

An introduction to genre theory essay sample



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An Introduction to Genre Theory

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1. The problem of definition

A number of perennial doubts plague genre theory. Are genres really ‘out there’ in the world, or are they merely the constructions of analysts? Is there a

finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite? Are genres timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are genres culturebound or transcultural?... Should genre analysis be descriptive or proscriptive? (Stam 2000, 14)

The word genre comes from the French (and originally Latin) word for ‘kind’ or ‘class’. The term is widely used in rhetoric, literary theory, media theory, and more recently linguistics, to refer to a distinctive type of ‘text’*.

Robert Allen notes that ‘for most of its 2,000 years, genre study has been primarily nominological and typological in function. That is to say, it has taken as its principal task the division of the world of literature into types and the naming of those types – much as the botanist divides the realm of flora into varieties of plants’ (Allen 1989, 44). As

will be seen, however, the analogy with biological classification into genus and species misleadingly suggests a ‘scientific’ process. Since classical times literary works have been classified as belonging to general types which were

variously defined. In literature the broadest division is between poetry, prose and drama, within which there are further divisions, such as tragedy and comedy within the category of drama. Shakespeare referred satirically to classifications such as ‘tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical,

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historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comicalhistorical-pastoral...'

(Hamlet II ii). In *The Anatomy of Criticism* the formalist literary theorist

Northrop Frye (1957) presented certain universal genres and modes as the key to organizing the entire literary corpus.

Contemporary media genres tend to relate more to specific forms than to the universals of tragedy and

comedy. Nowadays, films are routinely classified (e. g. in television listings magazines) as ' thrillers', ' westerns' and so on – genres with which every

adult in modern society is familiar. So too with television genres such as ' game shows' and ' sitcoms'. Whilst we have names for countless genres in

many media, some theorists have argued that there are also many

genres (and sub-genres) for which we have no names (Fowler 1989, 216;

Wales 1989, 206). Carolyn Miller

suggests that ' the number of genres in any society... depends on the

complexity and diversity of society' (Miller 1984, in Freedman & Medway

1994a, 36). 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). Themes, at least,

seem inadequate as a basis for defining genres since, as David Bordwell

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notes, 'any theme may appear in any genre' (Bordwell 1989, 147). He asks: 'Are animation and documentary films genres or modes? Is the filmed play or comedy performance a genre? If tragedy and comedy are genres, perhaps then domestic tragedy or slapstick is a formula'. In passing, he offers a useful inventory of categories used in film criticism, many of which have been accorded the status of genres by various commentators:

Grouping by period or country (American films of the 1930s), by director or star or producer or writer or studio, by technical process (Cinemascope films), by cycle (the 'fallen women' films), by series (the 007 movies), by style (German Expressionism), by structure (narrative), by ideology (Reaganite cinema), by venue ('drive-in movies'), by purpose (home movies), by audience ('teenpix'), by subject or theme (family film, paranoid-politics movies). (Bordwell 1989, 148) Another film theorist, Robert Stam, also refers to common ways of categorizing films: While some genres are based on story content (the war film), other are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), locat[ion] (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). (Stam 2000, 14).

Bordwell concludes that 'one could... argue that no set of necessary and sufficient conditions can mark off genres from other sorts of groupings in ways that all experts or ordinary film-goers would find "An Introduction to Genre Theory acceptable' (Bordwell 1989, 147). Practitioners and the general public make use of their own genre labels (de facto genres) quite apart from those of academic theorists. We might therefore ask ourselves '

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Whose genre is it anyway?' Still further problems with definitional approaches will become apparent in due course.

Defining genres may not initially seem particularly problematic but it should already be apparent that it is a theoretical minefield. Robert Stam identifies four key problems with generic labels (in relation to film): extension (the breadth or narrowness of labels); normativism (having preconceived ideas of criteria for genre membership); monolithic definitions (as if an item belonged to only one genre); biologism (a kind of essentialism in which genres are seen as evolving through a standardized life cycle) (Stam 2000, 128129).

Conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them. Alternative characterizations will be discussed in due course. The attempt to define particular genres in terms of necessary and sufficient textual properties is sometimes seen as theoretically attractive but it poses many difficulties. For instance, in the case of films, some seem to be aligned with one genre in content and another genre in form. The film theorist Robert Stam argues that 'subject matter is the weakest criterion for generic grouping because it fails to take into account how the subject is treated' (Stam 2000, 14). Outlining a fundamental problem of genre identification in relation to films, Andrew Tudor notes the 'empiricist dilemma': To take a genre such as the 'western', analyze it, and list its principal characteristics, is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films which are 'westerns'. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the 'principal characteristics' which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. (Cited in

Gledhill 1985, 59)

It is seldom hard to find texts which are exceptions to any given definition of a particular genre. There are no 'rigid rules of inclusion and exclusion' (Gledhill 1985, 60). 'Genres... are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of listable items' (ibid., 64). It is difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between one genre and another: genres overlap, and there are 'mixed genres' (such as comedy-thrillers).

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Specific genres tend to be easy to recognize intuitively but difficult (if not impossible) to define. Particular features which are characteristic of a genre are not normally unique to it; it is their relative prominence, combination and functions which are distinctive (Neale 1980, 22-3). It is easy to underplay the differences within a genre. Steve Neale declares that 'genres are instances of repetition and difference' (Neale 1980, 48). He adds that 'difference is absolutely essential to the economy of genre' (ibid., 50): mere repetition would not attract an audience. Tzvetan Todorov argued that 'any instance of a genre will be necessarily different' (cited in Gledhill 1985, 60).

John Hartley notes that 'the addition of just one film to the Western genre... changes that genre as a whole - even though the Western in question may display few of the recognized conventions, styles or subject matters traditionally associated with its genre' (O'Sullivan et al. 1994). The issue of difference also highlights the fact that some genres are 'looser' more open-ended in their conventions or more permeable in their boundaries - than others. Texts often exhibit the conventions of more than one genre.

John Hartley notes that 'the same text can belong to different genres in different countries or times' (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 129). Hybrid genres abound (at least outside theoretical frameworks). Van Leeuwen suggests that the multiple purposes of journalism often lead to generically heterogeneous texts (cited in Fairclough 1995, 88). Norman Fairclough suggests that mixed-genre texts are far from uncommon in the mass media (Fairclough 1995, 89). Some media may encourage more generic diversity: Nicholas Abercrombie notes that since 'television comes at the audience as a flow of programmes, all with different generic conventions, means that it is more difficult to sustain the purity of the genre in the viewing experience' (Abercrombie 1996, 45; his emphasis). Furthermore, in any medium the generic classification of certain texts may be uncertain or subject to dispute.

Contemporary theorists tend to describe genres in terms of 'family resemblances' among texts (a notion derived from the philosopher Wittgenstein) rather than definitionally (Swales 1990, 49). An individual text within a genre rarely if ever has all of the characteristic features of the genre (Fowler 1989, 215). The family resemblance approach involves the theorist illustrating similarities between some of the texts within a genre. However, the family resemblance approach has been criticized on the basis that 'no choice of a text for illustrative purposes is innocent' (David Lodge, cited in Swales 1990, 50), and that such theories can make any text seem to resemble any other one (Swales 1990, 51). In addition to the definitional and family resemblance approach, there is "An Introduction to Genre Theory another approach to describing genres which is based on the psycholinguistic concept of prototypicality. According to this approach, some

texts would be widely regarded as being more typical members of a genre than others. According to this approach certain features would 'identify the extent to which an exemplar is prototypical of a particular genre' (Swales 1990, 52). Genres can therefore be seen as 'fuzzy' categories which cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient conditions.

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 the 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. John Swales does note that 'a discourse community's nomenclature for genres is an important source of insight' (Swales 1990, 54), though like many academic theorists he later adds that such genre names 'typically need further validation' (ibid., 58).

Some genre names would be likely to be more widely-used than others: it would be interesting to investigate the areas of popular consensus and dissensus in relation to the everyday labeling of mass media genres. For Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, 'genres only exist in so far as a social group declares and enforces the rules that constitute them' (Hodge & Kress 1988, 7), though it is debatable to what extent most of us would be able to formulate explicit 'rules' for the textual genres we use routinely: much of our genre knowledge is likely to be tacit. In relation to film, Andrew Tudor argued that genre is 'what we collectively believe it to be' (though this begs

the question about who ' we' are).

Robert Allen comments wryly that ' Tudor even hints that in order to establish what audiences expect a western to be like we might have to ask them' (Allen 1989, 47). Swales also alludes to people having ' repertoires of genres' (Swales 1990, 58), which I would argue would also be likely to repay investigation.

However, as David Buckingham notes, ' there has hardly been any empirical research on the ways in which real audiences might understand genre, or use this understanding in making sense of specific texts' (Buckingham 1993, 137).

Steve Neale stresses that ' genres are not systems: they are processes of systematization' (Neale 1980, 51; my emphasis; cf. Neale 1995, 463).

Traditionally, genres (particularly literary genres) tended to be regarded as fixed forms, but contemporary theory emphasizes that both their forms and functions are dynamic.

David Buckingham argues that ' genre is not simply " given" by the culture: rather, it is in a constant process of negotiation and change' (Buckingham 1993, 137). Nicholas Abercrombie suggests that ' the boundaries between genres are shifting and becoming more permeable' (Abercrombie 1996, 45); Abercrombie is concerned with modern television, which he suggests seems to be engaged in ' a steady dismantling of genre' (ibid.) which can be attributed in part to economic pressures to pursue new audiences. One may acknowledge the dynamic fluidity of genres without positing the final demise of genre as an interpretive framework. As the generic corpus ceaselessly expands, genres (and the relationships between them) change over time; the conventions of each genre shift, new genres and sub-genres emerge and

others are 'discontinued' (though note that certain genres seem particularly long-lasting). Tzvetan Todorov argued that 'a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres' (cited in Swales 1990, 36). Each new work within a genre has the potential to influence changes within the genre or perhaps the emergence of new sub-genres (which may later blossom into fully-fledged genres). However, such a perspective tends to highlight the role of authorial experimentation in changing genres and their conventions, whereas it is important to recognize not only the social nature of text production but especially the role of economic and technological factors as well as changing audience preferences.

The interaction between genres and media can be seen as one of the forces which contributes to changing genres. Some genres are more powerful than others they differ in the status which is attributed to them by those who produce texts within them and by their audiences. As Tony Thwaites et al. put it, 'in the interaction and conflicts among genres we can see the connections between textuality and power' (Thwaites et al. 1994, 104). The key genres in institutions which are 'primary definers' (such as news reports in the mass media) help to establish the frameworks within which issues are defined. But genre hierarchies also shift over time, with individual genres constantly gaining and losing different groups of users and relative status. Idealist theoretical approaches to genre which seek to categorize 'ideal types' in terms of essential textual characteristics are ahistorical. As a result of their dynamic nature as processes, Neale argues that definitions of genre 'are always historically relative, and therefore historically specific' (Neale 1995, 464). Similarly, Boris Tomashevsky insists that 'no firm logical

classification of genres is possible. Their de-
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marcation is always historical, that is to say, it is correct only for a specific moment of history' (cited in Bordwell 1989, 147). Some genres are defined only retrospectively, being unrecognized as such by the original producers and audiences. Genres need to be studied as historical phenomena; a popular focus in film studies, for instance, has been the evolution of conventions within a genre. Current genres go through phases or cycles of popularity (such as the cycle of disaster films in the 1970s), sometimes becoming 'dormant' for a period rather than disappearing. On-going genres and their conventions themselves change over time. Reviewing 'evolutionary change' in some popular film genres, Andrew Tudor concludes that it has three main characteristics: First, in that innovations are added to an existent corpus rather than replacing redundant elements, it is cumulative. Second, in that these innovations must be basically consistent with what is already present, it is 'conservative'. Third, in that these processes lead to the crystallization of specialist sub-genres, it involves differentiation. (Tudor 1974, 225-6) Tudor himself is cautious about adopting the biological analogy of evolution, with its implication that only those genres which are well-adapted to their functions survive. Christine Gledhill also notes the danger of essentialism in selecting definitive 'classic' examples towards which earlier examples 'evolve' and after which others 'decline' (Gledhill 1985, 59).

The cycles and transformations of genres can nevertheless be seen as a response to political, social and economic conditions. Referring to film, Andrew Tudor notes that 'a genre... defines a moral and social world' (Tudor

1974, 180). Indeed, a genre in any medium can be seen as embodying certain values and ideological assumptions. Again in the context of the cinema Susan Hayward argues that genre conventions change 'according to the ideological climate of the time', contrasting John Wayne westerns with Clint Eastwood as the problematic hero or anti-hero (Hayward 1996, 50). Leo Baudry (cited in Hayward 1996, 162) sees film genres as a barometer of the social and cultural concerns of cinema audiences; Robert Lichter et al. (1991) illustrate how televisual genres reflect the values of the programme-makers. Some commentators see mass media genres from a particular era as reflecting values which were dominant at the time. Ira Konigsberg, for instance, suggests that texts within genres embody the moral values of a culture

(Konigsberg 1987, 144-5). And John Fiske asserts that generic conventions 'embody the crucial ideological concerns of the time in which they are popular' 4 (Fiske 1987, 110). However, Steve Neale stresses that genres may also help to shape such values (Neale 1980, 16). Thwaites et al. see the relationship as reciprocal: 'a genre develops according to social conditions; transformations in genre and texts can influence and reinforce social conditions' (Thwaites et al. 1994, 100). Some Marxist commentators see genre as an instrument of social control which reproduces the dominant ideology. Within this perspective, the genre 'positions' the audience in order to naturalize the ideologies which are embedded in the text (Feuer 1992, 145). Bernadette Casey comments that 'recently, structuralists and feminist theorists, among others, have focused on the way in which generically defined structures may operate to construct particular ideologies and values, and to encourage reassuring and conservative interpretations of

a given text' (Casey 193, 312). However, reader-oriented commentators have stressed that people are capable of 'reading against the grain'. Thomas and Vivian Sobchack note that in the past popular film-makers, 'intent on telling a story', were not always aware of 'the covert psychological and social... subtext' of their own films, but add that modern film-makers and their audiences are now 'more keenly aware of the myth-making accomplished by film genres' (Sobchack & Sobchack 1980, 245). Genre can reflect a function which in relation to television Horace Newcombe and Paul Hirsch referred to as a 'cultural forum', in which industry and audience negotiate shared beliefs and values, helping to maintain the social order and assisting it in adapting to change (Feuer 1992, 145). Certainly, genres are far from being ideologically neutral. Sonia Livingstone argues, indeed, that 'different genres are concerned to establish different world views' (Livingstone 1990, 155).

Related to the ideological dimension of genres is one modern redefinition in terms of purposes. In relation to writing, Carolyn Miller argues that 'a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish' (Carolyn Miller 1984, in Freedman & Medway 1994a, 24). Following this lead, John Swales declares that 'the principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes' (Swales 1990, 46). In relation to the mass media it can be fruitful to consider in relation to genre the purposes not only of the producers of text but also of those who interpret them (which need not be assumed always to match). A consensus about the primary purposes of some genres (such as news bulletins) - and of their readers - is probably easier

to establish than in relation to others (such as westerns), where the very term 'purpose' sounds too instrumental. However, 'uses and gratifications' researchers have already conducted investigations into the various functions that the mass media seem to serve for people, and ethnographic studies have offered fruitful insights into this dimension. Miller argues that both in writing and reading within genres we learn purposes appropriate to the genre; in relation to the mass media it could be argued that particular genres develop, frame and legitimate particular concerns, questions and pleasures. Related redefinitions of genre focus more broadly on the relationship between the makers and audiences of texts (a rhetorical dimension). To varying extents, the formal features of genres establish the relationship between producers and interpreters. Indeed, in relation to mass media texts Andrew Tolson redefines genre as 'a category which mediates between industry and audience' (Tolson 1996, 92). Note that such approaches undermine the definition of genres as purely textual types, which excludes any reference even to intended audiences. A basic model underlying contemporary media theory is a triangular relationship between the text, its producers and its interpreters. From the perspective of many recent commentators, genres first and foremost provide frameworks within which texts are produced and interpreted. Semiotically, a genre can be seen as a shared code between the producers and interpreters of texts included within it. Alastair Fowler goes so

far as to suggest that 'communication is impossible without the agreed codes of genre' (Fowler 1989, 216). Within genres, texts embody authorial attempts to 'position' readers using particular 'modes of address'. Gunther Kress observes that: Every genre positions those who participate in a text of that kind: as interviewer or interviewee, as listener or storyteller, as a reader or a writer, as a person interested in political matters, as someone to be instructed or as someone who instructs; each of these positionings implies different possibilities for response and for action. Each written text provides a 'reading position' for readers, a position constructed by the writer for the 'ideal reader' of the text. (Kress 1988, 107)

Thus, embedded within texts are assumptions about the 'ideal reader', including their attitudes towards the subject matter and often their class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Gunther Kress defines a genre as 'a kind of text that derives its form from the structure of a (frequently repeated) social occasion, with its characteristic participants and their purposes' (Kress 1988, 183). An interpretative emphasis on genre as opposed

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to individual texts can help to remind us of the social nature of the production and interpretation of texts.

In relation to film, many modern commentators refer to the commercial and industrial significance of genres. Denis McQuail

argues that: The genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers. Since it is also a practical device for enabling individual media users to plan their choices, it can be considered as a mechanism for ordering the relations between the two main parties to mass communication.

(McQuail 1987, 200)

Steve Neale observes that 'genres... exist within the context of a set of economic relations and practices', though he adds that 'genres are not the product of economic factors as such. The conditions provided by the capitalist economy account neither for the existence of the particular genres that have hitherto been produced, nor for the existence of the conventions that constitute them' (Neale 1980, 51-2). Economic factors may account for the perpetuation

of a profitable genre. Nicholas Abercrombie notes that 'television producers set out to exploit genre conventions... It... makes sound economic sense. Sets, properties and costumes can be used over and over again. Teams of stars, writers, directors and technicians can be built up, giving economies of scale' (Abercrombie 1996, 43). He adds that 'genres permit

the creation and maintenance of a loyal audience which becomes used to seeing programmes within a genre' (ibid.). Genres can be seen as 'a means of controlling demand'

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(Neale 1980, 55). The relative stability of genres enables producers to predict audience expectations. Christine Gledhill notes that 'differences between genres meant different audiences could be identified and catered to... This made it easier to standardize and stabilise production' (Gledhill 1985, 58). In relation to the mass media, genre is part

of the process of targeting different market sectors.

Traditionally, literary and film critics in particular have regarded 'generic' texts (by which they mean 'formulaic' texts) as inferior to those which they contend are produced outside a generic framework. Indeed, film theorists frequently refer to popular films as 'genre films' in contrast to 'non-formula films'.

Elitist critics reject the 'generic fiction' of the mass media because they are commercial products of popular culture rather than 'high art'. Many harbor the Romantic ideology of the primacy of authorial 'originality' and 'vision', emphasizing individual style and artistic 'self-expression'. In this tradition the

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artist (in any medium) is seen as breaking the mould of convention. For the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), an artistic work was always unique and there could be no artistic genres. More recently, some literary and film theorists have accorded more importance to genre, counteracting the ideology of authorial primacy (or 'auteurism', as it

is

known in relation to the emphasis on the director in film).

Contemporary theorists tend to emphasize the importance of the semiotic notion of intertextuality: of seeing individual texts in relation to others. Katie Wales notes that 'genre is... an intertextual concept' (Wales 1989, 259). John Hartley suggests that 'we need to understand genre as a property of the relations between texts' (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 128). And as Tony Thwaites et al. put it, 'each text is influenced by the generic rules in the way it is put together; the generic rules are reinforced by each text' (Thwaites et al. 1994, 100).

Roland Barthes (1975) argued that it is in relation to other texts within a genre rather than in relation to lived experience that we make sense of certain events within a text. There are analogies here with schema theory in psychology, which proposes that we have mental 'scripts' which help us to interpret

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familiar events in everyday life. John Fiske offers this striking example:

A representation of a car chase only makes sense in relation to all the others we have seen

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- after all, we are unlikely to have experienced one in reality, and if we did, we would, according to this model, make sense of it by turning it into another text, which we would also understand intertextually, in terms of what we have seen so often on our screens.

There is then a cultural knowledge of the concept 'car chase' that any one text is a prospectus for, and that it used by the viewer to decode it, and by the producer to encode it. (Fiske 1987, 115)

In contrast to those of a traditionalist literary bent who tend to present 'artistic' texts as nongeneric, it could be argued that it is impossible to produce texts which bear no relationship whatsoever to established genres. Indeed, Jacques Derrida proposed that 'a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without... a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text'

(Derrida 1981, 61).

Note

*In these notes, words such as text, reader and writer are sometimes used as general terms relating to 'texts' (and so on) in whatever medium is being discussed: no privileging of the written word (graphocentrism) is intended. Whilst it is hard to find an alternative for the word texts, terms such as makers and interpreters are sometimes used here as terms non-specific to particular media instead of the terms writers and readers.

2. Working within genres

John Hartley argues that 'genres are agents of

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ideological closure – they limit the meaning-potential of a given text’ (O’Sullivan et al. 1994, 128). Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress define genres as ‘ typical forms of texts which link kinds of producer, consumer, topic, medium, manner and occasion’, adding that they ‘ control the behavior of producers of such texts, and the expectations of potential consumers’ (Hodge & Kress 1988, 7). Genres can be seen as constituting a kind of tacit contract between authors and readers.

From the traditional Romantic perspective, genres are seen as constraining and inhibiting authorial creativity. However, contemporary theorists, even within literary studies, typically reject this view (e. g. Fowler 1982: 31). Gledhill notes that one perspective on this issue is that some of those who write within a genre work in creative ‘ tension’ with the conventions, attempting a personal inflection of them (Gledhill 1985: 63). 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. Fowler comments that ‘ the system of generic expectations amounts to a code, by the use of which (or by departure from which) composition becomes more economical’ (Fowler 1989: 215). Genres can thus be seen as a kind of shorthand serving to increase the ‘ efficiency’ of communication. They may even function as a means of preventing a text

from

dissolving into 'individualism and incomprehensibility' (Gledhill 1985: 63).

And whilst writing within a genre involves making use of certain 'given' conventions, every work within a genre also involves the invention of some new elements.

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As for reading within genres, some argue that

knowledge of genre conventions leads to passive

consumption of generic texts; others argue that making sense of texts within genres is an active process of constructing meaning (Knight 1994). Genre provides an important frame of reference which helps readers to identify, select and interpret texts. Indeed,

in relation to advertisements, Varda Langholz Leymore argues that the sense which viewers make of any single text depends on how it relates to the genre

as a whole (Langholz Leymore 1975, ix). Key psychological functions of genre are likely to include those shared by categorization generally - such as reducing

complexity. Generic frameworks may function to

make form (the conventions of the genre) more

'transparent' to those familiar with the genre, foregrounding the distinctive content of individual texts. Genre theorists might find much in common with

schema theorists in psychology: much as a genre is a

framework within which to make sense of related

texts, a schema is a kind of mental template within

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which to make sense of related experiences in everyday life. From the point of view of schema theory, genres are textual schemata.

Any text requires what is sometimes called 'cultural capital' on the part of its audience to make sense of it. Generic knowledge is one of the competencies required (Allen 1989: 52, following Charlotte Brunsdon). Like most of our everyday knowledge,

genre knowledge is typically tacit and would be difficult for most readers to articulate as any kind of detailed and coherent framework. Clearly one needs

to encounter sufficient examples of a genre in order

to recognize shared features as being characteristic of

it. Alastair Fowler suggests that 'readers learn genres

gradually, usually through unconscious familiarization' (Fowler 1989: 215).

There are few examples of empirical investigation of how people acquire and

use genres as interpretative frameworks in everyday

life. However, a few of these studies have been conducted with children in

relation to television genres. In an intensive longitudinal study of twelve

children from 2- to 5-years-old, Leona Jaglom and Howard Gardner (1981a,

1981b) noted the development of genre distinctions. 2-year-olds did not recognize the

beginnings and endings of programmes (Jaglom &

Gardner, 1981b). The researchers found that for the

2-year-olds the disappearance of characters was a

source of consternation: 'children become very upset

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and sometimes even cry when their favourite television personalities leave the screen' (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981a: 42): they suggested that this feature might assist their eventual identification of the advertisement genre. The researchers report the order of acquisition of the principal genre distinctions: adver-

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tisements (3. 0-3. 6); cartoons (3. 7-3. 11, early in interval); Sesame Street (3. 7-3. 11, late in interval); news (4. 0-4. 6); children's shows (4. 0-4. 6, late in interval); adult shows (4. 0-4. 6) (ibid.: 41). They argue that ' in the first few years of attempting to sort out the confusing elements of the television world, children are concentrating on making distinctions between shows' (ibid.: 42).

David Buckingham has undertaken some empirical investigation of older children's understanding of television genres in the UK (Buckingham 1993: 13555). In general discussions of television with children aged from 8- to 12-years-old, Buckingham found

' considerable evidence of children using notions of genre, both explicitly and implicitly':

The older children were more likely to identify their likes and dislikes by referring to a generic category, before offering a specific example.

They also appeared to have a broader repertoire of terms here, or at least to use these more regularly. However, there was some evidence even in the youngest age group that genre was being used as an unspoken rationale

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for moving from one topic to the next. Thus, discussion of one comedy program was more likely to be followed by discussion of another comedy program, rather than of news or soap opera. (Buckingham 1993: 139)

Buckingham then gave the children, in small groups, the task of sorting into groups about 30 cards bearing the titles of television programmes which had already been mentioned in discussions, with minimal prompting as to the basis on which they were to be sorted. The children showed an awareness that the programmes could be categorized in several ways. Genre was one of the principles which all of the groups (barring one of the youngest) used in this task. The children's repertoire of genre labels increased with age. However, Buckingham emphasizes that the data did not simply reflect steady incremental growth and that cognitive development alone does not offer an adequate model (Buckingham 1993:

149). He also cautions that ' it would be a mistake to regard the data as a demonstration of a children's pre-existing " cognitive understandings"' (ibid.: 154) since he stresses that categorization is a social process as well as a cognitive one. Nevertheless, his findings do offer some evidence ' that children progressively acquire (or at least come to use) a discourse of genre as they mature - that is, a set of terms which

facilitate the process of categorization, or at least make certain kinds of categorization possible. As their repertoire of terms expands, this enables them to identify finer distinctions between programmes,

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and to compare them in a greater variety of ways'

(ibid.: 154).

David Morley (1980) notes in relation to television differential social access to the discourses of a genre. Buckingham found some limited evidence of social class as a factor, with young working-class children employing a particularly consistent concept of soap opera (ibid.: 149) and with a recognition amongst older middle-class children of the limitations of genre discourse ' such as its tendency to emphasize similarity at the expense of difference' (ibid.: 154). The data could not, however, be explained ' in

terms of social class simply determining their access to discourses' (ibid.: 149).

Genres are not simply features of texts, but are mediating frameworks between texts, makers and interpreters. Fowler argues that ' genre makes possible the communication of content' (Fowler 1989: 215). Certainly the assignment of a text to a genre influences how the text is read. Genre constrains the possible ways in which a text is interpreted, guiding readers of a text towards a preferred reading (which is normally in accordance with the dominant ideology)

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- though this is not to suggest that readers are prevented from 'reading against the grain' (Fiske 1987: 114, 117; Feuer 1992: 144; Buckingham 1993: 136).

David Buckingham notes that:

We might well choose to read Neighbours [an Australian television soap opera], for instance, as a situation comedy - a reading which might focus less on empathizing with the psychological dilemmas of individual characters, and much more on elements of performance which disrupt its generally 'naturalistic' tone.

A more oppositional strategy would involve directly subverting the generic reading invited by the text - for example, to read the News as fiction, or even as soap opera (cf. Fiske 1987).

(Buckingham 1993: 136)

As David Bordwell puts it, 'making referential sense of a film requires several acts of "framing" it: as a fiction, as a Hollywood movie, as a comedy, as a Steve Martin movie, as a "summer movie" and so on' (Bordwell 1989: 146). Genres offer an important way of framing texts which assists comprehension. Genre knowledge orientates competent readers of the genre towards appropriate attitudes, assumptions and expectations about a text which are useful in making sense of it. Indeed, one way of defining genres is as 'a set of expectations' (Neale 1980: 51). John Corner

notes that 'genre is a principal factor in the directing of audience choice and of audience expectations... and in the organizing of the subsets of cultural competences and dispositions appropriate for watching,

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listening to and reading different kinds of thing' (Corner 1991: 276). Recognition of a text as belonging to a particular genre can help, for instance, to enable judgements to be made about the 'reality status' of the text (most fundamentally whether it is fictional or non-fictional). Assigning a text to a genre sets up initial expectations. Some of these may be challenged within individual texts (e. g. a detective film in which the murderer is revealed at the outset). Competent readers of a genre are not generally confused when some of their initial expectations are not met - the framework of the genre can be seen as offering 'default' expectations which act as a starting point for interpretation rather than a straitjacket. However, challenging too many conventional expectations for the genre could threaten the integrity of the text. Familiarity with a genre enables readers to generate feasible predictions about events in a narrative. Drawing on their knowledge of other texts within the same genre helps readers to sort salient from nonsalient narrative information in an individual text. Sonia Livingstone argues that:

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Different genres specify different ‘contracts’ to be negotiated between the text and the reader... which set up expectations on each side for the form of the communication..., its functions..., its epistemology..., and the communicative frame (e. g. the participants, the power of the viewer, the openness of the text, and the role of the reader). (Livingstone 1994: 252-3)

She adds that: ‘if different genres result in different modes of text-reader interaction, these latter may result in different types of involvement...: critical or accepting, resisting or validating, casual or concentrated, apathetic or motivated’ (Livingstone 1994: 253).

The identification of a text as part of a genre (such as in a television listings magazine or a video rental shop’s section titles) enables potential readers to decide whether it is likely to appeal to them. People seem to derive a variety of pleasures from reading texts within genres which are orientated towards entertainment. ‘Uses and gratifications’ research has identified many of these in relation to the mass media. Such potential pleasures vary according to genre, but they include the following. One pleasure may simply be the recognition of the features of a particular genre because of our familiarity with it. Recognition of what is likely to be important (and what is not), derived from

our

knowledge of the genre, is necessary in order to follow a plot.

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Genres may offer various emotional pleasures

such as empathy and escapism – a feature which

some theoretical commentaries seem to lose sight of.

Aristotle, of course, acknowledged the special emotional responses which were linked to different genres. Deborah Knight notes that ‘satisfaction is guaranteed with genre; the deferral of the inevitable provides the additional pleasure of prolonged anticipation’ (Knight 1994). ‘Cognitive’ satisfactions may be derived from

problem-solving, testing hypotheses, making inferences (e. g. about the motivations and goals of characters) and making predictions about events. In relation to television, Nicholas Abercrombie suggests that ‘part of the pleasure is knowing what the genre

rules are, knowing that the programme has to solve problems in the genre framework, and wondering how it is going to do so’ (Abercrombie 1996: 43). He adds that audiences derive pleasure from the way in which their expectations are finally realized (ibid.).

There may be satisfactions both in finding our inferences and predictions to be correct and in being surprised when they are not (Knight 1994). The prediction of what will happen next is, of course, more central in some genres than others.

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Steve Neale argues that pleasure is derived from 'repetition and difference' (Neale 1980: 48); there would be no pleasure without difference. René Wellek and Austin Warren comment that 'the totally familiar and repetitive pattern is boring; the totally novel form will be unintelligible - is indeed unthinkable' (Wellek & Warren 1963: 235). We may derive pleasure from observing how the conventions of the genre are manipulated (Abercrombie 1996: 45). We may also enjoy the stretching of a genre in new directions and the consequent shifting of our expectations. Making moral and emotional judgements on the actions of characters may also offer a particular pleasure (though Knight (1994) argues that 'generic fictions' themselves embody such judgements). Other pleasures can be derived from sharing our experience of a genre with others within an 'interpretive community' which can be characterized by its familiarity with certain genres (see also Feuer 1992, 144). Ira Konigsberg suggests that enduring genres reflect 'universal dilemmas' and 'moral conflicts' and appeal to deep psychological needs (Konigsberg 1987, 144-5).

3. Constructing the audience

Genres can be seen as involved in the construction of their readers. John
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Fiske sees genre as ' a means of constructing both the audience and the reading subject' (Fiske 1987, 114). Christine Gledhill argues that different genres ' produce different positionings of the subject... Genre specification can therefore be traced in the different functions of subjectivity each produces, and in their different modes of addressing the spectator' (Gledhill 1985, 64). And

Steve Neale argues in relation to cinema that genre contributes to the regulation of desire, memory and expectation (Neale 1980, 55).

Tony Thwaites and his colleagues note that in many television crime dramas in the tradition of *The Saint*, *Hart to Hart*, and *Murder, She Wrote*, Genteel or well-to-do private investigators work for the wealthy, solving crimes committed by characters whose social traits and behaviour patterns often type them as members of a ' criminal class'... The villains receive their just rewards not so much because they break

the law, but because they are entirely distinct from the law-abiding bourgeoisie. This TV genre thus reproduces a hegemonic ideology about the individual in a class society.

(Thwaites et al. 1994, 158).

Mass media genres play a part in the construction of difference and identity, notably with regard to sexual difference and identity (Neale 1980, 56-62). Some film and television genres have traditionally been aimed

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primarily at, and stereotypically favoured by, either a male or a female audience. For instance, war films and westerns tend to be regarded as 'masculine' genres, whilst soap operas and musicals tend to be regarded as 'feminine' (which is not, of course, to say that audiences are homogeneous).

However, few contemporary theorists would accept the extreme media determinism of the stance that audiences passively accept the preferred readings which may be built into texts for readers: most would stress that reading a text may also involve 'negotiation', opposition or even outright rejection.

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4. Advantages of generic analysis

Tony Thwaites and his colleagues note that 'genre foregrounds the influence of surrounding texts and ways of reading on our response to any one text. More specifically, it confirms textuality and reading as functions rather than things' (Thwaites et al. 1994, 92). Genre analysis situates texts within textual and social contexts, underlining the social nature of the production and reading of texts.

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. As well as locating texts within specific cultural contexts, genre analysis also serves to situate them in a historical perspective. It can help to counter the Romantic ideology of authorial 'originality' and creative individualism. In relation to news media, Norman Fairclough notes that genre analysis 'is good at showing the routine and formulaic nature of much media output, and alerting us, for instance, to the way in which the immense diversity of events in the world is reduced to the often rigid formats of news' (Fairclough 1995, 86).

5. D. I. Y. Generic analysis

The following questions are offered as basic guidelines for my own students in analysing an individual text in relation to genre. Note that an analysis of a text which is framed exclusively in terms of genre may be of limited usefulness. Generic analysis can

General

1. Why did you choose the text you are analyzing?
2. In what context did you encounter it?
3. What influence do you think this context might

have had on your interpretation of the text?

4. To what genre did you initially assign the text?

5. What is your experience of this genre?

6. What subject matter and basic themes is the text concerned with?

7. How typical of the genre is this text in terms of content?

8. What expectations do you have about texts in this genre?

9. Have you found any formal generic labels for this particular text (where)?

10. What generic labels have others given the same text?

11. Which conventions of the genre do you recognize in the text? 12. To what extent does this text stretch the conventions of its genre? 13. Where and why does the text depart from the conventions of the genre?

14. Which conventions seem more like those of a different genre (and which genre(s))?

15. What familiar motifs or images are used?

also, of course, involve studying the genre more broadly: in examining the genre one may fruitfully consider such issues as how the conventions of the genre have changed over time.

16. Which of the formal/stylistic techniques employed are typical/untypical of the genre?
17. What institutional constraints are reflected in the form of the text?
18. What relationship to 'reality' does the text lay claim to?
19. Whose realities does it reflect?
20. What purposes does the genre serve?
21. In what ways are these purposes embodied in the text?
22. To what extent did your purposes match these when you engaged with the text?
23. What ideological assumptions and values seem to be embedded in the text?
24. What pleasures does this genre offer to you personally?
25. What pleasures does the text appeal to (and how typical of the genre is this)?
26. Did you feel 'critical or accepting, resisting or validating, casual or concentrated, apathetic or motivated' (and why)?
27. Which elements of the text seemed salient because of your knowledge of the genre?

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28. What predictions about events did your generic identification of the text lead to (and to what extent did these prove accurate)?

29. What inferences about people and their motivations did your genre identification give rise to (and how far were these confirmed)?

30. How and why did your interpretation of the text differ from the interpretation of the same text by other people?

Mode of address

1. What sort of audience did you feel that the text was aimed at (and how typical was this of the genre)?

2. How does the text address you?

3. What sort of person does it assume you are?

4. What assumptions seem to be made about your class, age, gender and ethnicity?

5. What interests does it assume you have?

6. What relevance does the text actually have for you?

7. What knowledge does it take for granted?

8. To what extent do you resemble the 'ideal reader' that the text seeks to position you as?

9. Are there any notable shifts in the text's mode of address (and if so, what do they involve)?

10. What responses does the text seem to expect from you?

11. How open to negotiation is your response (are you invited, instructed or coerced to respond in

particular ways)?

12. Is there any penalty for not responding in the expected ways?

13. To what extent do you find yourself 'reading against the grain' of the text and the genre?

14. Which attempts to position you in this text do you accept, reject or seek to negotiate (and why)?

15. How closely aligned is the way in which the text addresses you with the way in which the genre positions you (Kress 1988, 107)?

Relationship to other texts

1. What intertextual references are there in the text you are analyzing (and to what other texts)?

2. Generically, which other texts does the text you are analyzing resemble most closely?

3. What key features are shared by these texts?

4. What major differences do you notice between them?

Appendix 1: Taxonomies of genres

The limitations of genre taxonomies have been alluded to. However, this is not to suggest that they are worthless. I have noted already that the broadest

division in literature is between poetry, prose and

drama. I will not dwell here on literary genres and sub-genres. Despite acknowledging the limitations of taxonomies, Fowler (1982) offers the most useful and scholarly taxonomy of literary genres of which I am aware. Mass media genres do not correspond to established literary genres (Feuer 1992, 140). After a brief consideration of the most fundamental genre

frameworks I will offer here a single illustrative taxonomy of fictional films.

Traditional rhetoric distinguishes between four kinds of discourse: exposition, argument, description and narration (Brooks & Warren 1972, 44). These four forms, which relate to primary purposes, are often referred to as different genres (Fairclough 1995, 88).

However, it may be misleading to treat them as genres partly because texts may involve any combination of these forms. It may be more useful to classify them

as 'modes'. In particular, narrative is such a fundamental and ubiquitous form that it may be especially problematic to treat it as a genre. Tony Thwaites and

his colleagues dismiss narrative as a genre:

Because narratives are used in many different kinds of texts and social contexts, they cannot properly be labelled a genre.

Narration is just as much a feature of non-fictional genres... as it is of fictional

genres... It is also used in different kinds of media...

We can think of it as a textual mode rather than a genre. (Thwaites et al. 1994, 112)

In relation to television, and following John Corner, Nicholas Abercrombie suggests that ' the most important genre distinction is... between fictional and non-fictional programming' (Abercrombie 1996, 42). This distinction is fundamental across the mass media (for its importance to children see Buckingham 1993, 149-50 and Chandler 1997). It relates to the purpose of the genre (e. g. information or entertainment). John Corner notes that ' the characteristic properties of text-viewer relations in most nonfiction television are primarily to do with kinds of knowledge... even if the program is designed as entertainment. The characteristic properties of textviewer relations in fictional television are primarily to do with imaginative pleasure' (Corner 1991, 276).

Despite the importance of the distinction between fictional and non-fictional genres, it is important also to note the existence of various hybrid

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forms (such as docudrama, ' faction' and so on). Even within genres acknowledged as factual (such as news reports and documentaries) ' stories' are told the purposes of factual genres in the mass media include entertaining as well as informing. In relation to film, Thomas and Vivian Sobchack offer a useful taxonomy of film genres (Sobchack & Sobchack 1980, 203-40). They make a basic distinction, on a level below that of fiction and non-fiction, between comedy and melodrama (adding that tragedy

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tends to appear in 'non-formula' films).

The Sobchacks list the main genres of comedy as:

slapstick comedy;

romantic comedy, including 'screwball comedy' and musical comedy;

musical biography; and

fairy tale.

They list the main genres of melodrama as:

adventure films, including 'the swashbuckler'

and 'survival films' (the war movie, the safari film, and disaster movies);

the western;

'fantastic genres', including fantasy, horror and science fiction; and

'antisocial genres', including the crime film (the gangster film, the G-man film, the private eye or detective film, the film noir, the caper film) and so-called 'weepies' (or 'women's films').

Whilst the Sobchacks offer an extremely useful outline of the textual features of films within these genres, part of the value of such taxonomies may be the way in which they tend to provoke immediate disagreement from readers!

The generic labels employed by film reviewers in the television listings

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magazines are worthy of investigation. Here is a personal attempt to map, purely by association, the labels used in the British television listings magazine *What's On TV* over several months in 1993.

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Appendix 2: Generic textual features of film and television

Whilst, as already noted, some recent redefinitions of genre have downplayed or displaced a concern with the textual features of genres, there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Hence, this section briefly notes some of the key textual features of genres in the context of film and television narrative. The distinctive textual properties of a genre typically listed by film and television theorists include:

narrative - similar (sometimes formulaic) plots

and structures, predictable situations, sequences,

episodes, obstacles, conflicts and resolutions;

characterization - similar types of characters

(sometimes stereotypes), roles, personal qualities,

motivations, goals, behavior;

basic themes, topics, subject matter (social, cultural, psychological,

professional, political, sexual, moral), values and what Stanley Solomon

refers to as

recurrent 'patterns of meaning' (Solomon 1995: 456);

setting - geographical and historical;

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iconography (echoing the narrative, characterization, themes and setting) – a familiar stock of images or motifs, the connotations of which have become fixed; primarily but not necessarily visual, including décor, costume and objects, certain ‘typecast’ performers (some of whom may have become ‘icons’), familiar patterns of dialogue, characteristic music and sounds, and appropriate physical topography; and

filmic techniques – stylistic or formal conventions of camerawork, lighting, sound-recording, use of color, editing etc. (viewers are often less conscious of such conventions than of those relating to content).

Less easy to place in one of the traditional categories are mood and tone (which are key features of the film noir). In addition, there is a particularly important feature which tends not to figure in traditional accounts and which is often assigned to text-reader

relationships rather than to textual features in contemporary accounts. This is mode of address, which involves inbuilt assumptions about the audience, such as that the ‘ideal’ viewer is male (the usual categories here are class, age, gender and ethnicity); as Sonia Livingstone puts it, ‘texts attempt to position

readers as particular kinds of subjects through particular modes of address’ (Livingstone 1994, 249). Some film genres tend to be defined primarily by their subject matter (e. g. detective films), some by their setting (e. g. the Western) and others by their narrative

form (e. g. the musical). An excellent discussion of the textual features of 'genre films' can be found in Chapter 4 of Thomas and Vivian Sobchack's *Introduction to Film* (1980).

As already noted, in addition to textual features, different genres also involve different purposes, pleasures, audiences, modes of involvement, styles of interpretation and text-reader relationships.

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