Genre Theory

1. How do genres develop?
A set of films "copy" an original content/form because it was successful . . . as several copies are made, the content AND form profile becomes recognizable to an audience . . . the audience expects certain things from the film because of its genre. . . a very commercial, American process!

2. A genre may be defined by:

3 Narrative Components:
   1. Plot
      For example, there are two main types of narrative strategy:
      A. Order/conflict (Westerns, gangster, detective)
      B. Integration (musical, screwball, melodrama/"weepie")

   2. Setting
   3. Character(s)

2 Other Aspects:
   4. Common iconography (e.g., in Westerns, white hats = good, black hats = bad)
   5. Form -- structure & techniques (e.g., top shot in Busby Berkeley musicals, LS in slapstick comedy, chiaroscuro lighting in horror and film noir)
3. We can see this development in the 4 genre stages described by Giannetti:

**Horror**
1. Primitive -- *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919
2. Classical -- *Bride of Frankenstein*, 1935
4. Parodic -- *Young Frankenstein*, 1974

**Musical**
1. Primitive -- *Gold Diggers of 1933*, 1933
2. Classical -- *Singin’ in the Rain*, 1951; *Oklahoma!*, 1955; *Music Man*, 1962
Film Genres--e.g.'s:

* Documentary  
* Western  
* War  
* "Chick Flick"  
* Musical  
* Epic  
* Gothic tale  
* Gangster  
* Adventure  
* Slasher/Dead Teenager

* Film Noir  
* Horror  
* Weepie/tearjerker  
* Biopic  
* Science Fiction  
* Mystery  
* Fantasy  
* Disaster  
* Animated feature  
* “Little Girl” films

* Comedy—Can’t call it a single genre!
  -Romantic  
  -Screwball  
  -Black/dark  
  -Frank Capra  
  -etc.

And. . . not really a genre:

Cult film:

-A 2-part definition:
  (1) loyal audience (often with group identification),
  (2) repeat viewing of the film
-How does the age of home video affect cult film status?
-Examples: Rocky Horror Picture Show, 1975  
Harold & Maude, 1971  
Pink Floyd The Wall, 1982  
The Big Lebowski, 1998  
Your own “personal” cult films?
Genre Hybrids or Intersections:

Western + Sci. Fi. = Westworld ('73)
Sci. Fi. + Film Noir = Blade Runner ('82)
Horror + Musical = Little Shop of Horrors ('86)
Sci. Fi. + Gothic Horror = The Fly ('86)
Film Noir + Animated Feature = Who Framed Roger Rabbit? ('88)
Gothic + Musical + Animated Feature = ??
POW War Film + Animated Feature + Comedy = ??
[and on cable TV:]
Gangster Film + Soap Opera = ??
Other hybrids??

A trend toward greater hybridization over time.
Genre Analysis:

**Screwball Comedy (~1934-40)**

PLOT: Battle of the sexes (conflict); but conflict is ultimately resolved (integration)

SETTING: A fantasy world -- the world of the rich, during the Depression!

CHARACTERS: Most are wealthy, don't have mundane, everyday concerns.
An eccentric couple (mainly the female), often set among staid old-money.

ICONOGRAPHY: Nothing very deep . . .
Icons of wealth are trivialized, denigrated. (e.g., mink thrown on ground); verbal sparring as a euphemism/metaphor for sex (Hayes Office era) . . .

FORM: Mostly a "straight shoot" using classical editing . . . many CU's compared to other films of that era, liberal use of reaction shots . . . some mickeymousing (not in all films)

Examples:
  - *It Happened One Night*, 1934
  - *Topper*, 1937
  - *Bringing Up Baby*, 1938
  - *Sullivan’s Travels*, 1941 (Screwball, yes, but also "self-reflexive," a film about film; and, it’s not just the wealthy misbehaving)
Genre Analysis:

**Film Noir (1940's-on)**

**PLOT:** Some type of quest, usually after the initial discovery of a death . . . e.g., a man searches for his own murderer (*DOA*), a reporter tries to clear a murderer's name (*Call Northside 777*)

**SETTING:** The dark & gloomy underworld of crime & corruption; almost entirely urban

**CHARACTERS:** Hero, villains, a gal gone wrong, woman as victim--all are jaded, disillusioned

**ICONOGRAPHY:** Guns = Power & Aggression; urban images of grime & smoke = depression

**FORM:** Chiaroscuro lighting; shot in B&W; many night scenes, canted camera or high angle shots sometimes used

**Examples:**
- *Citizen Kane*, 1941
- *Sorry, Wrong Number*, 1948
- *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941
- *The Killers*, 1946
- *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950
- *The Usual Suspects*, 1995
- Carl Reiner's *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982) parodied the genre, and used footage from many actual old films noir
Genre Analysis:

Black/Dark Comedy (1960's-on)

PLOT: The most serious of topics (e.g., war, death, dismemberment) is made fun of

SETTING: Cemeteries, funerals, war rooms

CHARACTERS: The deadly serious is often juxtaposed with the buffoon . . . the incongruity is humorous

ICONOGRAPHY: Death (e.g., The Loved One's "slumber rooms"), religion (e.g., picture of the pope in Harold & Maude), war & evil (e.g., "Nazi hand" in Dr. Strangelove), sex (bomb, cigars, gum in Dr. Strangelove) . . . icons are objects of derision in black comedy

FORM: Often, but not always, in B&W; music may be used as a comic counterpoint (Dr. Strangelove)

Examples (notice how many are also cult films):

Dr. Strangelove, 1964
The Loved One, 1965
Harold & Maude, 1972
Monty Python and the Holy Grail, 1975
Heathers, 1989
The Addams Family, 1991
Genre Analysis:

**Musical** (1927-1960's, and back again post-2000?)

**PLOT:** Two different integration plot types most common:
1. "Boy meets girl", and (2) "save the old theatre" (e.g., Mickey Rooney & Judy Garland; *Blues Brothers*). Each song provides an interim resolution of problems

**SETTING:** Two types: (1) "Backstage" musicals are set in theatres, clubs, TV, movies, (2) "Music-integrated" musicals are set anywhere

**CHARACTERS:** Boy, girl, bad guy(s) keeping them apart, buffoon(s)

**ICONOGRAPHY:** Could be anything for music-integrated; interpretive dance or ballet is common (e.g., Gene Kelly/Cyd Charisse in *Singin' in the Rain*)

**FORM:** e.g., Busby Berkeley top-shot . . . moving camera at floor level . . . film-style shooting (inc. looping later) allows dance numbers impossible to do on stage

Examples:

*Singin' in the Rain*, 1951
*West Side Story*, 1961
*The Music Man*, 1962
*Little Shop of Horrors*, 1986
*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1996

PLOT: Evil threatens the values of the dominant culture; forces of good are eventually victorious; themes include insanity, alienation, sexual deviance, obsession, and violence; examines what happens when man tampers with God’s natural world

SETTING: (1) the exotic (e.g., castles, Egyptian tombs) provides elements that are brought into (2) ordinary settings (e.g., the city)

CHARACTERS: The Monster--sentimentalized as a misunderstood, good-hearted sacrificial lamb; The [Mad] Scientist--he messes with Mother Nature; The Hero; The Girl

ICONOGRAPHY: Sexuality (e.g., Dracula, Cat People), Church (e.g., crosses in Dracula), “The Dark Side” (e.g., black cats, gypsy spells)

FORM: German Expressionistic style--B&W, chiaroscuro lighting, odd and highly stylized sets and costumes (many directors, cinematographers were German immigrants)

Examples:

Dracula, 1931
The Mummy, 1932
Frankenstein, 1931
The Invisible Man, 1933

The Old Dark House, 1932
The Wolf Man, 1941
The Black Cat, 1934
Bride of Frankenstein, 1935
Genre Analysis:
Biopic (Biographical Movie--from silent films through today, but particularly popular in the 1930s)

PLOT: More than “based on a true story,” a biopic attempts an actual biography of a real person, highlighting significant events in that person’s life; a biopic is not a documentary. . . as noted by film critic Roger Ebert (regarding The Hurricane, a 1999 biopic on boxer Rubin Carter), "those who seek the truth about a man from the film of his life might as well seek it from his loving grandmother. . . The Hurricane is not a documentary but a parable.”

SETTING: Anywhere, but spanning some substantial period of time in the subject’s life, so historical recreations of places and events are common

CHARACTERS: The central biographical figure is based on a real person; however, other characters are often amalgams of real individuals, constructed for dramatic emphasis

ICONOGRAPHY: Depends on the nature of the subject

FORM: Usually shot in realist (rather than expressionist) style; emphasis on acting of main star

Examples:
Judith of Bethulia, 1914
Napoleon, 1927
Rembrandt, 1936
The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex, 1939
Lust for Life, 1956
Chaplin, 1992
Nixon, 1995
Ray, 2004
Milk, 2008
Joan the Woman, 1916
Queen Christina, 1933
The Life of Emile Zola, 1937
Lawrence of Arabia, 1962
Ed Wood, 1994
Man on the Moon, 1999
The Aviator, 2004