Abstract:
Films have long been organised according to genre categories grounded by thematic and narrative conventions. Yet while these taxonomies have remained relatively static in industrial and academic discourse over the past two decades, the digital age has given rise to new modes of film distribution and consumption. This article presents preliminary findings from an audience research project carried out in collaboration with Australian media company Village Roadshow investigating genre and spectatorship. The findings suggest that in an era characterised by video-on-demand, screen convergence, and personalised recommendation systems, the existing categorisation strategies favored by the film industry and screen studies scholars may no longer align with the practices and priorities of contemporary audiences.

The article presents findings from a pilot study that examined the discursive processes that constitute genre as a cultural practice in the digital age through identifying how respondents classified and described certain films. The research also sought to explore the extent to which these classification practices aligned with or diverged from existing genre paradigms. The findings provide an audience-centered understanding of the shifting landscape of film distribution and consumption, as streaming services such as Netflix motivate significant transformations in the way films are accessed, understood, and consumed. Considering the influence of both traditional genre categories and new forms of categorisation and consumption driven by streaming services, the article demonstrates how contemporary audiences link films as diverse as *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016), *Deadpool* (Miller 2016), and *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960) based on style, narrative structure, and affective experience, thereby illuminating how audiences conceive of and relate to genre in this period of industrial flux. This research offers analytical strategies grounded in audience research aimed at re-evaluating genre in an era of personalised content curation, niche content categorisation, and on-demand access to films.
Keywords: genre; SVoD; film distribution; audience research; Netflix; recommendation systems

In the introduction to their 2016 collection *The Netflix Effect*, Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey describe how the streaming service Netflix has ‘contributed to changes in existing distribution and exhibition models’ with major media conglomerates viewing the company as a ‘disruptive interloper’ (2). As Mareike Jenner points out, since the production of Netflix Original content became a core pillar of Netflix’s internationalisation strategy in 2013, the streaming service’s disruption of global media conglomerates’ existing models has become particularly acute (2-3). In relation to the film industry, this industrial tension is evidenced in particular by a range of controversies surrounding the streaming service’s reluctance to distribute Netflix Original films theatrically: for instance, in 2018 the Cannes Film Festival introduced new rules around theatrical distribution for in-competition films that oppose Netflix’s release strategy (Lee), and director Christopher Nolan has described Netflix’s approach to film distribution as ‘an untenable model for theatrical presentation’ (cited in Kohn). In March 2016, Netflix mounted another challenge to traditional film production and distribution practices with the announcement that it would produce *Bright*, a Will Smith-starring feature film set in an alternative LA in which fairy tale creatures live alongside humans (Kit and Siegel). With its high-concept, A-list star, and large budget, the film was described as Netflix’s first blockbuster and further proof of the company’s move into spaces previously dominated by conventional studios (Ehrlich). Like traditional blockbusters, when *Bright* was released in December 2017 the film seemed to be everywhere. However, the film’s omnipresence did not stem from the usual array of billboards, magazine covers, and TV spots. Rather, every search on Netflix appeared to ultimately lead the user to the fantastical buddy cop movie, with the film variously categorised under familiar genres such as Action Thrillers, Crime Movies, and Sci-fi & Fantasy. Even within those ‘high-level categories’ (Amatriain) users could find the film sub-categorised under Netflix’s characteristically baroque descriptors like Visually Striking Action Film, A Crime Action-Adventure, and Exciting Action Sci-Fi & Fantasy. *Bright*’s pervasiveness extended beyond the SVoD (subscription video on demand) platform on which it was released and into wider film culture. On its release *Bright* received a poor critical reception. However, it was reported that the film was viewed eleven million times in its first three days, with Netflix quickly greenlighting a sequel (Galuppo and Kit). Thus, the film’s lacklustre reviews and unconventional release did not stem its wider cultural impact, with *Fortune* reporting that if the film had been a traditional release it would have grossed ‘$99 million debut at the box office – roughly what Universal Pictures’ *The Fate of the Furious* did in April’ (‘Netflix’s Big Budget Film’). Furthermore, at the time of the film’s release, lively discussion about *Bright* permeated social media and entertainment media journalism. Much of the discussion circulating around the film highlighted the disparity...
between professional critics’ and audience receptions, as evidenced on the review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*, where there was a significant discrepancy between the average critics’ score (27%) and the audience score (89%) (Alexander). This divergence led to tension on social media between fans and critics, with some defenders of the film suggesting that its negative reception was the result of a film industry threatened by Netflix’s new approach to film production and distribution (for instance see @Star_of_Chaos; @RiccyGee; @White_Rosslaw). Netflix stoked this controversy, with both the SVoD service’s official Twitter handle and the handle dedicated to *Bright* framing the film’s publicity around its divided reception: as one Tweet read, ‘Love it or hate it, #Brightmovie got some strong reactions. Where do you stand?’ (@Netflix).

The release and reception of *Bright* thus reveals how the cultural and industrial practices surrounding screen entertainment are undergoing a significant moment of transition driven by digital streaming platforms. *Bright* exposes the extent to which global film-going practices are becoming untethered from models of distribution, categorisation, and promotion shaped by the theatrical exhibition sector. In particular, *Bright*’s ubiquity was indicative of changes in film taxonomies and how audiences navigate and understand them. As this article will explore, the boundaries of film genres have always been contested and reworked, but in an era of digital distribution this ambiguity has increased, and tensions between traditional models of film categorisation and new models driven by algorithms, recommender systems, and big data have become highly visible. In this climate, traditional, industry-certified genre categories seem to lack the flexibility necessary to meet the needs of the migratory audience facilitated by convergent, on-demand screen culture. Yet the micro-tags used by SVoD services do not function as a neat replacement for traditional genre categories: as the example of *Bright* suggests, they often function as empty labels that serve a platform’s marketing strategies or mask catalogue deficiencies (Lawrence 362).

Indeed, the development of tools like ‘FlixBoss’ that help viewers to sort Netflix using more traditional genre categories highlights both the limitations of Netflix’s approach to film categorisation, and the extent to which cultural practices surrounding film consumption and genre are in flux.

This article discusses findings from a 170 respondent pilot study for a larger project that seeks to examine film categorisation practices in the digital age. This pilot project, carried out in collaboration with Australian entertainment company Village Roadshow, uses audience research to explore how audiences classify films in an era of on-demand streaming and personalised content curation, considering the influence of both traditional genre categories and new forms of categorisation and consumption driven by streaming services. Presenting the initial findings from this pilot study, this article will demonstrate how contemporary audiences link films as diverse as *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016), *Deadpool* (Miller 2016), and *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960) based on style, narrative structure, and affective experience, thereby providing a better understanding of how audiences conceive of and relate to genre in this period of industrial flux.
Industrial Flux and Genre as Cultural Practice

While a number of recent studies have explored the impact of digitisation on production and distribution (Curtin et al.; Iordanova and Cunningham; Lobato; Silver and Cunningham; Tryon), little research has examined the implications of screen culture’s changing landscape for long-standing assumptions about the relationship between film genres and audiences. As Jason Mittell has pointed out, subsequent to genre studies’ peak in the 1980s, critical engagement with the concept and underpinning of genre has declined: ‘while many works of media analysis use genre to demarcate and define the project’s scope, most scholars do not explicitly engage with the theoretical and methodological implications of genre study’ (‘Refiguring’ 88). ¹ A number of scholars have suggested that developments in digital technologies may pose a challenge to traditional genre paradigms (Snickars and Vondreau; Lobato and Ryan; Weinman). For instance, Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan argue that recent shifts in film consumption practices highlight how the study of film genres should be more attuned to questions of distribution. As they suggest, ‘thinking genre through distribution’ can help to foreground the impact of distributive logics on the production and subsequent categorisation of film texts, ‘allowing a retheorization of genre as something more than a semiotic compact between producer and audience or the end-product of sublimated social desire’ (emphasis in original 189).

Yet considering that the definition of genre as a ‘semiotic compact between producer and audience’ has long been integral to the scholarly discipline of film studies and to the industrial practices of film producers, promoters, and distributors, it is important to interrogate the contemporary status of this ‘semiotic compact’, and the assumptions upon which it is grounded. As new digital circuits of distribution and consumption have changed the way audiences enact and perceive their relationships to film, the contract between industry and audience that underpins traditional genre paradigms (Grant 116) is also being rewritten. In fact, as will be illuminated in the next section, the changes across all sectors of the film industry in the digital age reveal some longstanding gaps in genre studies as a field.

For decades film genres were sustained by tight relationships between the production, distribution, and exhibition sectors of the film industry, as genre ecologies were solidified through the industrial practices of Hollywood’s classical period (1917-1950s). As Steve Neale suggests, the formation and ossification of genres has long been embedded in the film industry’s institutional mechanics from ‘the earliest phases of a film’s public circulation, and in particular by those sectors of the industry concerned with publicity and marketing: distribution, exhibition, studio marketing departments, and so on’ (35). To return to Lobato and Ryan’s term, institutionally-defined genre categories thus became a ‘semiotic compact’ between industry and audience through marketing and distribution strategies that brand films according to particular genres, and seek to attract audiences based on broad demographic profiles that align with this generic identity. While Rick Altman points out that there are problems with the assumption that film studios consistently market films using explicit and clearly defined generic terminology (115), he explains that ‘if it is not defined by the industry and recognized by the mass
audience, then it cannot be a genre, because film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared’ (‘Film/Genre’ 16).

While the institutionalised dynamics of genre have continually been renegotiated in accordance with technological developments and changing industrial structures, the previously firm relationships between the film industry’s production, distribution, and exhibition sectors have unravelled with the diversification of screen consumption in the digital age. As Lobato and Ryan point out, ‘today’s distribution landscape has changed dramatically from the 1970s and 1980s, when many of the now-canonical genre studies were written,’ due in large part to the emergence of digital distribution platforms and rise of ancillary markets (193). Thus, audience access to films is no longer mediated through highly stratified categorisation processes driven by the intertwined distribution, exhibition, and marketing strategies of the various sectors of the film industry: film consumption is not centred as it once was around theatrical exhibition or the acquisition of DVDs/videos at ‘bricks-and-mortar’ stores that clearly organise content according to industrially-certified genre categories. This shift has been characterised as a ‘veritable revolution’ in screen entertainment distribution (Curtin et al. 2), for ‘industrial processes of distribution’ have gradually given way to ‘amorphous practices of decentralised content sharing’ (Lobato 6) and personalised, on-demand access (Tryon).

As a result, when it comes to the cultural practices surrounding film categorisation and genre, the power balance between the audience and the industry has shifted as generic categories mutate alongside changing consumption practices. It is important to note that audiences and ancillary markets – particularly those surrounding cult films – have always developed their own relationships to genre that have the potential to subvert or reposition industry-certified categories. However, in the on-demand SVoD era, highly personalised, audience-centric approaches to content categorisation have become mainstream. M J Robinson contends that such changes have led to the rise of a curatorial culture in which viewers ‘select and contextualize their own viewing schedule’ (24). Beyond the curatorial architecture underlying SVoD and other on-demand video platforms, practices such as the online curation of films via websites like LetterBoxd have become a popular way for audiences to define and publically display their film consumption habits. In this new film consumption landscape, what David Beer describes as the ‘classificatory imagination’ (42) – in which individuals organise their personal tastes and consumption in highly visible ways – has in turn come to influence industry approaches to genre.

These shifting cultural practices and audience negotiations with genre have prompted the contemporary overhaul of ‘film genre’ as an epistemic and cultural framework. Writing about televisual approaches to genre, Mittell advocates that genre be considered a ‘cultural category’ rather than a ‘textual category’: as he suggests, genre ‘surpasses the boundaries of media texts and operate[s] within industry, audience, and cultural practices as well’ (‘A Cultural Approach’ 3). According to Mittell, genres should
thus be understood as ‘discursive processes running through texts, audiences and industries via specific cultural practices’ (19), a point reinforced by Matt Hills’ proposal that genre exists at the nexus between cultural discourse and textual contract between audience and industry. Similarly, Beer illustrates that the manner by which media texts are classified, delivered and made negotiable to audience members has a significant influence on cultural conceptions of media content, as what Beer calls the ‘circulations of popular culture’ (2) – and the politics of these circulations – have the capacity to ‘shift and reshape culture itself’ (3). In the digital age, the cultural practices and circulations that buttress genre categories have undergone a significant shift, reshaping the way audiences relate to industrially-certified categories. This article – and the pilot study that it details – argues that an audience-centered approach can provide a better understanding of how these industrial and cultural shifts may be impacting the ‘semiotic compact’ (Lobato and Ryan 189) that underpins genre.

The Audience in Genre Studies (and Genre in Audience Studies)

Genre studies emerged in the 1970s as a corrective to the focus on the auteur in film scholarship. It was positioned by its proponents as an egalitarian approach that was more attentive to industry determinants and the marketplace. In particular, many scholars identified the audience as a key authority on when a group of films might be deemed a genre, with Thomas Schatz describing film genres as a ‘form of artistic expression which involves the audience more directly than any traditional art form had done before’ (11), and John G. Cawelti noting how ‘popular genres are also semi-ritualistic in that they are narrative patterns with rules known to everyone’ (17). Despite this focus on audiences, genre studies scholars rarely engaged directly with spectators. During genre studies’ classical period in the 1970s and 1980s, audience attitudes and interests tended to be discerned from box office figures or the seemingly successful sharing of industry approved terms and generic conventions in inter-textual relays. For instance, Andrew Tudor proposed that genre is determined by a ‘common cultural consensus’: put simply, that ‘genre is what we collectively believe it to be’ (138-139). Peter Hutchings points out that Tudor’s ‘common cultural consensus’ supposition elides – while exposing – a complex question that has long troubled genre studies as a field: ‘namely how does one identify the ‘common cultural consensus’ which “defines” a genre?’ (67).

This lack of direct engagement with audiences prompted Altman to summarise in his 1999 book *Film/Genre* that film genre theorists had ‘assumed a quasi-magical correspondence between industry purposes and audience responses – quasi-magical because the mechanics of the relationship between industry and audience have been described in only the most primitive terms’ (15-6). Similarly, Hutchings challenged the ‘fixed and exclusive definitions which proved so troublesome for the 1970s writing on genre’ by arguing that genre studies needs to be more attuned to the ‘liveliness of genres’ including ‘the roles of audiences’, summarising that only then can ‘an understanding of this important area of film [...] be further developed’ (75). Indeed, when genre studies is more attentive to
the audience, traditional genre frameworks can be challenged and new categories identified (Burke). While some scholars in the late 1990s and early 2000s attempted to address this limitation by factoring audience responses into their considerations of key genres, particularly horror (see Jancovich; Austin), this trend was short-lived.

The dynamic, audience-centred approaches to film genre described above by Hutchings are arguably more necessary in the contemporary landscape of digital distribution and resultant personalised consumption and curation practices outlined in the previous section. Responding to this paradigm shift, SVoD platforms like Netflix filter content in ways that position the taste profiles and consumption habits of individual subscribers at the nucleus of the content catalogue. As Yashar Deldjoo et al. explain, the goal of SVoD services is to ‘filter information and to recommend to users only the videos that are likely of interest to them. ... Preferences on attributes are implicitly detected by analysing the user’s past opinions on movies’ (‘Movie Recommendations’ 162).

However, current research that considers the impact of SVoD services on film consumption and categorisation tends to focus on the catalogues of the streaming service and how they are presented, rather than the audience/genre relationship. Much of this scholarship examines transnational screen traffic and conceptions of national cinema (Huffer; Church; Ene and Grece; Fontaine and Grece). For instance, in his research on SVoD platforms, Stefano Baschiera demonstrates how foreign films tend to be used in a way that gives the impression of a deep and broad catalogue, as a way of “filling up” genre categories ... and for completing the offerings in subgenres and specialist subcategories’ (‘Streaming World’ 5).

Emily Lawrence echoes Baschiera’s scepticism of the tortuously constructed subcategories such as ‘gritty Military Action & Adventure from the 1980s’ that are used to group films in SVoD catalogues. Drawing on coverage in the industry press, Lawrence terms these subgenres ‘altgenres’ and argues that they ‘are particularly compelling because they appear scientific and value-neutral’ (358). However, as Lawrence points out, through Netflix’s use of industry-orientated specialists (‘taggers’) to apply descriptors, inference is a ‘significant iterative step in Netflix’s recommendation process’ (358-362). Lawrence demonstrates this point by noting how Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge (Sholder 1985) is not tagged as ‘Queer’ in its descriptor despite the ‘film’s status as a queer horror classic’, explaining that ‘depending on how a particular tagger is situated, they may not be able to discover the film’s membership in this genre simply by looking’ (362). As Lawrence demonstrates, the manner in which films are organised and presented in SVoD service catalogues demands further scrutiny. However, if scholarship on contemporary film genres limits its focus to SVoD catalogues, then this new research runs the risk of slipping into the same mire as traditional genre studies by assuming Altman’s ‘quasi-magical correspondence between industry purposes and audience responses’ (Altman Film/Genre, 15-6), with the audience ignored by yet another generation of film genre theorists.

This research gap was identified by the On-Demand team at the University of York. Following a review of industry reports from groups such as the British Film Institute and the
regulatory body Ofcom, the research team concluded that ‘the data is still quite limited in terms of specifically understanding the consumption of films on-demand’ (Jones 3). Accordingly, the team circulated a survey to 2,088 adults in the UK which addressed the impact of VOD on cinema-going, diversity of films consumed, and the use of torrent websites (Jones 3-4). Although the study had a wide focus, it did engage with genre, with one of the survey’s seven questions asking respondents what ‘types/genres of film’ they have watched, with a familiar list of industry-certified genres such as Action, Comedy, and Drama offered (16). Among the study’s conclusions, the researchers found that VOD has not ‘encouraged audiences to consume a greater diversity of films’ and VOD seems to reinforce ‘prevailing movie tastes and interests’ (2). This study provided some much needed engagement with VOD users, and similar audience research will be necessary if genre studies is going to be able to develop a conception of genre that treats it as a discursive ‘cultural category’ (Mittell ‘A Cultural Approach’ 3).

While genre studies all too rarely engages directly with audiences, audience studies scholars regularly treat genre as an important framework in how audiences understand and appreciate films. For instance, in their study of the audiences for the 1995 film adaptation of Judge Dredd comics, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks noted how their respondents were ‘filmically and culturally aware’ of genre due to their tendency to categorise films through the use of terms such as ‘Bog standard Hollywood Action epic’, ‘drive-in movie type film’, and ‘trash movies’ (75). Barker maintained this interest in audience awareness of film genre for the 25,000 respondent study of The Lord of the Rings trilogy (Jackson, 2001-2013), which he led with Ernest Mathijs. The project was described by its organisers as ‘the largest and most complete attempt to date to study audience responses to a film’ (Barker et al. ‘Audiences and Contexts’ 1). It was motivated, in part, by the lack of research surrounding audience consumption and classification practices in screen studies scholarship: as Barker et al. argue ‘at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we still do not know that much about how actual film audiences watch films’ (1), and ‘film studies, presumably the discipline with the most interest in films’ impact on actual viewers, hardly acknowledges them’ (2).

For Barker and Mathijs’ Lord of the Rings project, participants were given the option of defining the film series’ genre, with ‘Epic’ being the most popular label among English-speaking respondents. However, in keeping with Hutching’s call for genre studies to be more attentive to national contexts (75), the global study considered how international audiences classified the films. For instance, Giselinde Kuipers and Jeroen De Kloet, in their article ‘Global Flows and Local Identification’, described how the genre label ‘Epic’ was ‘relatively rare’ in Belgium, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Kuipers and De Kloet partly attributed the differences to language, as ‘genre labels can have very different connotations in different countries’ (137-8). Moving from receptions of Lord of the Rings to its prequel trilogy, Carolyn Michelle et al. were also attentive to genre as a ‘mediated mode of reception’ in their longitudinal study of global receptions of The Hobbit trilogy (Jackson 2012-14) published as Fans, Blockbusterisation, and the Transformation of Cinematic Desire (36).
These studies offer a welcome engagement with audiences largely absent in traditional film genre studies. However, *Judge Dredd* (Cannon, 1995), *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Hobbit* were all adaptations of cult texts with easily identifiable audiences and active fan communities. Accordingly, these studies were largely carried out at fan forums (Barker and Brooks 31) or online, which tends to favour younger enthusiasts (Barker et al. ‘Methodological Challenges’ 222-223). As Michelle et al. noted when describing their recruitment strategies ‘our findings are specific to our survey population, and do not necessarily reflect the distribution of viewpoints within the wider mainstream *Hobbit* audience’ (Michelle et al. 39-40). Indeed, an approach to genre studies that engages with a wide audience on a diverse array of films is one of the intended goals of this larger project.

**The Pilot Study**

Film Language, New Technology (FLNT) is a collaboration between researchers at Melbourne’s Swinburne University of Technology and Village Roadshow (Village), the Australian media company whose activities include film production, distribution, and exhibition. Village were looking to develop a dynamic recommendation system that goes beyond traditional categories and better tallies with the cultural practices of contemporary users. Ahead of the planned larger project, a pilot study was conducted by the research team and their industry partner, in which a survey was distributed to Cinema and Screen Studies students at Swinburne University of Technology. Survey participants ranked films on thirteen attributes including narrative complexity, socio-political relevance, and aesthetic and visual qualities. For the larger project, researchers will use cluster analysis to organise a wide selection of films around these qualities with the aim of better understanding how contemporary audiences group films. However, for this pilot study the focus was on whether questions on these qualities would yield meaningful results, as well as what insights this early data might provide into film consumption in the digital age.

In his 2013 article ‘Big & Personal: data and models behind Netflix Recommendations’, Netflix’s Research/Engineering Director Xavier Amatriain described ‘Recommender Systems’ as a ‘prime example of the mainstream applicability of large scale data mining.’ Amatriain notes how ‘Netflix has discovered through the years that there is tremendous value in incorporating recommendations to personalize as much of the experience as possible.’ Indeed, Recommendation Systems are used today across a variety of areas such as gaming, search engines, online dating, and music and video services. Consequently, a premium has been placed on improving RS with Amatriain describing how Netflix introduced a ‘machine learning and data mining competition’, which awarded $1 million to whoever could improve the accuracy of their existing recommendation system. The ‘Netflix Prize’ is one of the many ways that the SVoD service has placed ‘personalization at the core of our product’ (Amatriain).

Compelled by the challenges and opportunities for developing more accurate video-on-demand recommendation systems, computer science researchers are showing increasing interest in this topic. For example, a team of computer science and information
technology researchers based at the Polytechnic University of Milan have questioned the efficacy of recommender systems based on ‘the traditional classifications of movies [...] such as genre and cast’ (Deldjoo et al. ‘Movie Recommendations’ 162). They argue that the ‘opinion of users on movies is better described in terms of the mise-en-scène’ (162). For instance, they suggest that while *The Fifth Element* (Besson 1997) and *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg 2005) belong to the same genre – science fiction – the stark differences in mise-en-scène between these two films suggest that they should be aligned with different categories. To that end, the team have developed an ‘automatic video analysis tool’ (162) that extracts ‘low-level’ detail from films to categorise them into four groups based on the visual features: ‘average shot length’, ‘color variance’, ‘motion’, and ‘lighting’ (162-164). In a later article detailing this project’s outcomes, the team describe how they ‘have successfully verified the hypothesis showing that the recommendation accuracy is higher when using the considered low-level visual features than when high-level genre data are employed’ (Deldjoo et al. ‘Visual Features’ 111). The team still acknowledge the ‘importance of explicit semantic features (such as genre, cast, director, tags) in content-based recommender systems’, but describe how such features are ‘more costly to collect, because they require an “editorial” effort’ (111).

As previously outlined, film genre theorists have positioned the audience as a central authority in classifying and organising groups of films. While Deldjoo et al.’s findings demonstrate the extent to which generic categorisation practices are in flux and have produced interesting results, building on traditions within film studies and audience research this project will avoid automated categorisation to engage directly with active audiences. As past research (Burke) and the early findings of this project demonstrate, new modes of film categorisation can often best be discerned through an attentiveness to real world audiences, the cultural practices that influence audience relationships with genres, and ultimately what Hutchings calls the ‘liveliness of genres’ (75).

The survey design was informed by film theorist Rick Altman’s work on genre, in particular his semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach, which combines structuralism, cultural context, and semiotics. Altman’s syntactics/semantics/pragmatics approach facilitated the development of survey questions that assess the respondents’ conceptions of each film’s constitutive aesthetic and structural patterns, in ways that do not necessitate leading descriptions of themes, content, or genre. As a result, drawing upon Altman’s model allowed the research team to design questions around key semantic/syntactic attributes, start discerning shared patterns based on these attributes, and thus uncover film groupings that may diverge from existing generic paradigms. Accordingly, some survey questions focused on the ‘building blocks’ of genre, which Altman terms ‘semantics’ (‘Semantic/Syntactic’ 10). These semantics include aesthetic traits, character types, and setting. For instance, respondents were asked to rate films on whether the films had a realistic or fantastical setting. Other questions related to syntactics, which Altman describes as the ‘meaning-bearing structures’ (11) of a genre: the ‘constitutive relationships’ (10) into which a genre’s semantics, or building blocks, are arranged. For example, some questions
focused on narrative complexity and closure. Revisiting this approach in the conclusion to *Film/Genre*, Altman adds pragmatics, which recognises that familiar patterns such as genre have multiple uses and users (e.g. various spectator groups, producers, exhibitors) which can inflect how they are received and understood (210). Accordingly, the survey aimed to account for the influence of contexts and conditions surrounding spectatorship and consumption choices. For instance, participants were asked to identify on which platform and in what context they saw each film, with selection options including DVD/Blu-ray, SVoD, and broadcast television. Inspired by Netflix’s use of industry-engaged ‘taggers’ who provide micro-tags for the streaming service’s content (Weinman 206), the pilot study was only distributed to Swinburne’s Cinema and Screen Studies students, but the larger project will make use of Village Roadshow’s extensive online and real world networks to gain a much larger and more balanced pool of participants.

In addition to two questions related to age and gender, the survey was made up of 18 questions, which took participants an average of 15-18 minutes to complete. On beginning the survey, participants were given the option to select up to ten films from a list of twenty as the basis of their study. As respondents would ideally be able to select at least ten of the twenty films, the film selection was limited to narrative feature-length films that were likely to have been seen by our study’s respondents whether they were recent box office successes (*The Avengers* [Whedon 2012], *Mad Max: Fury Road* [Miller 2015], *Pitch Perfect* [Moore 2012]); iconic movies (*Singin’ in the Rain* [Kelly and Donen 1952], *Psycho*, *The Wizard of Oz* [Fleming 1939]); award winners (*Spotlight* [McCarthy 2015], *Moonlight*, *12 Years a Slave* [McQueen 2013], *Spirited Away* [Miyazaki 2001]); cult favourites (*Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* [McKay 2004], *Ghostbusters* [Reitman 1984]); or Australian classics (*The Castle* [Sitch 1997] and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* [Elliott 1994]). The web interface of the survey linked each film title to its official poster to limit the likelihood of confusion, which was particularly important for titles such as *Ghostbusters*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *The Avengers*, which have been remade or are part of larger film series. The most popular film with 119 survey responses was *Deadpool*, with only 11 participants including *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011) among their selection. The planned larger study will expand the range of titles to be more inclusive of foreign language films, documentary, and art and independent cinema.

The survey went through a number of tests and workshops prior to its distribution. It was decided that most questions would be semantic differential scales with respondents choosing a number from 1-10 between two positions. For instance, respondents were asked to ‘Rate how important the visual aesthetic is to your experience of the film’ with 1 being ‘not important at all’ and 10 being ‘extremely important’. Differential scales proved more productive than Likert scales or similar approaches as they did not simply expect respondents to agree/disagree with a position, but to define a value of their own. For instance, as the respondents were choosing the titles and therefore were likely to have some investment in the film, they tended to agree that the visual aesthetics were important to their enjoyment. Using a semantic differential scale compelled respondents to assign a
value, and it is in the differences between those values that some of the most interesting findings emerged.

Similarly, it was initially planned that respondents would analyse each film independently, but this approach created two challenges. Firstly, the survey became laborious with respondents unlikely to complete the survey for more than one or two films. Also, when ranking films in isolation, respondents tended to gravitate towards the ends of the scales. However, film consumption is an intertextual process with audiences comparing the films within a number of frameworks (such as genre, stars, and style). To encourage this comparative approach and also offset participant fatigue, the survey was reworked prior to distribution so that respondents would answer each question for all ten titles at the same time, with each title receiving its own 1-10 slider. Workshop feedback and test data demonstrated that by comparing multiple films on the same attribute simultaneously, respondents were more likely to disperse their rankings across the available range, with the extreme ends of the scale reserved for films that respondents felt most met those criteria. This change led to each respondent rating a greater number of films, as well as more nuanced data.

In addition to semantic differential scale questions, the survey included a multi-select multiple-choice question about the platforms on which respondents had viewed each film. Also, while most questions yielded quantitative data, in keeping with Netflix’s approach to taggers the first question respondents were asked following their film selection was, ‘What key terms (up to three) would you use to describe the film to a friend who hasn’t seen it?’. It was necessary to place this question early so that respondents would not be swayed by the subsequent questions. Similarly, questions about preference and genre conformity were left until the end of the survey in case they might influence responses.

200 surveys were distributed electronically to Cinema and Screen Studies students in late 2017, with students incentivised to complete the survey in order to redeem a free Village Cinemas ticket. 177 responses were returned. Removing incomplete or spoiled surveys, 170 were used as the basis for this analysis. 101 respondents identified as Women, 67 as Men, and two as Other. Unsurprisingly, given that the survey was circulated to undergraduate students, all but 11 were aged between 16 and 30, with the highest concentration between 19-21 with 94 respondents.

While the comparatively small sample size of 170 respondents is not large enough to make any large generalisable claims, the data analysis found that every question reported very small p-values, suggesting that they are statistically significant and can be used for the larger study. This would potentially give the research team 13 attributes to measure films, which will hopefully provide a multi-faceted understanding of the intersections between elements of film style, structure, and cultural practice. In preparation for the larger project, this pilot study provided some interesting early findings that nuance, and in some cases challenge, established understandings of film genre, categorisation, and consumption.
Findings

After participants selected their ten films from a list of twenty, they were asked to respond to thirteen specific questions about their opinions and experience with each film as a text. For example, for one question, participants were asked to ‘Rate the setting of these films, with 1 being a very fantastical setting and 10 being a very realistic setting’ (see Figure 1). For our analysis, all responses to each question were analysed as categories for each film. For example, the individual survey respondent’s rating of the ‘setting’ for 12 Years A Slave, as in Figure 1, were combined with those of other respondents to become the category of ‘setting’ as a group of responses. A mean for all responses to any single category for each film was then calculated. For example, the category ‘twelve setting’ (i.e. the ‘setting’ question for respondents for 12 Years A Slave) produced the following array of responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This illustrates a clear trend towards the higher end of the scale, with the vast majority of ratings assigned by respondents at either 9 or 10. There were 48 total responses for this category. The formula for calculating the mean was therefore:

\[
\frac{(1 \times 1) + (0 \times 2) + (1 \times 3) + (1 \times 4) + (0 \times 5) + (1 \times 6) + (2 \times 7) + (5 \times 8) + (9 \times 9) + (28 \times 10)}{48}
\]

The result of this equation, when rounded to two decimal places, is 8.94. This number is accordingly the mean of all responses for 12 Years A Slave’s ‘setting’ question. We then generated summaries of the means of every category across all films surveyed, as well as comparisons between multiple categories (see for example Figure 8, which illustrates a comparison between the means for ‘Goal Orientation’ against the means for ‘Character Development’). We also created a tool that generated comparisons between any two films surveyed (see for example Figure 2, which illustrates a comparison between the means across all categories for The Avengers and Deadpool). This allowed us to explore our data through direct comparison, test out hypotheses, and identify points of correlation and difference.

Genres, dissected

By comparing any two surveyed films from what might be considered similar genres, we can see how the data begins to paint a picture of genre familiarity that reinforces the viability of this project’s approach and method, and, on some levels, that of traditional genre categories (Figure 2). We might expect the study’s two superhero films, Deadpool and The Avengers, for example, to return comparable results given their generic similarity. Indeed, we can see that both films obtained means across almost all categories with a difference of
Figure 1: One of the survey questions as presented to a participant.

Figure 2: *Deadpool* compared to *The Avengers*
less than one whole number (indeed, their ‘real world relevance’ scores were 3.95 and 4.03 respectively, resulting in just 0.08 in difference). Just three of the thirteen categories resulted in a difference of more than 1: storyworld scale (1.59 difference, with *The Avengers* scoring higher), importance of sound effects (1.17 difference, with *The Avengers* scoring higher), and challenging genre conventions (3.17 difference, with *The Avengers* scoring significantly lower). We can see here how the data begins to sketch the expected generic similarities, as well as crucial points of distinction. As superhero films, *Deadpool* and *The Avengers* share many similarities, but *The Avengers* is uniquely marked by its properties as a Marvel shared universe film, incorporating a large number of characters from previous franchise instalments (which is reflected in the higher score in the perceived scale of the filmic universe when compared to *Deadpool*). *Deadpool*, as a satire of the superhero genre, performs much more highly in terms of pushing against our respondents’ perceived generic expectations by comparison to the relatively conventional *The Avengers*. That the data manages to generally chart a broadly similar picture for related films, while nonetheless isolating such important differences, illustrates the survey’s effectiveness.

We can perform a similar comparison with musicals *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Pitch Perfect* (see Figure 3). There is an extremely close match between the means for the importance of ‘music’ and ‘sound’ for these two films (0.04 and 0.03 difference respectively), and only four of the thirteen categories returned differences in means of more than one whole number. These were setting (with *Pitch Perfect* ranked as 2.24 more realistic), goals (with *Pitch Perfect* returning a 1.17 more goal-oriented response), aesthetic (with *Singin’ in the Rain* ranking 1.67 higher in terms of how important the visual aesthetic was to our respondents’
enjoyment of the film), and genre expectations (with *Singin’ in the Rain* placing 1.19 above *Pitch Perfect* in terms of breaking the generic mould). Once again we might hypothesise likely explanations for these key differences: *Pitch Perfect* is much more ‘everyday’ in its setting (university campus versus the glamour of Hollywood history), while *Singin’ in the Rain* features at least one fantastical dance sequence towards the end of the film that dispenses with any pretence of naturalism. *Singin’ in the Rain* contains notable elements of satire and parody, which push against genre expectations, while *Pitch Perfect* features a straightforward plot structured around competing in and winning a competition. Again, we see genre relationships sketched out while key inter-film differences are highlighted.

Comparing action films *Drive* (Winding Refn 2011) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* also provided interesting results, especially given both films’ vehicular action focus (*Figure 4*). Indeed, both films rank similarly across most categories with the prominent exception of one: ‘setting’. In this category, *Drive* places a full 5.09 above *Mad Max* towards ‘realistic’, a significant difference that locates the two films at disparate ends of this category’s spectrum. Of course, *Mad Max* takes place in a post-apocalyptic desert wasteland, while *Drive* is set in a relatively recognisable and contemporary Los Angeles. In this case, we can see through the data two generically similar films that might otherwise be associated in all but one key respect.

Identifying such points of similarity and difference between films with clear textual similarities and closely inter-linked generic relationships is the first step in identifying unexpected relationships between unexpected films. For instance, films that would rarely
be grouped together in a DVD collection or streaming service catalogue might be linked by key attributes: *The Matrix, Moonlight*, and *Drive* were all ranked low on narrative closure, while *The Castle, Singin’ in the Rain*, and *Pitch Perfect* were all considered to have ‘endings that resolve all the film’s plot lines’. Audiences looking for challenging or conventional films may find this attribute more useful in selecting their viewing, even while these films are unlikely to be collected together under traditional genre categories. In addition, the profile for *The Wizard of Oz* aligned more closely with that of comedy superhero film *Deadpool* and the horror-comedy *Ghostbusters* than other musicals *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Pitch Perfect*. Notably *The Wizard of Oz, Deadpool* and *Ghostbusters* all have distinctly hybrid genre identities, and incorporate a heightened logic of whimsy and fantasy into familiar generic terrains (musical, superhero/action and comedy, respectively). Thus, this constellation of films offers particular pleasures related to shared attributes not captured in traditional genre classifications. Similar clusters can be identified across the other twelve attributes, linking films beyond industry prescribed categories.

**Are all genres body genres? Key terms and affectual experience**

In her seminal essay on the excessive, affect-driven genres of horror, pornography, and melodrama (lower brow ‘weepies’ and ‘women’s films’ more specifically [3-4]), Linda Williams suggests that these three film genres have shared structures and cultural identities because they ‘are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite’ (3). Drawing from Carol Clover’s earlier work on slasher films, Williams designates these three film types ‘body genres’ (3-4) because they are defined through the level and intensity of their affects: ‘the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen’ (4). Yet one particularly valuable finding drawn from the pilot study was that across a diverse range of films, participants defined and categorised films according to the sensations and affectual experiences they incited, rather than prioritising genre categorisations, production background, content, or themes. This suggests that perhaps across all film genres – whether or not they can be aligned with Williams’ low-cultural body genres – the viewer’s understanding of a film’s ‘success’ or generic identity may be tied to the range of sensations and emotional responses it sparks.

For instance, for the Oscar-winning independent coming-of-age drama/arthouse film *Moonlight*, the most commonly used term was ‘beautiful’, closely followed by ‘drama’, ‘moving’, ‘black’, and ‘powerful’ (Figure 5). Terms that marked the film out as an unconventional cinematic experience were also quite popular, with the terms ‘unique’ and ‘different’ being among the ten most popular terms and ‘interesting’, ‘raw’, and ‘intense’ within the top fifteen. Key content and category identifiers used to market the film were less prominent than the research team anticipated: terms related to the film’s Academy Award-winning status were used less frequently than affectual descriptors like ‘beautiful,’ ‘moving’, and ‘powerful’, with only four of the respondents who provided key terms for *Moonlight* including some variant of the term ‘award’, and two including the term ‘Oscar’
(‘Academy Award’ did not appear at all). Apart from ‘drama’ – a term that signals the film’s overarching generic identity and the range of affects it seeks to incite – further genre categorisations such as ‘arthouse’, ‘independent’, ‘thriller’ and ‘poetic realism’ appeared infrequently among the key terms.

**Figure 5: Moonlight Key Responses Word Cloud**

While the emphasis on affect rather than genre may be reflective of the fact that *Moonlight* has a hybrid generic identity, it nevertheless signals that when thinking of ways to describe and classify this film, generally respondents were not preoccupied with descriptions that accorded with specific generic categories, or even with positioning it along spectrums of taste and prestige. The film was, after all, the most recent Best Picture Oscar winner at the time the survey was conducted, a win that was particularly high profile because of the mistake made when the winner was first announced at the 2017 Academy Awards ceremony (one respondent seemed to acknowledge this using the key term ‘mistake’).

Notably, while *Moonlight*’s gritty social problem themes, arthouse status, and critical prestige were central to official paratextual materials, this seemingly did not have a significant influence on the respondents’ choice of key terms. The emphasis on affect may be related to *Moonlight*’s links to the melodramatic mode, which, as Williams suggests, ‘refers to a much broader category of films and a much larger system of excess’ (3) than horror and pornography. However, Williams links the most excessive and low-brow form of melodrama, the ‘weepie’ or ‘woman’s film’, to her concept of body genres (3-4). Defined in a paratextual and pragmatic sense primarily through its near-universal critical acclaim and high-art status, *Moonlight*’s generic and cultural identity is far removed from the kinds of ‘weepies’ Williams’ focuses on in her piece, and indeed, the term ‘melodrama’ did not feature at all in the participants’ responses to *Moonlight*. Yet nevertheless, its ‘raw’, ‘powerful’, ‘intense’, and, in one description, ‘tear-jerking’, affects were central to participant’s processes of classification. Although assigning an independent arthouse film
such as *Moonlight* with a clear genre identity may be somewhat more challenging than for those films that are more explicitly branded around a particular genre, this emphasis on affect was reflected across all of the films, even those that do align more clearly with well-established generic categories.

For instance, for the superhero film *Deadpool* the term that most frequently appeared was ‘funny’, with ‘hilarious’ and ‘fun’ the fifth and ninth most used terms (Figure 6). Overall, the responses to *Deadpool* were much more unified than those for *Moonlight*, which may in part reflect the film’s clear alignment with three generic categories: ‘superhero’, ‘action’, and ‘comedy’ were the second, third and fourth most popular terms respectively, suggesting that respondents conceived of this film in relation to established genres in a more straightforward way than *Moonlight*. Indeed, the industrially-certified genre of *Deadpool* is broadly ‘superhero action comedy’ (IMDB, which uses traditional genre categories, classifies the film as ‘Action/Adventure/Comedy/Sci-Fi’). Yet terms like ‘Marvel’ (the seventh most popular term), ‘parody’, and ‘satire’ (the twelfth and fourteenth most popular terms respectively) that more precisely pinpoint the film’s generic profile appeared comparatively infrequently in the responses. This is despite the fact that these features were prioritised in paratextual materials as markers of the film’s relationship to genre. Notably, the term ‘self-aware’ was used most often to describe the film’s play with established superhero genre conventions (being the eighth most popular key term) – a term that does not engage with questions of genre as precisely as the less frequently used terms parody and satire.

**Figure 6**: *Deadpool* Word Cloud

Furthermore, terms related to the key semantic signifiers of the superhero film such as special effects-driven fight sequences, costumes, and superpowers, and syntactic patterns such as the hero’s journey and good versus evil conflicts, were not prominent across the key
term responses, with the only example of such categorisation processes being the term ‘antihero’ (the sixth most popular term). This is significant given that the film’s subversive relationship to its genre was positioned as its central attraction in official marketing material (the marketing taglines for the film included ‘Justice has a new face’ and ‘A new class of superhero’). Neale suggests that rewarding patterns of difference and variation are key elements that undergird continuous audience identification with and preference for genres over time (216). However, the most popular key terms used to describe Deadpool suggest that when it came to classifying the film, the much-hyped play with superhero genre conventions was less significant to the respondents than the affectual experience it offered.

In addition, Psycho saw the terms ‘classic’ and ‘thriller’ appear most frequently, with ‘Hitchcock’ and ‘horror’ being the equal-third most frequently used terms (Figure 7). The pragmatic terms ‘classic’ and ‘Hitchcock’ suggest that the film was categorised in large part through its significant cultural status, yet again, as is indicated by the popularity of the terms ‘horror’ and ‘thriller’, descriptions of the affectual experience of viewing the film remained one of the most significant means of classification for the respondents. While the terms ‘thriller’ and ‘horror’ function as both descriptions for affectual states and generic categories, when the popularity of these terms is considered alongside that of a range of other affect-centric descriptive terms, the responses to Psycho again suggest that audiences gravitated towards terms that capture both the film’s genre and the affects it incites. As with the other films, a wide variety of affectual terms dominated the responses: ‘psychological’ was the sixth most popular choice, with ‘intense’, ‘creepy’, ‘scary’, ‘suspenseful’, and ‘thrilling’ also appearing regularly (all terms appeared with almost equal regularity among the top thirteen most popular terms). That Psycho could also be classified according to more precise generic signifiers such as ‘mystery’, ‘crime’, ‘serial killer’ or ‘slasher’ is important to take into account: while the term ‘slasher’ appeared in three responses, the terms ‘crime’ and ‘serial killer’ did not appear at all, and ‘mystery’ only once. Furthermore, the term ‘suspenseful’ – another word that defines the film according to how it affected the viewer – was more popular than the term ‘suspense’, a term that quite precisely identifies the film’s genre and filmmaker. Indeed, the generic descriptor ‘suspense’ appeared less often than terms like ‘scary’, ‘intense’ and ‘creepy’ which are vague in generic terms but specific when related to affectual experience. Thus, the key term responses in the pilot study suggest that new taxonomic methods should foreground affectual patterns, rather than simply relying on the textual and thematic groupings offered by genre. This approach would necessitate the modification and extension of Williams’ affect-centric body genres framework to a more diverse range of films.

Importantly, while Moonlight and Psycho do align with some elements of Williams’ definition of body genres, none of the films discussed above neatly accord with Williams’ description of body genres as those films that prioritise ‘seemingly gratuitous excesses’ (3) of bodily affect. Williams suggests that body genres tend to be classified in a low taste bracket – to be thought of as overly ‘sensational’ (2-3), ‘gross genres’ (4) – due in part to their associations with baser instincts and extreme bodily responses, as their ‘spectacles
have centred more directly upon the gross display of the human body’ (3). As Williams explains, ‘the film genres that have had especially low cultural status – which seemed to exist as excesses to the system of even the popular genres . . . [are those in which] the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen’ (4): to return to an earlier cited passage, these films’ raison d’être is ‘their power to excite’ (3). Moonlight and Psycho in particular carry a level of prestige for their artistry, narrative complexity, interaction with confronting social problems, and significant influence upon film culture, and have the resounding critical approval to match.

Figure 7: Psycho Word Cloud

Furthermore, their affects are driven in large part by inventive narrative structures and distinctive aesthetic styles rather than audience identification with excessive displays of emotion or corporeal responses. This prestige and formal and aesthetic complexity, should, in theory, distance these films from the excessive, affect-driven cultural identity of body genres. Yet the survey responses suggest that affectual processes were significant while generic markers associated with high/low cultural spectrums were insignificant to the respondents when it came to categorising these films. Even Deadpool received critical praise for its self-aware, satirical approach to the superhero genre – a generic formula largely considered tired or over-saturated in mainstream, journalistic discourse. However, the film’s celebrated, self-reflexive relationship to existing generic categories was not a central consideration for the respondents, who again classified the film largely through its affects (funny, fun, hilarious), rather than the numerous more specific dimensions of its generic profile. This suggests that emotional and bodily engagement was a key consideration in the respondents’ categorisation processes across a range of genres that do not necessarily align with Williams’ low-cultural body genres.

These results also suggest that the official paratexts that can play a key role in the institutional certification of genre did not dictate respondents’ own categorisation of these
films, a condition that could be related to the declining influence of theatrical distribution and marketing processes on consumption habits. The survey results highlighted the increasingly fragmented nature of film distribution and consumption. Unsurprisingly, given the age demographic (16-30) of the majority of the study’s respondents, the most viewed films on television were those released decades earlier and which had become Australian television staples, including *The Castle*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Given their ready availability, these films were among the lowest that respondents had downloaded digitally, with that category led by the comparatively recent release *Moonlight*. The films that ranked highest on the list for movies watched in the cinema, *The Avengers* and *Deadpool*, were in the bottom half of the download list. This inverse relationship tallies with critical and mainstream discourse (reinforced by box office figures) that special effects-laden superhero movies are one of the few contemporary genres that encourage theatre attendance. It is also notable that *Deadpool*, unlike *Moonlight* and many of the other films, was described using key terms that quite clearly highlight the film’s relationship with well-defined generic categories (even though the terms used to pinpoint the film’s genre still emphasised affectual properties over thematic or narrative ones). This suggests that traditional genre considerations, constructed in part by official paratexts like posters and trailers, were more central to the respondents’ categorisation of this particular film. This finding indicates that as film distribution and consumption become more diffuse and personalised in the era of SVoD and on-demand access, then the genre taxonomies codified in promotional materials and other official paratexts will not necessarily be central to the audience’s understanding of a film, necessitating a more open approach to classification oriented around how particular textual or thematic properties shape individuated affectual experience.

**Syntactics: Goal-Oriented Plot and Character Development**

In addition to requesting three key words, as described above the study asked respondents to rank each film on thirteen attributes, with the pilot study providing some interesting early findings. For example, there was generally an inverse correlation between the syntactic qualities of character development and the goal orientation of the plot. These syntactic elements were the subject of two separate survey questions:

Rate how much these films focus on character development, with 1 being *not at all focused on character development* and 10 being *very focused on character development*.

Rate these films on how goal-oriented their plot is (i.e. the characters have a clearly identified aim or objective that the film's plot hinges on) with 1 being *not at all goal-focused* and 10 being *very goal-focused.*
Both questions probe the extent to which films conform to or deviate from a structure that has long been considered a key feature of popular film genres in both genre studies and scholarship on film form and style: the classical narrative paradigm (Bordwell; Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson). The classical narrative paradigm pairs the achievement of the protagonist’s goals with the staged overcoming of plot-based challenges, constructing a rewarding process of character development aligned with the overall narrative structure: these are generally ‘efficient action-centered, goal-oriented linear narratives driven by the desire of a single protagonist, involving one or two lines of action, and leading to definitive closure’ (Linda Williams 3) Gaines describes this structure as ‘protagonist-driven’, ‘valued for the way it achieves closure by neatly resolving all of the enigmas it raises as well as for the way it creates this perfect symmetry by means of ingenious aesthetic economies’ (1). As Linda Williams outlines, popular film genres are often defined in genre studies scholarship through their relationship to this classical narrative structure (2). The specific semantic environment and syntactic patterns that structure the protagonist’s pursuit of goals are obviously constellated in different ways according to the specific genre, however articulation of a genre’s specific use or retooling of the classical narrative paradigm often features as a key element of genre criticism, as in Altman’s work on melodrama (‘Film Theory Today’ 345-347) and, in more implicit ways, the musical (‘The American Film Musical’ 108-110; 206; 231), and Williams’ own classification of body genres (2-3). Generally, some variation of a goal-oriented plot focused around the protagonist has long been considered key to the broad distinctions between genre and art/avant-garde (or anti-genre) films (Bordwell; Alan Williams). The character’s pursuit of goals thus underpins the causal logic central to classical narrative structures, whereas art or avant-garde films that defy, often self-reflexively, genre conventions tend to untether the protagonist from the casual chain of goal-orientation. To quote Eleftheria Thanouli’s analysis of Bordwell’s writing on art cinema modes of narration: ‘the classical hero has specific traits and goals, while the art film protagonist is defined by the lack of traits and goals, which practically means he could be anything other than a goal-oriented person’ (np). Our survey provided the opportunity to uncover whether a clear distinction was identifiable between the ‘goal-orientation’ of genre films, and the lack of character goals in those films that deployed art cinema narrative modes to subvert the causal logic of popular genre structures.

Intriguingly, across the survey the films that scored highest on character development tended to receive low scores when it came to the extent to which the plot was goal oriented (Figure 8). For instance, Moonlight ranked the highest on character development, but was the lowest ranked film when it came to goal orientation. This suggests that respondents experienced a narrative process of character development untethered from the gradual achievement of goals, a feature that aligns with the film’s self-reflexive resistance to classical Hollywood narrative structures and its concomitant indie, art-house status. However, other films that saw this inverse relationship – receiving within the ten highest scores for character development and amongst the ten lowest scores for goal-orientation – included The Artist, Spirited Away, La La Land (Chazelle 2016), and Drive,
a diverse range of films that to varying extents do participate in well-established genre traditions and thus cannot so easily be aligned with avant-garde, art cinema modes of narration. However, it must be noted that all five films feature a self-reflexive play with generic conventions, a pronounced interplay between upholding and renovating an established genre that is a key attraction of all films: the coming-of-age drama in the case of *Moonlight*, the musical in the case of *The Artist* and *La La Land*, the vehicular action film in the case of *Drive*, and the family animation in the case of *Spirited Away*. The inverse relationship between goal-orientation and character development suggests that for the respondents, character development was not bound to the causal, goal-oriented logic thought to undergird popular genre cinema. In light of the syntactic similarities across this body of films, this cluster also suggests that the perceived centrality of character development is in part associated with these films’ revisionist examinations of established generic structures.

![Figure 8: Goal Orientation compared to Character Development across all films](image_url)

The reverse was also common, with films that ranked high on goal-orientation tending to rank low on character development. For instance, *Ghostbusters* received the lowest score for character development (4.64), but received a relatively high score for the goal-orientation of the plot (7.47), a phenomenon that could be seen across a range of diverse films including *Spotlight* (character development: 5.63, goal-orientation: 9.08—the highest score), *The Castle* (character development: 5.58, goal orientation: 8.65), *The Avengers* (character development: 5.76, goal orientation: 8.43), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (character development: 5.59, goal orientation: 8.2).
While neither of these groups can neatly be categorised as ‘art’ or ‘genre’ film groups, in some ways this divide supports well-established scholarly distinctions between art/avant-garde and genre cinema. The films in the high character development/low goal orientation group align more closely with art cinema traditions, and the films in the low development/high goal orientation group have purer, less self-reflexive generic identities. Yet the distinction is much more precise than this, suggesting some ways forward in the creation of new approaches to film categorisation. As was suggested above, the key attraction of all the films in the high character development/low goal orientation group is that they feature a self-reflexive renovation of or play with established generic templates. This might suggest that audiences perceive character development to be more complex, pronounced, or rewarding when a film playfully interacts with or pushes against well-established generic structures or devices. In addition, the divergence between character development and goal-orientation suggests that the respondents perceived character development in relation to their affectual processes of engagement with the various characters’ shifting emotional states, rather than through the narrative beats of a classical, goal-oriented plot. Thus, these two groups suggest some preliminary ways that the research team could start developing groupings of films based on the complex nexus between narrative structure, affectual patterns, and character development rather than traditional genre categories.

**Conclusion**

This pilot study reveals some key cultural practices surrounding genre in the digital age, and suggests possible ways forward in the development of new taxonomies that align with contemporary processes of film categorisation. Since the popularisation of digital distribution, the epistemic frameworks underpinning film genres have been reworked in highly visible, mainstream ways. The emergence of SVoD services has led to a concomitant rise in on-demand and personalised consumption as well as content curation, arguably making genre a much more audience-centric process. However, audiences have long been central to film genres, with these industrial shifts exposing how genre studies has traditionally ignored real world audiences. By examining the way audiences categorise film texts, our pilot study reveals some surprising cultural practices around film categorisation, as well as some that support long-entrenched scholarly and industrial understandings of genre.

As is evident in the comparable profiles of films like *The Avengers* and *Deadpool*, the survey results confirm that traditional genre categories still often shape audience understandings of film texts. However, our survey also revealed that in many ways traditional genre categories were not key drivers of respondent categorisation processes: for instance, the key terms respondents used to describe the films tended not to emphasise genre, but the emotional and sensory experience that the film offered. Finally, the responses for key syntactic properties like character development exposed groupings of films from very different genres. Again, the two clusters of films exposed by the questions
related to character development suggest the importance of affectual processes of engagement and how particular textual structures shape a film’s emotional patterns of development, rather than shared themes and genres. Thus, these initial findings suggest that the viewer’s affectual experience with a film may be central to contemporary cultural practices of film categorisation, a finding that accords with the individualised, audience-centric dynamics of contemporary film consumption and curation.

The pilot study’s findings identified a constellation of attributes upon which films might be organised and categorised, including, but not limited to, industry certified genres. These competing frameworks may be a response to the fragmentation of traditional film distribution and consumption in the digital age, or perhaps audiences have long organised and articulated their film consumption in ways that resist industry approved taxonomies. The neglect of real world audiences by genre studies scholars makes such longitudinal comparisons difficult. However, as the tentative findings of this study suggest, scholars and the industry should be attentive to the practices and perceptions of audiences if they are to effectively map the discursive process of film categorisation.

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**Notes:**

1. Notable exceptions include the work of Matt Hills (see in particular ‘The Question of Genre’) and that of a number of television studies scholars, including Mittell himself (see ‘A Cultural Approach’).

2. Complicating this assertion, Altman demonstrates later in his influential text on film genre theory that despite the notion that genre theorists adopt critical distance from their object of study – as ‘the role of the critic is to stand aside and watch the effect of institutionally produced texts on unsuspecting audiences’ (28) – critics can often play a key role in the discursive formulation and renegotiation of generic categories. For instance, he suggests that critics ‘assay groups of films, creating new cycles in support of their own interests. The redefinition and rehabilitation of the woman’s film and family melodrama provide a particularly clear example of this process’ (82). Altman also points to film noir as an example of this discursive process (92), suggesting that while ‘the individual critic may be incapable of creating or reviving a genre, ... the critical community and its readers can’ (93).

3. For instance, see Matt Hills’ exploration of the complex ways that audience discourses and practices influence cult film taxonomies, illuminating how cult status can sometimes emerge through ‘a generic contract’ and at others times through audience opposition to industry-certified categorisation (np). See also David Church’s consideration of how cult film fans and grind house movie circuits ‘complicated Hollywood’s hold on the distribution chain during the studio era’ (50) and led to formations of genre outside of mainstream studio cycles of distribution and consumption.

4. While her research is centred upon platform and catalogue analysis and does not incorporate audience research, Mareike Jenner similarly argues that Netflix ‘heavily relies on genre to structure its interface. Its generic categories are based on an already existing consensus about genre, which Netflix does not challenge’ (132). Nevertheless, Jenner suggests, Netflix organises content based on individual preferences and thus caters to ‘much smaller niches than ever before’ (133), renegotiating how these traditional genres are experienced.

5. Williams identifies *Stella* (Erman 1990) – a remake of *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937) starring Bette Midler – as an example of a ‘weepie’ (5; 9). The film was nominated for two ‘Golden Raspberry Awards’ (an awards ceremony for those films deemed to be the year’s worst). In a review of *Stella*,
Rita Kempley wrote that it marked Midler’s transition to ‘goddess of suds, sap and pap’, suggesting that the film ‘positively overflows with sophomoric sentiment... vapid remonstrances and melodramatic posturing’ and that ‘even Oprah’s audiences are far too sophisticated for this preposterous goo’ (np).

6 Significantly, critiques and interrogations of the classical narrative paradigm are also part of such work, as considerations of classical narrative structures often serve to both affirm yet also ‘circle dubiously around [this] basic paradigm that has dominated film studies since the 1970s’ (Gaines 1).

7 It must be noted that Spirited Away also reflects the looser connections between characters and narrative goals common to the syntactic processes of Japanese cinema.