

## Thinking Through Genre

Pratt Institute

November 2 & 3, 2013

### SATURDAY

10:00–11:10

Kathleen Kelley (Pratt Institute/New School for Social Research)

“Melodramatic Demands: Cavell and Genre”

11:20–12:30

Eva Sancho Rodriguez (University of Amsterdam)

“The Merit of Genre versus Cinematic Tone and Mood:

Does Analysis Through Genre Open Up ‘Better’ Kinds of Questions?”

2:00–3:10

Josh Karant (Pratt Institute)

“Hip Hop Cinema: The Appropriation of Genre as Genre”

3:20–4:30

Zed Adams (New School for Social Research)

“On Location”

5:00–6:10

Suzanne Verderber (Pratt Institute)

“Genre, Repetition, and Difference in Detective Fiction”

6:20–7:30

Gregory Flaxman (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

“The Late Western”

### SUNDAY

10:00–11:10

Agustin Zarzosa (SUNY Purchase)

“Melodrama and the senses of modality”

11:20–12:30

Lisabeth During (Pratt Institute)

“A Romance from Hell: Unconscious Rape, Sexual Difference, and Film Genre”

2:00–3:10

Mathew Abbott (University of Ballarat)

“The Comedy of Remarriage in an Age of Technical Reproducibility:

Notes on Kiarostami’s *Certified Copy*”

3:20–4:30

Lisa Trahair (University of New South Wales)

“Cavell, Comedy and *The Ladies Man*”

4:40–5:50

Robert Sinnerbrink (Macquarie University)

“The Moral Melodrama”

**Kathleen Kelley (Pratt Institute/New School for Social Research)**  
**“Melodramatic Demands: Cavell and Genre”**

In this paper I have three main goals: 1) to separate Cavell’s notion of genre from his structuralist and formalist predecessors, showing how his notion is inherited from theirs as well as how it is transformed by Cavell’s use of it in reference to film and medium; 2) to show that there is a tension in Cavell’s idea of how genres are specified, and that this tension repeats a larger tension between convention and invention that runs throughout his philosophy; 3) to urge that seeing genre within Cavell’s wider stakes should push for the more transformative idea of genre that he sometimes endorses. Though taking up with this wilder idea of genre runs somewhat counter to his idea of film’s power as a medium, his own studies of the melodrama of the unknown woman can be seen as demanding such a transformation in our idea of film.

**Eva Sancho Rodriguez (University of Amsterdam)**  
**“The Merit of Genre versus Cinematic Tone and Mood:  
Does Analysis Through Genre Open Up ‘Better’ Kinds of Questions?”**

Stanley Cavell famously explored the philosophical thinking of film through his conception of genres, specifically the remarriage comedies and the melodramas of unknown women. The Cavellian understanding of genre is a perhaps different, more heightened conception of genre as it is understood in aesthetics and film studies. Films belonging to a genre are in an open-ended ‘philosophical conversation’ with each other, to paraphrase Stephen Mulhall. Yet, at the same time, the question remains if genre is the exclusive ‘prism’ through which philosophical thinking in cinema can be explored? In other words, does genre exist in a privileged hierarchical relationship towards other aesthetic frameworks – or categories – such as cinematic tone (like camp) or mood?

My essay would like to explore these questions by examining the recent rise of ‘sincerity’ aesthetics in cinema, exemplified by works by Miranda July, Wes Anderson, Sam Mendes & Dave Eggers i.e.. When engaging with the philosophical questions these contemporary films pose, is it necessary to think of them as a genre? Recent work has tried to account for the philosophical dimension of contemporary films through the concepts of tone (MacDowell, 2010) and mood (Sinnerbrink, 2012). Perhaps today, in a time of widespread genre-hybridisation and genre-revaluation, tone and mood are better categories for examining cross-filmic philosophical patterns. Through a case-study analysis of ‘sincere’ aesthetics and the ethico-philosophical questions they pose, this essay will seek to understand the relationship between genre, tone and mood. How do these concepts relate to one another when used in film-philosophical work? Does genre still remain the most abstract and therefore most ‘philosophical’ category?

**Josh Karant (Pratt Institute)**  
**“Hip Hop Cinema: The Appropriation of Genre as Genre”**

The sub-genre of ‘hip hop cinema’ is culled from (sampled by) artists from a diverse range of films which are, ostensibly, far removed from the culture’s urban American roots. Much

as hip hop artists have drawn from a wide range of sources in developing their music, art and dance, so does the appropriation of unlikely films reflect a parallel, and simultaneous, creation and subversion of the idea of 'genre' itself.

### **Zed Adams (New School for Social Research)**

#### **“On Location”**

In spite of the many advantages of filming in the controlled environments of studios, there have always been movies filmed on location. At the birth of cinema, “actualités” or “actuality films” filmed outside of studios made up the majority of movies, and location filming was pervasive in the silent years of Hollywood cinema. The introduction of sound led to an increased use of studio sets and backlots, but government-imposed limits on set construction during World War II led to a revival of filming on location, a trend that continued after the war. In short, location filming has been a constant throughout the history of cinema. But is there any special significance to filming on location? In particular, is there any special significance to the use of one-and-the-same location across different movies? As a way of answering this question affirmatively, this paper looks at the role that the Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles has played in a series of movies, from *D.O.A.* (1950) and *The Indestructible Man* (1956) to *Blade Runner* (1982). The paper argues that the repeated use of this same location functions to establish identifiable expectations in the audience for these movies, expectations that are then reinforced or overturned in subsequent uses.

### **Suzanne Verderber (Pratt Institute)**

#### **“Genre, Repetition, and Difference in Detective Fiction”**

The question of genre is bound up with repetition, with rules, with laws, with clichés (art as a repetition of what has already been done, of what the public expects so that it can enjoy in a state of complacency rather than being challenged to process something new). Experiments with genre that are too radical are often dismal failures (viewers get annoyed if *Law and Order* departs from the usual formula). In *Infinite Conversation*, Maurice Blanchot writes that “Nietzsche is there to maintain together ‘detour’ and ‘return’ and, if he speaks of ‘the eternal return of the same,’ it is perhaps in order to not to have to speak about the ‘perpetual detour of difference,’ in relation with which there is never a person to hold the memory, nor to make of it the center of a circular affirmation.” In repetition, it is not some “All” that returns; what returns is return itself. This paper will examine the problem of genre in relation to both Blanchot’s and Deleuze’s interpretations of the “eternal return,” which insist that what repeats is not something substantial, but difference itself, and that repetition of the Same is not possible because at the “origin,” the Same was always already multiple. The paper will also question whether the decline of interest in genre in the field of literary criticism and theory is an effect of movements like deconstruction that privilege writing, difference, singularity, and the event, rather than empirical description, prescription, and categorization (Aristotle, Frye, Propp). These meditations on genre and difference will be generated through reference to the most self-consciously formulaic modern genre, detective fiction, which has managed to maintain its “identity” and its “rules” even as it has traversed media like film and television.

**Gregory Flaxman (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)**  
**“The Late Western”**

This talk is devoted to the western, perhaps the only truly American genre. Jorge-Luis Borges famously wrote that “while literary men seem to have neglected their epic duties, the epic has been saved for us, strangely enough, by the Western.” Whether or not this was true fifty years sixty years ago, it is a great deal more difficult to make that argument today. What was the western? The west itself, as a concept, was codified by Frederick Jack Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” and it is by no means incidental that this thesis—that American expansion had reached its limit by the late nineteenth century—was delivered at the very moment the cinema was introduced (Edison’s kinetoscope is dated 1894). Within ten years, Owen Wister had published *The Virginian* and Edwin S. Porter had made *The Great Train Robbery*. As such, I want to try to understand how the west, which was ostensibly extinct by the census of 1892, was actually invented by literature (mostly pulp) and, even more importantly, by cinema. In this paradoxical reading, I’ll try to show how Turner’s thesis, which has been denounced as an analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, becomes an uncanny prescription for the cinematic western of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Agustin Zarzosa (SUNY Purchase)**  
**“Melodrama and the senses of modality”**

This presentation aims at clarifying the notion of mode, particularly in regard in its use in melodrama criticism. The first part of the presentation is dedicated to distinguishing mode from genre. Despite the consensus that a mode is somehow broader than a genre, it remains unclear what distinguishes the two terms and how they relate to one another. I survey the ways in which critics have theorized this distinction, ultimately proposing that genres involve the partition of a universe in terms of attributes or qualities whereas modes are concerned with the modifications of a whole. This understanding of modes follows from a Spinozist ontology in which modes are the affections or modifications of substance.

The second part of the presentation explains the difference between two senses of the notion of mode or, more precisely, the distinction between modal essence and modal existence. A modal essence is a consideration of the whole from a certain perspective, that is, a manner in which the whole expresses itself. As a modal essence, melodrama is the consideration of the whole from the perspective of suffering; melodrama is concerned with the redistribution of suffering and its visibility in any given situation. A modal existence refers to the individual expressions of a modal essence; in this case, melodrama comes into existence in any particular relation among bodies considered from the perspective of suffering. I claim that this distinction between modal essence and modal existence is necessary to understand the relationship between analysis and theory in melodrama criticism. A particular expression of suffering--a body’s expression of active and passive affections--explicates and complicates the modal essence of melodrama.

**Lisabeth During (Pratt Institute)**  
**“A Romance from Hell: Unconscious Rape, Sexual Difference, and Film Genre”**

Two of the genres Cavell has imprinted on our minds - the Hollywood comedy of remarriage and the melodrama of the unknown woman - take up the problem of

knowledge as part of the larger problem of **marriage**: its promise, its disappointments, its place in an ideal or not-so-ideal society. In the comedies, marriage is re-affirmed when innocence, or ignorance, or the resistance to knowledge, is given up, at least in part. In the melodramas, the costs of marriage are too high: a woman's integrity is worth more than convention, and isolation is sometimes the only option in a world where being known is a violation, a theft of control and freedom.

My paper continues the debate about the viability of the heterosexual relation as a recipe for human happiness. It studies a special case of the romance mode, the 'affair' between a man and a woman in which one partner is conscious and the other unconscious. What does this (unusual) case tell us about the inequities of sexual difference? What does it tell us about the degree to which woman's knowledge or woman's desire is excluded, feared or discounted? One classical poetic mode, the romance as interpreted by Northrop Frye, repeats the structure of myth: a hero descends into the underworld, loves and loses and regains a love, struggles against madness and death, and is purified or transformed. Can the rapists of my films (*Die Marquise von O* and *Talk to Her*) be purified from their taint of villainy? Are these stories versions of romance, in Frye's words 'the secular scripture'? Can a religion of love include unconscious rape, and at what price? And can a woman only be chaste if she is, to all intents and purposes, dead?

**Mathew Abbott (University of Ballarat)**

**"The Comedy of Remarriage in an Age of Technical Reproducibility:**

**Notes on Kiarostami's *Certified Copy*"**

In this paper I present a defense of the program of film-philosophy through the cinema of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. This means showing Kiarostami's films are exemplary of what has been variously called 'film as philosophy' or 'cinematic thinking': not just the idea that film is capable of illustrating philosophical ideas, arguments, or problems, but the bolder (and more controversial) thesis that film is itself capable of a certain type of thinking. Specifically my argument is that Kiarostami's cinema – with its rigorous and charming insistence on pursuing the epistemological problems that open in the very act of filming the world – demonstrates the intimate connection between cinematic thinking and problems of scepticism. This claim, which I develop out of the work of Stanley Cavell, leads me to a reading of Kiarostami's *Certified Copy*. Beginning with a lecture on the importance of reproductions of works of art, the movie raises a series of fascinating philosophical questions regarding love, authenticity, and genre. Inviting while simultaneously refusing the possibility of our taking it as a member of what Cavell has called the 'comedy of remarriage,' *Certified Copy* asks what it means for a film to be a member of any particular genre, and of the remarriage comedy in particular. With this reflexive aporia – as well as its deliberate narrational incoherence and refusal to answer even the most basic questions regarding the protagonists – the film forces the viewer into an epistemological crisis that reflects and refracts an experience of radical finitude, performing with startling clarity the paradoxes of belonging that haunt genre theory.

**Lisa Trahair (University of New South Wales)**

**"Cavell, Comedy and *The Ladies' Man*"**

In *The World Viewed: The Ontology of Film*, Stanley Cavell characterises film genre by comparing it in the first instance to the incidence of movie cycles. Although movie cycles are often rather cynically thought of as film producers attempting to cash in on the success of previous films, and thus generated by a commercial imperative, Cavell proposes instead that the basis of their constitution is entirely 'internal to the medium'; indeed, 'the best emblem of the fact that a medium has been created'. This is because 'a cycle is a genre; and a genre is a medium' (p. 36). The scope for cinematic thinking in Cavell's formulation of the constitution of film genre is further developed in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, where he defines it once again by comparing to something like the medium in the visual arts or to form in music: 'The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of an inheritance' (p. 28). Cavell also claims that the remarriage comedies he writes about, arguably in fact a subgenre of romantic comedy, constitute 'the principal group of Hollywood comedies after the advent of sound and therewith one definitive achievement in the history of the art of film' (p. 1), 'the worthy successors of the great comedies of the Hollywood silent era', worthier, for example than the films of the Marx Brothers or W. C. Fields (p. 2).

This paper considers further Cavell's claims about the comedy of remarriage, the question of it being a direct beneficiary of silent slapstick, and the necessary eclipsing of the continued existence of the genre of comedian comedy that occurs as a result. To do this, I focus on Jerry Lewis' film *The Ladies' Man* and provide two possible interpretations of the film—one that sees Lewis drawing on its inheritance of the features of comedian comedy in order to provide a closing meditation on the aberrant masculinity that constitutes the genre's primary subject, the other that sees the film as an example of romantic comedy.

**Robert Sinnerbrink (Macquarie University)**  
**"The Moral Melodrama"**

Film theorists have long linked genres with emotional responsiveness, investigating how genres can variously cue, modulate, or manipulate our emotional engagement with film. Less attention, however, has been given to the question of how genre, emotional response, and ethical experience are related. One genre that brings together these aspects in dramatic fashion is the melodrama. As Stanley Cavell has argued, melodrama can be viewed as a philosophical genre in its dramatisation of the interplay of knowledge and scepticism, self-deception and self-transformation, moral transgression and moral perfectionism. Departing from Cavell, my paper will explore what we might call the 'moral melodrama': films that use melodrama to elicit forms of emotional engagement that open up a space for moral questioning and critical reflection. Moral melodramas combine intensely affecting performances, dramatic presentation of character, and the evocative disclosure of social situations within a melodramatic narrative framework that invites ethical engagement and moral reflection from the viewer. From tragicist and feminist readings of melodrama to Cavell's meditations on the 'melodrama of the unknown woman', this genre has proven one of the most arresting ways of evoking ethical experience via the aesthetic devices of narrative cinema. To elaborate this idea, I explore some accomplished and provocative

examples of moral melodrama, both in classical Hollywood (Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*) and contemporary European cinema (Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her*).