Studies in Theatre and Film Genres

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INTRODUCTION

Genre remains a central concept in theatre and film studies because it provides a framework for understanding how texts and performances are organised, interpreted, and circulated. Yet genre theory is far from settled. Scholars debate whether genres function as stable aesthetic categories, historically contingent conventions, or critical constructs shaped by institutional practice (Stam 14). What unites these perspectives is the view that genre mediates relationships among creators, texts, and audiences, especially in performance forms where meaning emerges through representation and reception (Frog, Koski, and Savolainen 20; Bakhtin 103).

Classical antiquity offered the earliest systematic account of dramatic genres. Aristotle defined tragedy as the imitation of noble actions that evoke pity and fear leading to catharsis (*Poetics* 8), and comedy as the representation of ordinary people and their follies (*Poetics* 7). Although foundational, these categories evolved as Roman playwrights such as Plautus adapted Greek models through local humour, and medieval morality plays used allegory to stage ethical conflict (Stubbs). The Renaissance introduced history plays, masques, and hybrid tragicomedies, while later developments included melodrama, realism, and absurdism. As Román Calvo argues, "there is no pure genre," since each work blends invariants and variants (197).

Film extended this evolution by introducing industrial and technological conditions that shaped production and reception. Neale describes film genres as "systems of expectations" that structure both creation and interpretation (*Genre and Hollywood* 10). Nollywood exemplifies genre's cultural specificity: from *Living in Bondage* onward, filmmakers diversified into occult thrillers, romances, comedies, and Christian films in response to local concerns (Ayakoroma 81–96).

This essay compares theatre, global film traditions, and Nollywood to show how African performance cultures expand genre theory. It argues that genres are not fixed categories but evolving cultural processes shaped by repetition, adaptation, and innovation. This perspective highlights how Nigerian performance practices challenge dominant Western models. It aligns with Neale's view that genre operates through both stability and variation (Genre 48).

The Concept and Origin of Genres

Genre theory remains conceptually unsettled. As Stam notes, scholars continue to debate whether genres constitute fixed taxonomies, temporary clusters, or critical constructions shaped by interpretation (14). Robert Allen similarly observes that early genre study adopted a typological approach, classifying works "much as the botanist divides the realm of flora into varieties of plants" (44). Yet the analogy of scientific classification is misleading, because artistic forms resist rigid boundaries and evolve through use. Shakespeare famously satirizes this instability in Hamlet, where he mocks the proliferation of dramatic labels—"tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral… tragical-comical-historical-pastoral"—to expose the arbitrariness of strict generic divisions (Hamlet 2.2). His parody underscores a recurring insight: genres are categories in motion rather than fixed containers.

Modern theorists expand on this idea of fluidity. Jane Feuer argues that "a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world" (144), drawing attention to the fact that genres are constructed retroactively through criticism and industry practice. Alastair Fowler likewise maintains that genres display "family resemblances," with many forms and subforms remaining unnamed or only partially codified (216). Katie Wales reinforces this by noting that generic labels often mask internal diversity and historical transformation (206). David Bordwell further challenges rigid boundaries, arguing that "any theme may appear in any genre" and raising questions about whether categories such as documentary, slapstick, or animation should be treated as genres, modes, or stylistic formulas (147–48). These perspectives highlight a key point: genres gain meaning from cultural use rather than from fixed theoretical criteria.

Classical theory provides the starting point for these debates. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle identified tragedy and comedy as the principal dramatic genres, distinguishing them by social status, action, and emotional effect. Tragedy, rooted in noble actions, aimed to evoke pity and fear leading to catharsis (*Poetics* 8), whereas comedy depicted ordinary people and their flaws, generating laughter and ridicule (*Poetics* 7). Aristotle also linked pleasure with instruction, arguing that poetry imitates universals and provides moral insight when it follows principles of probability and necessity (98, 105). His emphasis on unity of plot and the didactic power of imitation shaped generations of dramatists.

Horace refined these ideas in *Ars Poetica*, formulating poetry's dual purpose as utile et dulce—to "delight and instruct" (126). He stressed decorum, unity, and stylistic appropriateness, warning against unnecessary embellishment or "purple patches" that distract from the central action (124). For Horace, effective poetry and drama required disciplined craftsmanship capable of guiding the audience's emotions and judgments: "It is not enough for poetry to be beautiful; it must also be pleasing and lead the hearer's mind wherever it will" (126). These principles established the classical distinctions between high and low style, tragedy and comedy, decorum and excess—distinctions that influenced dramatic practice from the Renaissance through modern theatre.

Taken together, Aristotle and Horace laid the foundation for genre as both structure and expectation, while Shakespeare, Fowler, Wales, and Bordwell reveal how these categories continually shift across history. Genre is therefore best understood not as a fixed system but as a flexible framework shaped by cultural practice, interpretation, and evolving artistic needs.

Theoretical Approaches to Genre

Contemporary theorists often describe genres not as fixed categories but as flexible groupings defined by what Wittgenstein termed "family resemblances"—shared traits that overlap without being identical. Swales applies this model to cultural forms, noting that no text embodies every defining feature of its genre, and that categorization depends on perceived similarity rather than rigid boundaries (49). Alastair Fowler similarly argues that genres are open frameworks in which texts exhibit varying degrees of conformity (215). This flexibility invites subjectivity: as Lodge observes, "no choice of a text for illustrative purposes is innocent" (qtd. in Swales 50), since almost any work can be aligned with another depending on the criteria used (Swales 51).

This sense of fluidity underpins several influential theories. Christine Gledhill maintains that genres lack "rigid rules of inclusion and exclusion" (60), while Steve Neale famously describes them as operating through "repetition and difference" (Genre 48). For Neale, repetition provides recognisable patterns that anchor audience expectations, while difference ensures creativity and prevents stagnation (50). Tzvetan Todorov also emphasizes difference, arguing that "any instance of a genre will be necessarily different" from earlier examples because genres renew themselves through the transformation of existing forms (qtd. in Gledhill 60). Even minor variations, as Hartley notes in relation to the Western, can reshape the contours of a genre (qtd. in O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery & Fiske 129).

These ideas are particularly relevant to theatre and film, where genres emerge through performance, production context, and audience interpretation. Theatre's performative nature often disrupts classical taxonomies. Medieval morality plays conveyed allegory but relied on communal staging for meaning (Stubbs), while commedia dell'arte developed around improvisation, stock characters, and audience interaction—elements that resist fixed classification. Film genres likewise depend on industrial practices, with mise-en-scène, cinematography, narrative structure, and marketing shaping how a film is categorized (Chandler 1). Tolson captures this dynamic by describing genre as a mediator between industry and audience expectations (92).

Another approach to genre highlights prototypicality. Swales notes that genres function as "fuzzy categories" in which some works are more central examples than others (52–58). Hodge and Kress argue that genres exist only when socially recognized and reinforced (7), while Andrew Tudor famously concludes that genre is "what we collectively believe it to be" (qtd. in Allen 47). These perspectives position genre as a product of shared cultural assumptions rather than inherent textual features.

Genre theory also emphasizes ideology. Tudor suggests that genres define moral and social worlds, offering frameworks through which audiences interpret values and behaviour (180). Hayward traces how genres such as the Western encode shifting constructions of masculinity (50), while Fiske argues that generic conventions reflect the ideological concerns of their time and

culture (110). Seen this way, genre is not merely an aesthetic category but a social contract that shapes and is shaped by cultural meanings.

These approaches reveal genres as evolving processes rather than fixed systems. They emerge through repetition, variation, and ideological negotiation, continually reshaped by performance, production, and reception. For theatre and film, this means that genres serve not only as descriptive labels but as dynamic frameworks that reflect broader historical and cultural transformations.

Theatre Genres

Classical Genres: Tragedy, Comedy, and Farce

The genealogy of theatre genres is rooted in classical antiquity, where Aristotle's *Poetics* established tragedy and comedy as foundational dramatic forms. Tragedy is defined as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; … through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (Aristotle 10). Its focus on noble characters and moral consequence shaped the dramaturgical traditions that followed. Comedy, by contrast, depicts "low" characters and everyday follies, producing laughter through exaggeration, ridicule, and social inversion (*Poetics* 7).

Horace's *Ars Poetica* reinforced these divisions through the principle of decorum, insisting that tone, subject matter, and diction must remain consistent within each genre (126). This taxonomic clarity, Osborne argues, reflected a broader cultural transition from shame-based to guilt-based moral consciousness (287), with tragedy performing a didactic role by dramatizing the dangers of hubris and ethical deviation.

A third mode, farce, evolved as a popular subgenre of comedy. Marked by exaggeration, improbable coincidences, and slapstick (Cohen 37), farce enjoyed particular prominence in Roman theatre. Although Aristotle considered it inferior, playwrights like Plautus adapted it into a vibrant comic form aimed at mass audiences. His works pursued "the greatest possible volume of immediate laughter" (Hadas 36), often prioritizing comic effect over plot coherence (Boardman, Griffin, and Murray 442). Like Aristophanes, who mocked religious authority (Boardman, Griffin, and Murray 177), Plautus satirized the gods (Segal 30) and used stock figures such as the scheming slave and boastful soldier (Duckworth 237–49).

These classical genres—tragedy, comedy, and farce—formed the "triadic core" of early genre theory. Yet they were not universal. Parallel traditions such as Alárìnjó theatre and masquerade performance developed independently in Africa, revealing that genre formation is culturally contingent rather than exclusively Western.

Modern Developments

From the Renaissance onward, classical boundaries loosened as playwrights experimented with hybrid forms. Shakespeare expanded genre possibilities through tragicomedy in works like *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Winter's Tale*, combining tragic tension with comic resolution and anticipating later genre hybridity.

By the nineteenth century, melodrama had become the most influential global theatrical form. Defined by heightened emotion, moral binaries, and spectacular staging, melodrama relied on clear distinctions between virtue and vice and used music and gesture to intensify sentiment. Its popularity cut across class boundaries, making it one of the most accessible dramatic forms of the period. Ackerman notes that "most writing for the theater until 1870, from romantic 'tragedy' to nationalistic comedy, manifested some aspects of melodrama" (6). Its narrative clarity and moral polarization allowed melodrama to transition easily into early cinema and later into Nollywood, where archetypal characters and moral conflicts continue to resonate strongly with viewers (Ayakoroma 81–96).

The twentieth century introduced modernist disruptions through absurdist theatre. Playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Ola Rotimi challenged realism, linear causality, and traditional character psychology. Esslin defined absurdism as dramatizing "metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (20). While Beckett and Ionesco cultivated minimalism and existential stasis, Soyinka localized the form by integrating Yoruba cosmology and ritual philosophy, demonstrating the adaptability of global genres to postcolonial contexts.

Indigenous African and Non-Western Genres

A comprehensive account of theatre genres must include indigenous African and other non-Western traditions, where performance emerges from ritual, spirituality, and communal life. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, Joel Adedeji traces Alárìnjó theatre to the egúngún masquerade, rooted in ancestral veneration during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu (221). Under Ologbin Ologbojo, masks and costumes became central performance elements, accompanied by palace rhapsodists who provided music and chants (223–24). Alárìnjó performances incorporated drumming, acrobatics, dance, and satire, culminating in the village square. As Adelugba, Obafemi, and Adeyemi emphasize, the theatre was simultaneously entertainment and social commentary (142), exemplifying "total theatre" through its integration of movement, music, costume, and narrative.

Other world traditions illustrate similarly diverse approaches to genre. In India, Sanskrit drama—articulated in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*—defined dramatic forms through *rasa* (emotional essence), aiming to evoke aesthetic pleasure and moral insight through coordinated music, dance, and acting (Cohen 155). Japanese Noh and Kabuki, while distinct, also combine stylized gesture, symbolism, and spectacle to express philosophical and social hierarchies (Cohen 163–70). These examples reveal how theatre genres reflect local cosmologies, aesthetic values, and cultural priorities.

African folk theatre extends this pluralism. Blending masquerade, storytelling, song, and festival performance, it embodies communal values and shared moral instruction. Sam Ukala's theory of Folkism positions African theatre as simultaneously didactic, entertaining, and socially corrective (285), resisting rigid classification and emphasizing the holistic unity of art, ritual, and community.

Cultural Contexts: Genre as Negotiation

The diversity of these traditions illustrates that genre is not a universal taxonomy but a cultural contract shaped by worldview and social experience. Osborne (289) argues that Greek tragedy emerged from specific moral transformations, while in African contexts tragedy is often communal rather than individual. Soyinka (qtd. in Deh 49) stresses "communal catharsis," and Rotimi's *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* reframes tragedy as collective suffering under unjust power. Such examples show that genre adapts to cultural needs and continues to evolve across performance and media.

Film Genres

Early Film Genres: Melodrama, Slapstick, and Westerns

In early cinema, genres offered audiences familiar cues for understanding new visual narratives. Melodrama, rooted in nineteenth-century theatre, emphasized heightened emotion, moral contrasts, and spectacle. Elsaesser describes melodrama as a "system of punctuation" that organizes affective engagement through stylistic intensification (74). Its reliance on binaries of virtue and vice and on expressive gesture made it easily transferable from stage to screen.

Slapstick comedy emerged from vaudeville, circus, and music hall performance, adapting physical humour and immediacy into cinematic form. Built on pratfalls, visual gags, and exaggerated violence, slapstick became one of the silent era's most recognizable genres. Paulus and King note that nostalgic celebrations of slapstick often obscure the industrial and social conditions that shaped it (3), even as figures such as Chaplin and Keaton helped define cinematic comedy.

The Western—often described as America's "national genre"—constructed myths of frontier identity. Its archetypes of cowboys, outlaws, sheriffs, and Indigenous peoples dramatized conquest narratives. Marcos Ramos and Mateos-Pérez argue that Westerns repeatedly stage white male struggles for territorial dominance, reinforcing colonial ideologies while erasing Indigenous perspectives (38). Through these early genres, cinema established narrative formulas that continue to shape global film production.

Major Genre Categories

As cinema developed, several genres became global staples. Action and adventure films revolve around spectacle, danger, and high-stakes conflict. Lizada describes them as "spectacles

of movement and danger" that captivate audiences through stunts and relentless pacing (8). Nigerian titles such as *State of Emergency* and *Across the Niger* adopt similar conventions with scenes of combat, pursuit, and dramatic confrontation (Ayakoroma 95–96).

Horror engages fear and the uncanny, creating the paradoxical pleasure of "fear-as-entertainment." While Hollywood horror has flourished through suspense-driven narratives, Nigerian horror has developed unevenly due to budgetary and technological constraints. Early attempts such as *Karishika*, *Valentine Day*, and *Lovers' Day* indicate local interest even though consistent production has not yet emerged (Ayakoroma 96).

Romance centres on intimacy, desire, and obstacles to union. In Nollywood, romances such as *All for Love* and *True Love*, featuring Genevieve Nnaji and Ramsey Nouah, became popular with youthful audiences and helped establish romance as one of the industry's most commercially dependable genres (Ayakoroma 92).

Science fiction explores technology, futurity, and the human condition. Internationally, works such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Blade Runner* interrogate humanity's relationship with machines. Nigerian science fiction remains emergent but is evident in projects such as *Malika – Warrior Queen*, *Hero Corps*, and *Town Crier*, which merge Afrofuturist aesthetics with local storytelling.

Documentary distinguishes itself through its claim to represent reality, whether through expository narration, observational strategies, or reflexive techniques. Across global cinema, documentary remains central to informing, persuading, and shaping public memory.

Nollywood Genres

Nollywood illustrates how genre develops within specific cultural, religious, and economic contexts. From *Living in Bondage* onward, the industry diversified into occult thrillers, romance, comedy, Christian films, and family drama, each responding to audience expectations and social concerns. Occult films such as *Blood Money* explore ritual power, corruption, and moral anxiety, dramatizing tensions around wealth and spiritual danger. Romance remains one of the industry's strongest categories, with films like *All for Love* and *True Love* resonating with young viewers through themes of intimacy, betrayal, and aspiration (Ayakoroma 92). Comedy continues to play a major role, as performers including Nkem Owoh and John Okafor mobilize humour to expose everyday contradictions and critique social realities.

A distinctive feature of Nollywood is its vibrant Christian film genre, represented by works such as *The Price*, *End Time*, *Christian Marriage*, and *Rapture*. As Ayakoroma notes, these films function as evangelical media aimed at strengthening faith and reclaiming backsliding believers (94). Together, these genres reveal how Nollywood merges entertainment with moral, social, and religious commentary, anchoring genre practice in local cultural experience.

Hybrid and Postmodern Genres

Film genres are not static; they evolve through blending and experimentation. Film noir, retrospectively labeled a genre, typifies alienation, moral ambiguity, and urban crime (Naremore 18). Nigerian films such as *Issakaba* and *Broad Daylight* echo noir's aesthetics and concerns by depicting vigilante justice and state failure (Ayakoroma 93–94).

The mockumentary parodies documentary conventions by using nonfiction formats to tell fictional stories. As Napolitano argues, it relies on irony and satire to critique social values (2–3). Hybrids such as horror-comedy combine fear with laughter, while Nollywood's *Osuofia in London* blends comedy with diaspora narratives, using humour to address globalization and cultural difference (Ayakoroma 95).

Afrofuturism merges science fiction with African cosmologies, reimagining Black futures through speculative aesthetics. While films like *Black Panther* popularized Afrofuturism globally, Nigerian titles such as *October 1* and *The Figurine* blend myth, modernity, and futurism, contributing to "New Nollywood."

Subgenres, Functions, and Ideology

Subgenres proliferate as cinema grows more diverse. Bordwell notes that "any theme may appear in any genre," challenging attempts to define clear boundaries (147). Hayward identifies multiple subgenres within war films, while Hutchinson views comedy as a supergenre encompassing numerous subdivisions (167; 19). Nollywood likewise includes occult films, prostitution narratives such as *Domitilla*, gender-focused works like *Mortal Inheritance*, and political dramas that navigate censorship concerns (Ayakoroma 96).

Genres also serve industrial and ideological functions. Neale positions genre as a framework that structures both film construction and audience interpretation (*Genre and Hollywood* 10). Nigerian video markets and streaming platforms classify films by genre to guide consumer choice and marketing (Ayakoroma 83). Ideologically, genres reflect cultural power relations (Gledhill 63) and shape audience identities (Fiske 115), though viewers often reinterpret or resist generic codes.

Intersections between Theatre, Film, and Digital Genres

Theatre, film, and digital media exist in a continuous dialogue, reshaping one another through adaptation, shared conventions, and evolving production contexts. As Chandler observes, genres function as "patterns/forms, style, structures, which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction … and their reading" ("An Introduction to Genre Theory" 1). Adaptation remains a key intersection: Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello migrate from stage to screen through cinematic techniques unavailable in theatre. In Nigeria, Yoruba Travelling

Theatre profoundly influenced early Nollywood, with films such as *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* preserving ensemble performance, drumming, and melodrama, while contemporary works like Bolanle Austen-Peters's *Wakaa the Musical* integrate digital scenography to blur stage–screen boundaries.

Melodrama provides another connective thread. Originating in nineteenth-century theatre, its heightened emotions and moral binaries flourished in cinema and remain central to Nollywood titles such as *Living in Bondage* and *Mortal Inheritance*. Despite these overlaps, theatre and film diverge in performance style—live physicality versus cinematic subtlety—and in spectacle, from symbolic scenography to visual effects. Nigerian theatrical traditions—from Yoruba Travelling Theatre to Igbo masquerade and Hausa oral performance—are reconfigured in Nollywood through editing, framing, and sound design. Audience reception also differs: theatre offers immediate collective response, while film and digital works circulate through mediated platforms (Chandler 3; Fiske 110).

Contemporary genre studies emphasize digital disruption and global hybridity. As Chandler argues, genres "evolve, overlap, and hybridize" (1), a trend visible in Nigerian social-media skits that condense satire, melodrama, and critique into mobile-friendly formats. Hluch notes comedy's structural adaptability to new technologies (83). Globally, Bollywood musicals, K-drama, and Nollywood demonstrate cross-cultural flows that reflect Neale's theory of "repetition and difference" (Genre and Hollywood 48). Streaming platforms intensify hybrid storytelling, as seen in *King of Boys*, which blends political thriller, crime drama, and family saga. Comedy, structured around exposition, complication, and resolution (Neale and Krutnik 27), remains especially dynamic, with Nigerian skits merging slapstick and social commentary (Berger, qtd. in Kypker 30). These developments reveal genres as fluid cultural processes continually reshaped across theatre, film, and digital media.

Conclusion

The study of theatre and film genres demonstrates that artistic forms are never static but continually transform across historical and cultural contexts. Nigerian performance cultures make this especially clear. From the improvisational energy of theatre to the dramatic intensity of Nollywood and the immediacy of digital skits, core elements such as exaggeration, satire, and communal address persist while adapting to new media environments.

Nollywood and contemporary digital creators merge indigenous traditions with global cinematic influences, showing how genre innovation emerges from cultural exchange, technological change, and creative experimentation. Genre thus functions as a flexible cultural process—renewed across theatre, film, and digital platforms, and enriched by Nigeria's distinctive contributions to global storytelling.

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