

THE WALL

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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PATRICK T. SHERIDAN

DR. TIM POLLARD

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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1. Introduction

The notion of genre existing in film has always confounded me. How do you label a film under one particular genre when it is clearly evident that multiple genre labels can be used for that very film? Secondly, what are the risks of multi-genre films and do they serve to introduce moviegoers to film genres they normally wouldn't be interested in or alienate them? Also, which multi-genre films most successfully and unsuccessfully try this filmmaking approach? Furthermore, is genre something tangible or is it more abstract in nature? Lastly, I will examine my creative project *The WALL* through various lenses including its status as both a mockumentary and as a "found footage" film, discuss what worked and what didn't work during the production, and finally attempt to label this creative project under one genre.

According to Janet Staiger (1997), noted author and professor of communication at the University of Texas at Austin, in *Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History*, "Hollywood films have never been "pure" – that is easily arranged into categories. All that has been pure has been sincere attempts to find order among variety" (p. 6). Staiger goes on to state that she is not trying say that patterns do not exist in film. They do, and have so since the very beginning. She is merely trying to make the case that not all films fit as neatly into one genre or the other as some would presume.

This idea is crucial when it comes to my creative project, *The WALL*. *The WALL* is about a man – Wally Skwarzek - claiming to be a vampire hunter. He convinces an amateur documentary filmmaker to film what a day in the life of a vampire hunter is like for him, and promises to finish that day with a hunt that should result in one or more dead vampires.

Undoubtedly, the first thing that comes to mind when discussing vampires is the horror genre.

Herein lays the conundrum when attempting to label *The WALL* as a horror movie. Despite the subject matter, *The WALL* primarily comes across as a comedy. In fact, there is not a moment of violence or horror until the last five minutes of the film, and the actual vampire does not make its appearance until the final minute. In essence, *The WALL* is not about vampires at all. The main narrative of the film is driven by a need for Wally to connect with somebody, anybody, in a more profound way than just through casual social contact. Wally Skwarzek is a man who has lost his family... a man with no future and a tragic past. He reaches out to this documentary filmmaker out of depression and loneliness rather than cockiness or assuredness of his skills as a vampire hunter.

Despite these tragic elements, *The WALL* very much remains a comedy at heart. Wally is obviously aware of the pathetic nature of his life on a subconscious level, but on a conscious level he claims to be the greatest vampire hunter to ever live. He also boasts that he has bedded more women than even the most notorious of lovers; fictional or otherwise. His attitude allows for several comedic moments throughout *The WALL* as he claims to be one thing, while footage played simultaneously suggests otherwise.

Based on that description alone, I can point out at least three different genre labels that can be applied to this creative project: horror, comedy, and drama. Tragedy would also fit nicely in there as well, although it is rarely used as a genre label in film. According to Howard Barker (1997) in *Arguments for a Theatre*, "Tragedy is the greatest art form of all. It gives us the courage to continue with our life by exposing us to the pain of life" (p. 209). I believe that genre is completely subjective and many films fall under multiple genres with

the additional factor of how each audience member perceives it. One of my main goals in creating *The WALL* was to illustrate the dichotomous nature of movie genres as they are connected and yet divergent in nature.

2. *The WALL* & Other Films

There are many films that influenced the writing of *The WALL*, but one film in particular is *Shaun of the Dead*, starring Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, and directed by Edgar Wright. *Shaun of the Dead* was advertised as a rom-com-zom – a romance, comedy, and zombie film. These are the three distinct genres that *Shaun of the Dead* effortlessly shifts between throughout its running time. This is exactly what I was referring to previously; the blending of different genres in one film to create a hybrid genre. In *Shaun of the Dead*, despite the obvious genre mixing as a source of influence, I also found inspiration from the way the filmmakers elicited comedy out of the horror.

According to Roger Ebert (2004), in his review of *Shaun of the Dead*:

Shaun of the Dead, written by Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright and directed by Wright, is a send-up of zombie movies, but in an unexpected way: Instead of focusing on the Undead and trying to get the laughs there, it treats the living characters as sitcom regulars whose conflicts and arguments keep getting interrupted by annoying flesh-eaters (p. 1).

The vampires themselves are not the humorous element of *The WALL*; rather, the hilarity, along with a liberal dose of absurdity, is embodied within the vampire hunter himself. He swears constantly and is loud and ignorant. He is sometimes intentionally and often unintentionally racist and sexist. None of the humor comes from an appearance by vampires, but rather it comes from the character of Wally Skwarzek.

Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez are filmmakers that know a thing or two about genre mashing. From Tarantino's revenge/kung fu infused *Kill Bill* to Rodriguez's half horror, half absurdist comedy lo-fi masterpiece, *Planet Terror*, both filmmakers have

shown a penchant for taking two unrelated genres and melding them together to create fresh, exciting, and unique films.

Arguably their crowning achievement in multi-genre filmmaking is the horror/hostage/comedy extravaganza *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Directed by Rodriguez and with a screenplay written by Tarantino, *From Dusk Till Dawn* is a tour de force of the amalgamation of different genres. According to Roger Ebert (1996), “*From Dusk Till Dawn* resembles one of those mythological creatures stitched together out of two different species, like a bull with a man’s torso. In this case, we get half of a hostage movie, and half of a vampire gore-fest” (p. 1).

Ebert goes on to state that while Rodriguez is adept at creating such a multi-genre smorgasbord, that it is obvious that Tarantino is truly the master of this art. He also states that your average moviegoer will either love or hate the film, but expands upon that comment by analyzing how Tarantino crafted the script. “Actually, a lot of people will hate half of the movie and like other half” (p. 1). Ebert describes how the first half of the film is very much in the vein of *Pulp Fiction* with smart, snappy dialogue and quirky touches, while the last 60 minutes of the film turns into a bloody massacre with vampires and humans being killed in various creative ways (p 1).

While Ebert claims to enjoy the film as a whole, he does state that he would have preferred the film to resolve its conflicts with brains rather than brawn. This problem that he faced while watching *From Dusk Till Dawn* is one of the key components of this analysis. One of the risks of creating a multi-genre film is the possible alienation of certain moviegoers. In the case of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, fans of Tarantino may expect an entire film of quick, witty banter with sporadic amounts of violence occasionally thrown in which

is exactly what they get for the first half of the film. As Ebert discusses, however, the film abandons most of the banter for bloodshed near the end (p. 1). This drastic difference in tone would undoubtedly turn some viewers off and ruin the film for them.

Conversely, the very reasons a film like *From Dusk Till Dawn* would alienate some moviegoers is the exact same reason it would enthrall others. Fans of dark comedy mixed with even darker violence would enjoy *From Dusk Till Dawn* immensely from start to finish. While Ebert doesn't hold the second half of *From Dusk Till Dawn* in as high regard as the first half because of what he alludes to as a de-evolution in storytelling, it must be stated that while yes, the quips do come less frequently near the end of the film, the characterization of each character is not completely abandoned in favor of mindless violence. The characters' motivations are still the same and are consistent with the first half of the film and there are still many comedic moments in the midst of beheading vampires and trying to stay alive. This model of examining multi-genre films, especially the ones with such stark contrasts in tone from beginning to end, can be applied to not only *From Dusk Till Dawn*, but any film featuring multiple genres.

There are countless films that utilize the multi-genre approach, but the ratio from good to bad films usually weighs in favor of the latter. For every *From Dusk Till Dawn* or *KICK-ASS* there is a *Blue Streak*, *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death*, or any Uwe Boll film. *KICK-ASS* balances action, drama, and comedy effortlessly, particularly when it comes to leading man Aaron Johnson.

According to Chris Bumbray (2010), in his review of *KICK-ASS*:

He's funny as the impossibly geeky hero, but what's great about Johnson is that he's also able to pull off some of the more dramatic scenes after this takes

a dark turn during the final act. Now, some people may complain that the tone of the film is inconsistent, but it worked for me, as there is a certain point when the film starts to take itself somewhat seriously, but thanks to the skill both in front and behind the camera, the transition is seamless (p. 1).

When writing and filming *The WALL*, I strove to accomplish exactly what *KICK-ASS* managed to achieve; a good balance of comedy and drama that is embodied by the main protagonist. For every ridiculous or crude comment uttered by Wally Skwarzek, there was also a touching moment where he was able to lower his defenses, or his “wall”, and give the viewers a little more understanding into his pathos and why he behaves the way he does. Admittedly, Wally *does* often favor rude remarks over sentimentalism, but still, the balance is there. However, due to budgetary restraints and not having a professional actor to portray Wally Skwarzek, I feel this aspect of *The WALL* could have been done better if given more time to produce this project.

In stark contrast to the superiorly crafted *KICK-ASS* we have one of the worst examples of a multi-genre film in Uwe Boll’s *Postal*. This is a film that tries to mine the tragedy on September 11, 2001 for comedy and fails miserably. Film critic Chris Carle (2008) most succinctly summarizes everything that is wrong with this film in his review:

The sequence begins with two Arab terrorists in the cockpit of one of the planes headed to the Twin Towers. They are arguing about the number of virgins they are going to get once they ascend to heaven or their sacrificial act... The moment is pure black comedy, and works once you get over the horror of the joke. But the second the plan collides with one of the towers, it ceases to be funny, much like the dark humor of the French film *Man*

Bites Dog turns on the audience midway through. In that film, the shift in tone is designed to make you think about what you've been laughing at. In Boll's film, there is no shift in tone, there is [sic] shift in audience perception, which is a problem that plagues the movie (p. 1).

Postal is supposed to be a satire about the American way of living, but Boll is never fully able to establish this and it comes across as a mean spirited film with no substance. There is a long list of films that aimed to utilize the multiple genre approach to filmmaking that failed miserably, but *Postal* is certainly near the top of that list.

3. Genre & its Effects in Film

It can be argued that genre existing in film is a necessity. Some moviegoers like to know which movie to see based on their own personal preference. According to Daniel Chandler (1997), a British visual semiotician at the department of Theatre, Film [sic] and Television Studies at Aberystwyth University in his document *An Introduction to Genre Theory*, “Genre provides an important frame of reference which helps readers to identify, select [sic] and interpret texts” (p. 7). While the medium he chooses to discuss here is text, it can be argued that the exact same analytic approach can be done for film as well.

But is genre something tangible that we can look at objectively? Or is it more abstract, subjective, and possibly even damaging to creativity, only really benefitting those that wish to pigeonhole certain films underneath a blanket definition? Chandler goes on to state that the problem with genre theory begins with definition:

The classification and hierarchical taxonomy of genres is not a neutral and ‘objective’ procedure. There are no undisputed ‘maps’ of the system of genres within any medium (though literature may perhaps lay some claim to a loose consensus). Furthermore, there is often considerable theoretical disagreement about the definition of specific genres. ‘A genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world,’ notes Jane Feuer (1992, 144). One theorist’s *genre* may be another’s *sub-genre* or even *super-genre* (and indeed what is *technique, style, mode, formula* or *thematic grouping* to one may be treated as a *genre* by another) (p. 1).

While Chandler obviously has his qualms with genre labeling by theorists, he states that even if the professionals abandoned the notion of genre altogether, people would still classify what they read and watch by genre:

How we define a genre depends on our purposes; the adequacy of our definition in terms of social science at least must surely be related to the light that exploration sheds on the phenomenon. For instance (and this is a key concern of mine), if we are studying the way in which genre frames the reader's interpretation of a text then we would do well to focus on how readers identify genres rather than on theoretical distinctions. Defining genres may be problematic, but even if theorists were to abandon the concept, in everyday life people would continue to categorize texts (p. 3).

Can genre be a hindrance to creativity? Chandler believes so, but admits that he is in the minority when it comes to this idea. "From the traditional Romantic perspective, genres are seen as constraining and inhibiting authorial creativity. However, contemporary theorists, even with literary studies, typically reject this view" (p. 6).

While Chandler's own opinions on genre obviously tend to skew to the negative side of the spectrum, he admits that genre analysis does reap some benefits.

"In addition to counteracting any tendency to treat individual texts in isolation from others, an emphasis on genre can also help to counteract the homogenization of the *medium* which is widespread in relation to the mass media, where it is common, for instance, to find assertions about the 'effects of television' regardless of such important considerations as genre" (p. 10).

This aspect of genre analysis is extremely important when dealing with blanket statements that try to label all of television or all of film as having harmful effects on the populace. In this instance, genre analysis serves as a buffer to protect certain films from such simplifications.

Chandler (1997) states that while his own personal opinion on genre is still vague, many theorists are in agreement that genre also helps to create an understanding between the creators of the work and the readers or viewers consuming the product. “From the point of view of the producers of texts within a genre, an advantage of genres is that they can rely on readers already having knowledge and expectations about works within a genre” (p. 6). My own personal views on this skew slightly different than the theorists Chandler discusses in his texts. Using that very same argument which seeks to establish the positive effects of consumers having preconceived notions about a product going into it based on their knowledge of genre, can't the argument be made that because of these preconceived notions, that consumers will tend to view and read only that which they are comfortable with? Won't they conceivably miss out on many new and different experiences if they only see and read what they think they know and enjoy? I believe so, and this is one of the aspects of genre labeling that I find problematic.

The topic of genre was first and foremost in my mind when crafting the script for *The WALL*. I created the character of Wally Skwarzek over a decade ago and while initially he was just a vampire hunter, soon he evolved into a family man that had to balance his normal life with vampire hunting. This dichotomous relationship between his two identities is what really separated this character from the countless other vampire hunters that exist in popular media.

4. Genre Technique when applied to *The WALL*

With a character that is half family man, half vampire hunter, naturally the topic of genre came into play. Initial incarnations of *The WALL* had almost every genre in existence applied to it. From the drama of Wally dealing with his family, to the horror of vampires feeding on innocent people, to the comedy in Wally's one-liners, to the action of several vampires at once attacking a vampire hunter, *The WALL* had a little bit of something for everyone.

For the purposes of the creative project, I made several changes to the Wally Skwarzek character for various reasons. First, I removed almost all action and horror elements from the original script. Since this creative project is a low budget film, although I like to refer to it as a no budget film, staging any elaborate fight scenes or vampire attacks would have proved especially difficult. Another reason this decision was made was to allow a deeper exploration of the character, Wally Skwarzek.

Within Wally's actions and comments in *The WALL*, there are at least three different genres at work. From the quick cut editing that provides Wally's ridiculous comments with a dose of humor, to the drama in his random admission of guilt over what his life has become, to the tragedy of his realization that his family, and wife in particular, has moved on and he has lost them forever, *The WALL* is chock-full of different genres at work – sometimes all three at the same time. The 'action', while visibly absent except for the ending of the film, is driven by Wally's dialogue. You know that this is a man struggling with his demons, and his often change of demeanor, sometimes at the drop of a hat, serve to propel the action forward to its climax.

5. Found Footage & Editing Techniques

While there are many different genres at work in *The WALL*, there was also a decision to not only explore multiple genres, but to also explore different avenues of filmmaking as well. *The WALL* is a mockumentary, which serves to not only lampoon a certain genre of film and aspects of popular culture, but also to poke fun at the documentary format of filmmaking itself. *The WALL* is also a “found footage” film. The “found footage” film is thought to have been originated by experimental filmmaker Joseph Cornell in his 1936, 19-minute short film, *Rose Hobart* (<http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/139471>). This film was mixed with footage from Cornell’s film *East of Borneo* and several of his other films.

One of the newer “found footage” films that expertly utilizes this format is the J.J. Abrams produced *Cloverfield*. Roger Ebert (2008) describes *Cloverfield* as “an effective film, deploying its special effects well and never breaking the illusion that it is all happening as we see it” (p. 1). He commends the “found footage” approach to filmmaking, as well as the handheld camera that he dubs Queasy-Cam that really works to provide the feeling that a giant monster has really attacked New York.

Cloverfield’s “found footage” approach to filmmaking is commended by critic Joshua Starnes (2008) for adding to the feeling of dread that the audience feels throughout *Cloverfield’s* lean, 86 minute running time. “*Cloverfield*, the new thriller from mastermind J.J. Abrams (*Lost*) uses its style to focus clearly on its characters and the terrifying reality of being trapped in a horrible situation, producing a superior thriller that, despite running about ten minutes too long, is genuinely entertaining” (p. 1). While there is no real aspect of horror found in *The WALL*, I did try to make the audience feel like they were on this journey with not so much Wally, but the documentary filmmaker, James. Wally is meant to be a loud

mouthed braggart who is in such denial over his current state of affairs that the audience, just like James does in the film is supposed to just shake their heads at this man and go through all the same emotions that James does throughout *The WALL*; disgust, anger, horror, and even a bit of empathy as the reasons for why he acts this way come to light.

There are several different editing techniques that *Cloverfield* and other films of its type use to get across the “found footage” feel. When writing, filming, and especially editing *The WALL*, I attempted to utilize and enact several of these techniques myself, with varying degrees of success. There are several times during *Cloverfield* that footage filmed to look like it was recorded at a previous date randomly pops up when characters either fast forward or rewind footage of the events taking place during the scenes where the creature attacks. I took that approach and put a bit of a spin on it. Since at the end of my film the camera is presumably left by the dumpster for an undisclosed amount of time, anything could have happened to it to cause massive amounts of damage to the footage gathered during the making of the “documentary”.

So with that in mind, I proceeded to edit out random clips from different points in the movie and insert them into scenes where they obviously don’t belong. For instance, in the beginning of the film, a three second clip of Wally talking to the camera plays, disrupting the opening credit sequence. This creates a random, but efficient bit of comedy that lets the audience know what they are in for; a “documentary” following a man claiming to be a vampire hunter that has somehow been severely damaged in the process of filming. By the end of the film, the audience is able to extrapolate the reason for the damaged quality of the footage by what they are shown on screen.

Another technique used in *Cloverfield* to authenticate the “found footage” aspect of the film are the random jump cuts inserted throughout its running time, which gives it a disjointed, unedited feeling. This is where it gets complicated. While the presentation of *Cloverfield* and *The Wall* suggests that little to no editing was done whatsoever, both films are in direct contrast with the concept of continuity editing. However, the core concepts of continuity editing *also* fit into what both my film and *Cloverfield* were trying to accomplish. By that I mean while both films appear unedited, they are not as seamless as the definition of continuity editing dictates. According to Todd Berliner and Dale J. Cohen (2011), in their article in *Journal of Film & Video*, continuity editing is “a system of editing devices that establish a continuous presentation of space and time. For instance, in a classically edited movie, a character moving from left to right in one shot will, for purposes of continuity, likely be shown moving left to right in an [sic] immediately subsequent shot” (p. 45).

Films featuring continuity editing are usually major motion pictures that feature a very linear way of storytelling. And while films like *The WALL* and *Cloverfield* do tell a story in a linear fashion, they also feature seemingly random clips inserted in places they shouldn't be and jump cuts that cut off the characters in mid-sentence and switch to a completely different scene. It is in this way that most “found footage” films contain the continuity editing technique while also at the same time completely turning the concept on its head. This leads me to suggest that films featuring this kind of non-continuity editing should bring cause for the existence of a hybrid form of continuity editing.

How successful *The WALL* is at suspending disbelief in viewers in terms of coming across as a piece of mostly unedited film depends on each individual who views it and how closely they look. While I believe that this creative project was able to adequately come

across as a “found footage” film, I am not going to suggest that it is at the level of a film like *Cloverfield*. Films like *Cloverfield* and others like it such as *The Blair Witch Project*, *Rec*, or *Open Water* have much larger budgets, casts, and crew and are able to pull off the “found footage” approach more believably. A great deal of the credibility of *The WALL* lays with the concept of the footage becoming so severely damaged that the audience has to believe that the jump cuts and problems with the footage they are seeing as they watch the film all happened naturally. To further get this concept across, I also used several video filters to further suggest the severity of the damage and to give the film a lo-fi look which lends even more credibility to *The WALL* as a “found footage” film.

6. Conclusion

The WALL falls under many different genres, so choosing one to label it proved to be quite a difficult task. From the comedy, drama, and tragedy found in Wally's behavior to the inherent horror that vampires bring to film, *The WALL* seeks to be the epitome of what a multi-genre film can be. However, if one genre were to be deemed the "main" or "core" genre, comedy would definitely be found to be more prominent throughout the film. This is especially true when taking into account the recent edits done to trim the running length down from 45 minutes to approximately 20 minutes.

These new edits serve to bring a faster paced, more random feeling to the footage and have created brand new comedic bits from previous footage that may have been intended to compel the audience to either feel disgust or bewilderment at what they are viewing. Based on everything researched for and discussed in this analysis, I am hesitant to officially label *The WALL* under one genre. However, if I were to choose one and was not provided the luxury of choosing multiple genres, comedy would undoubtedly be the main genre utilized in *The WALL*.

This idea of genre is at times both a necessity and a hindrance to not only film but other mediums that promote creativity as well. This analysis doesn't suggest that the idea of genre labeling should be abandoned altogether, however, and hopefully in the future the lines between genre will continue to blur until more film theorists at least consider adopting the approach suggested in these pages.

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