The Theory Drop

Neale: Genre Repertoires

Nick Lacey gets to grips with hybridity and genre repertoires in the hard-boiled detective/super hero series, *Jessica Jones*.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Believe it or not this philosophical question is relevant to genre because we can ask the question, 'what comes first, the genre (the chicken) or the text it lays?' The answer may seem obvious: it must be the text because without texts there are no genres; but it's not that simple. Take the first 'superhero', Superman, who appeared in Action Comics in 1938. At the time the *Superman* comic strip wasn't considered to be an example of the 'superhero' genre but part of the tradition of 'masked heroes' that included *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1903) (okay Superman doesn't have a mask but you get the idea). The success of *Superman* spawned *Captain Marvel* and *The Flash* a year later and it was only then, when there was a number of different texts that audiences, and critics, recognised as having similar elements, that the 'superhero' genre was born. Only retrospectively could it be seen that *Superman* also belonged to the genre. So the answer to the chicken-egg question is 'both'; while the *Superman* text came first it wasn't identified as belonging to the superhero genre until after the genre had been recognised.

Fortunately you are not studying for a philosophy exam but it is important to understand that genre is not a straightforward concept. Steve Neale, in *Genre and Hollywood* (1988), investigated the complexity of defining genres: we may know a horror movie when we see it but being able to define it accurately in a way that includes all horror texts is exceptionally difficult. Despite the fact that many genres have a distinct repertoire of elements, – particular narratives, iconography, characters and settings – Neale showed these are always changing and the boundaries between genres can be very vague. Here we are going to focus on two of his conclusions:

> **'Generic repertoires themselves can be at least partly compatible: mad-doctor films combine some of the elements of horror and some of the elements of science fiction… In this way, hybrid films, cycles and genres are formed...'**

> **'The repertoire of generic conventions available at any one point in time is always in play rather than simply being replayed...'**

To examine Neale's ideas we shall consider the first season of *Jessica Jones* (2015), a Marvel series available on Netflix.



Illustration by Tom Zaino

Genre Hybrids

The Marvel logo at the start of *Jessica Jones* ensures that audiences understand that the programme belongs to the superhero genre. However the visual style and iconography of the title sequence, supplemented with a jazz inflected score, signifies film noir. *Jessica Jones* is a hybrid of 'superhero' and the 'hardboiled detective' trope typical of film noir.

The television series *Jessica Jones* is not the first text to mix the dark expressionism of noir with superheroes. Such comics have been a staple hybrid subgenre for some time; for example *Alias* (2001) in which Jones first appeared as a civilian after being the superhero Jewel.

Despite this, the genre hybrid is likely to have more of an impact in a television series than in comics because the latter is a decidedly niche market. In 2017 *The Punisher* was released on Netflix and it's likely that Jones' success gave the producers confidence that there was a market for dark superhero narratives. The darker elements are typical of noir narratives and this bleaker Marvel product is more likely to be seen on non-network television, though *Deadpool* (2016) is an exception.

In noir (and superhero) narratives the protagonist is usually male so having a female detective walking 'mean' urban streets is a play on the gender expectations of the genres. Although voiceover narration is used, there are fewer typical 'wise cracking' lines associated with male detectives. Jones is a traumatised victim of rape and childhood tragedy and so her humour is mostly acerbic.

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"What the hell is a genre repertoire?" Krysten Ritter as the eponymous *Jessica Jones*



cht, Netflix

David Giesb

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When she is talking to the mother of her adopted sister (Trish) she says:

'I wish there was a' mother of the year' award and then I could bludgeon you with it.'

The first episode opens with a knowing reference to the dark city of noir when she says: 'New York may be a city that never sleeps…' The noir genre predominates in the episode as there are only a few superhero moments: seven minutes in when she jumps unfeasibly high onto a fire escape, and ten minutes later, when she is lifting a car. Both of these events are not actually shown but implied. It's not until the fourth episode, when she superhumanly trashes a room in anger, that we clearly see her super powers.

Jones is a hard boiled – meaning she is cynical – private detective who, like the protagonists of 'classic' noirs, such as Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1956), is not entirely mentally stable (the back story of her trauma is revealed during the series). The logo of the programme's title is cracked, like her psyche, and she is also the 'lone wolf' hero of noir as she has few friends. The cynicism of noir is evident in her voiceover: 'She's either an idiot in love or being conned. Which pretty much amounts to the same thing.' The visual style of film noir drew upon German expressionism of 1920s cinema and there are a few heavily stylised camera set-ups: for example the overhead shot that emphasises her shadow on the sidewalk.

The repertoire of elements of most 'superhero' texts will require the titular characters, wearing spandex, to save the world (narrative) from nefarious villains (character) using special effects driven powers and advanced technology (both iconography). Settings are recognisably our own, but are also an 'alternative world' (the Marvel Cinematic Universe in this case) where superpowers are real.

Of these elements *Jessica Jones* retains only the superpowers and setting. The villain, Kilgrave, who can make people do what he wants simply by speaking to them, is played (as if often the case in American texts) by a British actor, David Tennant. Kilgrave, however, has no desire for world domination and is basically a pathetic man who represents white, male privilege. His petulance when his attempt to seduce Jones (by buying her childhood home, hoping she would love him) fails, shows his childishness when he doesn't get his way.

As Neale shows, it is the fluidity of genre that allows these variations and can change the way we regard the noir and superhero genres. However simply identifying generic variations in a text is not enough in itself as we also need to consider the effect these changes have: in other words, what is this hybrid text about?

There isn't space to answer that question in detail here but Charlotte Andrews' suggestion is a good starting place:

'[*Jessica Jones* is] a scalpel-sharp dissection of patriarchy at its most abhorrent, a harrowing examination of power, control, abuse and trauma – and the superhuman strength required to survive all that.' (2016)

So the noir narrative about surviving trauma, caused by white, male arrogance, uses superhero powers as a metaphor to explain the (superhuman) personal qualities required to recover from the abuse. Kilgrave gets what he wants simply by asking for it and this reflects the privileged position that white, middle class males have in western society. The sexual abuse that the #MeToo 'movement' campaigns against is an example of male arrogance and evil in action. Jessica Jones is a damaged individual, often misanthropic, but nevertheless tries to do the right thing and she won't give up fighting.

If this hybrid, superhero-noir leads to more audiovisual texts (as it already exists in comics) of this subgenre then there will be a new cycle of texts. Typically, if a text with a significant generic variation is successful then others will follow until their popularity fades.

Whether *Jessica Jones* is a harbinger of this cycle or not, it has made a considerable impact in its critique of male misogyny in a gripping narrative.

Nick Lacey is a freelance Film and Media Studies teacher, textbook author and regular contributor to MediaMag. His study guides on *Do The Right Thing, Pan's Labyrinth* and *Vertigo* are available on Kindle.

Further reading

Charlotte Richardson Andrews (2016) 'Jessica Jones: the antihero we need', British film institute, available at: http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/tv/jessica-jones-antihero-we-need

Daniel Murphy (2016) '*Jessica Jones*' and Gendered Forms of Seeing', Popmatters, available at: https://www.popmatters.com/jessica-jones-and-gendered-forms-of-seeing-2495451026.html