

IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH – HANDOUT **(Theory & Methods of Genre Analysis)**

An ideological approach is designed to identify the prevailing belief system of a genre. **Ideology** is defined as the system of beliefs or ideas that help determine the thinking and behavior of a certain culture. All sorts of genres send messages about what life is and what life ought to be. An examination of the ideological underpinnings of genres can provide insight into ways in which a genre shapes the audience's expectations and understanding of content. Genres can also serve as an arena that reflects the attitudes and beliefs of subcultures within a society.

These are the main kinds of ideologies:

1. **Political** – assumptions about how the world should operate, who should oversee the world, and the proper and appropriate relationships among its inhabitants.
2. **Religious** – sacred tenets that believers are expected to follow.
3. **Cultural** – establishing standards of success and laying out a roadmap that defines how to get there.

Popular genres have emerged as a way to export ideologies to other countries. However, in some countries with traditional cultures, there is some concern that genres that reflect Western culture may undermine their own value systems.

Genres lend themselves to particular ideological messages. The emergence of ideological broadcast news outlets in the United States provides a platform for promoting political agendas. While the manifest function of certain news stations is to inform the public, its latent functions usually promote agenda of ruling political administrations. Horror movies are well suited to present ideological themes dealing with social class. Some reality shows focus on the ideology of consumer culture and convey cumulative messages about the road to success in consumer culture.

Genre and Social Commentary

Ideological dialogue is carried on through popular genres. The appearance of social criticism in a popular genre may signal shifts in public sentiments. Genres can be an effective vehicle for social commentary precisely because they are not normally ideological.

A **parody** is a presentation that is designed to ridicule or criticize the original presentation. Much of the humor in parody is based on the audience's familiarity with the formula of the genre being lampooned.

An **allegory** is a story that is set in a distant time and place but parallels contemporary events. Some genres are particularly well suited for allegories, especially the futuristic setting of the science fiction genre, which furnishes perspective on political and social issues and events.

Modes of Analysis

Point of View

The point of view of media programming is generally presented from the source of power and control. Production elements often furnish clues about the dominant point of view of the genre.

Worldview

The worldview of a genre can provide considerable insight into its ideology. Every genre shapes its audience's interpretation of the world by framing the action within a particular worldview.

Function

Identifying the function of a genre is a very useful approach for detecting its ideology. Because audiences generally focus only on the manifest function, such as entertainment or information, they may be susceptible to a latent ideology. The latent function behind the production of popular genres is political persuasion.

Popular genres may also contain latent ideological functions that are not part of a grand design on the part of the media communicator. These latent ideological functions reinforce cultural attitudes. One cumulative ideological function that underlies many genres is social control.

In the Western market-driven media system, it is not uncommon for the original ideological function of a genre to be co-opted, replaced by a consumer ideology. Regardless of its particular political ideology, a latent ideology of Western news programming is always *profit*.

Formulaic Elements

1. *Premise* - Because the fundamental beliefs that define the premise of a genre are never questioned by its heroes and heroines, the audience willingly accepts a premise with ideological overtones. The *title* of generic programming can also provide clues about its ideology. Significantly, the question of *why* these contestants would want to become members of the upper class goes unanswered. It is just taken for granted that this would be their goal.
2. *Structure* - The formulaic structure of a genre can furnish clues about its ideology. For example, action movies follow this belief: this world is reactionary; it does not require change but changing *back* to the status quo.
3. *Plot* - Plot conflicts often serve as an arena for competing ideologies. They often pit the conflicting ideologies of different groups against each other. The conclusion of programs with plot conflicts resolves these tensions and ambiguities.
4. *Characters* - Stock heroes are generally members of the dominant class. In contrast, members of the working class or lower class appear in subordinate roles, reflecting their societal role. Indeed, lower-class characters are hardly visible, as they serve the heroes and heroines.

Inter-genre Approach

An inter-genre approach can be employed to identify cumulative ideological messages that transcend genre. Tracing ideological messages that appear across genres can reveal the depth and breadth of a particular ideology.

Examples of cumulative inter-genre messages:

- *The Preeminence of "The System"*: Genres absolve individuals of responsibility for their behavior. In addition, an inter-genre approach can furnish perspective into different dimensions of an ideology. Individual genres may focus on a particular aspect of a broader ideology. Thus, putting these ideologies together like a puzzle can disclose the broader ideology.
- *Consumer Ideology*: Popular genres provide insight into aspects of consumer ideology.

Silverblatt, Art. 2007. *Genre Studies in Mass Media – A Handbook*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.