



THE TYPOLOGY OF LITERARY GENRES

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Abstract

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?

Key words

classification, hierarchical, taxonomy, genres, neutral, procedure, undisputed, medium, loose consensus, theoretical disagreement, specific genres.

Introduction

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, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-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 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).

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, 128- 129). 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).

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). 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.

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