

## The “Family” Film and the Tensions Between Popular and Academic Interpretations of Genre

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Genre has long been a source of controversy in film studies. The controversy can be reduced (albeit crudely) to a basic disagreement on the question of definition: should film genres be understood in terms of the definitions and typologies used in the popular sphere (i.e. by producers, fans, and non-academic writers), or by a more rigorous methodology which groups films by shared formal aspects (e.g. narrative patterns, situations, characters and locations, and symbols and iconography)? During the early-1970s, with cinema still widely viewed as a lowbrow popular amusement and film studies struggling to establish itself as a serious and legitimate academic discipline, it is hardly surprising that the early film genre theorists chose to forego popular definitions and instead borrow categories used in the literary studies arena. As a result, the film genres which most interested scholars were those with a long historical lineage, such as “comedy”, “drama”, “thriller” and “horror”, alongside others which had clear formal coherence, such as the “western” “war film” and “crime film”. In the process, I will argue, a disconnection occurred between scholarly and popular discourses on film genre, in which numerous generic forms widely recognised by producers, exhibitors, trade writers and fans remained wholly *unrecognised* by formalist genre theorists. Although there has been increasing recognition among some film scholars (e.g. Neale, 2000; Geraghty and Jancovich, 2009) that a more inclusive, less schematic conceptualisation of genre is required, formal definitions remain dominant. I would suggest that the tension between popular and academic definitions of genre is embodied most prominently by the so-called “family film”.

The family film has only recently been “discovered” by scholars, who are still divided over its generic status. Conversely, the family film has been construed as a genre by producers, distributors and exhibitors in the Hollywood film industry since the 1930s, with the label entering the vocabulary of film fans and casual audiences in the United States at approximately the same time. The family film is roughly analogous to the “children’s film”. Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples argue that the former is “essentially American”, while the latter is “essentially, but no longer exclusively, European” (94-95). Peter Krämer pragmatically draws a further distinction: “children’s films are made specifically for children”, and “family films can be defined as those films aimed at both children and their parents” (186). However, although they constitute “many of the most cherished and most successful [...] American films in recent decades”, including the *Star Wars* (1977-2005),

*Indiana Jones* (1981-2008), *Back to the Future* (1985-90), *Toy Story* (1995- ), *Shrek* (2001-10) and *Harry Potter* (2001-11) series, Krämer is right to suggest that family films are “very low on the academic agenda, at least in film studies” (185-86). The primary reason for this, as Krämer suggests, is that any systematic analyses of the format would be forced to abandon the reliance on “iconography, narrative patterns and thematic concerns underpinning much of genre studies” (186).

In this essay, I will argue that the family film *is* a genre, and must be regarded as such if it is to receive the depth of scholarly attention befitting its global popularity. It should be emphasised that, unlike genres such as the western and the war film, the family film is comparatively unstructured; it is an umbrella term applied to films that may also be placed within more conventionally-recognised genres such as fantasies, musicals, sci-fi films and even horror. However, this relative lack of formal unity has not prevented the widespread proliferation of the family label among such centres of discourse as studio publicity departments, popular magazines, fan publications and websites, wholesalers and video rental shops. In failing to recognise their authority and significance, film genre theory has separated itself from the realities of popular discourses, in ways which are unproductive and ultimately self-defeating. I would like to stress the importance of genre labels used in the popular sphere as a means through which hitherto-neglected forms, such as the family film, may be identified and productively engaged with by scholars. To this end, I will begin by outlining some of the ways in which genre theory has proven ineffective, before examining popular usage of the “family film” label in the United States. The final section of this essay will suggest a means through which popular and scholarly interpretations of genre may be reconciled, by arguing that the family film can be seen as a structuring “master-genre”, within which a broad, formally-diverse array of sub-genres may reside, while deriving meaning from the expressive power of the family label.

### **The Problems of Film Genre Criticism**

To understand the origins of the disconnection I have identified between popular and academic interpretations of genre first requires some analysis of early film genre analysis, and its subsequent concretization into a recognized sub-stratum of film studies. Richard Maltby correctly argues that genre theory does not constitute “a theory as such” (501). Rather, it emerged in the early-1970s as one of several theoretical approaches (the others being auteur theory and what has been called “Grand Theory”, which was essentially a hybridisation of semiotics, Marxist and psychoanalytical concepts) that attempted to establish film studies as a credible, academically-rigorous, scholarly discipline. The fact that film courses began to proliferate widely in Anglophone higher education institutions in the mid-to-late 1970s would suggest that these attempts to secure the intellectual legitimacy of the discipline were largely successful. Film studies further expanded in the 1980s, with the neo-liberal economics of Reagan and Thatcher opening higher education to the market forces which were held as the truest indicators of social and cultural value. Previously, the study of film as a serious intellectual pursuit had been impeded by elitist disregard, but now its popularity among consumers (i.e. students) secured its position on undergraduate and postgraduate curricula alongside more illustrious cohorts in the arts and humanities, such as literary studies, classics and philosophy.

Concurrently, film studies began diversifying into new theoretical and historiographic territory, as well as into new media (e.g. television). However, the influence of formalist genre theory remains apparent in the film studies academy, which continues to construe commercial cinema as comprising no more than a dozen core genres. The most “canonized” cinematic genres are the western, the comedy, the musical and the war movie. There is some debate over the categories of melodrama, the crime film (a.k.a. *film noir*), the thriller, the horror movie, the science-fiction film, the epic, the teen film, the social problem film and the action-adventure movie (Neale *Genre and Hollywood* 51). And there are several other generic labels popularly employed that hold even less status in academic criticism, most notably the family film but also, increasingly, the so-called “feel-good film”. The obvious anomaly in the above list of genres is that they are defined in different ways. As Bordwell and Thompson have noted, “there is no single principle by which genres can be defined” (97). Formally-defined genres – such as the western, the war film and the musical – are the most critically “secure”. In contrast, formats characterized by their relationship with audiences (rather than by textual commonality) – such as horror films, teen films, and, to a lesser extent, family films – remain endlessly contentious in genre theory.

One of the major problems of early film genre theory was that it made broad assertions without firm empirical or historical bases. As Altman argues, 1970s semiotic approaches to genre were “by definition and from the start devoted to bypassing history”, and he is right to suggest that “genres were always – and continue to be – treated as if they spring full-blown from the head of Zeus” (“Semantic Approach” 29). The key difficulty in such ahistorical interpretations is that they are inevitably impressionistic and superficial, in that they are not based in sound analysis of how genres emerge, develop and circulate. In 1973, critic Andrew Tudor identified a key difficulty in definition: genres cannot be analyzed without first isolating a constitutive corpus of texts; but it is impossible to isolate a corpus of texts without having identified the key elements constituting the genre. He argued that one possible solution to this dilemma was adhering to popular interpretation. Later genre theorists, such as Altman and Neale, have instead argued that it is more desirable to isolate genres using industry categories; with reference to “discourses of publicity, promotion and reception that surround Hollywood’s films”, including “both trade and press reviews” (*Genre and Hollywood* 2-3).

Lukow and Ricci (1984) have called these various discourses the “inter-textual relay”, and these non-theoretically-derived methods of categorisation have informed the work of the two most distinguished genre theorists of the last thirty years: Neale and Altman. They do, however, disagree on the importance of the “inter-textual relay” to the process of generic categorisation. Whereas Neale sees it the overriding determinant, Altman sees such discourses merely as constituting the first stage of generic formation; it is then the role of the critic and theorist to “subject the corpus to analysis, locate a method for defining and describing the structures, functions, and systems specific to a large number of the films within it” (Neale, “Questions” 163-65). Thus, although they both perceive genres as *processes*, lacking historical stability, they disagree as to whether the film critic, having used the inter-textual relay to isolate a generic corpus, should then apply their own more rigorous methodologies to the debate. According to Altman’s perspective, the theorist is effectively the gatekeeper of film genre; although other discourses have some bearing on the discussion, ultimately the judgement and authority of the theorist is pre-eminent.

Aside from its parochialism, the biggest weakness in Altman's approach is that film genre theorists and critics have so often got it wrong. Genre studies frequently have their origins in what is critically favoured or fashionable. As Mike Chopra-Gant has shown, collectively the film studies academy has constructed its own spurious narrative in which *film noir* is seen to be the pre-eminent Hollywood genre in the years immediately following the Second World War. This completely ignores the fact that most of the biggest commercial hits of the immediate post-war period were actually ideologically affirmative and emotionally uplifting "feel-good" films. Janet Staiger has also debunked the common implication in genre criticisms that genres are even somehow ineffably "pure" and self-contained. And as Neale has convincingly argued, our understanding of significant periods in the history of Hollywood cinema is still, at best, partial (*Genre and Hollywood* 254). How is it possible, when film genre criticism has been swayed not by impartiality but by personal preferences, and when its accounts are based not on complete but fragmentary knowledge of film history, for its claims to supreme authority to be given credence?

There is also the basic problem of lack of consensus in genre theory. Altman himself observed in the mid-1980s that

the more genre criticism I read, the more uncertainty I note in the choice or extent of essential critical terms. Often what appears as hesitation in the terminology of a single critic will turn into a clear contradiction when studies by two or more critics are compared. ("Semantic Approach" 27)

This led to his attempts to develop what he called a "semantic/syntactic approach" to film genre, in which definitions that depend on "list[s] of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like" – i.e. "semantic" aspects – are considered alongside "certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders"; the ritual, cultural and ideological meanings that make up "the genre's fundamental syntax" ("Semantic Approach" 31-32). The trouble, it seems to me, is that the semantic/syntactic approach has not been widely adopted; there is still a privileging of *semantic* commonality in genre criticism.

This is troubling, because although semantic approaches are clearly fruitful when applied to crime films, musicals and westerns – which all possess relatively transparent iconographies – they have little application to the family film. There is evidence to suggest that audiences understand the family film in terms of structural and emotive expectations, such as the upbeat tone and happy ending (Wasko and Meehan 334-36). These unifying elements may be powerfully felt by audiences but are largely unquantifiable from a formal perspective. Semantic approaches are also liable to prove less than efficacious in relation to some of the "unrecognised" or "semi-recognised" genres Neale identifies as requiring further examination: "drama", "racetrack pics", "overland bus and prestige films" and "hybrids and combinations of all kinds" (*Genre and Hollywood* 254). Some more recent studies of film genre have tried to resolve the many inconsistencies and incongruities of film genre theory. In one of the most cogent and mercifully jargon-free books on the subject, Barry Langford attempts to reconcile the approaches of Altman, Neale and others into a coherent account which ultimately argues that genre is still relevant and necessary. In

contrast, a recent collection of scholarly essays (Geraghty and Jancovich) advances the still-profound notion that questions of genre often serve to inhibit useful discussion of the films in question. Other scholars still cling stubbornly to the notion that Hollywood cinema can be understood in terms of self-contained explorations of a small, seemingly mutually-independent range of core, “canonical” genres (Sanders).

### Genre and the “Family” Film

The distinction between scholarly and popular discourses, of course, is not always straightforward. Although video rental stores (such as Blockbuster) and film sites (such as IMDB) routinely use the “family” and/or “children’s” categories, more “legitimate” organisations such as the American Film Institute (AFI) and British Film Institute (BFI) are more directly influenced by academic discourses. (In fact, they are effectively pseudo-academic organisations themselves, deriving much of their legitimacy through their interactions with professional scholars.) Unsurprisingly, then, they adhere to predictably formalist interpretations of film genre. The BFI states that it “recognise[s] genres by their narratives or their themes, but also by their iconography, characters and certain stylistic elements (for example, lighting, camera style)” (“Genres and Themes”). As such, it recognizes a fairly extensive array of genres defined by semantic commonality, including “20s-30s avant-garde”, “Black British film”, “British-Chinese cinema” “children on film” and “women and film”, but its list omits the children’s/family film.

The AFI, meanwhile, recognizes ten pre-eminently “classic” genres, namely “Animation”, “Romantic Comedy”, “Westerns”, “Sports Films”, “Mystery Films”, “Fantasies”, “Sci-fi Films”, “Gangster Films”, “Courtroom Dramas” and “Epic Films” (“America’s 10 Greatest Films in 10 Classic Genres”). In contrast, video rental giant Blockbuster – which categorizes films based on popularity with consumers – recognizes eight dominant genres of a very different ilk: “Action”, “Family”, “Comedy”, “Drama”, “Horror”, “Sci-Fi”, “Thriller” and “TV” (“Top Movie Categories and Genres”). Interestingly, there is some overlap; the genres “comedy” and “science-fiction” are recognised by the BFI, AFI *and* Blockbuster. Of course, the most interesting discrepancy is in the “family” category. The AFI’s list of top films within its “classic” genres of “animation”, “fantasy” and “sci-fi” all include renowned family films, but, crucially, the “family” category is not seen as unified. Conversely, Blockbuster lists it among its most popular – and hence most widely-used – genres.

The obvious question arising from such blatant discrepancies is: Can (or should) we move *beyond* genre? The provisional answer to the question must be “no”, because of its ubiquity as a concept. The “genre” that most people – including film genre critics – understand today is an overarching monolith, subsuming within its internal structures the Platonic and Aristotelian “modes” which, in literary criticism, have provided a fixed point against which the more thematically-defined, temporary “genres” are understood. This relationship between “modes” and “genres” is not precisely hierarchical, but instead construes modes as “the extensions of certain genres beyond specific and time-bound formal structures to a broader specification of ‘tone’” (Frow 65). Thus, the ahistorical, non-thematic categories of “the comic”, “the tragic”, “the heroic”, “the satirical”, “the romantic”, “the melodramatic” and “the gothic” are all modes in the classical literary sense, whereas

the greater specificity and temporality of “film noir” or “the slasher film” delineates them as genres.

As we know, film genre critics now reject the idea (inherited from the literary studies firmament) that certain formal categories are immune to historical forces, and this may explain why the concept of the “mode”, despite its usefulness as an orienting principle, has lapsed into obsolescence. Everything, from the broadest orienting category to the smallest sub-category, has become a “genre”. This makes some sense, from a popular perspective, where generic markers are used by audiences to help them make decisions about whether to watch a film, and by studios and marketers to boost audience awareness of their latest release. Beyond academia, such categorisations are merely a useful (if sometimes misleading) shorthand means of identifying or communicating basic typology, corresponding to or deviating from established cinematic norms. Sometimes, established generic labels prove insufficient because, by definition, they are predicated on comparisons with familiar earlier works, but more often than not, genre remains a helpful diagnostic tool. Tensions only tend to arise in its formulation and application when the concept is interrogated, and such probing is chiefly the province of the theorist.

I have argued that the family film can be construed as a genre. Indeed, there is considerable precedent for such a position, as the “family film” label has long been used as a term of generic orientation in industry and popular discourse. As previously suggested, the family film is particularly associated with Hollywood cinema, whose vast resources and global distribution avenues dating back to the 1910s demanded universalistic modes of address to appeal to mass audiences. As Noel Brown argues (in the only scholarly work to date which explores the historical dimensions of the family film), although Hollywood cinema was widely identified as a “family” entertainment medium as early as the 1900s, the “family film”, that is, “a feature-length production *explicitly* designed for the joint consumption of adults and children”, only materialised after the end of the silent film era in the early-1930s (18). The family film began as a strategic response on the part of Hollywood producers to criticisms that “talking pictures” were inappropriate for the consumption of children. As criticisms mounted, increasingly organized civic, educational and religious groups forced the industry to reform, and the self-regulatory Production Code, initially introduced in 1930, was made mandatory in 1934 with the stated intention of making all Hollywood entertainment family-suitable.

The early wave of Hollywood family films were defined largely in terms of a series of oppositions: inclusively for the “family” rather than the “adult”; wholesome, instead of salacious; anodyne, rather than hard-edged. Yet, as Brown points out, during the mid-to-late 1930s, a variety of explicitly family-oriented sub-genres emerged: the literary classic adaptation, the child-star film, the animated feature, the fantasy and the family series film. Although most of these genres pre-dated Hollywood’s transition to sound in 1929, their generic identity was now reinforced with the direct application of the “family” label. By the mid-1930s, major North American trade papers, such as *Variety*, *Film Daily*, *The Motion Picture Herald* and *Boxoffice* were using the “family film” label to describe any film designed for a mixed audience of adults and children. The term also proliferated among exhibitors and the popular press, in publications such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* – the nation’s most popular daily newspapers (Brown 38-44).

Altman has argued that the inter-textual relay is not a reliable means of defining a genre, because it tends to reflect industry labels. He points to the danger of “accepting categories provided by an openly self-serving industry”, noting that “one finds that industry labels have time and again preceded and influenced critical terminology” (*Film Musical* 1, 7). Undeniably, initially the concept of the “family film” – a clean, broadly-suitable entertainment for all sections of the movie-going public – was actively sponsored by the Hollywood film industry for public-relations purposes. However, during the 1970s and 1980s – the foundational period of the diversified, blockbuster-oriented “New Hollywood” – the major studios largely abandoned the “family” label, as its dusty, conformist associations entered into conflict with the edginess demanded by the increasingly lucrative youth audience in the United States. Director Richard Sarafian, for example, openly objected when his film *Run Wild, Run Free* (1969) was described in the trade press as a family film (Goldstein). However, the “family” label was kept alive in the trade papers, popular press, and in the popular consciousness as well, and was revived by the studios with renewed enthusiasm in the early-1990s in the wake of the “family values” rhetoric being promulgated by several leading U.S. politicians. Most of the major Hollywood studios, including Warner Bros., Fox, Sony and Universal, formed specialized “family film” divisions (Brown 181-83). Many of the most profitable Hollywood films and franchises of the 1980s – including *Superman* (1978-87), *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and *Back to the Future* – were widely received as family entertainment, even though they were not explicitly marketed as such. Unsurprisingly, the popularity of the family film in recent years has led to it routinely being employed by studios as a brand label, carrying commercial as well as formal implications.

Moreover, despite its seemingly-fragmented generic identity, a growing body of family films have gained recognition – in English-speaking Western countries, at least – as belonging, immutably, to the genre. This cultural consciousness has been formed, in some cases, over many decades through the various critical and industrial discourses alluded to above, as well as suitability ratings, subsequent repeats on television, merchandising and critical re-evaluation (Brown 6-8). Almost all Disney productions are acknowledged universally as family films, in addition to many *non-Disney* Hollywood movies. A select list of such non-Disney films includes *Little Women* (George Cukor, 1933); the films of Shirley Temple; the Mickey Rooney-starred Andy Hardy films; *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939); *Meet me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944); *National Velvet* (Clarence Brown, 1945); *The 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958); *The Time Machine* (George Pal, 1960); *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965); *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Mel Stuart, 1971); *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977); *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982); *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985); *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990); *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993); *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995); *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001); and the *Harry Potter* franchise.

Altman would attribute the forming of this “canon” of family films as further evidence of the pervasive influence of self-serving studio publicity discourses on the popular imagination. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that mass audiences are capable of rejecting inappropriate generic labels. One example would be the reception of Disney’s live-action film *The Black Hole* (Gary Nelson, 1979), which was the studio’s first PG-rated production. Designed for an older demographic, it substituted a higher quotient of violence

for the humour, sentiment and amiability that had – increasingly detrimentally, from a commercial standpoint – become synonymous with the Disney brand (Finch 372). As a result, even though it was marketed as a family film, it is not widely construed as such; nor was it a critical or commercial success (Krämer 192). Another example is the marketing of the DVD release of the comparatively adult-oriented J. M. Barrie biopic *Finding Neverland* (Marc Forster, 2004), which attempted to position it as a family film. Since there is little scope for interpreting *Finding Neverland* as a family film on formal grounds, this imposition did not prove successful. Although marketing and publicity strategies undeniably influence the generic identity of any given film in the public sphere, they are most successful when there is clear correlation between the brand and the story. In other words, mass audiences have their own conception of what a “family film” represents.

Genre is not simply imposed on uncomprehending audiences by all-powerful opinion makers; it is constructed over a period of time through complex inter-textual discourses. Cognitive neuroscience has shown us that “humans think about and respond to categories” – including types of story – “by way of prototypes” (Hogan 14-15). Thus, “for most of us the prototype of a bird is more or less a robin”, and “in judging whether something is or is not a bird – or whether it is a ‘normal’ bird or a ‘strange’ bird – we commonly compare it to that prototype” (14-15). There is no prototypical family film, as the format is ever-evolving (and so, therefore, are audience expectations). But there are *archetypal* family films which operate similarly to prototypes in terms of their ingrained position in the cultural consciousness. Archetypal family films include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), *The Wizard of Oz*, *E.T.* and *Toy Story*. Cosmetically, these “canonical” family films are very different, but their archetypal statuses not only bespeak the influence of the discourses surrounding them, but *also* various recurring formal (albeit not semantic) elements. These include: the reaffirmation of nation, kinship and community; the exclusion and/or defeat of disruptive social elements; the minimisation of “adult” themes, such as representations of sexuality, violence, crime, profanity, drug abuse, poverty, gore, etc.; and a story which, while acknowledging the possibility of an unpleasant or undesirable outcome, is finally upbeat, morally and emotionally straightforward and supportive of the social status quo.

The opening credits of Joe Camp’s highly successful independently-produced animal film, *Benji* (1974), explicitly identify it as “A Family Film”, a term which, without further necessary explication, creates a concrete initial set of expectations in the minds of audiences, which are then met as the film unfolds. The family film archetype is under continued modification, as successful new releases gradually change audience expectations regarding their film experience. Such is the extent of their popularity, it is feasible that in future decades the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* series will fulfil a pseudo-prototypical function in relation to the development of the family film. The family film “canon” consists of films where content and relay are either in accordance, or, at least, where they do not enter into direct conflict. *Star Wars* is a case in point. While it was not explicitly marketed as a family movie, the discourse which surrounded the film upon release – which included trade and popular reviews and word-of-mouth – constructed it as such. Hence, there need not be uniformity among relays, but the relay must accord, to some degree, with cultural consensus regarding genre meanings.

To summarise, despite the generic incoherence of the family film category purely in *semantic* terms, the vast majority of family films do share certain formal characteristics. It may be useful to refer here to the “ritual” approach to genre; this encapsulates, in the words of Thomas Schatz, the viewpoint that genres are “a form of cultural expression” (13). As Brown points out, although Hollywood family films have increasingly pursued international mass audiences since the 1980s, they have always reflected certain ideologies particularly enmeshed within the U.S. national character, namely “freedom, individualism, political and racial superiority, the importance of family and community, and the ‘American Dream’ of meritocratic self-advancement” (220). Thus, family films have “reflect[ed] the perceived requirements of their dominant consumers” (220). Although Brown concedes that there has been an increasingly liberal inflection in post-1980s Hollywood family films in accordance with changing social values, he maintains that the vast majority continue to valorise the nuclear family (whether literally or symbolically represented) to the exclusion of alternative (non-Nuclear) family structures. It is hardly coincidental that there are also highly specific expectations for family films to possess a happy narrative outcome, for the longevity of the genre surely reflects “a cultural need for basically affirmative, happy stories which evoke pleasure in many forms, emotional and aesthetic” (227).

Admittedly, uplifting narratives are not the exclusive province of the family film, but the attempt to unify pluralistic audiences imposes further specifications of a more formal nature: the need to avoid situations and themes that may cause offence, such as swearing, extreme violence, cruelty and misconduct (when it is not punished) and explicit depictions of sexuality. These are all virtually inviolable elements in family films, and are inescapably thematic and textual in provenance. Moreover, if Tudor, Neale and others are correct in supposing that genre can be understood in terms of the formulation and articulation of audience expectations, then these defining characteristics are inevitably generic in nature. Variables such as character, setting and iconography are all semantic aspects, which operate independently of the recurrent “syntactic” elements outlined above. Several “family” genres – such as the child-star films of the 1930s, the small-town family dramas of the 1940s, the epic family musicals of the 1960s, the body-swap cycle of films from the late-1980s, and the slapstick comedies of the mid-2000s – have their own semantic and syntactic commonality, and they are open-ended and impermanent. Such ephemerality is a widely-acknowledged characteristic of film genre, even among formalists. Irrespective of self-evident cosmetic differences, there is a strong sense that all of these genres reside within the broader classification of “family” entertainment.

### **The “Family” Film as Master-Genre**

The simplest and most persuasive way of understanding the family film is viewing it as a broadly structuring, but not formally-prescriptive, master-genre. This approach has much in common with the literary distinction between “mode” and “genre”. However, it seems to me that a master-genre implies greater specificity than the literary mode. A master-genre cannot communicate such detail as plot, location, theme or character (and it is worth pausing to consider if *any* generic label communicates such information in any reliable way), but in relation to the family film it does promise a familiar package of emotional uplift and moral wholesomeness. The relative importance of the master-genre and the sub-genre in the process of signification varies between films and historical periods. *Star Wars* was

widely received as a family film by critics and audiences, but is often categorized as a science-fiction or adventure movie (Brown, 151-52). Conversely, such productions as *Snow White* (feature animation), *National Velvet* (animal film), *Sleeping Beauty* (fairy tale), *Mary Poppins* (musical), *E.T.* (sci-fi), *Back to the Future III* (western) *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (film noir), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (comedy) and *Harry Potter* (fantasy), despite their sub-generic identities, are all identified primarily as family films.

Brown places Hollywood family films of the 1980s and 1990s into twelve sub-generic categories, ranging from “the family-adventure movie” to the “family-horror movie” (165). However, the practice of identifying films with reference to an orienting master-genre and a more formally-specific sub-genre is more prevalent among film guides and other reference materials than in academic discourse. While many video stores insist on placing all their films within a single generic category (Langford 3-4), the IMDB usefully employs a variety of generic labels to identify films. For instance, *Mary Poppins* is listed simultaneously as a “Comedy”, a “Fantasy” and a “Family” film (“Mary Poppins”), whereas *E.T.* is an “Adventure”, a “Drama” and a “Family” film (“E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial”). These categorizations may be somewhat arbitrary, but the point is that by rejecting the dogmatic notion that a film can easily be arranged into a singular, over-arching category and instead adopting the appealingly simple notion of the family film as an orienting *master-genre* encompassing a wide variety of more specific *sub-genres*, we can take a small step towards overcoming the problem of disconnection between the scholarly and popular spheres that has bedevilled genre studies for decades.

Perhaps we can also avoid unnecessary complicated definitions of the kind that even critics as skilled as Altman are guilty of perpetrating. In his study of the Hollywood musical, Altman identifies a series of hitherto-unrecognized sub-genres, such as “the fairy tale musical” and “the folk musical” (*Film Musical*). He identifies certain semantic and syntactic elements peculiar to these sub-genres, advancing some useful readings of the musical genre as a whole. Unlike Neale, I have no objection to these additional categorizations and explications. As Langford perceptively argues, scholarly discourse now constitutes its own inter-textual relay that must be afforded critical latitude (6). But the point is that it is just one relay among many. While it may be tempting to see critics fulfilling a quasi-judicial role, independent from the vagaries of popular discourse, such a standpoint is ultimately self-defeating in relation to such a complex, widely-used and nebulous concept as genre. Altman unwittingly provides one of the clearest examples of the dangers of the critic casting themselves in such a role, when he absurdly calls into question whether various musical “children’s films”, including *Snow White*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mary Poppins*, should be seen as musicals at all (103-05). This difficulty arises because of his insistence of defining the musical as a film “built around a romantic couple whose coupling takes place within a recognisably human setting [...] no couple, no musical” (*Film Musical* 103).

Having drawn such a definition, Altman considers himself justified in “excluding numerous children’s films” on the grounds that “they fit music into an entirely different framework, one which does not correspond to the methodology developed in the first section of this book” (104). But although he concedes that such exclusion “represents no small threat to the methodology elaborated here”, he seems not to perceive that such oddities testify to the inadequacies and over-specifications of his own schematic (104).

Ultimately, he admits these three films to the generic canon of the musical, albeit on a technicality, namely that in each of them a more symbolic romantic coupling takes place (105). But he does exclude the Disney musical animated features *Pinocchio* (Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen, 1940), *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1941), *Bambi*, *Alice in Wonderland* (Clyde Geronimi, 1951) and *Peter Pan* (Clyde Geronimi, 1953) on the grounds that they constitute a group of musicals that “systematically avoids courtship” (105). When the critic insists on such over-specifications – which enter into direct conflict with popular understandings – they surely transgress the imagined frontier between productive engagement and unproductive meddling with generic corpses. It is a prime example of critical hubris, since it assumes that, ultimately, the professional critic is the only sound judge of generic identity.

As Bruce Babington (borrowing from Schopenhauer) has argued, critics who reject the inter-textual relay as a means of defining the generic corpus must inevitably wrestle with contrary impulses of homogeneity and specification (122-123). Simply put, there is the parallel need to broaden the range of films constitutive of the genre to a credible level to avert accusations of irrelevance, while keeping the range of films under examination narrow enough to avoid straining (as Altman does with the musical) the theoretical prescripts at the heart of the initiative. Where the genre’s homogeneity is perceived to be so great as to disallow the required level of specification – as in the family film – critical neglect is probable. This demonstrates the importance of the inter-textual relay in providing the initial impetus upon which deeper investigation (whether founded on industry analysis, close readings of films or reception studies) can be undertaken. And, as I have argued in relation to the family film, one may find greater formal commonality among the films constituting the genre than might initially have been suspected. It should be remembered that only a handful of film critics, most notably Bazalgette and Staples, Krämer, and Brown, have even *attempted* analyses of the family film of sufficient rigour as to transcend such superficial judgements.

Only sporadically has the concept of the “master-genre” been profitably employed in film analysis (e.g. Knight). My positioning of the family film as a master-genre represents an attempt to reconcile popular and academic conceptions of film genre, by affirming the role of the academy as a purveyor of informed criticism, whilst recognising the importance of the inter-textual relay in shaping popular responses. This approach may also prove fruitful in relation to other imprecise yet highly suggestive popular categories, such as the “feel-good film” – a label that has been applied to some of the most commercially successful films of the last twenty years, but has been the subject of even less scholarship than the family film. The presumption that informed judgment regarding generic identity is the sole province of the academy is not only futile but damaging to the credibility of the discipline. I would emphasize that I am not, in any way, advocating a general reduction in the role or authority of the critic or theorist, or of the academy *in toto*. But I would forcefully argue against any scholarly attempt to refute the primacy of broader socio-cultural understandings of genre, which, in the final analysis, must be, as Tudor observes, “what we collectively believe it to be” (9-11).

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