FILM/GENRE

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What's at stake in the history of literary genre theory?

We discover that the critical theory of genres is stuck precisely where Aristotle left it. The very word 'genre' sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is. Most critical efforts to handle such generic terms as 'epic' and 'novel' are chiefly interesting as examples of the psychology of rumor.

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (1957, p. 13)

Of all the concepts fundamental to literary theory, none has a longer and more distinguished lineage than the question of literary types, or genres. From Aristotle to Todorov and from Horace to Wellek and Warren, the topic of genre has remained one of the staples of theoretical discourse. As much as has been written on genre, however, the historical study of genre theory can hardly be characterized as a satisfying enterprise. The debate over genre has consistently taken place in slow motion. The decades – or even centuries – that have separated major genre theory statements have all too often led the debaters alternately to take disputed propositions for granted or to forget the very topic of the debate.

The history of genre theory thus traces a particularly zigzag trajectory. Sharing major claims with their predecessors, theoreticians on the straight stretches evince no need to justify their positions, while genre theorists in the turns rarely explain why a change of direction is necessary. Yet, quietly, the genre theories of the past have nevertheless set certain standards that continue tacitly to underlie recent attempts to theorize genre. If this chapter contains many of the familiar names of generic thinking, it is not, however, simply to rehearse what these thinkers have said about genre. In other words, what follows is in no sense a history of literary genre theory. Rather, in the hope of discovering the origins of our own blindness, the purpose here is to highlight the very claims that genre theorists have failed to recognize they were making, the constitutive assumptions that theoreticians have neglected to acknowledge in their own work, the habits and positions that have been silently passed on, often at cross-purposes with official positions and conscious claims.

Classical genre theory

'I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each', says Aristotle at the outset of *Poetics*.

Epic poetry and tragedy, comedy also and dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects – the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct.

Certainly, one of the most attractive features of Aristotle's famous treatise – and one of the sources of its continued influence – is the clarity, indeed the apparently incontrovertible simplicity, with which every claim is made. Everything is straightforward. Or rather, as with all great rhetoricians, every claim is made to seem straightforward. In fact, every one of Aristotle's apparently transparent expressions conceals a set of assumptions tacitly adopted by virtually every subsequent genre theorist. An expanded version of the first sentence of the *Poetics* should help to underscore the assumptions that Aristotle asks us to make with him:

I propose to treat of the form of activity that our society has labeled poetry which I claim can best be considered as an isolated phenomenon in itself and of what I will treat as its various kinds, noting or rather claiming that there is such a thing as the essential quality of each.

In order to begin his work, Aristotle must define an object of study. By borrowing an already defined object rather than defining his own, however, Aristotle provides a model for centuries of genre thinkers. Surprisingly, this most careful of thinkers thus opens his thought to whatever Greeks the Trojan horse of 'poetry' might carry. Who defined poetry? To what end? On the basis of what assumptions? With what ramifications for the proposed generic breakdown? Aristotle's spare, declarative style makes it unlikely that these questions will be asked, and very likely that subsequent theoreticians will remain oblivious to the slippery slope of the underlying terrain on which their theories are built.

The very notions that poetry exists 'in itself' and that a kind can have an 'essential quality' involve unsubstantiated claims with far-reaching effects. These unopposed assumptions justify Aristotle's famous claim that the types of poetry differ in medium, object and manner of imitation, along with the implication that no other differences are involved. Note that the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not suggest that the types of poetry differ in the uses to which they are put, the places in which they are used, or the groups that use them. He does not propose distinctions based on the actions that differing types of poetry inspire, but instead assumes that poems with similar 'essential' qualities will produce similar effects on their audiences. Thus all poems that arouse pity and fear are not necessarily tragedies, but all tragedies may be expected to arouse pity and fear.

My purpose here is not to show that Aristotle is in any way wrong, but rather to show that (a) the *Poetics* is based on unspoken and apparently incontrovertible assumptions, (b) these assumptions sanction certain types of conclusion, while precluding others, and (c) alternatives do exist to the positions taken by Aristotle. For example, given the origin of Greek poetic forms in diverse rituals, a categorization of poems based on their differing ritual uses would have produced a fascinating and fully defensible generic breakdown. From within the *Poetics*, however, such an approach remains invisible, unthinkable – not only to today's readers, but more importantly to readers across the ages who have taken their generic cues from Aristotle. As influential as it may have been, Aristotle's categorization of the kinds of poetry has had the effect of narrowing genre theory ever since. By accentuating poetry's internal characteristics rather than the kinds of experience fostered by poetry, Aristotle set genre theory on to a virtually

unbroken course of textual analysis. Not that textual concerns and experiential concerns are entirely unrelated, but their relationship requires theorization – and that is precisely what Aristotle's spare style and unanswerable rhetoric preclude.

By the time Horace drafted his Ars Poetica, three centuries after Aristotle's death, the Greek philosopher's arguments about poetic types had achieved the status of received truth. Whereas Aristotle opens his Poetics with the stealth of a rhetorician schooled in the delicate art of Platonic debate, Horace begins his epistle on the art of poetry with all the bravado of an author sanctioned by the ancients.

Suppose a painter meant to attach a horse's neck to the head of a man, and to put fancy-work of many colored feathers on limbs of creatures picked at random; the kind of thing where the torso of a shapely maiden merges into the dark rear half of a fish; would you smother your amusement, my friends, if you were let in to see the result?

Believe me, Pisones, a book will be very much like that painting if the meaningless images are put together like the dreams of a man in a fever, to the end that the head and the foot do not match the one body.

Wrapped in the authority of (his culture's notion of) nature, Horace need not argue for the existence of genres. The only natural and healthy thing to do, Horace implies, is to recognize the differences among genres. If nature and health exist, then so do genres. Confident as if backed up by the combined Roman legions, Horace leaves the recipient of his epistle little room to manoeuvre. Each genre must be understood as a separate entity, with its own literary rules and prescribed procedures. Tragic verse forms, Horace affirms, must not be used for comic situations. 'Let each form of poetry occupy the proper place allotted to it.' Inaugurating a long tradition whereby genre and decorum are allied in critical discourse, with proper behaviour expected of literature and citizens alike, Horace also initiates the equally tenacious tradition according to which the authority behind the 'proper' and the method of allotting a separate place to each form of poetry remain outside the genre theorist's range of analysis.

Quoted continually from the late Renaissance to the eighteenth century in support of neoclassical poetic and theatrical practices, Horace's Ars Poetica contains more than detailed prescriptions regarding specific genres. More important are two changes in emphasis with relation to the Aristotelian model. For Aristotle, imitation means mimesis, sketching from nature; for Horace, the same term implies imitation of a literary model and adherence to the standards represented by that model, as described by distinguished critics (such as Horace himself). In other words, the notion of genre is now fully conscripted into the legion of techniques whereby writers are trained to respect current standards of cultural acceptability.

With this redefinition of generic imitation as a major form of cultural indoctrination, a fundamental bifurcation occurs in generic thinking. Whereas Aristotle aims primarily at description of existing works of art, sometimes speaking solely as critic, sometimes addressing the problems of poets and their audiences, Horace is mainly concerned to prescribe appropriate modes of writing poetry. Having devoted the first half of the *Poetics* to a historical and theoretical analysis of poetic genres, only in the latter half of the treatise does Aristotle begin to sketch out

appropriate writing practices. To the Greek master's historical preterites and descriptive present tenses correspond Horace's incessant imperatives:

- Let the work of art be whatever you want, as long as it is simple and has unity. (96)
- Adopt material to match your talents ... (96)
- Let each form of poetry occupy the proper place allotted to it. (97)
- Do not bring out on stage actions that should properly take place inside, and remove from view the many events which the descriptive powers of an actor present on the stage will soon relate. Do not have Medea butcher her sons before the audience ... (100)
- Do not let a play consist of less than five acts. ... Do not have a god intervene. ... Have the chorus carry the part of an actor ... and do not let them sing anything between the acts which does not contribute to the plot and fit properly into it. (100)
- Whatever you have in the way of a lesson, make it short ... (103)

At every turn, Horace is concerned to provide clear rules for generically faithful literary composition. To Aristotle's concern for the structure of generic texts is now added a durable interest in the production of generic texts.

Curiously, for all his emphasis on the production of poetry, Horace radically dissociates the processes of creation and criticism. The critic does the reading of previous poetry and criticism, while the writer carries out the critic's prescriptions. As we will see in later chapters, this split has a significant effect on the future of genre theory. Whereas Aristotle saw history and theory, criticism and practice, audience and poets, as somehow all intertwined, Horace sets up a simple generic model for the ages: poets produce by imitating a predefined original sanctioned by the literary-critical oligarchy.

Neoclassical genre theory

As filtered through Horace and the power of Roman literary institutions, Aristotelian notions of genre provided the very foundation of the neoclassical critical system. Rediscovered by Italian Renaissance authors, Aristotle inspired virtually non-stop publication of poetic treatises throughout the sixteenth century – in three volumes (Marco Girolamo Vida, 1527), in six (Ugento Antonio Minturno, 1559), in seven (Julius Caesar Scaliger, 1561), or in a single-volume summary (Lodovico Castelvetro, 1570). For nearly two centuries, the adaptation of neo-Aristotelian principles would be chronicled and justified in the writings of such important writer-critics as Torquato Tasso, Pierre Corneille, Nicolas Boileau, John Dryden and Alexander Pope.

Perhaps the most celebrated cause of this period is the battle over the ultimate generic crossbreed: tragicomedy. Ever the incontrovertible naturalist, Horace had set limits on the poet's right to mix genres: 'it does not go to the extent that savage should mate with tame, that serpents should couple with birds, or lambs with tigers'. Reacting strongly against the medieval grotesque tendency to mix the sublime and the ridiculous, the sacred and the secular, the tragic and the comic, seventeenth-century French neoclassical critics at first found it quite impossible to accept the new composite. Yet little by little the production of new plays by Pierre Corneille and Jean Mairet in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, along with the apparent Roman precedent of Plautus' Amphitryon, broke down critical resistance and led to acceptance of the hybrid genre.

For our purposes, one particular lesson stands out from this unexpected development. That a new genre should be born in an expanding culture hardly provides cause for surprise. More important is the way in which this genre develops out of the coupling of two genres previously thought diametrically opposed. In spite of the Horatian commitment to keep genres separate and the neo-Aristotelian refusal to recognize genres not mentioned by Aristotle, the rise of tragicomedy demonstrates the possibility of generating new genres through the monstrous mating of already existing genres. For the first time, genre theory must accommodate itself to genre history, rather than vice versa.

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, a new genre began to edge its way between tragedy and comedy. At first called simply the 'serious genre', as opposed to the classical genres, deemed incapable of dealing with contemporary reality, the new genre was denigrated as the 'weepie genre' (genre larmoyant) by its conservative opponents. Eventually baptized simply 'drama' (drame) by its radical supporters (Denis Diderot, Pierre de Beaumarchais, Louis-Sébastien Mercier), this is the theatrical form that would eventually give rise to melodrama – the most popular theatrical mode of the nineteenth century and cinema's most important parent genre. The details surrounding the new genre's rise to popularity and its post-revolutionary transformation into popular melodrama are less important here than genre's new role as the object of critical and political strife.

If Aristotle has remained a favourite with twentieth-century genre theoreticians, it is in part because his primary purpose was to describe and codify existing practice rather than to exercise any direct influence over that practice. While most recent genre critics and theorists continue to accept genres - including melodrama - as classically attested pre-existent forms, the history of (melo)drama reveals that critics once understood their role as far more active and interventionist. The example of melodrama stresses the critic's potential role in making genre a living, changing, active part of cultural development and self-expression. From this point on in the history of genre theory, classically motivated genre separation will never again hold sway, yet, as we shall see, many of the hidden institutional commitments underlying the classical system will never fully die.

Nineteenth-century genre theory
As with the classics, so with the romantics, but in reverse. Whereas the neoclassical approach to all composition began with identification and separation of genres, romantic inspiration was based on the breaking down of all generic differences. German theoretician Friedrich Schlegel provided the philosophical underpinnings, recommending abolition of all generic classifications in his Dialogue on Poetry (1800), while two French renegades led the assault. Stendhal spearheaded the first attacks in his tract, Racine et Shakespeare (1823 and 1825), with Victor Hugo's theatrical works and their prefaces soon providing able reinforcement (Cromwell in 1827, Hernani in 1830). In support of its genre-mixing aesthetic, the romantic movement rapidly established a new canon, including such unlikely bedfellows as Isaiah, Aeschylus, Rabelais and Shakespeare, all masters of the mixed genre.

Here again we encounter an unexpected contribution to the broader realm of

genre theory. The neoclassical canon was fully furnished by centuries of tradition; the only remaining questions were of the order of whether Homer or Virgil was the greater epic poet. The romantics quickly discovered that new genre theories can be skillfully buttressed by adducing a carefully concocted new canon. Choosing works from different countries and even different periods (Hugo throws in Homer, Saint Paul, Tacitus, Dante and Cervantes for good measure), the romantics fully revealed for the first time just how effectively genre theory (and even the production of generically marked literary works) can be pressed into the service of broader institutional goals. Often forgotten, this lesson will be recalled in later sections of this book.

The final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a development of particular importance for the future of genre theory. While the binomial nomenclature system of Carolus Linnaeus had provided a new basis for the classification systems used in the world's increasingly numerous natural history museums, it took the evolutionary schemes of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer to attract the literary community to a scientific model. Especially in the work of French literary historian Ferdinand Brunetière, the evolutionary model was directly applied to the problem of genres (particularly in the multivolume L'Evolution des genres, 1890-94). Believing in the reality of genres as if they were biological species, Brunetière was of course only providing scientific underpinnings for the already familiar Horatian model. The strength of this added argument, however, can scarcely be overestimated. Reinvented by virtually every student of genre since Brunetière, scientific justification of genre study serves to convince theorists that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, that they can be firmly identified, that they operate systematically, that their internal functioning can be observed and scientifically described, and that they evolve according to a fixed and identifiable trajectory.

It is indeed surprising just how far the influence of this attitude extends. Within a page of the beginning of *The Fantastic* (1970), for example, as careful a scholar as Tzvetan Todorov quotes Karl Popper's claim that 'no matter how many instances of white swans we have observed, this does not justify the conclusion that all swans are white' (p. 4). Anxious to establish the validity of a deductive, scientific method, Todorov retorts:

On the other hand, a hypothesis which is based on the observation of a limited number of swans but which also informs us that their whiteness is the consequence of an organic characteristic would be perfectly legitimate. To return from swans to novels, this general scientific truth applies not only to the study of genres, but also to that of a writer's entire *oeuvre*, or to that of a specific period, etc.

(1970, p. 4)

Given the well-known genre of swans, claims Todorov, I can take a small number of specific swans at random, study their organic make-up, and come to legitimate conclusions regarding the entire genre. But who will define the genre of swans, we might well object, when 'swan' stands for 'fantastic novel'? And how will we know how to recognize a 'swan' when we see one? And just what are the organic characteristics of 'swans'? And so on. The scientific model offers an extra-

ordinarily powerful rhetorical ploy, yet, begging basic questions, it often leads unsuspecting readers astray. Perhaps more important still, by obscuring very real theoretical problems the scientific model all too often keeps serious genre theorists from coming to terms with all aspects of their own object of study.

Twentieth-century genre theory

Not surprisingly, twentieth-century genre theory begins with a resounding 'No!' to the scientific schemes of Brunetière and his many imitators. From his very first important publication in 1902 (Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic), Italian theorist and critic Benedetto Croce launched a frontal attack on the very concept of genre. Indeed, by his own admission, the critique of genres provided the impetus for Croce's entire philosophy. Noting that attempts to prescribe the code of a genre are consistently defeated by poets' efforts to exceed or subvert that code, Croce sought to sweep away virtually all generalizing critical discourse. Ironically, where he might have become the father of postmodernism, with its distaste for totalizing discourse, Croce instead sired an unexpected combination of nihilism and aestheticism, along with a fundamental shift in the definition of genre problematics.

For over a century before Croce, virtually all genre theory involved some version of the classic versus romantic genre dialectic, opposing the so-called pure genres handed down by tradition to modern mixed genres more attentive to human multiplicity and complex reality. Croce's strong critique of genres had the effect of shifting genre theory towards a new dialectic opposing generic categories and individual texts. Whereas all literary composition, as well as all interpretive acts, had for centuries been seen as occurring within generic boundaries, the new model figured genre as one pole of an opposition featuring modernist innovators at the other pole. Eventually played out by Anglo-American New Criticism, this new dialectic also had an important influence on post-war film theory, which neatly opposed bedrock genres to the creative efforts of auteurs capable of subverting and personalizing them.

One of the most influential and level-headed attempts to renew genre theory in the post-Croce era came from René Wellek and Austin Warren, in their *Theory of Literature* (1956), written during the 1940s while both were faculty members at the University of Iowa. Distinguishing between what they call 'inner' and 'outer' form, Wellek and Warren propose a bifurcated approach:

Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose – more crudely subject and audience). The ostensible basis may be one or the other (e.g., 'pastoral' and 'satire' for the inner form; dipodic verse and Pindaric ode for outer); but the critical problem will then be to find the *other* dimension, to complete the diagram.

(Wellek and Warren, 1956, p. 231)

Encouraging critics to investigate the relationship between structure and technique, Wellek and Warren clearly provide both a conscious model for analysis,

and criteria according to which the existence and extent of a genre may be conveniently judged.

In providing such a reasonable model, however, they reveal a strange blindness. On the one hand, they recognize that genres are more than just convenient classification aids: 'The literary kind is an "institution" – as Church, University, or State is an institution. It exists, not as an animal exists or even as a building, chapel, library, or capitol, but as an institution exists' (*ibid.*, p. 226). Thus distancing themselves from Brunetière and the biological model, Wellek and Warren open up a potentially new domain for genre theory. Providing critics with the wherewithal not just to recognize genres, but to redraw the generic map, based on concordances of inner and outer form, Wellek and Warren nevertheless fail to recognize the role of the theorist or critic in founding generic institutions, thus missing the opportunity to bring radical change to genre theory.

The possibility of redrawing generic charts, only vaguely evoked by Wellek and Warren, was rapidly realized in the work of Canadian scholar Northrop Frve. whose Anatomy of Criticism (1957) remained at the centre of international genre theory debate for two decades. Taking his cue from Jung, Frye links literary forms with broader archetypal categories. Especially in his 'Theory of Mythos', Frye singlemindedly follows up his intuitions and observations regarding inner and outer literary form to the point of redescribing and thus ultimately redefining such familiar generic categories as comedy, romance and tragedy. No longer would the establishment of a corpus of texts depend on tradition alone. Adducing a wide spectrum of sometimes unexpected texts in support of his revised definitions, Frye treats literary criticism and its categories not as institutions but as the object of a new scientific endeavour, based on a broad inductive approach and the positing of coherence. How ironic that Frye, as the first theorist perhaps of all time singlehandedly to succeed in imposing a new generic classification, should fail to recognize the institutional nature and ramifications of his own activities, which he instead defines as transparently and selflessly scientific.

While Brunetière borrowed the evolutionary content of Darwin's Origin of Species (1859), Frye adopts its revolutionary method and its idealistic vision of apolitical scientific endeavour. With the Scopes trial, Darwinians learnt once and for all that new scientific paradigms, however rational, would always be seen by certain sectors of society as unacceptable competition. If literary questions could cause the 'battles' associated with Corneille's Le Cid in 1636-7 and Hugo's Hernani in 1830, it hardly seems surprising that a problem of 'pure' literary theory should lead to academic strife in the 1960s. Appearing in French in 1970, the first chapter of Tzvetan Todorov's The Fantastic was in a sense Frye's Scopes trial. He doesn't lose the trial, in spite of strong criticism levelled at him by Todorov, but at a time when North American and European literary theories were clearly locked in battle over the terrain of young academic minds (including my own at the time), Frye's trial-by-critique certainly sent out a clear signal to all would-be followers of Frye: 'In spite of what you may have heard [e.g., from Geoffrey Hartman's article in the 1966 Yale French Studies issue on Structuralism], Anatomy of Criticism is not consonant with French structuralism'. Todorov begins by expressing six articles of faith that he shares with Frye, and that have been adopted by most subsequent genre theorists:

- 1. Literary studies must be conducted in a scientific manner.
- 2. Value judgments have no place in literary studies.
- 3. Literature is systematic; chance has no part in it.
- 4. Literary analysis should be synchronic, as if all texts existed simultaneously.
- 5. Literary discourse is not referential.
- 6. Literature is created from literature, not from reality. (1970, pp. 9–10)

Such a set of assumptions might well have led Todorov to welcome Frye into the structuralist camp.

Instead, Todorov castigates Frye for a series of failings, including the inability to recognize the difference between 'theoretical' genres, which are deduced from a theory of literature, and 'historical' genres, which are the result of an observation of literary phenomena. Seeking to dissociate himself from previous unsystematic genre study, and to stake out a firm ground on which a durable analysis might be built, Todorov distinguishes between the types traditionally recognized by our culture (epic, short story, lyric poetry, and so forth) and the new types suggested by the modern systematic critic. Types accepted by the culture are thus labelled 'historical', while 'theoretical' types are defined by the critic. But this opposition begs the question of the critic's position within the culture. All historical genres or types were once theoretical genres, defined by the critics of a former culture (who may have been known by other names – essayists, journalists, or simply men or women of taste and influence – but who played the role of critic none the less) according to a theory then current (not a self-consciously elaborated theory like that championed by Todorov, but a theory none the less).

In spite of the repeated pronouncements of Todorov and others, there is no place outside of history from which purely 'theoretical' definitions of genre might be made. In substituting his so-called 'theoretical' definition of the fantastic for a series of historical categories (fairy tale, ghost story, gothic novel, etc.), Todorov is only substituting a current historical understanding of literature (heavily dependent on contemporary fashions of psychoanalysis and formal analysis) for a former historical definition of literature (referring instead to literature's mimetic function and thus dependent on content paradigms). Reading The Fantastic a generation after its publication, we already recognize its vocabulary, its methodological tools, and its classification of literature as marked by a particular period which only recently was the present, which may once have appeared not-yethistorical, but which we now identify with the historical phenomenon of French structuralism. The 'fantastic' as defined by Todorov is already (was always already) a historical genre. 'Theoretical', when it is opposed to 'historical', defines a utopian space, a 'no place' from which critics may seemingly justify blindness to their own historicity. Just as the critic is always part of a culture, thus undermining any attempt to oppose the critical to the cultural, so the theoretician always stands on the historically marked ground of a particular era.

Whether or not Todorov's justification of theoretical genres makes historical sense, *The Fantastic* certainly furthers the tendency – already posited by Wellek and Warren, and developed by Frye – towards critic-defined genres. Indeed, Todorov goes so far as to place the primary determinant of the fantastic genre within the reader. Does the reader hesitate between two explanations – one uncanny, the other marvellous – of the phenomena encountered in the text? Then

the text must be considered part of the fantastic genre. While this approach perhaps raises more problems than it solves (can the same text be fantastic for one reader, but not fantastic for another? can the same text be fantastic on first reading but not on subsequent readings? does the genre exist among the impressionable and on dark nights, but not among scientists or in the daytime?), it paradoxically throws Todorov's readers, trained to respect self-conscious theory over all else, back on the mercy of untutored readers, capable of making decisions of generic magnitude simply by deferring reading past nightfall.

This dependence on readers' attitudes exactly reverses the order of priorities that we noted earlier in Aristotle's logic. For the Greek philosopher, tragedies are defined by their essential properties, and because they share essential properties they can be expected to have similar effects on viewers (i.e., arousing pity and fear). How different the history of genre theory might have been had Aristotle taken the opposite position, identifying all texts that arouse pity and fear as tragedies (rather than vice versa). Indeed, this is precisely what Todorov does. Rather than claim that all fantastic texts cause readers to hesitate between two readings, he suggests that all texts producing hesitation between uncanny and marvellous readings are part of the fantastic genre. The Fantastic thus stands as a potentially important turning point in literary genre theory, not because it out-structures and out-theorizes Frye's Anatomy of Criticism in the front room, but because it opens the back door to ordinary historical readers and their reading habits.

In many ways, Todorov's project thus parallels that of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., whose Validity in Interpretation (1967) reintroduced the notion of genre into the reading process – not only for generic readings or interpretation of specific literary genres, but for every act of reading, literary or not. Hirsch's project develops the simple and apparently unexceptionable insight that 'the details of meaning that an interpreter understands are powerfully determined and constituted by his meaning expectations. And these expectations arise from the interpreter's conception of the type of meaning that is being expressed' (1967, p. 72). This basic tenet of schema theory is proved every day when we manage to understand dialogue that we can hardly hear, simply because we have a clear idea of the general type of meaning involved. From time to time, of course, we confirm Hirsch's hypothesis more negatively, by misconstruing a message that we heard perfectly well, simply because we had wrongly identified the type of meaning involved.

From this broad assumption, Hirsch moves directly to the claim that 'an interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands, and that this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered' (p. 74). Sliding all too easily from 'type of meaning' to 'genre', Hirsch is able to affirm that 'every disagreement about an interpretation is usually a disagreement about genre' (p. 98). By equating 'genre' with 'type of meaning', however, Hirsch has broadened the notion of genre to the point where it no longer coincides with the meaning usually ascribed to the term in literary theory. Certainly, Hirsch is right to claim that a husband's comment on returning home late, 'I'm very tired tonight', may carry a variety of meanings, depending on the conventions that have been established between husband and wife (p. 53). Yet the word genre will have changed meanings too much to be of any use to us if it must refer to general types of meaning like 'expression of physical state', 'admis-

sion regarding previous whereabouts', or 'refusal to participate in love-making activities'. While Hirsch offers eloquent evidence for the role of genres in the meaning-making process, he unintentionally spotlights the extent to which literary and filmic genres are more than just general classes of texts expressing determinable types of meaning.

More than previous genre theorists, Todorov and Hirsch tie questions of textual structure to reader expectations regarding textual structure. Within their methodology, this strategy serves as yet one more way to focus attention on a text's formal properties. If it were released for general usage, however, this emphasis on reading patterns would risk provoking what we might call a 'sorcerer's apprentice' effect: once the magic word 'reader' is pronounced, there might be no controlling the ultimate effect. Once labelled by writers and critics, genres might well fall into the hands of untutored readers or out-of-control audiences.

Thus far, this threat has not materialized. On the contrary, the most important English-language genre theory of the last two decades, Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes (1982), resolutely returns to classical emphasis on textual structure within traditional genres and canons of texts, instead of releasing responsibility for genres to readers and audiences. 'The kinds, however, elusive, objectively exist', says Fowler (p. 73), permanently closing off debate.

Ten tendencies of literary genre theory

At the conclusion of even as cursory an overview as that presented here, it should be possible to outline the major principles of genre theory established by two millennia of genre theorists. Yet this is precisely what we cannot do. Even so simple a question as the meaning and extent of the term *genre* remains confusing, for the term inconsistently refers to distinctions derived from a wide variety of differences among texts: type of presentation (epic/lyric/dramatic), relation to reality (fiction versus non-fiction), historical kind (comedy/tragedy/tragicomedy), level of style (novel versus romance), or content paradigm (sentimental novel/historical novel/adventure novel).

While this overview of literary genre theory has been far too limited to provide anything like a history of the topic, it has served to bring to the surface a number of important tendencies, questions and contradictions that deserve to be recalled as we move to the area of film genre. The following list thus attends to unexpressed assumptions shared by genre theorists, along with some of the theoretical problems that remain unaddressed over the long history of genre-oriented literary speculation.

- It is generally taken for granted that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, and that they can be firmly identified. Indeed, these facts have seemed so obvious to theoreticians that they have rarely seemed worthy of discussion, let alone of questioning.
- Because genres are taken to be 'out there', existing independently of observers, genre theorists have generally sought to describe and define what they believe to be already existing genres rather than create their own interpretive categories, however applicable or useful.

- 3. Most genre theory has attended either to the process of creating generic texts in imitation of a sanctioned predefined original, or to internal structures attributed to those texts, in part because the internal functioning of genre texts is considered entirely observable and objectively describable.
- Genre theorists have typically assumed that texts with similar characteristics systematically generate similar readings, similar meanings, and similar uses.
- 5. In the language of theoreticians, proper genre production is regularly allied with decorum, nature, science and other standards produced and defended by the sponsoring society. Few genre theorists have shown interest in analysing this relationship.
- 6. It is regularly assumed that producers, readers and critics all share the same interests in genre, and that genres serve those interests equally.
- 7. Reader expectation and audience reaction have thus received little independent attention. The uses of generic texts have also largely been neglected.
- 8. Genre history holds a shifting and uncertain place in relation to genre theory. Most often simply disregarded by its synchronically oriented partner, genre history nevertheless cries out for increased attention by virtue of its ability to scramble generic codes, to blur established generic tableaux and to muddy accepted generic ideas. At times, genre history has been used creatively in support of specific institutional goals, for example by creating a new canon of works supportive of a revised genre theory.
- 9. Most genre theorists prefer to style themselves as somehow radically separate from the objects of their study, thus justifying their use of meliorative terms like 'objective', 'scientific', or 'theoretical', to describe their activity, yet the application of scientific assumptions to generic questions usually obscures as many problems as it solves.
- 10. Genre theoreticians and other practitioners are generally loath to recognize (and build into their theories) the institutional character of their own generic practice. Though regularly touting 'proper' approaches to genre, theorists rarely analyse the cultural stakes involved in identifying certain approaches as 'improper'. Yet genres are never entirely neutral categories. They – and their critics and theorists – always participate in and further the work of various institutions.

Regarding a number of important interrelated questions, literary genre theory has come to no firm conclusion. For some, the important dialectic constitutive of genre theory and practice involves the opposition of pure genres to mixed genres, while others stress the antithesis between genres and individual texts. Some theorists pay attention to the contrast between rule-driven production and spontaneous creation, while other theoreticians are more interested in the difference between inner and outer form. Does genre reside in a pre-existing pattern, in texts, in criticism, or somewhere else? Are genres classificatory conveniences or are they representations of reality? What difference do genres make? How and to whom do they make that difference? Even the term 'genre' is itself extremely volatile, in extent as well as in object and content.

But it cannot be taken for granted that film genre is the same thing as literary genre. Nor should we assume that film genre theory is coterminous with literary genre theory, even if it does largely derive from the work of literary theorists. In the next chapter we will discover whether any of these questions receives more satisfactory treatment in the work of film genre theorists.

2

What is generally understood by the notion of film genre?

Genre isn't a word that pops up in every conversation about films – or every review – but the idea is second nature to the movies and our awareness of them. Movies belong to genres much the way people belong to families or ethnic groups. Name one of the classic, bedrock genres – Western, comedy, musical, war film, gangster picture, science fiction, horror – and even the most casual moviegoer will come up with a mental image of it, partly visual, partly conceptual.

Richard T. Jameson, They Went Thataway (1994, p. ix)

In many ways, the study of film genre is no more than an extension of literary genre study. While film genre critics rarely quote Horace or Hugo, they do regularly cite Aristotle and a litany of more recent literary theorists. Leo Braudy invokes Samuel Johnson; Frank McConnell harks back to John Dryden; Ed Buscombe looks to Wellek and Warren; Stuart Kaminsky, John Cawelti and Dudley Andrew cite Northrop Frye; Will Wright leans on Vladimir Propp; Stephen Neale quotes Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov. Clearly, much that is said about film genre is simply borrowed from a long tradition of literary genre criticism.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between film genre criticism and its literary predecessors. Starting in the late 60s, publication on film genre mush-roomed, eventually producing an intellectual space in which film scholars and critics now respond primarily to each other rather than to the literary critics who provided the backdrop for previous generic speculation. Whereas the bibliography of Will Wright's Sixguns and Society (1975), for example, still depended heavily on assorted literary theoreticians, linguists and anthropologists, almost every film genre study of the last decade repeats the same litany of film genre theorists, all published in the last quarter-century: Altman, Buscombe, Cawelti, Doane, Elsaesser, Neale, Schatz, Williams, and the very same Will Wright. In short, film genre study has over the last two decades established itself as a field separate from literary genre study. As such, it has developed its own assumptions, its own modus operandi, and its own objects of study.

This chapter will be devoted to a sketch of recent approaches to film genre. This overview is based primarily on book-length studies of major genres, along with particularly influential articles. The positions described are not necessarily the ones touted on book jackets or in theoretical introductions, however, but derive from the actual praxis of current genre study, i.e., the theory that emerges from the practice of genre criticism and history. I do not agree with all the methods or conclusions presented in this chapter. Indeed, the rest of this book will offer alternatives to many of the positions presented. Nevertheless, it is important for readers to understand the classical tradition of film genre studies as a basic context for the proposals that will be made in subsequent chapters. For this reason,

the following ten claims have been presented in as straightforward a manner as possible, with little attempt to present variant positions or to criticize potentially problematic stands and strategies.

Genre is a useful category, because it bridges multiple concerns

Comic books are full of contraptions capable of performing multiple tasks. Genre is usually seen as just such a device. Only slightly short of magical in its versatility, genre endures within film theory because of its ability to perform multiple operations simultaneously. According to most critics, genres provide the formulas that drive production; genres constitute the structures that define individual texts; programming decisions are based primarily on generic criteria; the interpretation of generic films depends directly on the audience's generic expectations. All of these aspects are covered by the single term of genre.

As Dudley Andrew puts it in *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984), genres serve a precise function in the overall economy of cinema, an economy involving an industry, a social need for production of messages, a vast number of human subjects, a technology, and a set of signifying practices. Genre is a rare category in that it overtly involves every aspect of this economy; these aspects are always at play whenever the cinema is concerned but their interrelation is generally very difficult to perceive (1984. p. 110). Genre, it would appear, is not your average descriptive term, but a complex concept with multiple meanings, which we might identify as follows:

- genre as blueprint, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production;
- genre as structure, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded;
- genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- genre as contract, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience.

While not every genre theorist attends to each of these four meanings and areas of generic operation, genre theorists typically justify their activity by the concept's polyvalence. Stephen Neale's *Genre* (1980), for example, begins by quoting Tom Ryall's claim that 'The master image for genre criticism is the triangle composed of artist/film/audience. Genres may be defined as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the filmmaker, and their reading by an audience' (p. 7). From the film-maker through the individual film to the eventual audience, the same term suffices.

It is of course this ability to serve multiple functions that gives genre the power to secure privileged relations among cinema's various components. Film genre's special power is nearly always expressed in terms of stylistic devices or metaphors that figure a special ability to establish connections. According to Thomas Schatz (1981), film genres 'express the social and aesthetic sensibilities not only of Hollywood filmmakers but of the mass audience as well' (p. 14). In preference to this simple 'not only ... but ... as well' construction, Dudley Andrew offers an active balancing metaphor, asserting that 'genres equilibrate spectators and that vast

technical, signifying, and ideological machine of the cinema' (1984, p. 111). It is Jim Kitses (1969), however, who achieves the most dynamic expression of film genre's communicative powers. 'Genre,' affirms Kitses in *Horizons West*, 'is a vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts' (p. 8). At one and the same time, genre is a structure and the conduit through which material flows from producers to directors and from the industry to distributors, exhibitors, audiences and their friends. While it is easy to understand how genre's multiple definitions and associations might lead to some confusion, it is even easier to appreciate how a concept of such versatility should capture the imagination of film critics (leading some to mistake the concept of genre for a critical panacea).

In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that film genre's consistent connections to the entire production-distribution-consumption process make it a broader concept than literary genre has typically been. Where the Horatian system emphasizes appropriate models for textual production and the Aristotelian tradition stresses textual structure and its effects on reception, film genre theorists have systematically assumed that the main virtue of generic criticism lies in its ability to bind and explain all aspects of the process, from production to reception. In fact, by regularly choosing examples from genres where all definitions (production, text, exhibition, consumption) neatly line up, critics have managed to avoid difficult questions regarding possible conflicts among those definitions.

Genres are defined by the film industry and recognized by the mass audience

Universally assuming that genres are broadly recognized public categories, film critics regularly find themselves faced with a tricky problem: if the existence of a genre depends on general public recognition rather than on individual spectator perception, then how does that public recognition come about? While this problem might have been resolved by reference to general cultural circumstances (following Siegfried Kracauer's argument in *From Caligari to Hitler* [1947]) or to the institutions of film reception (following Tony Bennett's [1983] 'reading formation' model), film genre theorists have preferred to trace a direct path from industrial origins to generalized audience acceptance of generic existence, description and terminology. While this conclusion depends on the somewhat doubtful assumption that genres shaped by the film industry are communicated completely and uniformly to audiences widely dispersed in terms of time, space and experience, it serves to close off further debate about the constitution and naming of genres.

When Frye and Todorov call for a 'scientific' approach to genre study, they mean that critics must be free to discover new connections, to form new textual groupings, and to offer new labels. Only in this way can Frye offer his theory of *mythoi* or Todorov describe the genre that he calls the *fantastic*. Film genre criticism has not followed this lead, particularly in constituting its objects of study. Instead of the romantic model of privileging individual critical analysis, film genre theory has followed the classical line, stressing the primacy of industry discourse, along with its broad effect on the mass audience.

Refusing to locate genre in textual properties alone, film genre theorists have

systematically assumed a quasi-magical correspondence between industry purposes and audience responses – quasi-magical because the mechanics of the relationship between industry and audience have been described in only the most primitive manner. Leo Braudy's version of the relationship, for example, goes as follows: 'Genre films essentially ask the audience, "Do you still want to believe this?' Popularity is the audience answering, "Yes" ' (1977, p. 179). As Schatz says, after quoting Braudy's formula approvingly, 'The genre film reaffirms what the audience believes both on individual and on communal levels' (1981, p. 38). Paradoxically, then, the standard view of film genre sets up industry and audience each as an agent of the other. While in one sense 'genres are "made" by the collective response of the mass audience' (Schatz, 1981, p. 264), in a more fundamental way they are originally established and named by the film-producing industry. In an apparently continuous loop, like two serpents biting each other's tails, industry and audience are seen as locked in a symbiotic relationship leaving no room for a third party.

Explaining that genres are 'the product of audience and studio interaction', Schatz stresses that genres are 'not the result of some arbitrary critical or historical organization. Neither organized nor discovered by analysts, film genres are instead 'the result of the material conditions of commercial filmmaking itself' (ibid., p. 16). This point is echoed throughout the film genre tradition in the methods used by critics to constitute their generic canon. Whether the topic is the musical (Feuer), the Western (Cawelti), the biopic (Custen), the historical adventure film (Taves), the war film (Basinger), or even British genre films (Landy), the generic corpus is assumed to be a given, pre-defined by industrial fiat. As we will see in Chapter 5, by constructing their own versions of industry genre definition and corpus constitution, most genre studies actually do not fully respect the industrial activity to which they systematically pay lip service. Nevertheless, the theory behind current genre study clearly turns on the importance of industrial action to define what Neale calls 'institutionalized classes of texts' (1990, p. 52). If it is not defined by the industry and recognized by the mass audience, then it cannot be a genre, because film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared.

Genres have clear, stable identities and borders

The theoretical clarity of film genre criticism is quite obviously challenged at every turn by the historical dimensions of film production and reception. Where film genre theory assumes coincidence between industrial and audience perceptions, history furnishes example after example of disparity. Where the theory of generic reception requires texts whose genres are immediately and transparently recognizable, the most interesting texts supplied by film history are complex, mobile and mysterious. Where Linnaeus' scientific binomial nomenclature model assumes pure specimens, genre history offers crossbreeds and mutants.

Yet film genre studies have too great a stake in generic purity to pay overmuch attention to history. Though the history of cinema might well have turned the study of film genre towards romantic notions of generic mixing, the theoretical programmes adopted by genre critics depend instead on careful adherence to

classical standards, not only in terms of genre separation, but also in terms of rule-based creation. The reasons for this are quite clear. Because genre is conceived as a conduit down which are poured textual structures linking production, exhibition and reception, genre study produces satisfactory results only when it has the right type of material to work with, i.e., texts that clearly and simultaneously support all aspects of the standard generic trajectory: blueprint, structure, label and contract. Only when the label and the structure provide a clear blueprint for production and a demonstrable basis for reception can this particular approach to genre operate properly.

In order to furnish appropriate material for this type of genre study, critics have regularly performed two complementary operations. First, they have systematically disregarded films that fail to exhibit clear generic qualifications. Second, each major genre has been defined in terms of a nucleus of films obviously satisfying the theory's fourfold assumptions:

- (a) Each film was produced according to a recognizably generic blueprint.
- (b) Each film displays the basic structures commonly identified with the genre.
- (c) During its exhibition each film is regularly identified by a generic label.
- (d) Audiences systematically recognize each film as belonging to the genre in question and interpret it accordingly.

However the privileged corpus of an individual genre is defined, one characteristic stands out: most genre critics prefer to deal with films that are clearly and ineluctably tied to the genre in question. No romantic mixed genres, no cross-breeds, no anomalies.

In fact, one of the common first moves made by genre theorists and historians is to justify reduction of the enormous corpus implied by the book's main title to the narrow corpus expressed in the title's colonated small print. Robert Lang, for example, begins a book titled American Film Melodrama (1989) by explaining that he is really dealing with 'family' melodrama as it appears in three films each by Griffith, Vidor and Minnelli. Will Wright (1975) reduces multiple thousands of Westerns to fifty films grossing more than four million dollars. Many more books conceal a de facto selection process beneath broad titles and claims. For Jane Feuer (1982) the musicals that really count are those produced by MGM's Freed unit. Thomas Schatz (1981) expresses his conclusions about the history of the Western in terms of selected films directed by John Ford. There is no sense in doing genre criticism, it would seem, without first constituting a corpus that is incontrovertibly generic.

A second method of assuring genres that are neat, manageable and stable is simply to subdivide broad genres into smaller units. Rather than take on the whole comic genre or even all of romantic comedy, Stanley Cavell (1981) trims down Hollywood comedy in *Pursuits of Happiness* to six comedies of remarriage. Brian Taves in *The Romance of Adventure* (1993) provides a remarkably clear example of this process in the opening words of the first chapter:

Ask six different individuals – lay person, scholar, critic, or filmmaker – to name the first adventure film that comes to mind, and there will probably be a half-dozen widely divergent answers. One person mentions Raiders of the Lost Ark, the second champions Star Wars, another replies The Guns of Navarone, a fourth cites Quo Vadis, a fifth cham-

pions the James Bond movies, and the sixth suggests Robin Hood. I believe that of these examples only Robin Hood is truly an adventure film. The others represent genres that are distinct in their own right. Raiders of the Lost Ark is a fantasy... Star Wars is science fiction... The Guns of Navarone is a war movie... Quo Vadis is a biblical epic... James Bond is a spy... in a world of espionage and secret agents. Robin Hood, by contrast, deals with the valiant fight for freedom and a just form of government, set in exotic locales and the historical past. This is the central theme of adventure, a motif that is unique to the genre.

It is essential to determine what comprises an adventure film, to analyze the genre's central tenets, and to distinguish its borders from other forms with similar elements.

(pp. 3-4)

Concerned to remain faithful to the true nature of the genre, Taves demonstrates the importance currently attributed to aligning a genre's 'central tenets' and a narrow generic corpus with clear 'borders'. The nationalistic overtones of this dedication will receive further commentary in Chapter 12.

Individual films belong wholly and permanently to a single genre

Just as genres must have clear borders in order to facilitate the kind of genre criticism described here, so the individual films of any particular generic canon must clearly serve as examples of that genre. While a film may be seen as combining several lighting or camera styles, as juxtaposing radically different sound models, or as mixing location, studio and process images, it is usually treated as *either* a Western or a film noir, *either* a musical or a melodrama, *either* a historical adventure film or a biblical epic. When Hollywood converted to sound, films were designated by percentages, as 20 per cent talkie, or 50 per cent talkie, or even all-talkie. With genres, no such gradations are commonly deemed possible. Because of the uses to which the notion of genre is put, only an all-or-nothing approach to corpus building has appeared acceptable.

If spectators are to experience films in terms of their genre, films must leave no doubt as to their generic identity; instant recognizability must be assumed. Statements about generic spectatorship typically take this for granted. For example, Stephen Neale says that 'The existence of genres means that the spectator, precisely, will always know that everything will be "made right in the end", that everything will cohere, that any threat or any danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained' (1980, p. 28). It is of course not 'the existence of genres' alone that guarantees spectator comfort. A text conflating two genres, say romantic comedy and documentary reporting or exploitation violence, might well put spectators in a potentially uncontainable quandary. Where one genre seems to assure the young lovers' safety, the other offers only an atrocious death. This too is a type of reading that could be made possible by 'the existence of genres', but it is emphatically not the one regularly chosen by recent critics.

For this reason, terms used to describe relationships between individual films and genre typically follow the type/token model. That is, each film is imaged as an example of the overall genre, replicating the generic prototype in all basic characteristics. Thus films are often said to 'belong to' or to be 'members of' a genre. While the inclusive lists provided at the end of many genre studies show great

concern to divide the genre into its constitutive subgenres, they almost never reveal any doubt about whether each and every film deserves to be considered as a token of the genre in question. Termed simply 'Major and representative westerns' (Cawelti, 1975), 'Musicals by subgenre' (Altman, 1987), 'Biopics by studio' (Custen, 1992), or 'Adventure films by type' (Taves, 1993), these listings provide eloquent testimony to the doctrine of generic exclusivity practised by recent critics, theorists and historians. If genres are regularly treated like nation-states, then dual citizenship has clearly been proscribed by current genre studies.

Rare is the city that has forever flown the same flag. Just as it might seem logical to think that some films simultaneously exhibit the characteristics of more than a single genre, it would appear reasonable to believe that some films might have changed colours over the years. In the 20s, virtually every film was identified as either a melodrama or a comedy; in the 40s films were regularly identified by multiple designators (such as comedy melodrama, juvenile comedy, or comedyfantasy); by the 70s an entirely new set of generic types was available (road film, big caper film, disaster film, and the like). Instead of considering that changes in terminology modify the generic identity of previous films, however, critics have always assumed that new terms should have no effect on already existing films and that generic identification is a once-and-for-all affair. When Stuart Kaminsky introduces the big caper genre, he suggests that, 'as a formula, big caper movies are as old as Westerns' (1974, p. 75). Yet he mentions only three pre-1950 films and reaches the conclusion that 'The big caper film did not emerge as an identifiable genre, however, until the 1950s' (ibid., p. 76). The next twenty-three pages and the entire film list are thus given over to the genre since 1950.

Stephen Neale (1990; 1993) has pointed out that many films have undergone a change in genre designation over the course of their lives. Far from concluding that films may indeed under some circumstances change genre, however, Neale simply castigates recent critics for misapprehending the genre of the films in question. The basic, broadly accepted assumption thus stands: once generically identified by the industry, films are typed for life.

Genres are transhistorical

In current practice, the very act of identifying a genre requires that generic texts be lifted out of time and placed in a timeless holding area as if they were all contemporaries. Responding to a classical sense of tradition popularized by Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and Northrop Frye, this synchronic approach strips away historical differences, thus offering a stage where similarities among texts may readily be recognized. Also operative here is the influence of Lévi-Strauss and of anthropology in general. Commonly dealing with texts that are undatable or virtually unchanging over time, structural anthropologists offer the perfect model for genre critics who would see genre as somehow beyond history.

Even more than Jungian psychology, Lévi-Straussian influence on literary structuralism heavily contributed to a persistent tendency either to compare genre to myth or to treat genres as current embodiments of myth. For Bazin, 'The western was born of an encounter between a mythology and a means of expression' (1971, p. 142). Altman claims that 'the musical fashions a myth out of the Amer-

ican courtship ritual' (1987, p. 27). Schatz confesses that 'in the final analysis, the relationship of genre filmmaking to cultural myth-making seems to me to be significant and direct' (p. 263). Will Wright dots the 'i's': 'the Western, though located in a modern industrial society, is as much a myth as the tribal myths of the anthropologists' (1975, p. 187).

Likening genre to myth provides clear gains for genre theorists. This strategy provides an organizing principle for genre study, transmuting what might have been a hollow commercial formula into a culturally functional category, and thus lending the prestigious support of cultural anthropology to the heretofore lowly study of popular genres. In return for these benefits, however, genre critics have been forced to forego serious historical considerations in favour of the transhistorical model offered by myth. Says John Cawelti: 'Genre is universal, basic to human perceptions of life' (1975, p. 30). Following Peter Brooks, Robert Lang speaks of the 'melodramatic imagination' (1989, pp. 17–18), while Gerald Mast (1973) speaks of the 'comic mind'. Each film genre is thus figured as a representational form deriving directly from a basic human capacity.

The need to treat genre as a transhistorical category has an interesting effect on recent accounts of genre beginnings. Whereas genres might have been seen as developing within the film industry, according to a historically specific logic, they tend instead to be seen either as continuations of genres pre-existing in literature (the Western), theatre (melodrama) and non-fiction writing (the biopic), or as volcanic eruptions of mythic magma, brought to the surface by the vagaries of technology (the musical), censorship (screwball comedy), or modern life (sci-fi). Whatever role current circumstances may play in formulating the surface structure of genre films, much recent genre theory has assumed that the deep structures come directly from the archetypal depths of myth, whether already apparent in other domains or newly brought to the surface by cinema itself.

The transhistorical nature of current generic speculation often leads to treatment of a single film or group of films as having a special role in defining a genre or expressing its 'essence'. Stanley Cavell claims that 'a genre emerges full-blown ... and then works out its internal consequences ... it has no history, only a birth and a logic' (1981, p. 27). Like many others, Thomas Schatz refers to a 'generic prototype' (1981, p. 264), as if genres were typically set in place on an industrial model: create a prototype, put it into production, continue to produce the new product as long as it sells. Jerome Delamater slightly varies this metaphor by treating a particular type of musical (the 'integrated' musical) as the genre's Platonic ideal (1974, p. 130), i.e., as the mythically pure form to which this earthly genre aspires. The musical was born by mistake in the wrong form, as Delamater tells the story, but the genre's 'natural' tendency towards replicating the myth's pure form assured the musical's eventual adherence to the integrated model.

If all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, then all genre theory is little more than a footnote to Aristotle. The current tendency to figure genres transhistorically simply extends Aristotle's intention to note the *essential* quality of each poetic kind. It is precisely the notion that genres have essential qualities that makes it possible to align them with archetypes and myths and to treat them as expressive of broad and perdurable human concerns.

Genres undergo predictable development

By defining genres in a transhistorical fashion, recent critics facilitate the identification and description of genres, while stressing the extent to which genres regularly repeat similar strategies. Yet genres do exist in history. Unlike the exact replicas produced by other consumer industries (clothing, appliances, cars), genre films must not only be similar in order to succeed, they must also be different. As Robert Warshow has pointed out, 'variation is absolutely necessary to keep the type from becoming sterile; we do not want to see the same movie over and over again, only the same form' (1974, p. 147). Genre critics have long deemed it necessary to construct a model that would properly describe and account for this tendency towards variation.

Two closely related paradigms, both dependent on organic metaphors, have been developed to configure and explain the restricted variations of genre film. The first treats the genre as a living being, with individual films reflecting specific age brackets. As Jane Feuer points out, 'film genres, especially long-lived ones such as the Western and the musical, follow a predictable life cycle' (1993, p. 88). John Cawelti details the stages of this development: 'One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so wellknown that people become tired of their predictability' (1986, p. 200). The metaphor is pervasive. Brian Taves (1993) notes the development of the adventure genre from 'a time of comparative innocence' (p. 73) to a period of 'experience . . and disillusionment' (p. 74). Schatz (1981) returns repeatedly to life-cycle terminology, outlining 'a newborn genre's status as social ritual' (p. 41), evoking a genre's habits 'at the earliest stages of its life span' (p. 38), and concluding with evocations of maturity and death. Two different section headings in Schatz's book Hollywood Genres employ the expression 'comes of age' to describe generic development (with reference to the musical, p. 189, and melodrama, p. 223), while the Western's growth is traced from youth through self-confident maturity to neurotic professionalism.

The notion that a genre grows according to a human developmental scheme accompanies a more general anthropomorphism whereby genres are regularly said to develop, to react, to become self-conscious, and to self-destruct. Whether the parallel is simply suggested metaphorically or programmatically developed, generic anthropomorphism always provides a rhetorically effective model of variation within a context of fundamental fixity. Convinced of the sacrosanct nature of personal identity, our society easily accepts the human life metaphor as guarantor of continuity.

Critics who stress change over continuity typically also turn to a second model, that of biological evolution. Brian Taves traces the 'evolution' of the adventure genre through four cycles (1993, 56ff). Thomas Schatz (1981) shuttles between Christian Metz's classic-parody-contestation-critique model and Henri Focillon's quadripartite version of the life of forms: the experimental age, the classic age, the age of refinement, the baroque age. Designed to account for variety within a genre's overall homogeneity, these evolutionary schemes paradoxically stress generic predictability more than variation. Whereas biological evolution depends

heavily on unexpected mutations, the evolutionary model used to describe generic evolution always dwells on entirely predictable patterns. Jane Feuer's treatment of the backstage musical clearly exemplifies this tendency:

The backstage musical provides a textbook illustration of a genre's development from a period of experimentation in which the conventions are established (1929–33) to a classical period during which a balance reigns (1933–53) to a period of reflexivity dominated by parody, contestation and even deconstruction of a genre's native tongue. Indeed, the neat unfolding I have just been enumerating has about it an almost mathematical precision, as if one could out of a table of permutations have predicted the emergence of certain new combinations at certain periods in the genre's history.

(1993, p. 90)

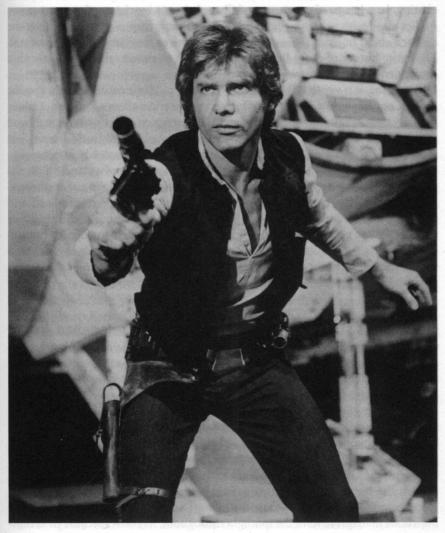
Feuer's unfolding metaphor identifies her evolutionary stance as pre-Darwinian. Genres are like genetically programmed seeds, she seems to say, bound for a particular destiny and no other.

Both of the models typically evoked to explain generic development – the wellknown stages of a human life and the prescribed pattern of an unfolding evolution - thus offer precious little elbowroom. Like a train, genre is free to move, but only along already laid tracks. This tendency to subordinate history to continuity by restricting change to prescribed limits helps us to understand the sleight of hand whereby genre history can regularly be written without contradicting genre's transhistorical nature. Like railroad tracks, teleological history assures that genres will be free only to shuttle back and forth between experimentation and reflexivity. Always contained, generic types are forever separated by the isolating action of a historical logic according to which genres can only unfold, but never mate or select. Genre history so eschews change that it resembles no other modern form of history. Yet genre history's organic model serves a particular type of genre theory especially well, effectively containing the significant challenge that serious historical consideration would pose to genre, thereby preserving recent genre theory's overall commitment to a transhistorical definition of clearly separate genres.

Genres are located in a particular topic, structure and corpus

Films might reasonably be categorized – indeed have been categorized – according to a wide spectrum of variables. Films are produced by major, minor, or independent studios, in live-action or animation form, on a big budget or a shoestring, as personal projects or programmers. Short or long, widescreen or academy ratio, in black and white or colour, films are distributed as 'A' or 'B' pictures, initial- or re-release, with an age rating of, for example, 'PG' or 'X'. Exhibited in first-run or local theatres, in standalones or multiplexes, with mono sound, Dolby stereo, or THX, films inspire audiences to giggles and laughter or pity and fear, to silence or whistling, to buy popcorn or not. Any one of these differences, and many more, might have been deemed pertinent to generic classification. Yet genres are typically defined according to a far more limited range of characteristics.

Consider the famous *Variety* headline: 'STIX NIX HICK PIX'. Are 'hick pix' a genre, including rural melodramas, regional musicals, small-town crime movies, and any other film dealing with rural America? Generations of American genre critics have answered this question in the negative. We understand what 'hick pix' are, but we don't treat this category as a genre. Instead, genres are thought to reside in a particular topic and structure or in a corpus of films that share a specific topic and structure. That is, in order to be recognized as a genre, films must have both a common topic (and here rural America might well do) and a common structure, a common way of configuring that topic. Even when films share a common topic, they will not be perceived as members of a genre unless that topic systematically receives treatment of the same type (which is where 'hick pix' falls short, for it is a



Shots like this one of gunfighter Harrison Ford led many critics to assimilate Star Wars (1977) to the Western.

category based solely on a broad topic). The inverse of this proposition has also remained true in recent criticism. When *Star Wars* took American theatres by storm, many viewers recognized in its structure the familiar epic configuration of the Western. In fact, some critics described *Star Wars* as a Western. Their desire to integrate this film into the corpus of the Western did not hold sway, however, for the general tendency of genre theorists and the popular audience alike is to recognize genre only when both subject and structure coincide.

If genre-ness is thought to reside in a particular complex of topic and structure (or 'semantics' and 'syntax', the terms used in my 1984 article printed as an appendix to this volume), the genre itself is typically thought of as a corpus of films. When we hear the expression 'the Hollywood musical' we understand that someone is referring not to production, exhibition, or reception concerns, but to an existing, largely agreed on corpus of films. It is not by chance that most genre studies close with a list of films, for it is that very corpus that constitutes the author's object of study. This attitude has become so familiar as to seem natural. The entire history of genre theory has trained us to expect critics to start with a predefined genre and corpus.

In passing, it is worth noting that the corpus typically identified with a specific genre is not single, but double. Nearly every genre critic offers a long list of films, but only treats a few of them. Sometimes this restriction is done consciously and openly (Thomas Elsaesser [1973]reducing melodrama to family melodrama), but more often, in imitation of Northrop Frye's slippage from comedy in general to the more restrictive domain of New Comedy, the narrowing of a standard corpus fails to be acknowledged (as in the common auteurist tendency to equate the suspense film with Hitchcock, the melodrama with Sirk, the Western with Ford, and the musical with films produced by MGM's Freed unit). Because of this tendency towards generic gerrymandering, it is important to recognize the effective difference between the full list of films identified as the critic's object of study and the far more limited list of films that represent the critic's version of the genre's putative Platonic ideal.

Genre films share certain fundamental characteristics

Given the critical tendency to locate genre in a shared topic and structure, films within the same genre must obviously share certain basic attributes. Curiously, though, the resemblance does not stop there: critics have noted that all Hollywood genre films share certain essential properties.

Constantly opposing cultural values to counter-cultural values, genre films regularly depend on dual protagonists and *dualistic* structures (producing what I have called dual-focus texts). In the archetypal Western scene, the sheriff confronts an outlaw in a shoot-out; the gangster is doubled by a rival gang leader or FBI agent; the US Army commander is matched by a German or Japanese counterpart; the human hero is pitted against a monster from prehistory or outer space; even Fred Astaire must share the billing with Ginger Rogers. When a single individual manages to hold the spotlight throughout, it is often because he is himself schizophrenic, divided like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde into separate and opposed beings.

Both intratextually and intertextually, the genre film uses the same material over and over again. A common complaint levelled against genre films, 'If you've seen one you've seen 'em all', correctly describes their repetitive nature. The same fundamental conflicts are resolved over and over again in similar fashion – the same shoot-out, the same sneak attack, the same love scene culminating in the same duet. Each film varies the details but leaves the basic pattern undisturbed, to the point where shots used in one film are often recycled in another (for example, battle action from the 1929 Divine Lady is pressed into service in the 1935 Captain Blood and yet again in the 1940 Sea Hawk – see Behlmer, 1985, p. 109). The extras of adventure and war movies truly die a thousand deaths – once shot they must change costume or location in order to repeat the exercise. The genre film seems to represent nothing more than the endless repetition of the same confrontation, the same love scene.

The repetitive nature of genre films tends to diminish the importance of each film's ending, along with the cause-and-effect sequence that leads to that conclusion. Instead, genre films depend on the *cumulative* effect of the film's often repeated situations, themes and icons. Early critics of the gangster film were already well aware of this fact; the deaths of Cagney, Robinson and Muni at the end of *Public Enemy*, *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* are insufficient to reverse the impression left by the rest of the film. In its totality, the gangster film glorifies the gangster by accumulating scenes of bravado, wit, good sense, fidelity and just plain guts. Who can follow or remember the cause-and-effect sequence presented in *The Big Sleep*? Yet no one forgets the interaction between Bogie and Bacall. Far more important than the ending of a road movie are the repeated and similar encounters that make up the middle of the film. From *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Thelma and Louise* it is the cumulative effect of the couple's interactions that stays with the viewer, rather than any particular decision or result.

The repetitive and cumulative nature of genre films makes them also quite predictable. Not only can the substance and the ending of most genre films be predicted by the end of the first reel, but the repeated formulaic use of familiar stars usually makes them predictable on the basis of the title and credits alone. Such names as Boris Karloff, Errol Flynn, Jeanette MacDonald, John Wayne, Gene Kelly, Sylvester Stallone, Goldie Hawn and Arnold Schwarzenegger designate more than just actors and actresses – they guarantee a certain style, a particular atmosphere and a well-known set of attitudes. The pleasure of genre film spectatorship thus derives more from reaffirmation than from novelty. People go to genre films to participate in events that somehow seem familiar. They may be looking for strong emotions, exciting scenes, novel situations and fresh dialogue, but like those who go to the amusement park in search of adventure, they would rather enjoy their excitement in a controlled environment that they recognize. Genre film suspense is thus almost always false suspense: in order to participate in the film's strong emotions we must provisionally pretend we don't know that the heroine will be rescued, the hero freed, and the couple reunited.

Films with weak generic ties usually depend heavily on their own internal logic, whereas genre films make heavy use of *intertextual* references. The Western respects and recalls the history of the Western more than it does the history of the West. Musicals constantly refer back to earlier musicals. As if each genre were itself

a complete and closed universe, discussions among film genre fans regularly evoke other genre films rather than the real world. Implicitly, each new genre film ingests every previous film, a process often literalized by the recycling of popular titles. In order to understand the later films we must also know the earlier films that they contain.

In spite of a strong tendency to close in on themselves, genre films nevertheless maintain a strong connection to the culture that produced them. Whereas other films depend heavily on their referential qualities to establish ties to the real world, genre films typically depend on *symbolic* usage of key images, sounds and situations. Actual location matters less for the Western's incessant long shots of the landscape than the way the landscape is used to figure the simultaneous danger and potential that the West represents. Similarly, a train crossing the prairie (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*), a contested gun (*Winchester '73*), and the building of a church (*My Darling Clementine*) or a schoolhouse (*Oklahoma!*) all carry a symbolic weight that outstrips the historical referent. More than just part of history, these symbols evoke the taming of nature's dangers and the resultant civilization of the West. Often castigated for oversimplification of history and human relations, genre films also gain from their simplicity, for it is the very concentration derived from simplification that allows cowboys, gangsters, dancers, detectives and monsters to take on symbolic value so easily and systematically.

As Malinowski and Radcliffe-Browne discovered with ritual, as Langer and Cassirer claimed of myth, as Freud suggested for dreams and Huizinga for play, film genres are functional for their society. Whereas producers and exhibitors see genre films as 'product', critics increasingly recognize their role in a complex cultural system permitting viewers to consider and resolve (albeit fictively) contradictions that are not fully mastered by the society in which they live. Seen as referential documents, musicals are a lie; they offer a view of male-female relationships that simply does not square with real life. Musicals make much more sense when they are seen as working out the sexes' different expectations within American culture, thus justifying cultural practices that might otherwise be judged unacceptable. Musicals – and other genres – thus function to satisfy a society that its practices, almost always problematic from some point of view, are fully defensible and deserving of public support.

Genres have either a ritual or an ideological function

During the 60s and 70s, renewed interest in popular culture and its genres was spurred on by two critical currents. On the one hand, literary structuralism followed the lead of Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss in concentrating on folk narratives without any apparent source other than the very audience of those narratives. From Lévi-Strauss and other structural anthropologists, genre critics learnt that narrative can serve as a form of societal self-expression, directly addressing the society's constitutive contradictions. During the same period, a growing number of Marxist critics followed the example of Louis Althusser, who demonstrated the ideological investment that governments and industries place in the symbolic and representational systems that they produce.

During the 70s and 80s, these two basic tendencies were transformed into

exemplary theories regarding the function of genre in popular texts. Had genre theorists turned instead to other available models, for example quantitative uses and gratifications research, Freudian psychoanalysis, or the New History of the Annales School, they would certainly have reached different conclusions about the function of genre. With Lévi-Strauss and Althusser serving as primary models, however, it is hardly surprising that they split into two counterposed groups – what might be called the ritual and ideological camps.

Following the example of primitive or folk narrative, the ritual approach considers that audiences are the ultimate creators of genres, which function to justify and organize a virtually timeless society. According to this approach, the narrative patterns of generic texts grow out of existing societal practices, imaginatively overcoming contradictions within those very practices. From this point of view, audiences have a very special investment in genres, because genres constitute the audience's own method of assuring its unity and envisioning its future. Particularly welcome to champions of popular culture because of its ability to lend meaning to a previously neglected or condemned domain, the ritual approach has been applied to cinema by a wide range of critics, including Altman, Braudy, Cawelti, McConnell, Schatz, Wood and Wright.

Based on an entirely different narrative model, the ideological approach reaches radically divergent conclusions. Imaging narrative texts as the vehicle for a government's address to its citizens/subjects or an industry's appeal to its clients, Althusser's system attributes greater importance to discursive concerns than the ritual approach, more sensitive instead to questions of narrative structure. Whereas ritual critics interpret narrative situations and structural relations as offering *imaginative* solutions to a society's real problems, ideological critics see the same situations and structures as luring audiences into accepting *deceptive* non-solutions, while all the time serving governmental or industry purposes. Here too, genres have a particular role and importance, for it is through generic conventions that audiences are lured into false assumptions of societal unity and future happiness.

Taking their cues from demonstrations by Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno that popular texts lull audiences to sleep by apparently doing the reading for them, ideologically oriented theorists treat genres as particularly soporific tunes in the overall ideological lullaby programme. Originally propounded by Jean-Louis Comolli and other writers for the Parisian journal Cahiers du cinéma, along with Jean-Louis Baudry and his colleagues at Cinéthique, the film-oriented version of ideological criticism was initially popularized in the English-speaking world by the British journal Screen; in the United States it was first championed by the Marxist-inspired Jump Cut, but moved rapidly to Camera Obscura and other feminist venues before suffusing virtually the entire field during the 80s.

One might expect the proponents of each of these approaches to champion a

One might expect the proponents of each of these approaches to champion a separate corpus of films, like conservative and liberal Christians quoting complementary passages from the Bible in support of their irreconcilable positions. Curiously, the debate has never turned on the kind of complex textual gerrymandering characteristic of religious conflict. On the contrary, both sides regularly cite films by the same beloved directors (Ford, Hitchcock, Minnelli, Sirk) and with the sole exception of the film noir, which ritual critics have still not managed to crack,

both sides regularly evoke all major genres and a wide variety of minor ones. One reasonable conclusion – that Hollywood genres owe their very existence to their ability to serve both functions at once – has been advanced (Altman, 1987, pp. 98–9), but not generally adopted.

Genre critics are distanced from the practice of genre

The role of film criticism and the status of speculation about genre occupy an unexpected place in recent genre theory. The genre critic might well have been accorded a special function in our overall understanding of genre. As a primus inter pares within the genre audience, the genre critic might have been seen as an especially important player in the game of determining generic existence, boundaries and meaning. This position follows quite reasonably from the ritual approach, whereby audiences are said to mould genres to their own needs. The critic would thus play the role of shaman, interceding between the audience and the text, the society and the industry.

Instead, the stance typically assumed by genre critics follows a different model, where texts are seen as handed down by a distant, powerful government or industry. Here, the role of the critic is to stand aside and watch the effect of institutionally produced texts on unsuspecting subjects. Following a time-honoured humanist tradition, further developed by Cartesianism, Enlightenment science and nineteenth-century positivism, critics are assumed to have the power to rise above the very audiences with whom they viewed the films they write about. The kindest words that genre theorists of the last half-century can apply to themselves – such terms as scientific, objective, or theoretical – are all words that implicitly separate them from the masses of viewers who are unable to see with the specially trained eyes of the critic. While this configuration was not surprising in post-war high culture attacks on popular culture, it is to say the least unexpected in the entertainment-oriented domain of genre film.

The ramifications of this position are many. Though originally developed in order to empower critics, who were thus all the better able to look down from their cultured heights on the masses, the distancing of critics from the genre audience has had the effect of excluding them, at least in theory, from the active constitution of genres. The 'industry' is regularly treated by Stephen Neale and other writers as the only effective creator and sustainer of genres. While this position no doubt overlooks the extent to which genre criticism has itself become a substantial industry, it does have the virtue of maintaining the purity of the critic's role as observer, rather than as player, in the genre game. All the more curious in a post-structuralist context, where every reader is expected to be a rewriter of texts, the objective and distanced genre theorist has chosen the strange position of a high culture commentator in order to comment on a popular culture form.

The extent to which current genre theory places the genre critic 'out of the loop' is all too consistent with the way in which genre critics actually view films, for it must be admitted that critics are the only viewers of genre films who so regularly do their viewing alone, whether in screening rooms, on a Moviola, or a VCR. However consistent this position may be with other aspects of traditional journalism and academic endeavour, it is important to recognize that it does not

constitute the only possible solution. Chapter 5 will evoke examples of the generic changes that might be made by critics and audiences who would see their appropriate role as active and engaged rather than as theoretical and objective.

The overall account that emerges from these ten partial views is surprisingly coherent – far more so than literary genre study has ever been. According to this account, the film industry, responding to audience desires, initiates clear-cut genres that endure because of their ability to satisfy basic human needs. While they do change in predictable ways over the course of their life, genres nevertheless maintain a fundamental sameness both from decade to decade and from production through exhibition to audience consumption. Guaranteeing the broad applicability of generic concepts is the broad range of meanings attributed to the term genre, along with the conduit-like nature of textual structure. Seen from the vantage point of the distanced critic, genres at times appear to function ritually, and at other moments to operate ideologically.

This traditional view of genres thus presents a neat and welcome package. Still, the very coherence of this approach remains somewhat disconcerting. Several times during this chapter, the question of genre history has been raised as a potential threat to traditional views of genre. The time has now come to take that problem seriously. Can the current understanding of genre be squared with genre history? Or might careful consideration of historical questions shake the very ground on which traditional genre theory is built?