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AN INTRODUCTION TO GENRE THEORY

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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.

Key words

boundaries, genres, shifting, permeable, Abercrombie, steady, dismantling genre, new audiences, the dynamic fluidity, the final demise, interpretive, framework.

Introduction

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 that Tudor even hints that in order to establish what audiences expect a western to be like we might have to ask them.

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.

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 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)

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' (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.

John Hartley argues that 'genres are agents of 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.

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 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.

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