

WJEC GCSE Media Studies, Unit 2, Section B

Contemporary Hollywood Film – Genre

Key terms:

Genre: A category or type of media text.

Genre codes: The identifiable signs within a genre that generate meanings.

Genre conventions: The typical or common elements of a genre.

Sub-genre: A genre within a genre.

Genre hybrid: A media text with the conventions of more than one genre.

Genre iconography: Recognisable images or symbols that belong to the genre.



Genre, industry and audiences

- **Distributors** use genres to help **sell films** by **targeting audiences** and minimising risk. The marketing material for a franchise film will clearly signal the genre and iconography – e.g. fast cars and action in a trailer and poster for a *Fast and Furious* film.
- Genre films provide **audiences** with **expectations and pleasures**. They contain recognisable character types, narratives and iconography. Audiences also enjoy the **differences** in films of the same genre as a filmmaker may deliberately **subvert** some of the genre's conventions.

Below is a table with the top 10 grossing film franchises of all time and their genres. What does this tell you about which genres are the most popular in contemporary Hollywood cinema?

Film Franchise	Genre(s)
Marvel Cinematic Universe	Comic book, superhero
Star Wars	Science-fiction, action-adventure
Harry Potter	Fantasy
James Bond	Spy thriller
The Lord of the Rings	Fantasy
X-Men	Comic book, superhero
Fast and the Furious	Action
Jurassic Park	Science-fiction, action-adventure
DC Extended Universe	Comic book, superhero
Spider-Man	Comic book, superhero, teen movie

'genres are instances of repetition and difference' –(Steve Neale,1980, 48).

Many superhero films combine the codes and conventions of different genres. They often include comedy, action adventure and a romantic sub-plot. This ensures a **mass appeal** as audiences can enjoy a range of pleasures and familiar tropes associated with these genres, including laughter, suspense and high-octane action and spectacle.

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Superhero film franchises are some of the most successful franchises of all time. Here are some of the common codes and conventions of superhero films:

- The main characters often begin as ordinary people who gain extraordinary powers. They often have alter-egos who are ordinary, flawed people. E.g. Clark Kent is the alter-ego of Superman.
- The first film to introduce a superhero within the franchise is often an origin story which outlines how the superhero gained their powers.
- The main iconographic identifier of the superhero is their recognisable costume. Filmmakers may adapt their costume over time or to fit the mood of the film. E.g. Recent incarnations of Batman tend to be dark and moody in contrast to the brighter, more comic costume of 1960s' Batman.
- Superhero characters have a strong moral code and often face moral dilemmas.
- New York City is a common setting for superhero films. Although Gotham City (the setting for the Batman films) is a fictional city, it is heavily based on NYC.
- The creator of Spiderman, Stan Lee said that “if the heroes had real personalities and realistic problems in life, then they should live in a real city and work in a realistic place”.
- As superhero films are often blockbuster spectacles – they often feature high-budget action set-pieces with heavy use of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI).



Case Study: Hybrid genre and *Black Panther* (2018)



Black Panther is a superhero film and part of the MCU. It is also a **hybrid** as it contains elements from a variety of popular genres. Director Ryan Coogler explains the film's different generic elements and influences: “I think it's a bit of an **espionage thriller**. I think it's a little bit of a **family drama**. It involves T'Challa working with his family, so I think there's a family-drawn element to it. He works with his sister, he works with his mother. He's dealing with the loss of his father, so similar to any film that deals with royalty, you have a family element and you have a political side, too. It works as a **political drama** as well...Yeah, [we can definitely see the comparisons with] **James Bond**. I think similar to **Captain America: The Winter Soldier**, we're definitely influenced by the films of the '70s and influenced by **crime fiction**.”

Black Panther is also an example of **afro-futurism**; a genre and aesthetic that combines advanced technology and science-fiction with ancient African myths. It re-imagines an Africa not colonised by white Europeans.