A brief introduction to Genres & Semiotics: What are they and why do they matter?

What does ‘Genre’ mean?

Dictionary.com says:

‘A class or category of artistic endeavour having a particular form, content, technique, or the like: the genre of epic poetry; the genre of symphonic music.’

‘Genre’ comes from the French for ‘kind’.

Genres are vague categories with no fixed boundaries; they are formed by sets of conventions (many works cross into multiple genres by way of borrowing and recombining these conventions). They can change, grow and shrink over time and produce ‘sub-genres’.

They are applicable to a range of artistic endeavour from literature, film, painting, TV, music and photography etc.

According to Daniel Chandler of Aberystwyth University

’[Genres] create order to simplify the mass of available information. Creating categories promotes organization instead of chaos.’

Take a term like ‘friend’. What does this mean? We have an idea of who our friends are and are not but individuals can move in and out of this group, be on the fringes of it and we will have ‘close friends’ and ‘casual friends’.

Genre works is a very similar way. Like friendship it is hard to define as it changes over time and relies on some form of vague categorization.

Problems with the use of genres

We use the term genre to try and make order out of complexity in the arts. However this order is self-imposed and often arbitrary and can lead to sweeping statements. For example:

‘Clint Eastwood is a star of westerns movies’
‘David Bailey is a fashion photographer’

Genre is useful as long as we remember that it is a helpful tool, to be reassessed and scrutinised constantly and we must not forget to examine works on their unique merit as well as their place within the genre.
Identifying a genre

Useful tests for categorizing a genre are:

* **Aesthetic**
  One can organize according to certain sets of visual characteristics.

* **Ritual**
  Ritual uses its own culture to help classify. I.e. what is considered the norm for the given genre (within its culture).

* **Ideological**
  The effectiveness of this type of categorization can be measured by how well the public accepts the category as valid.

So how do we know when we are dealing with a particular genre?

Lets look at some examples, in this case all to do with food:

**What genres could these pictures come under?**

Still Life? Wedding? Commercial?

Travel? Photojournalism? Documentary? Commercial?

Travel? Photojournalism? Documentary?

Do you feel all of these could be classed under `food photography`?

Probably not, so how do we know which genre is correct?
You cannot classify a photo only by the subject photographed. We need to think about the ideas it conveys and its’ purpose.

With examples are above we are likely to class them as follows; in the first case commercial photography, in the second case wedding photography, in the third case—travel photography, and in the forth case—photojournalism.

So the **purpose** of the photo may be as important as the technique or content.

Lets look at it the other way around. If you were given a genre or sub-genre would you be able to classify images within it and define the characteristics of that genre? (We did a task based on this in the session).

**What are the major photographic genres?**

We can all name a few like portraiture and landscape photogaphy, but how do these genres correlate with travel photography for example? Are portraiture and landscape photography included into travel photography or not?

Having the photo’s purpose in mind, let us see what classification we can get:


After looking at this list you may decide the definition of a genre is very hard to define and is arguable. So why does it matter?

**Communication**

An understanding of genre matters as we, as photographers, can tap into them to communicate more than the picture itself. If we understand the conventions of a given genre we can use them as a short hand to reinforce what we are trying to convey in an image or we can subvert it to change meaning (think of Adbuster) and create outcomes such as irony.

**Genre and audience**

Although genres are not precisely definable, genre considerations are one of the most important factors in determining what a person will take from your imagery. If you do a fashion shoot and it does not tap into the conventions of the genre it will not convey what you intended and at worse could look amateurish or be unintentionally funny. But how do genres convey their conventions? For this we need semiotics.
What is Semiotics?

Dictionary.com says:

‘the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour’.

In other words semiotics is a theory of how we understand the meaning of ‘things’ (pictures, cloths, adverts movies, paintings, language etc, etc). Lets look at an example...

What does this picture (and object) convey about drinking water and how do we know?

http://www.blingh2o.com/

It suggests wealth and exclusivity. In fact ‘Bling H2O’ can cost from $20 to $480 dollars a bottle – and remember it is water! But how is this idea of a ‘couture water’ conveyed?

Saussure’s model of the sign
A cultural object, operates as a signifier (in this case a photograph of a crystal encrusted mineral water bottle) and the signified is the meaning it conveys (wealth, exclusivity, decadence).

In marketing for example, what a consumer item conveys can be reinforced again and again by the use of semiotics.

‘[The] bottle is held up suggestively by a woman between her derriere and her heel. The phallic symbolism is hard to miss’

Boradka ‘Designing Things’

The same theme of drinking water can mean something radically different though if the semiotics is changed.
The **signifier** above (in this case a photograph of a black child drinking from a plastic container with an anxious expression) and the **signified** (basic need, possible shortage, African drought, third world depravation) conveys a very different meaning about drinking water.

Semiotics is powerful but often subtle.

If you wish to understand more about this topic there is a helpful introduction to semiotics and photography here:

[http://www.crhfoto.co.uk/crh/semiotics.htm](http://www.crhfoto.co.uk/crh/semiotics.htm)

and here:

[http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html)

**In Conclusion:**

- A Genre is a class or category of creative endeavour
- Genres have no fixed boundaries, they are formed by sets of conventions
- It is not just about subject or technique but is also about what is conveyed
- You need to understand the conventions of the different major genres to use and not unintentionally miss-use them
- You can use genres as a way of tapping into additional meanings in your images
- Genre is a helpful tool but we must not forget to examine works on their unique merit as well as their place within the genre.
- Semiotics is the study of ‘signs’. A cultural object, such as a photograph, operates as a signifier (intentionally or not) and the signified is the meaning it conveys (again, intentionally or not).
- You need to master what is conveyed by the intentional use of genres and semiotics.

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