Formulaic Analysis

Formulaic Elements

- Genres are characterized by common formulaic elements.

- Formula refers to patterns in premise, structure, characters, plot, and trappings.

- As John Cawelti observes, "Individual works are ephemeral, but the formula lingers on, evolving and changing with time, yet still basically recognizable."

- Formula serves as a guide for the audience, providing clues and cues that help them negotiate meaning as they read a novel or watch the news on television.

- The British game show ***Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire***, now exported to thirty-one countries, maintains a standard formula. British technicians are sent to train the local crews so that the look of each set is identical. A computer program standardizes the music and lighting in all countries

- The success of a genre largely depends upon the audience's ability to recognize, identify, and respond to the formula of a genre. Thus, formula is tied to the audience's expectations: what they anticipate when they attend a horror movie or romantic comedy. Satirists often use the audience's familiarity with formula as a source of humor.

THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF....

EXTRACT: THE REAL HOUSEWIVES of Vancouver

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0EdKmc_05M

EXTRACT: THE REAL HOUSEWIVES of Disney – parody

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-2fnZfK9Lg

Evolution of Formula

The evolution of a genric formula generally falls into three distinct stages:

1. **Formative Stage**: the formula and conventions that come to characterize a genre have yet to be clearly defined. The origin of the TV talk show format, for example, was wildly experimental. In the late 1940s, Ernie Kovacs got his start at WPTZ-TV, a local television station in Philadelphia.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34zpEEyHfUc

Evolution of Formula

2. **Popular Stage:** the formula of a genre is established, there is a basic structure of each program – e.g. monologue, the order of guests – first the most renowned, last relatively unknown, etc.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRJ3gqRagTs

Evolution of Formula

3. **Mature Stage:** the genre is well established, with many versions of the genre appearing in the media. Tonight Show on broadcast television alone includes *Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS), *Conan O'Brien*(NBC), *Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson* (CBS), and *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (ABC).

In an effort to appear distinctive, these programs experiment with the established formula.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUcgH1lbNxI

Formulaic Elements

A **premise** is defined as the initial circumstance, situation, or assumption that serves as the point of origin for a narrative. Each genre has its own distinctive formulaic premise; that is, a characteristic situation in which characters find themselves.

The premise of a genre begins with a describable worldview. One way, then, to identify a premise is to begin with this statement: ***The x genre presents a world in which. . . .***

PREMISE

- A premise can simultaneously exist in layers:
  (1) the premise of a genre;
  (2) the premise of a subgenre;
  (3) the premise of an individual series.

- To illustrate, the premise of the reality genre is as follows: Non-actor contestants are placed in a competition or artificial circumstance that they must contend with in the course of the series. Often, these people are placed in conditions that require them to work together as a team to accomplish difficult tasks.

PREMISE

- Subgenres have a more narrowly defined premise. Thus, the premise for **transplantation reality subgenre** can be described as follows: A person is moved into a new environment. The program centers on how he or she reacts to the new situation, as well as how those in that environment react to a stranger in their midst.

PREMISE

- Finally, each series within a genre has its own distinct formula. For instance, below are examples of premises for a transplantation series:

Worlds Apart transplants American families to Borneo, Mongolia, and other remote locales.

Wife Swap features the exchange of two mothers into very different households.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMEXzg1-dU0

Formulaic Structure

The standard framework found in sitcoms is **order/chaos/order**:

- The initial order of the story is disrupted almost immediately.

- The chaotic stage consumes the majority of the program and is the source of much of its interest.

- The status quo is finally restored in the conclusion.

Formulaic Structure

- At the conclusion of the sitcom, order is finally restored. This formulaic structure reaffirms cultural values. A latent message is that problems are all solvable, and justice always prevails. Characters who have violated the moral code of sitcoms (e.g., by lying or trying to be something they are not) suffer the consequences. Misunderstandings are cleared up, and characters who were at odds are reconciled.

Formulaic Structure

As with the sitcom formula, horror films typically begin with a sense of order, but then quickly descend into the chaos stage. The characters soon discover that the initial order was only an illusion. Behind this fragile façade, evil is lurking—such as monsters that had heretofore been dormant or forces that are hidden within human beings.

Formulaic Plot

A **plot** is a planned series of events in a narrative, progressing through a struggle of opposing forces to a climax and a conclusion. The formulaic plot that typifies the action / adventure genre: Our hero, an average Joe Blow, gets his wife and/or children massacred / kidnapped / threatened by Yankee renegades / Nazis / Arab terrorists / Eurotrash gangsters/malevolent visitors from the future and vows vengeance. Betrayed by his friends / neighbors / fellow police / comrades-in-arms / evil twin, Blow must endure intense physical hardship in order to restore peace / freedom of expression / fair play / unimpeded commerce to the community. Blow's reward: the girl and/or a sequel.

Formulaic Plot

This environment of hostility and back-biting conveys the latent message that conflict is more interesting to watch than cooperation.

In the same vein, conflict has been incorporated into political talk shows, in an effort to move the genre beyond the static "talking heads" format typically seen on Sunday morning television.

Formulaic Plot

In the world of the soap opera, extraordinary things happen to ordinary people: car accidents, hurricanes, medical emergencies, and criminal assaults such as blackmail, theft, and murder. Soap opera characters are striving to establish some degree of equilibrium in this rapidly changing world.

Soap opera plots typically focus on relationships.

Formulaic Plot

A cumulative message that emerges from these plots is that happiness is fleeting.

In the worldview of soap operas, the key to survival is a clear sense of identity. Numerous subplots deal with the issue of identity:"lost" relatives, cases of amnesia, and inheritance issues.

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Formulaic Plot

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Examples include the gun duel in a Western, the wedding scene in a romance, and the car chase in the action genre.

The Jerry Springer Show, which became so popular that in 1998 it surpassed the eleven-year reign of the Oprah Winfrey Show at the top of the ratings. One of the formulaic plot conventions of the program was The Fight.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_CRZrytSYE

It was then disclosed that guests were given explicit instructions prior to the shows, such as "We want four fights."

Stock characters

Even unscripted reality shows employ stock characters:

- The Good Girl
- The Bitch
- The Pot-stirrer (someone who fans the flames of controversy)
- The Groovy Guy

Formulaic Setting

- The geographical location (including its topography and scenery)

- The physical arrangement of the location such as the windows and doors of a room

- The time or period in which the action takes place

Trappings

Trappings are artifacts that appear so often that they have become associated with a genre.

For instance, Stetson hats, horses, and spurs are items that subtly establish the authenticity of the Western genre.

Using different trappings may give the illusion of a new genre. For instance, it can be argued that police dramas are actually contemporary Westerns. Horses have been replaced by hot cars, and the prairie and rough towns of the Old West have been transformed into the urban landscape. However, the essential conflicts of good verses evil remain the same.