

Feminist scholars have long looked to genre as a means of understanding the politics of representation and, combining textual analyses with an awareness of production conditions and the socio-cultural ideological context, have mapped out a dense social history of post-war femininity. Rabinovitz contends that American networks took advantage of the emergent and lucrative female demographic, to develop a new trend of feminist programming with a sub-genre of sitcoms like The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS, 1970–7), Maude (CBS, 1972–8) and Rhoda (CBS, 1974–8). Rabinovitz claims, ‘A generic address of “feminism” became an important strategy because it served the needs of American television executives who could cultivate programming that could be identified with target audiences whom they wanted to measure and deliver to advertising agencies’ (1999: 146).

Haralovich (2003: 69–85) pays close attention to how American sitcoms like Leave It To Beaver (CBS, 1957–8; ABC, 1958–63) and Father Knows Best (CBS,
1954–5 and 1958–62; NBC, 1955–8; ABC, 1962–3) ‘sold’ suburban middle-class family life, in the way it naturalized class and gender identities through patterns of consumption and the spatial layout of the home, to the female consumer. Interest in how television accommodated social change – incorporating dissent and turning it into consensual representation that preserves dominant patriarchal ideology – has proved another area of discussion. Bathrick (2003), for example, deliberates on how the sitcom form of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, the first to center on an unmarried career woman, and initially aired in 1970 at the height of second-wave feminism, worked in fact to preserve patriarchal values. Other contributions like Rabinovitz’s analysis (1994: 3–19) of ‘single mom’ sitcoms (for example, One Day At A Time (CBS, 1975–84) and Kate and Allie (CBS, 1984–8)), and Bodroghkozy’s (2003: 129–149) situating of the black sitcom Julia (NBC, 1968–71) – in the broader socio-political context about black single mothers (Julia lost her husband in the Vietnam War) and the politics of civil rights in 1960s America – determine how gender was (re)produced and institutionalized by television and its representational practices; and how those gendered meanings corresponded with, or else opposed, broader areas of women’s changing experience and culture.

Genre hybridity appears perfect for scholars attempting to understand the contradictory nature of gendered politics in the post-feminist age (Akass and McCabe, 2004). Mixing musical forms, feminine identities and generic styles, the credits for Sex and the City (HBO, 1998–2004) offers us a post-feminist joke narrative. Accompanied by modern jazz rhythms, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) wanders through New York City delighting in the sights – the Chrysler Building, the downtown skyline, the World Trade Center (replaced by the Empire State building after 9/11) and the Manhattan Bridge. Like classic slapstick, however, the viewer soon knows more than Carrie. A wheel drives through a puddle, the camera pulls back and for the first time we glimpse our heroine’s outfit – a white tulle skirt and pink vest. A Metropolitan Transit Authority bus carrying her sexy sophisticated image – the ‘naked’ Donna Karen dress that she wears when planning to have sex (and does when she first sleeps with Mr Big [Chris Noth]) – has given the fairy princess a soaking. Four shots later and the punch line is delivered. A reworking of the classic pie-in-the-face gag finds our heroine looking horrified and embarrassed while a Japanese male tourist observes her soggy humiliation with a wry smile.

Feuer points to the ideological flexibility of genres in which generic forms are cyclical rather than linear (1992: 155). What is meant here is how forms and
formats get recycled to give representation to current ideological struggles rather than offering something radically new. Certainly *Sex and the City* self-reflexively references the romantic comedy genre, and in particular the classical Hollywood screwball, as well as the enduring television tradition of sub-generic sitcoms focusing on the single girl in the city, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Rhoda* (with Valerie Harper, who played the smart witted Rhoda Morgenstern, and turns up in ‘Shortcomings’, 2: 15). Carrie is a worthy inheritor with her sharp witty dialogue and pratfalls. But just as the series repeats while transforming past generic codes and structures, the opening joke structure comically plays with these generic elements to give representation to fantasies of the feminine self, gender identities and gendered cultural performance. If post-feminist theory contests that feminine identities have become multiple, contradictory and complex then the opening credits of this postmodern, post-feminist series plays with the generic forms of fairytale narratives, romantic comedy, screwball, sitcom and sex comedy to convey the heroine’s uneasy relationship to the fairy-tale romance and happy-ever-after glamour and the pursuit of the perfect body.

**Box 12.4 Genre, HBO and original programming**

*Six Feet Under* (2001–5) had its debut on HBO (Home Box Office Entertainment), the American premier pay-for-view cable channel, at 10 pm, on Sunday 3 June 2001. It was the first drama series launched by the channel since *The Sopranos* – and HBO were under pressure to repeat its success. The series was created by Alan Ball, fresh from Oscar winning success for best screenplay with *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), and made by the production company Greenblatt Janollari Studio, with whom Ball had signed a three-year television development deal. Ball initially met with Carolyn Strauss, senior vice-president for original programming at HBO. Inspired by her interest in producing a show about running a funeral home, he wrote the pilot. HBO bought the concept and gave him a thirteen-episode commitment – and *Six Feet Under* was born (or so the story goes).

Set in a Los Angeles funeral home, the series focuses on the dysfunctional Fisher family that runs it. In the pilot the Fisher patriarch, Nathaniel (Richard Jenkins) dies in a road accident when a city bus ploughs into his hearse. The family is left bereft and the brothers – Nathaniel Jr (Peter Krause) and David
(Michael C. Hall) – are charged, along with restorative artist and long-time employee Federico ‘Rico’ Diaz (Freddy Rodriguez), with continuing the family business. Each episode starts with a death and concludes with the burial. Each death brings the Fishers some business, and often it sets the tone for that episode.

*Six Feet Under* premièred only months before the terrorist atrocities of 9/11 and thus was well positioned to respond to the haunting elegiac-ness of a nation in mourning. The series was thus grounded in this uneasy cultural Zeitgeist obsessed with death and tragedy. Arguably, American culture has long been obsessed with death – with guns, violence and killing. We may be able to bear the cause–effect logic of a mobster whacking a miscreant in *The Sopranos*, but are far more uncomfortable with the fatal consequence of that violence – the cool quiet of death.

Just as the *Six Feet Under* characters are drawn from the post-Vietnam, post-feminist, post-civil-rights, post-Watergate eras of social upheaval, which rendered patriarchal authority suspect; the aftermath of 9/11 has led to another period of introspection and a questioning of American patriarchy – its foreign policy, the Bush administration and the Republican agenda. Many episodes struggle with this contemporary post-patriarchal dilemma – the middle-aged, post-menopausal widow coming to terms with her adult children who no longer need her, the teenage-daughter searching for her identity, the eldest son suffering an existential crisis; the younger one negotiating his way out of the closet.

*Six Feet Under* was laid to rest in 2005. Over its five seasons it fulfilled the HBO agenda of challenging conventional television wisdom and representing that which had rarely before been seen on our screens. But even so, it pushed HBO to its limits: it is difficult to place in institutional and generic terms; it walks a fine line between comedy and tragedy; it teeters on the edge of unbearable poignancy before tipping over into corny melodrama. Structurally it deals with the space between death and burial; thematically it focuses on cultural taboos – homosexuality, mental illness, old age, sickness, drug addiction, adolescence, race and class – which in turn are used to revisit traditional cultural certainties like religion, marriage and the family – and it questions who we are.

Neale has written, ‘It should be recognised that categories such as ‘narrative’ and ‘fiction’ – even ‘film’ and ‘television’ – are generic in nature, that there is a generic aspect to all instances of cultural production, and that these instances
are usually multiple, not single in kind’ (2003: 3). Adapting his thinking here, could it not be argued that genre in the new television era, which places emphasis on diversity, innovation and competitiveness, and is driven by among other things consumer demand and customer satisfaction, can be used to define a brand identity for a broadcasting company (Epstein, Reeves and Rogers, 2006: 15–25). In the age of brand marketing and niche audiences, HBO, it would seem, uses genre not only to assert its brand identity within an overcrowded market place, but also to make sense of the diversity of its original programmes.

Superficially at least, the programmes that HBO label ‘original’ have nothing in common with each other. A generically disparate bunch – a gangster series, a sex comedy set in Manhattan, a family drama involving morticians, a magic realist tale concerning a travelling circus, a western, a prison drama, an historical drama set in Ancient Rome, a ‘realist comedy’ about a man’s struggle with the quotidian and a drama about a polygamist and his three wives. And yet, a closer look reveals that HBO’s original programmes are a more coherent group than it first appears.

Neale contends that all genres are predicated on repetition and difference, but it is the work of narrative to regulate such logic. What is meant here is how genre emerges through the way in which the narrative organizes and handles specific structural components and discourses. A telling example of this is when David Milch approached HBO with a drama about order without law in Ancient Rome. The executives may have liked the script but *Rome* (2005–2007) was already in pre-production. Undeterred, Milch re-set the drama in a frontier town in 1876 and *Deadwood* was born (Havrilesky). Looking closely at the narratives of HBO’s original programmes, what emerges is a generic theme of, and structuring around, the melodramatic male. From *The Sopranos* through to their latest offering *Big Love*, the narratives often focus on beleaguered men struggling with ‘family’ demands and work pressures. McArthur (1972) understands genre as about a culture talking to itself, and what unites these original programmes from *Six Feet Under* to *The Sopranos*, regardless of setting or historical specificity, is a different, perhaps darker, response to the American dream based on a destabilised patriarchy and conflicted histories.

How original programming give representation to the illicit – profane language, violence, sexuality and nudity – coheres the diverse offering. HBO has doubtless not discovered any new taboos, but it has defined new rules and
conventions for representing the illicit. Straining the limits with its use of profane language, graphic images of nudity and violence, original programs use the illicit as a crucial narrative component in creating innovative and ground-breaking television. Suggested here is that the freedom granted at HBO goes beyond writing brutal violence and lurid language, but it is about telling stories in unconventional ways that surprise audiences. Latitude to tell stories differently, creative personnel given the autonomy to work with minimal interference and without having to compromise, has become the trademark of HBO – how they endlessly speak about and sell themselves, how the media talks about them and how their customers have come to understand what they are paying for.

Returning to Neale’s (1983) theory of genre is useful in understanding the television audience. Drawing from psychoanalysis he suggests three basic principles in how genre produces and regulates subjectivity: First, the subject is motivated by a desire to repeat a past pleasure despite the impossibility of fulfilling that initial state of enjoyment; second, conferring identity is always predicated on the Other; and third, identity is never stable but always in the process of becoming (1983: 48–55). Viewers have long come to expect controversial themes, provocative subject matter and thought-provoking television from HBO. Anticipating innovation, adult themes and edgier drama, rather than a particular format, repeatedly lure back the audience who must pay a monthly subscription to view the programmes. HBO must, for commercial survival, differentiate its products and build a distinct reputation to attract its audience. Key to its market strategy is the promise to deliver difference not only from the networks but also in terms of its own programme content.

Hess understands the formulaic repetition of generic convention as rooted in the economics of business practices (cited in Grant, 1977: 54). For her, meaning is limited to supporting the production company ethos. Doing different (setting itself against what is prohibited on network television) emerges as a crucial institutional strategy for HBO. Its audacious marketing slogan ‘It’s not TV. It’s HBO’ signals its intent. Freed from a reliance on sponsorship and censorship including FCC (Federal Communications Commission) regulations, the subscription-only cable company has built its reputation around original programmes different from what can be seen elsewhere in the television flow. But HBO is a branch of the Time Warner Empire, which also includes Warner Bros. Television, producers of *E.R.* and *The West Wing* [NBC,
1999–2000]. HBO can push itself into new and often controversial television territory precisely because it is part of a vast economic conglomerate demanding difference within the same company.

**Conclusion**

Generic forms provided a fruitful site of academic inquiry in the 1980s and beyond, in part because the trend to reclaim popular cultural forms gained greater prominence, in part helped by post-structuralist approaches to genre analysis, and in part because new interdisciplinary approaches better enabled scholars to theorize representational ambivalence. The history of genre criticism has shifted away from initial categorizing to theorizing a complex interaction involving criticism, cultural specificity, audience expectation and industrial demands.

**Summary**

- Studying TV genre is inherently problematic because it is already a contentious term.
- ‘Genres are made not born’ (Feuer, 1992: 114).
- Genre frames audience expectations.
- Ryall stresses, genre can help us understand the historical and cultural conditions of production and consumption (1978: 11–12).
- Industry depends on generic forms and formats for its organization and attempts to attract audiences.
- TV genre and programming forms and formats are notoriously hybridized.

**GOING FURTHER**

This is an accessible introduction to the study of television genre, identifying generic forms and analyzing the various categories, like soap opera, drama and news, with close textual readings.

This edited collection brings together recent scholarship on television genre. It begins with an historical and theoretical overview of the term, before analyzing in depth various generic forms popular on American television.

Although focusing on the cinema, this seminal text is one of the first attempts to theorize genre. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Neale provides an invaluable insight into the interplay between film-makers and audiences, history and society, and industrial demands.

A key text for students studying television genre, offering a comprehensible history of genre criticism, before providing a close reading of the sit-com.

Introduces students to various methodologies by which genre can be studied and understood.

One of the first attempts to map out the field of television studies, including an early definition of genre as applied to television.

**STUDENT ACTIVITY 12.1**

1. Deconstructing the title sequence of Desperate Housewives, discuss what it has to say about contemporary gender politics.
2. Deconstructing the title sequence of Six Feet Under, identify its genre.

**References**


ANALYZING FICTIONAL TELEVISION GENRES