

FILM GENRE FOR THE SCREENWRITER, JULE SELBO (2014)

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Whilst there are many books on film genre available to the reader interested in the subject, there are no specific, published texts for the screenwriter. Furthermore, books on screenplay writing tend to dedicate only a chapter or two to the subject of genre, or try to cover specific genres, such as horror and SF. In this compelling and well-researched book, Jule Selbo provides a much broader and more comprehensive ‘toolbox’ on film genre for screenwriters. In *Film Genre for the Screenwriter* Selbo delivers practical guideposts to the craft of screenwriting, enabling writers to apply the familiar and iconic genre elements that are quickly recognized and understood by an audience. Selbo also weaves a thread through the sixteen most popular, mainstream genres (comedy, drama, dramedy, romance, action and adventure, coming-of-age and fish-out-of water, horror, thriller, science-fiction, fantasy, western, disaster and war, melodrama) analysing and explaining each genre and how it affects a story’s main character, the set-up of the specific world, and plot points that take into account the fact that all films can be considered genre hybrids. Selbo impressively builds her arguments on the diverse and varied research fields such as cognitive science, mythology, classical and modern philosophy, psychology, semantics, film history, visual aesthetics, culture studies, literature theories, theatre, media theories, and, of course, film theories. But she does not stop here. She states very clearly that she does intend to rewrite genre theories but ‘to apply the existing explorations’ directly to the practice of screenwriting. Selbo recognizes that genre is not only a body of work, classified and labelled, but also a specific system of audience’s expectation and hypothesis that the audience brings with them to the cinema (Neale, 2000: 27).

Selbo continues her exploration by providing a brief, historical evolution of each genre and an in-depth critical analysis rooted in key films. She then strengthens her arguments further by applying Gilles Fauconnier’s constructs of the ‘mental space’ and the ‘idealized cognitive model’ to the films’ narratives. Selbo explains how these constructs could be beneficial to both the screenwriter in building a film narrative, and to the audience by drawing on the conventions of genre in their reception of film.

This important contribution to screenwriting considers the philosophical construct of the mental space that the screenwriter uses during the early stages of writing a screenplay, something that Selbo described as the ‘ideation’ stage. Selbo strongly believes that a cognizant use of film genre theory, and an understanding of the conventions of specific genres, will contribute to making an idea stronger, more commercially valuable, and more identifiable for audiences. Selbo progresses beyond the usual approach to genre in terms of structure, tone, and character delineation, by proposing a third consideration based on the idea of the writer’s

mental space that the theory of ‘possible worlds’ found in philosophy. Lakoff in the *Foreword* to Fauconnier’s book *Mental Spaces* ([1985] 1994) argues that these possible worlds are not exact but very close representations of the real world. The main difference between a mental space and a possible world is that a mental space need not contain a faithful representation of reality – and can instead be an idealized cognitive model of a possible world (Fauconnier ([1985] 1994: xi). Selbo progresses these ideas by explaining that the created, fictional world is a neutral one; and one that has Aristotelian meaning. It is a constructed cinematic world that corresponds to real life, but is also fictional and structured to advance the story. Screenwriters create a ‘specific universe for specific characters’ tailored to encourage distinctive fictional elements and thematic threads, whilst simultaneously discarding ‘real world’ components that would distract an audience from the comprehension of the core story. The screenwriter and the audience rely on two elements which aid in the pleasurable experience of a particular genre, that is, schematic knowledge (content recognizable by both the screenwriter and the audience) and specific knowledge (content mediated through the individual screenwriter and audience member). In her book Selbo adds a third component - relevant knowledge – which is the sociological and the ideological environment of the contemporary audience that position the audience in relation to what they see on the screen.

I use Selbo’s book extensively in my teaching, and my students have benefitted enormously from it. My desire is to see more books like this, aimed specifically at screenwriters treating their subject matter in a detailed and holistic manner. In the conclusion to her book, Selbo argues that ‘new forms and new interpretations are always welcome, for the art form [screenwriting] must always be evolving’. I could not agree more.

REFERENCES

Fauconnier, Gilles. ([1985] 1994), *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Neale, Steve. (2000), *Genre and Hollywood*, London and New York, NY: Routledge.

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