An Introduction to Genre Theory

Daniel Chandler

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 culture-bound 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, 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 categorising 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 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 '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, 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). 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', analyse 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 clearcut 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 recongized 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 rememblance approaches 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 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 labelling 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 systematisation*' (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 categorise '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 demarcation 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 crystalisation 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' (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 texts 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 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' (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 standardise and stabilise production' (Gledhill 1985, 58). In relation to the mass media, genre is part of the process of targetting 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 harbour the Romantic ideology of the primacy of authorial 'originality' and 'vision', emphasizing individual style and artistic 'self-expression'. In this tradition the artist (in any medium) is seen as breaking the mould of convention. For the Italian aethetician 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 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 - 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 non-generic, 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 genreless 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*.