

Guest Editorial

Valley of the Genres

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TO TALK ABOUT GENRE is to talk about type, kind, sort. Things that belong to genres are seen to travel in packs, to belong in bundles, even if from another perspective they appear distinctive or unique.

The term brings ambiguities. There are different sets of sets, which partially overlap. What are the primary genres of literature? A plausible answer would be: *fiction, poetry, drama*. Never mind the overlaps between even these widest terms (much drama has been poetic, and isn't all poetry fictional?) – I think we know what we mean by them enough for them to be functional. Possibly one or two other genres could be added: non-fiction, memoir, the essay, even the graphic novel? But that needn't much trouble this first categorization, which divides the literary field by format. In many cases you can allocate texts just by glancing at them: the crammed, continuous pages of prose fiction; poetry with its lines rarely touching the right-hand margin; drama with its offset speakers and italicized stage directions. To consider genre as a discursive format, implying a particular relation between author and audience, is a procedure that goes back to Plato, and was still what Northrop Frye meant by the term when he published *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957.

But when people these days talk conceptually about genre, they will just as likely be talking about the range of genres *within* one of those formats or media.

The traditional classifications of tragedy, comedy and their various companions like romance and satire are a major instance of this. Though they may have originated in drama, they cut across formats. We have comic novels and satirical poetry, not to mention the cross-generic hybrids famously theorized by Shakespeare's Polonius. (In Frye's cosmically ambitious account, these classical modes are reclassified as *mythoi* and made to correspond to the seasons of the year.) But alongside these categorizations we must place still another emphasis. For genre also refers to the varieties of *popular* narrative which have developed in the era of mass culture. Sometimes these overlap with, or continue, the traditional genres – as in film comedy or the romantic novel, not to mention their many variants (gross-out comedy) and crossovers (romantic comedy). But to a large extent the genres of mass culture displace their predecessors. Science fiction, the Western, the gangster or spy narrative, crime and horror fiction form a distinct, historically recent set of genres. Like most things, they have historical roots – as in the Gothic tradition that lies behind the horror movie. But the Aristotelian distinctions between the traditional genres are different from the way we distinguish the new ones – more often by iconography (horses, robots, vampires) and the kind of worlds they depict.

So at least three frameworks are in play here (and perhaps more, especially if one takes into account non-Western traditions). A text can exist in multiple frames at once, as with a crime novel that is also tragic. Each vector allows us to say different things about the text in question; they are complementary, not in competition. What they share is that they are all ways of generalizing: of talking about groups of objects, rather than single ones. This bears reflection. For the urge to generalize, and to put into genre, coexists with a widespread assumption that art concerns the singular. In recent years literary theory has seen a revived emphasis on the singularity of literature. Theorists have explored the idea that the literary experience is unique and unrepeatable. But to talk about genre is to talk about repetition. It is to frame the specificity of any text within broader patterns of similarity and predictability that enable it to exist. It is to emphasize not a work's singularity, but its typicality.

We may thus see genre as part of a long-standing dynamic within art, between the individual and the collective. We are quite used to thinking of art as expressive: as a place where an individual transmits something distinctive about themselves. But there are also many ways in which any such expression interacts with factors beyond the individual, which are in effect collectively owned and maintained. The forms of poetry – sonnet, sestina, villanelle, haiku and a thousand more – are one instance. So is genre, in any of the senses sketched above. The idea of genre does not disallow individuality, but does immediately complicate and undercut it. Once genre is in play, we cannot think of expression as purely a matter for the individual. Artistic creation must instead be conceived as a negotiation with forms and norms outside ourselves. The demands of genres loom like Monument Valley's rocks, great inherited formations through which artists must make their way.

In its mass-cultural sense, genre is also an emphatically collective form in the size of its audiences. The gangster movie, radio thriller or superhero comic did not develop as means to convey exquisitely personal feeling, but as unashamedly

broad-brush formats, crowd-pleasers, pot-boilers and money-spinners. They belong to an age that could gather hundreds in the dark to watch a story; an era of urban masses and hit-parade broadcasts, crowded commuter trains and teeming skyscrapers. Perhaps this is one reason that radical writers have repeatedly turned to genre forms. Science fiction has become a heartland not merely for writers loosely on the Left, but for Marxists and anarchists light years beyond the political mainstream. The genre's innate possibilities for critique, speculation and utopia clearly attract them. So too, perhaps, does the sense of writing in a form that was developed for the consumption of the masses, with its connotations of collective effort and identity rather than decadent individualism. This would partially explain the compact, in contemporary culture, between genre and the avant-garde. People who are attracted to noise, distortion, abstraction, montage, chaos, chance and silence seem much more likely to be simultaneously enthusiastic for SF, crime or comic books than for Rose Tremain or Alan Hollinghurst. A kind of pulp-modernist coalition excludes the apparently mainstream and middlebrow, recapitulating the historical avant-garde's desire to affiliate with the proletariat over the heads of the bourgeoisie.

Cultural value is in one sense infinitely variable and contestable. Notwithstanding *The Simpsons'* canon-forming Comic Book Guy, there is little prospect of reaching stable consensus on whether Green Lantern is better than Dan Dare or Dick Tracy, or indeed Virginia Woolf better than Henry James. In another sense, cultural value is structural, with gatekeepers, opinion-formers and historical shape. In this sense, we can say that mass-cultural genres were for a long time devalued. The Western or horror movie had its place, but was not to be confused with serious creativity. This assumption, once again, is surely connected to the collective character of genre. If genre was culture made in a factory, then it did not seem plausible to say that it could equal the creative work lovingly crafted by an individual. It was this orthodoxy that the Parisian film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* challenged in the 1950s with its *politique des auteurs*. By the revisionist lights of auteurism, individual artists could flourish amid Hollywood's production lines. Rather than stymieing creativity, generic codes could stimulate it. Howard Hawks could stroll across whatever generic territory was in vogue at the time – screwball, gangsters, Westerns, war – and make money while still making the genre his own. *Cahiers* is one of the historical sources of our contemporary attitude to genre, which is doubtful of dismissing it. To say 'but that's just genre fiction' would in many contexts open one to criticism, hostility, even ridicule. The idea that genre work is inferior no longer seems respectable. It seems to me that we are past the point where the major popular genres need special pleading to stand alongside what is still, perhaps incongruously, called the mainstream. The Genre Liberation Front has probably put itself out of business.

Where does this transfiguration leave the individual / collective dynamic? Those who promote the value of genre work are necessarily promoting sets of repetitions, typologies, recurrent scenarios and iconographies. They also often make the thought-provoking case that those forms that seem to stand outside and against genre – notably the 'literary novel' – are themselves generic, which is to say, bound by their own tics and traits, repetitions which may not even be

recognized as such. (Long-standing laments about the tedium of the 'Hampstead novel' are a familiar version of this case.)

But the case for genre is not usually, in practice, the case that art is best when it's impersonal and predictable. The idea of a computer program that could produce genre work to order is, like Brian Eno's generative music which can elaborate on itself for eternity, interesting in its own right. But the most celebrated genre work is acclaimed less for its adherence to rules than for the perception that an individual has been able to achieve something distinctive within them, even to bend or rewrite them. The evident logic of genre may be toward codification and generalization, but the survival and success of a genre also appears to depend on a play of repetition and difference. And that principle of difference is still often associated with the creative individual who can do something with, or within, genre. 'Writing', wrote Roland Barthes in his genre-busting self-analysis, 'is that *play* by which I turn around as well as I can in a narrow place'. Maybe we can think of the 'narrow place' as the rules that keep genre going, and the 'play' as the unexpected individual move that keeps it interesting.

If you like a genre, are you most attracted to what most daringly exceeds it, or to what's most firmly within it? That's probably an individual decision; it might also be another way, less keyed to hierarchy, of thinking about value. Some of the greatest Westerns are 'anti-Westerns', from the revisionism of the 1960s to *Unforgiven*. But couldn't some of the greatest Westerns also, almost by definition, be the purest Westerns you could find: perhaps in B-movies of the 1930s, before the genre became more and more complicated by its internal dynamics as well as external social change? We could try this with any generic art. Are 'Where Did Our Love Go?' and 'Dancing In The Street' among the greatest 1960s soul records because they fulfil a set of generic laws, or somehow exceed them? It is curious that in an era that has reasserted the value of genre, the *generic* remains pejorative. But there are surely ways of revaluing the most generic work, as that which most joyously fulfils a genre's demands.

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