Book Review

John Sanders:
The Film Genre Book.
Poland: Auteur. 2009.

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In *The Film Genre Book*, John Sanders analyses nine films from seven chosen genres: western, drama, science fiction, horror, comedy, fantasy and, finally, the blockbuster. It is clearly an advantage for this book that so-called "Key scene textual analysis" is conducted for all of the 63 film case studies. Important scenes are picked apart in quite interesting and sometimes instructive ways. Even though this "method" could seem unfair to the rest of the film (and Sanders does not describe a method for selecting the chosen scenes), this reader is convinced that by focusing on only a few scenes, a compelling idea about the whole film is created. Instead of spending 120 hours watching all of the films, the enthusiastic reader (most likely a film-student or fan) is presented with the opportunity to press the forward button on the remote when watching the films, and in that way go through the selected scenes and get an overview of important genre films in film history.

The *Film Genre Book* also benefits from a focus on audiovisual analyses, even if this could have benefitted from being managed more systematically. It seems most necessary to Sanders when, for example, Truffaut's *Les Quatre cent coups* (1959) is being examined and less important when, for instance, analysing *Titanic* (1997), but some audiovisual comments are included in all of the case studies, which is interesting to read. The reader, moreover, is offered quite a lot of information on each film regarding numbers and types of awards, filmography, links to other films etc. In this regard, and not as a book one chooses to read from page one to 464, this book is entitled as a detailed film genre encyclopaedia for the film enthusiast.

If you did not know or cannot remember the impressive number of awards given to, for example, American/Taiwanese director Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), labelled as a western by Sanders, you can learn or be reminded that the film received 11 awards (including Best Achievement in Directing for Ang Lee at both the Academy Awards and Golden Globes). *Brokeback Mountain* was the film which highlighted the quality of Lee's work and, in addition, created a huge debate on the topic of homosexuality. Lee actually had tried to start this debate back in 1993 with his comedy *The Wedding Banquet*, but somehow the timing and genre seemed more perfect regarding *Brokeback Mountain*. Sanders suggests a reasonable explanation for this success as he stresses: "At a time of such uncertainty [global terrorism, global warming etc.] and where many previous taboos are being more fully addressed, it seems appropriate that the western, a genre that epitomises maleness of a very rigid nature, should, in this era, be the forum for a mediation on a love affair that has rarely entered bigger budget film-making in Hollywood" (Sanders 2009: 66). As one can surmise, Sander's text is both well-written and it offers proper contextual explanations for a film's success, such as that of *Brokeback Mountain*.

To place 63 films into the larger context of production circumstances and public debates etc. demands a high level of overview, which Sanders seems to have regarding this field. Unfortunately, he only provides a few guidelines concerning *how* he actually selected the 63 films. In a way, he thereby highlights a kind of film canon from 1916-2006, and in my opinion this calls for argumentation and reflection on the "method" chosen. But this "method" is missing.

In the beginning of the book, Sanders stresses "[…] that this is not The Film Genre Theory Book. Although the book touches on theoretical concepts (such as genre hybrids, for example), it is not intended as a theoretical work *per se*" (Sanders 2009: 8). Even though I fully respect the approach that places more weight on analysis and description than on theory, the reader – depending on who (s)he is – still needs some reflection on the genre depiction and development. As a scholar and teacher of media science myself, I would have preferred to have at least some delineation regarding the choosing of the seven genres and the genre optic behind this system, if I were to use *The Film Genre Book* in my own teaching. As a reader, I'm not convinced why, for instance, "the blockbuster" should be defined as a specific genre. It does not fit very well with genre definitions from Steve Neale or Peter Schepelern, for example. And one could argue that the nine films categorized as "blockbusters" could also be placed in some of the other genres: *Titanic* (1997) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as dramas, or more precisely, melodramas etc.

To this reader, it seems as if Sanders is presenting what we could call a "diacron" (as opposed to an "acron" (Schepelern 1981)) view on genres. "No genre is absolute", he writes (Sanders 2009: 8). And in pointing this out – with a little bit more argumentation – it is apparent his position is that genres are dynamic and constantly changing. It would have been useful for the reader to have been presented Sanders' reflections on this issue.

The Film Genre Book is heavily illustrated with screenshots from the analysed films, and some of these screenshots work well when demonstrating some of the topics and points in the descriptions. Unfortunately the pictures are only black-and-white. It seems that colour pictures would have made the reading experience more lively and some of the points stronger. The fact that all the screenshots are black-and-white, and a majority of them are quite small, makes it quite difficult to actually see the elements in the compositions.

To conclude, I would like to recommend this book for film students and enthusiasts. Especially film school students working with film on a practical level, to me, seem to be the actual target group. In the back pages it is argued that *The Film Genre Book* is "an invaluable resource for teacher, student and enthusiast alike". From my perspective, this only rings true if one excludes the teacher. Sanders himself is Head of Film Studies at Bedford Modern School in the UK. He states that he is a film lover and a teacher himself. One has to share a love for film with Sanders (which I personally do) or have a huge interest in this field to read it from cover to cover. But if viewed as a rich encyclopaedia or just good, well-written entertainment, it reaches out to quite a broad target group.

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