

# Classified by Genre: Rhetorical Genrefication in Cinema

By  
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## Abstract

This dissertation argues for a rethinking and expansion of film genre theory. As the variety of media exhibition platforms expands and as discourse about films permeates a greater number of communication media, the use of generic terms has never been more multiform or observable. Fundamental problems in the very conception of film genre have yet to be addressed adequately, and film genre study has carried on despite its untenable theoretical footing. Synthesizing pragmatic genre theory, constructivist film theory, Bourdieusian fan studies, and rhetorical genre studies, the dissertation aims to work through the radical implications of pragmatic genre theory and account for genres role in interpretation, evaluation, and rhetorical framing as part of broader, recurring social activities. This model rejects textualist and realist foundations for film genre; only pragmatic genre use can serve as a foundation for understanding film genres. From this perspective, the concept of genre is reconstructed according to its interpretive and rhetorical functions rather than *a priori* assumptions about the text or transtextual structures. Genres are not independent structures or relations among texts but performative speech acts about textual relationships and are functions of the rhetorical conditions of their use. This use is not only denotative, but connotative, as well, insofar as certain genre labels evoke aesthetic or moral judgments for certain users. This dissertation proposes the concept of meta-genres, or the sum total of textual and extra-textual attributes plus the evaluative valances a given user associates with a generic label. Meta-genres help guide interpretation and serve as a shorthand for evaluative judgments about certain kinds of films, and are thus central to the kinds of taste politics negotiated through film texts. The rhetorical conditions of genre use can be typified, and this dissertation adapts concepts and methods from the field of rhetorical genre studies to show that the film genre use is most readily observable through its uptake rhetorical genres. These

rhetorical genres, in turn, index the social groups and recurring situations that they are called upon to meet. By studying examples like academic writing, popular press reviews, filmmaker interviews, internet message board comments, and digital media recommendation systems, one can identify how specific deployments of generic terms serve as a nexus of text, user, group, and social activities, and can develop a methodology for studying genre as use relative to those dimensions.

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## Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	<i>Get Out</i> and the Stakes of Genre	2
1.2	Genre and Use	6
1.3	Generic Textualism and Generic Realism	10
1.4	Literature Review	15
1.5	Chapter Overview	23
2	Genre as Interpretive Schema and Rhetorical Frame	30
2.1	Genre as Interpretive Schema	30
2.1.1	Genre and Context	42
2.1.2	Academic Discourse, Interpretation, and Framing	46
2.1.3	<i>American Film Cycles</i>	50
2.2	Genre as Rhetorical Frame	64
2.2.1	Genre as Framing	68
2.2.2	Rhetorical Conditions	70
2.2.3	Genre Users	71
2.2.4	Torture Porn and “Spectacle Horror”	77
2.3	Chapter Conclusion	83
3	Meta-Genre and Social Action	84
3.1	Genre and Social Action	84
3.2	Meta-Genres	90
3.2.1	The Slasher Meta-Genre	98
3.3	Meta-Genre and Popular Discourse: <i>28 Days Later</i>	108

3.3.1	Filmmaker Discourse	109
3.3.2	Reddit and Fan Discourse	117
3.4	Chapter Conclusion	129
4	Rhetorical Genre and Film Genre Uptake	131
4.1	Rhetorical Genre Studies: Some Key Concepts	136
4.1.1	Rhetorical Genres and Rhetorical Genre Theory	139
4.1.2	Context of Culture	142
4.1.3	User Groups	144
4.1.4	Context of Genres	147
4.2	Rhetorical Genre, Film Criticism, and Historiography	152
4.3	Netflix and Film Genre Uptake	156
4.3.1	Netflix's Recommender System	157
4.3.2	Netflix and Filmic Genres	163
4.3.3	Limits of Pragmatic Genre Theory	171
4.3.4	Constellated Communities vs. Rhetorical Genre User Groups	177
4.3.5	Netflix and Rhetorical Genrefication	183
4.4	Chapter Conclusion	191
5	Conclusion: Lingering Questions and Future Directions	193
5.1	Recap: Rhetorical Genrefication	193
5.2	Genre Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy	195
5.3	Rhetorical vs. Artistic Genres	199
5.3.1	Paracinema	208
5.3.2	Operationalism	210

5.3.3	Documentary Mode	214
	Appendix	219
	Filmography	235
	Works Cited	241

## Introduction

*We have various kinds of lands, various forms of government, with estates and without them, imperial towns, a nobility of whom some are immediate, subjects of all different sorts, and a thousand other such things—to think for oneself, what good is it here? Not the slightest! What can the Philosoph do about it? Not the slightest! These are plain facts, things I must accept ... as they are, unless I want to deform and ruin our German Empire.*

*Johann Jakob Moser*  
Neues teutsches Staatsrecht, 1776<sup>1</sup>

*Science fiction is what we point to when we say it.*

*Damon Knight*<sup>2</sup>

Johann Jakob Moser was an 18th century German lawyer and expert on the legal systems of the Holy Roman Empire. By Moser's time the Empire was fragmented into a jigsaw puzzle of thousands of different political entities, some large territories with sophisticated administrations on the verge of modernizing, some rural properties with a nominal lord that wouldn't cover an American county. Not only were the entities varied in size and wealth, but they each had unique legal standing and political relations. Some were subject to a local vassal, and some owed allegiance directly to the Emperor. Centuries of wars, treaties, marriages, alliances, largesse, and other ad hoc political actions had produced a hopeless tangle of inherited rights and privileges particular to a given principality and which frustrated the futile systematizing efforts of scholars like Moser. But Moser's exasperation is coupled with and perhaps aggravated by the Empire's

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<sup>1</sup> See Walker pp. 334-5.

<sup>2</sup> See Knight p. 23

indispensability as a political entity. The Empire could not be reformed and maintain any semblance of its traditional core. In short, it worked. Not rationally or efficiently, but it worked well enough.

### *Get Out and the Stakes of Genre*

As self-identified fans of one or another film genre we enjoy not only watching but also discussing our favorite films in the genre. It is likely we can posit some common generic features, explain away exceptions, cite canonical and liminal examples—all with more or less authority. It is likely also that we regularly discriminate between social situations in deciding when a detailed, complex account of a genre is appropriate and when we have other things to do. When we need to navigate a retail or library shelf or streaming interface to find a movie, to fill out a dating or social media profile, to interpret a poster or trailer, to make sense of a review, or to briefly describe a film to someone when we can't or would rather not have a long conversation? In these latter cases, a genre is a crudely instrumental term, one that allows us to interact with manifold other texts and people as we go about our lives. Genre acts as something of a stop-gap in these situations, a term that allows us to talk about a corpus while deferring its inconsistencies and special cases in order to pursue some other activity.

As scholars, however, and especially as scholars trained in traditional genre study, we tend to emphasize the importance of the former kind of genre-related discourse at the expense of the latter. Our identity as scholars turns both on an ethos of thorough, sober, independent assessment as well as on our participation in institutional discursive activities that demand precisely this kind of textual engagement. But while this mode of engagement is valued in papers

and lectures and seminars and books, it is neither the only nor, as I suggested above, necessarily the most useful approach to genre available to us at any given moment, in any given social situation.

Genre always seems to be a problem for critics, partly because it wouldn't really be worth talking about if it weren't. Genres historically have been cobbled together in the ad hoc, instrumental way described above by critics, producers, advertisers, scholars, and fans. Each instance on its own terms should make sense, because that particular classification is directed toward some other goal or activity. Taken *in toto*, however, with each invocation of genre abstracted from its social use, genres look messy, inconsistent, incommensurable, irrational, and unsystematic. When the genre theorist sees it as her or his task to systematize, s/he alienates genres from the pragmatic and rhetorical practices that produce and reproduce them. Genres may be unsystematic, but they work for most people most of the time. They are indispensable cognitive and communicative tools, not despite but because of their indeterminate variability. It is only from the elevated, systematizing perspective of the genre scholar, like that of Moser's *Philosoph*, that this messiness is really a day-to-day problem.

This is not to say that genre is only ever a problem for scholars. Films may be framed relative to one set of generic criteria or another. Those criteria are situationally specific, but the framings themselves may find broader reading audiences. Problems arise when generic denotations and connotations conflict within one or among multiple audiences, if the participants deem it important enough to contest a given framing. On one hand, it may not be worth the effort to complain to a Target manager that "drama" is too broad a category or to correct a coworker who calls *American Psycho* (2000 dir. Mary Harron) a slasher. On the other hand, there are

fanzines and social media groups whose *raison d'être* is precisely to promote and host arguments among genre enthusiasts.

The stakes of genre framing extend beyond the limited intersubjective discourse of fan communities to broader industrial and institutional activities. A recent example is the 2017-2018 awards season controversy over Jordan Peele's 2017 film *Get Out*, which was nominated for two Golden Globes as a comedy.<sup>3</sup> This categorization sparked tremendous debate over the film's proper genre and the value implied by one generic designation over another. Fans and critics had been similarly confused in 2016 when *The Martian* (dir. Ridley Scott, perf. Matt Damon) won the Golden Globes for Best Film and Best Actor in a Comedy or Musical. However, the concern then had largely centered on the unfairness of a big-budget film with an A-List director and star competing against more modest productions.<sup>4</sup> In this latter case, some fans and critics felt that the designation "comedy" trivialized *Get Out*'s critical themes of racist violence and white liberal hypocrisy.

Though early after its release Peele himself had discussed the film in terms of horror and explicitly compared its themes and style to other horror films, he also referred to it as a "social thriller" and later, more sardonically, as a documentary.<sup>5</sup> The film is indeed funny in some parts, and it also clearly evokes the atmosphere and imagery of horror—not that those elements are mutually exclusive. Moreover, as Peele makes clear in his *Fresh Air* interview, he doesn't believe that horror is trivial, insofar as it allows us to confront historical, real-life horrors. But

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<sup>3</sup> Who nominated the film as a comedy is a complicated question. Eric Kohn of *IndieWire* explains that "while Universal submitted *Get Out* as a comedy to the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, Peele clearly had no input into that decision. [...] In fact, submissions are made to individual categories, but the HFPA makes the final decision about which categories each film falls into" (Kohn ¶4).

<sup>4</sup> See Child.

<sup>5</sup> See Kohn and Peele.

not everyone shares Peele's esteem for the horror tradition and, in light of the conventional wisdom that genre movies don't win awards, it makes sense to hedge. At stake in this controversy is how seriously movie audiences and institutions take its formal approach and thematic content, as well as the millions of dollars in extra revenue that a major award can generate.

Now, we might ask also why the Golden Globes have a comedy or musical category but no "horror" and "science fiction" categories, or why the HFPA makes generic distinctions in the first place. One perspective on this suggests itself in light of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' recent embarrassment over a proposed and quickly withdrawn Achievement in Popular Film Oscar category. Again, reactions from fans and critics ranged from nonplussed to indignant, but for different reasons. Some felt that inclusion of high-grossing films—if that's what were to define "popular"—would compromise the Academy's elite cultural authority by recognizing films that people actually go see. Others believed it would create a tiered system in which otherwise serious Best Picture contenders like *Black Panther* (2018, dir. Ryan Coogler) would be permanently relegated based on its lower generic classification.<sup>6</sup> Whatever one's take on the whole imbroglio, it highlighted the Academy's increasingly untenable situation: the tension between its roles as both arbiter of art and profit-driven industrial organization; its traditional crisis of competition with other entertainment media, most recently with digital platforms; its perception among some as irrelevant, elitist, or even reactionary, especially in light of the #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo movements. These industrial issues turn on the aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup> The new category was announced by Academy CEO Dawn Hudson in August of 2018 and rescinded the following month after the outcry. For a retrospective overview, see Igoe.

and moral value accorded a given film, the received value of a given genre, and how those might affect the profitability and/or cultural authority of a given institution.

The point of bringing up *Get Out* is not to correct and admonish the HFPA or Universal for miscategorizing the film as a comedy. I am not claiming that it is definitely a horror film and not a comedy. I am not claiming that it is neither genre, or both, or no genre at all. *Get Out* is a horror film and a comedy (and a horror-comedy) and a social thriller—not inherently, or because of any internal textual features, or because of Jordan Peele’s special authority as filmmaker. Because it has been interpreted, evaluated, and talked about as a horror, comedy, and social thriller by groups who use those terms for particular rhetorical purposes and social activities, it belongs to those genres for those groups.

A major goal of this project is to frame genre in terms of this kind of use, and that use in terms of social conditions, or the kinds of groups, activities, institutions, and discourses that fans, scholars, and fans who are scholars interact with. While modes of understanding and engaging with genre vary widely across user groups and social situations, the common principle is precisely that: use among user groups in social situations. In other words, genre entails use *by someone for someone for some purpose*. This is the broader framework for my main claim that genre is a function of the rhetorical conditions of its use.

### *Genre and Use*

Use is a bit of a fuzzy concept, though, and defining it as “social use” only goes so far toward sharpening it. One theoretical task this project tackles is distinguishing among the various functions ascribed to genre. Let’s take one function to illustrate the complexity of the issue.

Genres classify, but for what purpose? Some kinds of classification serve to elucidate an individual text or to illuminate a broader pattern among texts. Genre functions as a “metaphoric premise” for this kind of interpretive reading, though to leave it at that is to ignore the immediate rhetorical practices and purposes surrounding the reading—e.g., how that interpretation is communicated—as well as the broader social and cultural groups and institutions for whom such interpretations are meaningful and useful. George Kamberelis explains that

the value of genres and genre theory lies not so much in their powers of classification but in their powers of clarification and generativity. Genres are convenient fictions used in the attainment of pragmatic and rhetorical ends. They allow us to create or to see particular texts in a genre's terms, and, paradoxically they signal the interpretive limits of those terms. As such, a genre's definition is not constituted and constrained by "a deeper ground," whether it be an entity or a category. It is always constrained pragmatically and rhetorically by a set of specific situations, purposes, and audiences. Genres are not classes of texts but classifying statements [...] Genres provide communication systems, for the use of speakers and writers in producing texts, and readers and critics in interpreting them. (158)

Kamberelis succinctly describes the pragmatic, anti-textualist position I will take as a starting point for this project in film genre theory. I will say plenty more about pragmatic anti-textualism shortly, but note for now that it rejects the “textualist assumption” that genre is somehow intrinsic to the text and that understanding genre requires methods of textual analysis—close reading, comparative analysis, historical analysis (Mittell “A Cultural Approach” 4-5). Without a tenable textual “deeper ground” to by which to define a genre, we can only look at how it is and has been used, by whom, and for what purposes. The rhetorical approach I will advocate

decenters the primary text as object of analysis, directing us instead to look at how other writing about the primary text frames it, to examine precisely how a genre's composition, boundaries, associations, values, and communicative faculties are not "constrained by" but are indeed *functions* of the "specific situations, purposes, and audiences."

Below is the basic trajectory of this project. Beginning with an anti-foundationalist rejection of the textualist assumption, I try to work out the functions conventionally ascribed to genre in its interpretive and evaluative capacities along pragmatic and specifically rhetorical lines. Understanding genre pragmatically as performative genrefication, I question whether there is any good reason to believe that something called genre exists beyond instances of public genrefication or genre use. This perspective requires that we understand genre's interpretive, evaluative, and rhetorical functions as different—if inextricable—because they serve different pragmatic and social purposes. A radically pragmatic genre theory then would understand genre as a function of the rhetorical conditions of its use. More specifically, I will pursue four directions following from this position on film genre.

1. Building on constructivist and radical constructivist theories of schematic interpretation and adaptive knowledge, I will try to describe genre's function in the interpretative process, specifically how textual and extra-textual attributes are subject to constant reconfiguration under different received schemata.
2. Since we don't have unmediated access to the private interpretations of "readers and critics," we have to look at what they themselves have written or otherwise recorded. But these writings are themselves rhetorically and (therefore) socially situated documents, and must be framed as such. Hence, we must try to

reconstruct the rhetorical situation and implied audience for a given instance of recorded interpretation and genre use. The aim is not to expose or qualify or excuse an ‘incorrect’ use of genre, but to show how a given genre’s denotative and connotative attributes and associations are integral to the communicative and persuasive utility of that genre in a given rhetorical situation.

3. I will consider the specific evaluative functions of genre and how closely they are tied to social identity and group dynamics. This includes, say, expressing one’s preference for “art films” or disdain for “chick flicks,” but it also goes beyond that. Fan studies across different media have shown how certain subcultural identities are asserted, negotiated, and authenticated through arguments about the definition, composition, boundaries, and broader cultural politics of a given genre. This sociological dimension of genre manifests through the written or otherwise recorded accounts of fans, critics, and scholars, which testify to the crucial role of genre in reproducing and challenging dominant and oppositional taste politics.
4. Because film genre use is defined as social use in rhetorical situations, and because the social groups that use film genres do so via other kinds of writing in recurring situations, I propose adapting a methodology that studies film genres by attending to how they are “taken up” or put into social action by rhetorical genres such as journalistic reviews, scholarly articles, filmmaker interviews, social media posts, or streaming platforms.

My goal is to take seriously and tease out the implications of deconstructivist and pragmatic critiques of conventional genre studies, stripping away untenable foundational assumptions and trying to describe and account for the functions of genre as instrumental to other social activities.

### *Generic Textualism and Generic Realism*

There are shades of understanding among different groups about just what genres are or where they come from or what they do. As I suggested earlier, for most people they are likely workhorse concepts that serve well enough to achieve everyday goals. Though I suggested that genre was a perennial problem for scholars, really it is only for genre theorists, those who try to systematize, rationalize, find a generalizable principle for generic composition or boundaries or social functions. For many scholars, genre is a workhorse academic concept as well, one that allows them to delimit a study or define a corpus or establish a set of working stylistic features in service of some other project. It is in these cases that genre acts, in Kamberelis' terms, as premises for an argument. These are then, practically speaking, enthymemes, insofar as the genre of a given text or the connotative and/or denotative attributes of a given genre are rhetorically deferred by such a move. Indeed, there is much left unspoken in popular and even scholarly use of genre.

Toward the beginning of his 1998 *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman identifies and summarizes ten widespread assumptions in film genre criticism and theory as practiced from the 1960s through the 1990s.

- Genre is a useful category, because it bridges multiple concerns
- Genres are defined by the film industry and recognized by the mass audience

- Genres have clear, stable identities and borders
- Individual films belong wholly and permanently to a single genre
- Genres are transhistorical
- Genres undergo predictable development
- Genres are located in a particular topic, structure, or corpus
- Genre films share certain fundamental characteristics
- Genres have either a ritual or an ideological function
- Genre critics are distanced from the practice of genre<sup>7</sup>

Altman briefly raises doubts about each of these assumptions, even though he spends much of the rest of his book refuting them. Some of these assumptions seem particularly dated and restricted to a small field of genre theory. For instance, the question of whether genres have a ritual or an ideological function was of particular concern for the structuralist genre critics of the 1970s and 1980s, who adopted Levi-Strauss and Althusser as their respective models.<sup>8</sup> Some of these assumptions, on the other hand, persist and are evident in contemporary criticism, scholarship, and fan discourse. I will address each of these questions directly or indirectly over the course of this project to greater or lesser degrees. But note for now that I am building my project on groundwork laid in *Film/Genre*, which itself refutes each of the above assumptions

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<sup>7</sup> See Altman ch.2, 14-29.

<sup>8</sup> Among the “ritual” genre critics Altman names himself, Leo Braudy, John Cawelti, Frank McConnell, Thomas Schatz, Robin Wood, and Will Wright. On the “ideological side Altman cites Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-Louis Baudry, as well as the journals *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Cinématique*, *Screen*, *Jump Cut*, and *Camera Obscura* (Altman 27).

It is worth noting that Altman and one of the ideological structuralists, Steve Neale, have a long history of critiquing one another. This relationship is not really worth going into here, since by *Film/Genre* Altman has completely rethought and rejected much of his own older ritual structuralist model. One of Neale’s concepts, “inter-textual relay,” has been influential. I will discuss Altman’s critique of inter-textual relay in Chapter 2, and moreover I will show in Chapter 4 that Altman’s own understanding of fan communities is vulnerable to the same critique. See Altman Ch. 2 and Conclusion.

about film genre. Indeed this project can be seen as a revision and expansion of Altman's *Film/Genre*, which itself was a rethinking of conventional film genre theory. In a sense I am accepting Altman's position on textualist film genre theories and the principles of pragmatic film genre theory. However, I am expanding his model to account for genre's role in interpretation, evaluation's role in genrefication, and the rhetorical conditions under which genrefication occurs.

Because this model focuses less on films themselves than on how people write about those films under varying circumstances, I am very much interested in the spoken and unspoken assumptions about film genre and, moreover, how one knows about it or justifies knowledge claims. To explain this further, I will say a little more about the textualist assumption—henceforth just *textualism*—and also discuss what I am calling “generic realism.” These two general assumptions or appeals encompass several of Altman's more specific assumptions listed above, and can be thought of as characterizing less the ontology of genre than its epistemology—less about what genres are than about how we know about them.

Generic textualism looks to texts and applies close reading and comparative methodologies in order to identify genres as similarities between and across textual boundaries. Genres, it assumes, are discovered by but exist independent of critical activity. Generic authority is found in the film, but it can be displaced onto the professional critic or scholar or the auteur. The movie, in a sense, tells us what genre it belongs to if we are shrewd enough to decode and identify it. Disagreements among fans, critics, or scholars about a film's genre or a genre's characteristics can be resolved by appeal to more precise and insightful analytic methods that can get to the deeper ground and reveal the true genre.

This is a common assumption, and the one that I shall argue most strongly against, especially in Chapter 2, since 1) the position is neither logically nor historically tenable and 2) it does not tell us what genres mean and for whom. From the perspective of pragmatic genre theory, genre cannot be reduced to textual similarity, in part because there are too many similarities. Even if it were the case that formal similarity defined genre, sorting out the *relevant* similarities still involves selective critical activity. The films have to be made to speak in a particular way to suit a particular end. From a pragmatic perspective, we would think not just about how they are similar, but how pointing out or sorting films according to particular kinds of similarities serve certain social and institutional ends, whether scholarly or journalistic or commercial. Genre is found in the use to which a social group puts a label and body of films. Generic authority is rhetorical authority—it is exerted in advertisements and textbooks, YouTube reviews and journal articles, seminar and barroom discussions, and other supposedly ancillary paratexts. This more expansive understanding of genre considers the points of articulation between the textual and extra-textual features—what I am calling *attributes*—by which genre users interpret texts and the social groups as well as their constituent activities and discourses through which genres are expressed as meaningful and useful.

The second term, generic realism, is less explicitly invoked, but still operates in conventional genre criticism. “Realism” here is akin to a kind of metaphysical realism, as if genres are like Platonic forms and exist independent not only of critical activity but of texts themselves. I suspect few would make this claim expressly, but it is implicit in many conventional positions on genres, especially in attempts to account for inconsistency and change among the texts that ostensibly compose them. This is especially pronounced in the case of the genre labels that have persisted for decades, the (for lack of a better term) classic genres, like

westerns, musicals, horror films, and so forth. These terms are only useful if they posit continuity among texts, so obvious differences that cannot be ignored must be accounted for. Genres that change over time, or that vary from studio to studio or country to country, prompt ever more intricate taxonomies and evolutionary models of period or subgenre or generic hybridity. In a sense, the genre as a stable *type* has to be saved from the chaotic manifestations of its *tokens*. How, we might ask instead, do we know coherent genres exist if the instances of genre are so incoherent? Why try to save the concept of genre when the textual examples require so much explanation?

I do not deny that genres exist, but I do deny that they have an independent ontology. Genres exists as speech acts, and they are variable because the conditions of their use are variable—the social groups that use them and the purposes they are used for change. An advertisement, a scholarly book, and a word-of-mouth recommendation entail a pragmatic framing of a film relative to the rhetorical conditions that obtain: who the reader is, what s/he knows about similar films, what s/he values, what one wants her or him to do.

I should note that, while I assume a skeptical position with regard to genre and to filmic texts as self-contained totalities, I do not deny the existence of texts as such. I can explain this in an illustrative anecdote. A friend-of-a-friend, exasperated with my opaque explanations, contended that, “whatever you want to call it, a dog is a dog.” At first I pivoted to the ontological uncertainties surrounding film and artworks in general. Later, however, it occurred to me that he was right, and the thrust of my argument lay in the commonsense understanding of dog-as-a-dog. The really important question is when is a dog a *sporting dog*, a *stray*, a *service animal*, or *under 50 pounds*? These and other questions point to the social conditions under which a “dog” might be framed and understood. The definitions relevant to an American Kennel Club judge are not

the same used by an animal control officer or a restaurant owner or a landlord, for whom “dog,” by itself, is necessary but insufficient. Clearly the analogy between dogs and films is tenuous at best, and I do not mean to elide the tension between the materiality of film and its ideal image.<sup>9</sup> The simpler point is that, where use is concerned, whatever the ontology of the object, it is regardless subject to definition under the social and rhetorical conditions of its use. In a sense, even if we could reach the deeper, essential structure of a body of films, independent of its use by producers, scholars, critics, and fans, that ontic nature would be beside the point, since what matters—that is, how genre functions in everyday life—is precisely its social, intersubjective, rhetorical use.

### *Literature Review*

This section will lay out the scaffolding of the approaches I synthesize in this project, which pulls together a number of different threads in film theory, genre theory, and fan studies. I begin with the biggest influence, Altman, whose poststructuralist account of genre as a pragmatic process undercuts the structuralist assumptions of earlier genre criticism and theory and ties the development and use of film genres to institutional discourses. Altman’s account, however, doesn’t provide a sense of what role genre plays in the construction of meaning. I intend at this basic level to use Altman’s pragmatic genre theory and David Bordwell’s account of meaning construction to complement one another and to synthesize a theory of film genre’s role in informing interpretation. Though Bordwell and Altman combined give us a sense of the mechanics of generic interpretation in a strictly denotative sense, they do not explain the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Usai.

evaluative, connotative function genre serves in broader cultural discourses. Mark Jancovich's theory of genre in social use includes an account of genre's role in taste politics, especially as expressed through certain social "mediations," such as fan magazines or film reviews. One issue I raise is that the form of these mediations affects the content of the genre use and entail a certain power dynamic among those involved in a given particular rhetorical act. A film genre's social use is ad hoc, and so it would seem to imply an ad hoc, atomistic method of study. However, the field of Rhetorical Genre Studies treats exactly the *kinds* of generic discourse—genres of writing like letters to the editor or film reviews—as social interactions that are typified and recurring and thus amenable to a systematic methodology for study. By combining Altman's pragmatic genre theory, Bordwell's constructivism, Jancovich's Bourdieusian sociological focus, and Rhetorical Genre Studies' analytical methodology, I hope to provide a theoretical account and methodology for studying cinematic genre as a matrix of interpretation, communication, evaluation, and social distinction.

This notion of genre as a social, discursive process is central to Rick Altman's rethinking of film genres in *Film/Genre*. Responding to a body of scholarly genre criticism that has wrestled with the complexities and contradictions of generic textuality and historicity, Altman proposes a pragmatic, industry-focused model in which competition among studios drove a dialectic of imitation and product differentiation. In the classical studio era, film producers would imitate their own successes by repeatedly employing and highlighting proprietary textual elements, such as trademarked characters or contract stars, to generate a studio-specific *cycle*. Alternately, studios would also imitate a competitor's successes by replicating the more general, non-proprietary elements, such as setting, tone, general visual style, or subject matter. This inter-studio imitation produced significant textual similarities and apparent genres, but only insofar as

critical discourse among film reviewers identified certain textual commonalities and grouped these bodies of films together accordingly, making finer and finer distinctions along the way. From melodrama, for example, critics generated musical melodrama, western melodrama, crime melodrama, and so forth. Through studio replication and critical reiteration of textual commonalities, these modifiers became substantized, creating “musicals,” “westerns,” and “crime films.” This process, called *genrefication*, is performative in the (Austinian) sense of proposing that certain configurations of attributes are significant and ought to inform interpretation. It is also iterative in the sense that the lack of stable textual foundation requires repeated, ongoing regenrefication for the genre to survive.

One hallmark of Altman’s model is an expanded notion of “the critic,” from a narrow sense of a professional reviewer or scholar, to a “critical reading position” more broadly. Obviously, film reviewers perform these kinds of readings, but film producers also act as critics insofar as they analyze the textual elements of box office successes to inform their production decisions in pursuit of further successes. Moreover, where many scholarly genre critics operated under the assumption that they were deducing the existence of or describing objective genres via comparative film analyses, Altman shows how scholarly and other professional critical discourse, too, produces and reproduces genres, even and especially retroactively, such as in the case of film noir or the woman’s film. This is because the textual elements identified as typical of a genre in one context—such as historical film reviews—are not necessarily the same that later scholarly critics would look to when compiling their own groupings. Moreover, Altman’s theory of genre as *genrefication* challenges the stability of a given text by showing how it is always already subject to an ongoing process of regenrefication. Texts are configurations of textual elements akin to astronomical constellations, in that the meaningful and agreed-upon

arrangement of the most relevant textual features must be repeatedly reimagined and articulated in discourse. This also implies that different imagined configurations of textual elements could lend the film to multiple genres. Thus the nature of a text's genericity is not only historically situated but also multivalent. At any given point in time a text can belong to multiple genres simultaneously. One crucial implication of this is that we can neither appeal to textual elements nor to historical context to settle and stabilize a text's genre.

A comparable approach to the "critical reading position" is that offered by David Bordwell in *Making Meaning*. Bordwell's constructivist theory holds that meaning does not reside in the text. Filmmakers can (and do) use conventional cues to direct or suggest a particular meaning, but the viewer must construct the meaning for her/himself. From basic referential systems like narrative causation, continuity editing, or depth of field, to more complex schemata like personification or metaphor meaning is actively constructed by the viewer as she observes and frames visual and auditory data. No less than ideological interpretations, even the most basic acts of comprehension—understanding the literal or referential images and events that appear on-screen—turn on a viewer's ability to pick up on textual cues and to apply to the text interpretive schemata and semantic fields, or structures and relations of meaning. Meaning is produced by the viewer, who is subject not only to broader socio-historical and cultural conditions, but also to the more immediate context of a discourse group, such as academic film criticism. Thus both the interpretation and its articulation are constrained by the rhetorical conditions or the interpreter, which may privilege some strategies and philosophies of interpretation—such as Marxist or psychoanalytic symptomatic close readings—depending on the values and priorities of the institutional milieu at that point in history.

Bordwell focuses on the interpretive practices of academic critics, but his account can be expanded for our purposes in three useful ways. First, his constructivist argument holds that all viewing involves meaning making to one degree or another, and so his model of meaning construction is applicable to film viewers beyond scholarly critics and professional film reviewers; his is a model of comprehension and interpretation as such. Likewise, Bordwell's consideration of rhetorical conditions in the academy should direct us to look to the rhetorical conditions under which students, fans, and casual viewers construct and express meaning in a film. Second, though Bordwell's own discussion of genre as a schema is restricted to received Hollywood genres and limited by the notion of genre as stable, a reconstructed pragmatic conception of genre like Altman's coupled with Bordwell's account of the function of schemata in interpretation provides a powerful framework for theorizing the role of dynamic, multivalent genres in interpretation and rhetoric. Third, combining the two provides a way of 1) theorizing the influence of cinematic genres—as historically variable public schemata—in the interpretive process in a manner that lends more precision to Altman's account of the critical reading position, and 2) understanding *all* interpretive schemata as potential pragmatic genres, given favorable rhetorical conditions. In other words, the extent to which the schema “Oscar nominee” or “psychodrama” or “observational documentary” functions pragmatically in interpretation and expression, it is in effect a genre.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This expanded notion of genre could thus provide a response to Thomas Beebee, who somewhat sarcastically questions Frederic Jameson's inclusion of “bestseller” among such airport paperback genres as thrillers, westerns, and romance novels. Insofar as “bestseller” 1) signifies some category of texts that 2) is meaningful for some group or groupings of users and 3) in some way informs users' reading practices, it can be said to be a genre. Thus, insofar as “bestseller” is a meaningful classification used by publishers, retailers, marketing departments, consumers, and reviewers, and it appears to inform the readings of derisive critics like Jameson, it can be said to be a genre. (Beebee 8)

Altman's and Bordwell's respective systems provide accounts of the denotative or value-neutral mechanics of genre. However, Altman's model of genre fan communities tacitly assumes a harmonious coexistence among genre fans that is not supported by fan studies. Mark Jancovich, in "Genre and the Audience" and "A Real Shocker," extends the Bourdieusian analysis of cinematic fan communities advanced by Jeffrey Sconce to an explicit focus on film genres and how genre functions as a medium of cultural distinctions.<sup>11</sup> In the former piece, Jancovich examines film reviews of and critical responses to *The Silence of the Lambs*, especially in publications like *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Nation* aimed at middle-class, educated readers. He shows how the film's genre designation—whether or not it is labelled a horror film in a particular review—is bound up in the aesthetic, moral, and political value judgments a given reviewer makes about the film and the horror genre, as well as the taste formation a given publication both reflects and contributes to. In the latter article Jancovich focuses on genre fan discourse within niche publications like *Fangoria* or *Fear*. In letters to the editor Jancovich finds film genre functioning as a medium for establishing and expressing subcultural capital within a fan community. The authenticity of a particular text is a paramount concern in these disputes, and Jancovich finds abundant argument about whether a film like *Alien* belongs to the horror genre, or whether it's *really* a science fiction film. These intra-group contestations turn on disparate readings as well as different ideas about what constitutes an authentic genre film—what the essence of the genre is or ought to be. For example, the slick production value of *Alien* disqualifies it as 'authentic' horror for some readers, for whom horror

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<sup>11</sup> Jancovich critiques Sconce's concept of paracinema and its application in a later article. See Sconce and Jancovich, "Cult Fictions."

cinema's transgressive nature dictates that a film ought to offend aesthetic as well as moral values.

Jancovich provides a bridge from the mechanics of inferential interpretation and the discursive transformations of genre labels to an account of the conflicting values between and among different discourse groups and the associated taste formations that frame and indeed suffuse acts of genrefication. This added dimension brings into relief the motivations and sociological stakes of generic discourse within, without, and among industrial, academic, and journalistic institutions. "Motivations" here should not be understood in any kind of furtive or disingenuous sense, as if users deliberately miscategorize films to suit an agenda; such a suspicion would have to entail that there is a "right" genre to which a given film objectively belongs. To understand genre in the multivalent, pragmatic sense offered here we would need to accept that genre is defined by its use within a discursive framework, for one or more groups of genre users, toward some purpose. Jancovich shows us that the social context of this use-value implies a *social* use-value, that the standpoint and values of a user or community of users informs the reading position and inferential strategies, as well as how the user frames the film in communicative acts. While Jancovich attends to different "mediations" of generic discourse, his definition of genre and its structural relationship to those forms of mediation remains unsystematic. What is needed is an approach to genre that defines genre in terms of use and directs us toward a methodology for studying genre qua discourse.

Rhetorical Genre Studies – which developed out of English, communication, and rhetoric and composition studies – conceives of rhetorical genres as "social action." (Miller 163). Specifically, Carolyn Miller defines genre as "a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of a rhetorical action [which] acquires meaning from situation and from

the social context in which that situation arose” (163). In other words, rhetorical genre approach considers these issues less in terms of the formal or thematic character of a given text and more in terms of repeated and/or ongoing interactions and the social need that these rhetorical acts meet. Much RGS focuses on institutional settings as dynamic contexts and may incorporate ideological implications in its analyses. Examples of such genres include student papers, lab reports, business memos, grocery lists, or the State of the Union Address. Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff broaden the definition of genre to include “forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations” (4). The rhetorical approach, simply put, looks at how addresser and addressee relate to one another in a given concrete situation; how exigences, purposes, forms of address, and other rhetorical genres shape the rhetorical genre and situation; and how rhetorical genre and situation shape one another.

One key concept from RGS is “uptake,” which describes the ways genres interact with one another in a given rhetorical context. A genre is taken up when it is brought into meaningful social action (Bawarshi and Reiff 83-4). Thinking of film genre as a discursive process of genrefication, we would have to conclude that genres appear only through uptake into a rhetorical genre. That is, genrefication and regenrefication can only occur in rhetorical communication—whether discussions, reviews, or scholarly writing—because film genres are performative discourse and discourse is mediated by rhetorical situation. A film review of a western takes up the film genre ‘western’ into the rhetorical genre ‘film review.’ In this case, we would want to understand what textual attributes the author identifies as characteristic of ‘the western,’ how positing those attributes contributes to an evaluative argument (and relative to what evaluative criteria), and what audience or group the author is writing for. How, by this

hypothetical writer's account, does the intertextual baggage of the genre designation interact with the textual particulars of the film and what rhetorical end is it meant to serve?

In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt outlines and engages with the various critical perspectives on RGS. Chapter 2 in particular lays out several points important for the current inquiry. Though I have used the term “communities” fairly loosely here, Devitt argues that to understand rhetorical genres in terms of their utility for social groups requires that we make more careful distinctions among those groups as communities, collectives, and networks, three divisions that share decreasing frequency and intensity of interaction, but share one or more rhetorical genres. Furthermore, we have to understand the genre/user relationship as reciprocal and dynamic; users construct rhetorical genres, but they are also to some degree constructed by them as genres mediate communicative activities. The functions that rhetorical genres serve for groups are not neutral; “a genre reflects, constructs, and reinforces the values, epistemology, and power relationships of the group from which it developed and for which it functions” (Devitt 63).

### *Chapter Overview*

In Chapter 2, “Genre as Interpretive Schema and Rhetorical Frame,” I will lay out a model of genre's interpretive and rhetorical uses as two dimensions of a pragmatic genre theory. In the former case, I will argue for an adaptation of David Bordwell's constructivist theory of meaning augmented by Altman's pragmatic definition of genre. This chapter will argue that, though texts are interpreted according to conventional schemata, their systems of textual and extra-textual attributes are in principle infinitely reconfigurable. This allows and in fact requires a given text to be constantly regenrefied and thus framed according to present exigences. There

is no special kind of method that allows scholars to study and talk about genre without participating in genrefication. Since film history and genre studies are mutually dependent—each relies on the other for conceptual frameworks and critical evidence—rhetorical genrefication has profound implications for film historiography, as I will demonstrate in the first of my chapter use cases. A critical reading of Amanda Ann Klein’s recent *American Film Cycles* will illustrate the need for an explicit historiographic approach to genre study and genre history, one which emphasizes the scholar’s participation in framing genres along the lines of constructivist interpretation. Klein’s application of genre theory to social film history inherits the limits of traditional genre criticism and perpetuates some of its mistaken assumptions about generic stability and the mutual independence of genre and scholarly discourse, and her methodology and broader argument are weakened as a result.

To describe the second dimension i.e., genre as a rhetorical frame, I draw on Bordwell, as well as Altman, Jancovich, and literary genre critics like Thomas Beebee and Adena Rosemarin who insist on genre as defined by use. Following from Rosemarin’s claim that genre is a classifying statement rather than a class in itself, I will demonstrate how the public use of genre entails framing films and genres relative to one another in institutional and non-institutional discourse (Rosemarin 46). In some cases of scholarly practice, genres orient critical perspectives on historical and cultural studies, allowing academics to call upon certain genres and films as mutually explicatory frames.<sup>12</sup> In other scholarly cases, academics actively construct new genres by emphasizing different sets of apparently common features. In some cases of industrial practice, promotional materials exploit multivalent genre reading practices by combining

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<sup>12</sup> This reliance on the explanatory power of received genres exhibits the same structure and is subject to the same critique as “context,” in the sense that Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, following Jonathan Culler, criticize as simplifying matters and introducing an “incipient positivism.” See Bal and Bryson (175-180) and Culler (xiv).

semantic elements and allowing the potential audience to invoke multiple genres. In other industrial cases, promotional discourse explicitly invokes one genre in service of distancing a film from another. To illustrate this rhetorical dimension, examine Adam Lowenstein's article "Spectacle Horror and *Hostel*: Why 'Torture Porn' Does Not Exist" and its rhetorical dimensions relative to those of David Edelstein's coinage from five years earlier. I will argue that Lowenstein's titular claim evinces a normative genre criticism that turns on a textualist premise. As an alternative, I will consider the rhetorical conditions under which popular press film writers use that term in contradistinction to Lowenstein's argument, which was published in an academic journal. Rather than appeal to historical context, I'll try to reconstruct the specific rhetorical conditions—exigence, appeals, audience, etc.—that obtain in either case. By emphasizing the use of a genre for a particular user group, I hope to show that genre is a configuration of textual features commonly identified among a user group as a function of the rhetorical use it is put to.

In Chapter Three, "Meta-Genre and Social Action," I introduce the concept of meta-genres, which are generalized performative utterances about film genres but which are dislocated from concrete textual examples. Meta-genres contain the sum total of possible semantic, syntactic, and extra-textual elements known to a given viewer and also imbue film genres and genrefication with their evaluative content; hence they serve both denotative and connotative functions. Meta-genres guide our active classifications of films as part of larger communicative acts. But meta-genres also serve as a rhetorical shorthand for those discourses and values, and meta-genres implicate politics and ideology in acts of genrefication. Not all uses of genre or meta-generic shorthand are expressly political in the style of ideological genre criticism. Instead, power flows through filmic genre and meta-genre's uptake into a range of institutional and

informal social discourses, including in particular evaluative classifications that evince individual taste. Here, I will show how the concept of meta-genre fills the evaluative gap between the denotative mechanics of Bordwell's and Altman's accounts and the axiological judgments inherent in the taste politics described by Jancovich. The chapter will explore how genres become reified and doxic through institutional use, especially in industrial and academic discourses, where a meta-generic label can anchor genrefication to negative connotations.

In order both to illustrate meta-genre and to expand upon the rhetorical framework introduced in Chapter Two, I will analyze institutional and fan discourse around the 2002 film *28 Days Later* and its relation to the zombie meta-genre. Director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Alex Garland's 2003 interview with film critic Kim Newman will be contrasted with a Reddit discussion of the film from 2011. In each case the film's genre is explicitly discussed and contested to greater or lesser degrees, but evident also are the different historical periods at the beginning and height, respectively, of the so-called zombie renaissance in popular culture.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Beebe's claim that genres are defined negatively, whether explicitly or implicitly, will illuminate Boyle and Garland's pre-emptive invocation of science fiction and apocalypse narratives to describe what was then and is still widely seen as a zombie film.<sup>14</sup> On one hand, their avoidance of the zombie meta-genre designation is indicative both of the lower evaluative

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<sup>13</sup> The early 2000s saw an explosion in the popularity of zombie-related films, television series, novels, graphic novels, video games, board games, apparel, and other pop culture miscellany dubbed the "zombie renaissance." *28 Days Later* has been seen retrospectively as an important watershed film that helped to both reinvigorate and also to legitimate to some degree a traditionally disreputable movie monster, and thus to help precipitate the zombie renaissance. *28 Days Later* was released after decades of B and Poverty Row and then exploitation pictures featuring zombies which, with the occasional exception of a George Romero film, were not highly regarded. It was not at all clear at the time that there would be a renewed popular interest in the genre. *28 Days Later* emerged after Sony's big-budget video game adaptation *Resident Evil* but before critically acclaimed transmedia titles like *Shaun of the Dead*, *The Walking Dead*, *World War Z*, and *Zone One*. This historical framing helps to explain why an indie art-house director would want to distance his film from a genre associated with schlock, whether low-budget or blockbuster. For more on the zombie renaissance, see Bishop and Russell.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Elley's 2002 *Variety* review and the Rabin et al's. 2015 *AV Club* retrospective listicle.

valence associated with zombie narratives at the time as well as the acknowledgement of the interpretive schema it implies. On the other hand, it illustrates how differently Boyle's, Garland's, Newman's, and *Filmmaker's* institutional rhetorical concerns shape the framing of the film's genre in contrast to an anonymous online discussion among niche genre fans whose ethos is fluid and ad hoc. In the Reddit thread, part of the "/r/zombies" page, a self-selected group of users can be observed jockeying for ethos through appeals to their own textual analyses and their knowledge of zombie film aesthetics and history, thus exhibiting both the critical reading position as well as their subcultural capital as members of a community of zombie fans for whom the meta-genre is not pejorative.

In Chapter Four, "Rhetorical Genre and Film Genre Uptake," I will introduce rhetorical genre studies and sketch some of its key concepts. While the piecemeal identification of the rhetorical conditions of given instances of generic discourse would be tedious, it also would miss the broader structural characteristics and power dynamics inherent in certain kinds of rhetorical discourse. To produce systematic and generalizable analyses of the rhetorical use of film genres, I advocate the adaptation of the concepts and tools of rhetorical genre theory for a methodology for film genre studies. First I will argue that a theory of genre that focuses on its use cannot take the content of its use for granted. Instead, we must consider the rhetorical conditions of its use. The RGS concept of *uptake* attends to the relations between artistic and rhetorical genres, or how each incorporates the other and puts it into social action. This principle of uptake directs our attention to the rhetorical genres in which film genres and meta-genres participate. RGS also provides a framework for distinguishing precisely among different kinds of rhetorical genres based upon which groups use them and for which purposes. Rigorous discernment among rhetorical genres is crucial because the situation varies according to the users and purposes of

each genre, as do their corresponding power relations—audience in any rhetorical situation is always to some degree a construct of the rhetorical process (Devitt 31). This rhetorical construction is reciprocal but not symmetrical. The interests of the rhetor, speaker or writer, and the ability of the audience to push back or construct itself vary broadly depending upon the situation.

My use case for this chapter will examine industrial discursive use of film genres by Netflix in its streaming algorithm. In particular, it will focus how Netflix’s digital recommendation system, which reconfigures textual elements to match curated “microgenres” to precise user tastes. Netflix engages in the same pragmatic regenrefication that has characterized industrial filmic genre use through its history, even if now on a scale at once broader, in terms of number of titles, as well as more focused on individual consumers.<sup>15</sup> The Netflix case will also demonstrate how uptake functions in the digital realm, whereby classical film genres, along with other genrefied schemata, are taken up into the rhetorical recommendation genre. Moreover, framing the Netflix DRS rhetorically will underscore the asymmetrical construction of Netflix and its users, as well as how the other genres in its genre system (such as user agreements) and genre set (such as the Netflix Tech Blog) function to maintain and elide this asymmetry.

I will conclude by recapping the overall model and offering some thoughts on the methods and methodologies of genre theory relative to those of genre criticism and pedagogy. While genre theory ought to attend to writing about films rather than films themselves, and to adopt a hermeneutic reading strategy, genre criticism and pedagogy ought to reflect on the positivist implications of textualism and the rhetoricity of their discursive activities. In the

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the Netflix RS, see Amatriain and Basilico and Madrigal.

conclusion I also address the question of why rhetorical genres might be relatively more stable than the filmic genres they take up. This leads to the question of how to distinguish philosophically between rhetorical and artistic genres. I suggest tentatively that all texts are potentially rhetorical and potentially artistic, depending upon how they are received relative to situated cultural norms and values as well as rhetorical need. I briefly discuss paracinema, operationalism, and documentary modes as film-specific examples.

## Chapter 2: Genre as Interpretive Schema and Rhetorical Frame

### Genre as Interpretive Schema

I noted in the introduction the difficulty critics have had as they looked more closely at the genres they employ. Neither textualist definitions, such as those of structuralist film critics, or more historical definitions hold up under skeptical scrutiny. All we can justifiably say is that genres have been and are used—some more general, some more specialized—and in various forms over time. Genre theory, then, as I have suggested, ought to concern itself with this use, with how genres have been and are employed, by whom, and toward what end.

This notion of genre as a social, discursive process is central to Rick Altman's rethinking of film genres in *Film/Genre*. Responding to a body of scholarly genre criticism that has wrestled with the complexities and contradictions of generic textuality and historicity, Altman proposes a pragmatic, industry-focused model in which competition among studios drove a dialectic of imitation and product differentiation. In the classical studio era, film producers would analyze and imitate their own successes by repeatedly employing and highlighting proprietary textual elements, such as trademarked characters or contract stars, to generate a studio-specific *cycle*. Alternately, studios would similarly analyze and then imitate a competitor's successful films by replicating the more general, non-proprietary elements, such as setting, tone, general visual style, or subject matter. This inter-studio imitation produced genres, but only in an indirect sense. The films might closely resemble one another, and this was due to producers' calculated attempts to capitalize on a hit formula. But it was the critical discourse of reviewers that identified textual commonalities and grouped these bodies of films together accordingly, making finer and finer

distinctions along the way—from melodrama, for example, generating musical melodrama, western melodrama, crime melodrama, and so forth. The general acceptance of the categories in popular use among other reviewers and audiences that constituted them as genres. Once readers understood what reviewers meant by *gangster picture* as opposed to *urban crime melodrama*, the genre was up and running. Through replication and reiteration of textual commonalities, these modifiers became substantized, creating *musicals*, *westerns*, and *crime films*. From these gradual variations in discourse about films, new genres emerge as they are proposed and adopted by other reviewers, producers, scholars, readers, viewers, and other genre users.

One hallmark of Altman's model in *Film/Genre* is an expanded notion of "the critic," from a narrow sense of a professional reviewer or scholar, to a "critical reading position" more broadly (44).<sup>16</sup> Obviously, film reviewers perform these kinds of readings, but film producers also act as critics insofar as they analyze the textual elements of box office successes to inform their production decisions in pursuit of further successes (43-4). Moreover, where many scholarly genre critics operated under the assumption that they were deducing the existence of or describing objective genres via comparative film analyses, Altman shows how scholarly and other professional critical discourse, too, produces and reproduces genres, even and especially retroactively, such as in the case of film noir (60-1) or the woman's film (72-7). This is because the textual attributes identified as typical of a genre in one kind of discourse—such as historical film reviews—are not necessarily the same that later scholarly critics would look to when compiling their own groupings. I shall have quite a bit more to say about scholarly discourse later, but for now note that Altman's theory of genre and genrefication challenges the stability of

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<sup>16</sup> N.B. All subsequent citations of Altman will be from *Film/Genre* unless otherwise noted.

a given text by showing how it is always already subject to an ongoing process of regenrefication.

Genres are configurations of textual attributes akin to astronomical constellations, in the sense that the meaningful and agreed-upon arrangement of the most relevant textual features must be repeatedly reimagined and rearticulated. While the component stars or textual data may be independent phenomena, the relations among them that constitute constellations or genres are wholly imaginary and performative. This also implies that different imagined configurations of textual attributes could lend the film to multiple genres. Thus the nature of a text's genericity is not only historically situated but also multivalent; that is, at any given point in time a text can belong to multiple genres simultaneously or, rather, it can *participate* in one or more genres while never belonging properly to any one (Derrida 230). One crucial implication of this is that we can neither appeal to textual attributes nor to historical context to settle and stabilize a text's genre. For example, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903, dir. Edwin S. Porter) can neither positively be said to be a western by virtue of its semantics and syntax—that is, its iconography and structure—nor can it positively be said to be *not* a western simply because the genre didn't exist at the time of the film's production. It is a western because and only because it eventually became and continues to be widely talked about as a western.<sup>17</sup>

Altman's poststructuralist account of genre as a pragmatic process undercuts the structuralist assumptions and/or teleological historiography of earlier genre criticism and theory, and it ties the development and use of film genres to institutional discourses while also resisting

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<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the genrefication of the western, see Altman 34-8.

the sort of ideological genre criticism that conflates industrial generic discourses.<sup>18</sup> Altman's model, however, doesn't provide a sense of what role genre plays in the construction of meaning, in both interpretation of and in rhetoric about films. To put that another way, Altman tells us *that* producers and critics sorted films according to select and variable textual similarities, but he doesn't tell us *how* or *why* they chose the similarities as they did or what function those selections played in interpreting films. To address these questions, we will need to augment Altman's model with an account of the mechanics of spectator interpretation.

David Bordwell offers a comparable approach to Altman's critical reading position in his 1989 *Making Meaning*. Bordwell's constructivist theory holds that meaning does not reside in the text. Filmmakers can (and do) use conventional cues to direct or suggest a particular meaning, but the viewer must construct the meaning for her/himself. From basic referential systems like narrative causation, continuity editing, or depth of field, to more complex schemata like personification or metaphor meaning is actively constructed by the viewer as she observes and frames visual and auditory data. but is actively constructed by the viewer as she observes and frames visual and auditory data (13).<sup>19</sup> No less than ideological interpretations, even the most basic acts of comprehension—understanding the literal or referential images and events that appear on-screen—depend on a viewer's ability to pick up on textual cues and to apply to the text semantic fields, or relations of meaning (such as *nature vs. civilization*), and schemata, or the textual data structures that convey those meanings (such as *personification* or *metonymy* or *structuring absence*). There are more or less conventional semantic fields and schemata a viewer might look for, depending on the conventional poetics of the time and her own social standpoint.

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<sup>18</sup> Altman criticizes Steve Neale in particular for treating film criticism and film production as part of the same industry and refusing to distinguish among their often divergent interests and practices (72).

<sup>19</sup> N.B. All subsequent citations from Bordwell will be from *Making Meaning* unless otherwise noted.

For instance, how a 21st century viewer interprets the gun comparison scene between John Ireland and Montgomery Clift in *Red River* (1948, dir. Howard Hawks) may depend largely upon her exposure to theories of camp, homosociality, or queer theory, or simply on the extent to which she is attuned to look for coded homoeroticism in classical Hollywood cinema. Meaning is produced by the viewer, who is subject not only to broader socio-historical and cultural conditions, but also to the more immediate context of a discourse group, such as academic film criticism. Both the viewer's interpretation and its articulation are constrained by the rhetorical conditions that obtain.<sup>20</sup> These conditions that may privilege some strategies and philosophies of interpretation—such as Marxist or psychoanalytic symptomatic close readings—depending on the values and priorities of the institutional milieu at that point in history.<sup>21</sup>

Bordwell's own discussion of film genre largely frames it in terms of category schemata. He recognizes that genres cannot be deductively defined, nor can genre as a principle be clearly distinguished from modes, cycles, formulae, or—as the marginal annotations in my second-hand copy suggest—movements and schools. (147). “One could [...] argue that the concept of genre is so historically mutable that no set of necessary and sufficient conditions can mark off genres from other sorts of groupings in ways that all experts and ordinary film-goers would find acceptable” (ibid.) The “one could” here is representative of Bordwell's hesitance to make a positive claim about genre proper as currently used. He is content to leave those fuzzy distinctions be as such and to focus instead on genre's interpretive and rhetorical functions as a

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<sup>20</sup> N.B. First, “Rhetorical conditions” is not Bordwell's term, but this consideration is central to my own project and is relevant to Altman's and Bordwell's respective accounts, as I shall argue later. Second, I don't wish to give the impression that rhetorical conditions are some kind of burden or limitation. On the contrary, given the rhetorical genre's role as nexus of subject, group, text, and social action, it might be more accurate to say that rhetorical conditions necessitate and facilitate as well as constrain. I will discuss the multidimensional nature of rhetorical genres in greater detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>21</sup> As we shall see shortly, Altman's critique of Todorov turns on identifying the sensibilities of French structuralism at work in his distinction between theoretical and historical genres.

category schema, which in principle are identical to those of other category schemata. Genre for Bordwell is prototypical of how critics use categories in general to structure meaning in their interpretive and rhetorical practices.

This point is crucial. Having discarded textualism as a foundation of genre, we have turned to genre use—what it does, how it functions. Genre, in its interpretive functions, is a category schema and, in its rhetorical functions, a category schema is a genre. Consider Bordwell’s list of

the variety of categories at work in film criticism—grouping by period or country (American films of the 1930s); by director or star or producer or writer or studio; by technical process (CinemaScope films); by cycle (the ‘fallen woman’ films); by series (007 movies); by style (German Expressionism); by structure (narrative), by ideology (Reaganite cinema); by venue (‘drive-in movies’); by purpose (home movies); by audience (‘teenpix’); by subject or theme (family films, paranoid-politics movies) (148).

We might also add to this list production and distribution conditions (low-budget or direct-to-video); public notoriety (“video nasties”); ratings classifications (G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17 and “Unrated” films); franchise (Marvel Cinematic Universe); relations to source material (original screenplays, adaptations, sequels, prequels, remakes); cultural status (canon, cult movies, trash cinema). Because these are performative classifications that both index and prompt a particular kind of reception for an audience they function as genres just as much as “western,” “musical,” or “science fiction.” Hence, insofar as they might serve as rhetorical frames, all category schemata are at least potential genres.

Bordwell focuses on those interpretive practices of academic critics, but his account can be expanded in three useful ways.

1. His constructivist argument holds that all viewing involves meaning making to one degree or another, and so his model of meaning construction is applicable to film viewers beyond scholarly critics and professional film reviewers; his is a model of comprehension and interpretation as such (8-10).<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Bordwell's consideration of rhetorical conditions in the academy should direct us to look to the rhetorical conditions under which students, fans, and casual viewers in their own ways construct and express a film's meaning (20).
2. Though Bordwell's own discussion of genre proper as a schema is restricted to received Hollywood genres and limited by the conventional notion of genre as stable (which he doesn't necessarily share), he does identify genre's function as category schema with a range of classificatory criteria. *A reconstructed pragmatic conception of genre would encompass category schemata as well as Hollywood genres.*
3. Synthesizing Altman's and Bordwell's models provides a way of theorizing the influence of cinematic genres—as historically variable public schemata—in the interpretive process in a manner that lends more precision to Altman's account of the critical reading position, while also admitting all interpretive schemata as

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<sup>22</sup> It is in these pages that Bordwell lays out his distinctions among *referential*, *explicit*, *implicit*, and *symptomatic* meanings. The first two, which Bordwell calls comprehension, are evident on the face of the film: the literal events and actions represented on-screen and the explicitly stated themes, respectively. The latter two terms indicate meanings that critics infer through textual analysis: implicit meanings are deeper themes not available on the surface, and symptomatic meanings are those determined by and which evince a broader extra-filmic context, such as late capitalism, the instability of the sign, or the structure of the psyche.

potential pragmatic genres, given favorable rhetorical conditions. That is, the extent to which the schemata like “Oscar nominee” or “psychodrama” or “observational documentary” or “Michael Bay movie” function pragmatically in interpretation and expression for some group, they are genres.<sup>23</sup>

The more dramatic challenge to conventional genre study here has to do with how genres are configured and what counts as a genre. Altman’s deconstruction of the genres Bordwell cites as discrete types of schemata means that any and all attributes including but not limited to schemata and semantic fields are fair game for genrefication. That is, semantic fields and schemata manifest as textual attributes and Altman’s own semantic and syntactic elements are all in play.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as we saw above, extratextual attributes such as filmmaker(s), historical period, country, production or exhibition conditions, and even broader institutional noteworthiness could potentially be generically significant, since generic significance is not an inherent property of the text but is contingent upon a viewer’s interpretive and rhetorical activity.

This is not to say that there are no constraints, or that any film could belong to any genre. In principle, this may be true, but interpretive activity is not a free-for-all. Instead, it is an adaptive process in the epistemological sense I borrow from Nick Redfern’s application of radical constructivism to film historiography.<sup>25</sup> Experiences are not tested against the objective

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<sup>23</sup> This expanded notion of genre could thus provide a response to Thomas Beebee, who somewhat sarcastically questions Frederic Jameson’s inclusion of “bestseller” among such airport paperback genres as thrillers, westerns, and romance novels. Insofar as “bestseller” 1) signifies some category of texts that 2) is meaningful for some group or groupings of users and 3) in some way informs users’ reading practices, it can be said to be a genre. Thus, insofar as “bestseller” is a meaningful class designation used by publishers, retailers, marketing departments, consumers, and reviewers, and it appears to inform the readings of derisive critics like Jameson, it can be said to be a genre. (Beebee 8)

<sup>24</sup> See Altman “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre” in *Film/Genre*

<sup>25</sup> Redfern describes his historiography as a sort of Humean radical empiricism, built on Ernst von Glaserfeldt’s radical constructivist philosophy of science, which derives its conception of adaptive knowledge from Jean Piaget. See Redfern section 3 ¶ 3.

world—to which radical constructivism denies we have access—but are organized according to what Redfern calls *schemes* (related to but not to be confused with Bordwell’s *schemata*) or existing configurations of knowledge. If possible, new experiential knowledge is *assimilated* into an existing scheme. If the new experience cannot be assimilated, if it causes a *perturbation*, then existing schemes must be altered or new schemes must be created to *accommodate* the incongruity. Experience and knowledge are thus evaluated according to functional utility and internal consistency, not independent objective verification (Redfern Sec. 3 ¶ 3).

The correlation between Altman’s genre theory and radical constructivist adaptation is fairly straightforward. Films are experienced and are analyzed via their semantic and syntactic textual features, as well as their extratextual attributes, which function as *facts* in the radical constructivist sense of “constructs based on regularities in a subject’s experience,” i.e. experience of filmic and historical artefacts in the present (Redfern Sec. 4 ¶ 4). This perspective helps us to resist treating iconography or plot as objectively knowable or meaningful outside of our present experience of it. These textual facts are organized according to certain interpretive schemes, which includes conventional genres. If possible, textual elements and their relations are configured to assimilate the film into an existing generic scheme. If the variant features cause too much perturbation, the genre must be reorganized so as to accommodate the film or a new genre must be posited.<sup>26</sup> One benefit of this adaptive approach is that it frames genre as a process in terms of constant experiential encounter and allows for revision and adjustment without claiming any transformation of the physical object (i.e. the filmic text), which remains independent of but metaphysically inaccessible to the interpreter.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Bordwell and “recalcitrant data” (31). We will see examples of this in Ch. 3 when discussing fan discourse and responses to *28 Days Later*’s running zombies.

Constraints on this adaptive process include internal consistency or ‘best fit’ of data and schemata, but also the plausibility of a given configuration for whomever the interpreter proposes it to. Absent justification for genre as a special case among other schemes or schemata, the effective difference among them is one of rhetorical mobilization and efficiency, or whether the proposed generic schema is plausible and useful for a given rhetorical audience. Whether or not such configurations of attributes have been or are currently employed as genres is an empirical question, about which I shall have more to say shortly. For now, suffice it to say that there is a broad range of filmic attributes that could potentially become genrefied—could be employed to function as genres—under favorable rhetorical conditions.

Consider the interpretive function of descriptors like *silent era*, *foreign language*, *blockbuster*, *low budget*, *grindhouse*, *art house*, or *pre-Code*. All of these terms do interpretive work both in *extension*—i.e. by positing similarity among a variety of texts—and also in *intension*, or by opening up one text in detail, and thereby, paradoxically, establishing its particularity (Kamberelis 158).<sup>27</sup> These terms, however, are also historically and culturally situated. Obviously “pre-Code” doesn’t make any sense as a category in the pre-Code era, nor does “video nasties” before the 1982 UK moral panic and ban on violent videos. Tom Gunning notes that early Pathé and Biograph catalogues from 1901-1906, put together for exhibitors, include *fiction*, *trick and mixed comedy films*, *views of notable persons*, and *parade views*. By the 1990s, however, Blockbuster and other video rental stores classified their offerings in now more familiar terms, such as *drama*, *children’s*, *horror/suspense*, *western*, *foreign films*, and *adult* (54-5). Video stores provided a sense of who their customer base might be according to the categories they employed, and for some those interests might include the work of a particular

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<sup>27</sup> See also Bordwell “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice” in *Poetics of Cinema*.

filmmaker. The now-defunct local video store I frequented as an undergrad featured sections devoted to (and labelled) *Kubrick*, *Hitchcock*, *Kurosawa*, and other directors, catering to the auteurist sensibilities of the cinephiles who would make of point of patronizing independent stores at the height Blockbuster's and Hollywood Video's dominance.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, the store set apart the corpuses of directors not as categories *alongside* genres but *as* genres.

The idea of director *qua* genre is perhaps a hard sell. Surely it is a simple historical fact that, say, Alfred Hitchcock directed *Psycho*, and it is thus surely less objectionable a term than subjective and/or teleological generic designations like *psychological crime thriller* or *proto-slasher* or *early post-classical horror*. But the schematic function of the director—especially of such a notable and written-about director—greatly exceeds the fact of a production role, and that excessive function is the interpretive and rhetorical domain of genre. Thinking about filmmakers as genres requires understanding how the explicit association of a film with a director mutually qualifies each.

This understanding is comparable to Michel Foucault's description of the "author function," in which the simple attribution of a text to an author is functionally equivalent to a description (209).

The author's name [...] permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts [...] The fact that several texts have been placed under the

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<sup>28</sup> Though they are not quite extinct, I describe video stores in the past tense here because their dwindling numbers accompany a decline in their active influence in sustaining codified genres, even if their categories still largely anchor current genres as a legacy of their former prominence. The emergence and triumph of video streaming services such as Netflix seem to represent a disruption of these industrial practices, but I shall argue in Chapter 4 that, as far as genrefication goes, Netflix in particular intensifies in scale and precision of rhetorical genrefication rather than disrupts it.

same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, and authentication of some texts by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization. (Foucault 210-11)<sup>29</sup>

While Foucault is speaking here of a literary author, whose singular creative genius may be a more plausible proposition (though Foucault is of course denying this), this mode of textual organization is nevertheless common in cinematic discourse, both in formal and casual appeals to auteurs. But the ‘author’—as opposed to the director, screenwriter, DP, editor, etc.—is an attribute or attribution of the interpretive process, not an empirical or historical fact independent of the viewer. Foucault goes on to claim that the “aspects of the an individual which we designate as making him [*sic.*] an author are only a projection [...] of the operations we force texts to undergo, the connections we make, the traits we establish as pertinent, the continuities we recognize, or the exclusions we practice” (213). These impositions on the text are so central to and useful for interpretation that we do not recognize their theoretical or practical limits, except perhaps where there are two names with strong and contrastive associations, such as in the case of *Poltergeist* (1982, dir. Tobe Hooper, prod. Steven Spielberg).<sup>30</sup>

The ‘auteur function’<sup>31</sup> here is just one example of how a category schema like ‘author’ can function like a genre, doing the extensive and intensive work of interpretation and framing

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<sup>29</sup>For an application of this Foucauldian approach to film noir, see Naremore.

<sup>30</sup> The classic case study here is *The Thing from Another World* (1951, dir. Christian Nyby, prod. Howard Hawks). But Nyby never had the auteurist associations that Hooper (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1974], *Salem’s Lot* [1979]) and Spielberg each enjoyed relative to horror cinema, and *Poltergeist’s* authorship remains controversial. The issue is complicated considerably by the framing at work by *Poltergeist’s* paratexts. Spielberg received top billing over Hooper; publicity interviews featured Spielberg and co-producer Frank Marshall; the novelization credited Spielberg as having written the story and screenplay (and does not mention Hooper); and the official soundtrack album features liner notes about the importance of music in horror films written by Spielberg, nevermind that Hooper (along with Wayne Bell) actually co-composed and performed the score for his *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Thanks to Shannon Blake Skelton for sharing his presentation slides on *Poltergeist’s* and other horror films’ pressbooks.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Naremore

for a user group. This is not to claim that all auteurs are genres unto themselves, only that the authorial attribute of a text is one available interpretive schema that a user may or may not employ in interpretation and framing a text for her user group. I might call *Se7en* (1995) a David Fincher film, and that could carry its own thematic, stylistic, temporal, and intertextual associations. But I might also call it a crime drama, a thriller, a Brad Pitt movie, a serial killer film, a neo-noir, a revisionist noir, a detective-horror hybrid, a proto-torture porn, a 90s indie film, and so forth. Whether each of these designations is useful depends entirely upon the interpretive and rhetorical situation it is called upon to meet. All textual and extra-textual attributes and combinations from among them are potential genres, and whether they are manifest as genres or not cannot be discerned through normative textual analysis but through descriptive discourse and rhetorical analysis—not by grouping and looking at the films but by looking at how people group and talk about the films.

### *Genre and Context*

Film history contributes evidence to critical and theoretical scholarship on genres and is thus crucial to any discussion of genrefication. Whether locating genres in broader artistic traditions,<sup>32</sup> tracing the ideological contours of a genre in a given period,<sup>33</sup> or identifying the impact of technological development on genre aesthetics,<sup>34</sup> genre critics and theorists necessarily look to historical context for before-and-after evidence of change and its causes. Some older models of genre theory posit a transhistorical deep generic structure rooted in synchronic structures of

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<sup>32</sup> See for example Braudy

<sup>33</sup> See for example Wood.

<sup>34</sup> See for example Mathijs

meaning or essential human capacities or quasi-Platonic ideal forms. But even these accounts must square their formulations with fact that we experience genres in history, and that their manifestations evidently change, even if their structures or functions or essences supposedly do not.<sup>35</sup>

We might consider the more radical idea that genre theory in some sense *is* genre history. That is to say, they are mutually constitutive insofar as genre is essentially temporal in its use and that history is invariably mediated by genre. To explain this claim, I want to contrast it with a perspective on genre that sees it as serving an ancillary function to history and textual representation. This latter approach might be summed up by what Frederic Jameson characterizes as “the mediatory function of the notion of genre,” which he argues “allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life” (105). For Jameson, genre helps us to connect history—both aesthetic and material—with a given text. By this account both the text and material history are granted primacy over genre, as if each was more self-evident, independent, and accessible. I propose instead a notion of texts, of the history of forms, and even of social history as accessible only and always already mediated by genre.

Jameson’s reliance on the given-ness of social history evokes what Jonathan Culler calls “the incipient positivism of ‘context.’” Culler contends that “the notion of context frequently oversimplifies rather than enriches discussion, since the opposition between an act and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the act” (xiv). Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson elaborate on Culler’s point, arguing that “it cannot be taken for

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<sup>35</sup> In his overview of transhistorical genre theory, Altman cites Andre Bazin, Thomas Schatz, Will Wright, John Cawletti, Peter Brooks, Robert Lang, Gerald Mast, Stanley Cavell, and Jerome Delamater, as well as his own earlier work. (19-20).

granted that the evidence that makes up ‘context’ is going to be any simpler or more legible than the visual text upon which such evidence is supposed to operate.” (177) ‘Context,’ for Bal and Bryson, often operates as a static guarantor of meaning, a fixed and unquestioned point of reference by which the meanings of localized phenomena can be pinned down.

“Context” is in fact unable to arrest the fundamental mobility of semiosis for the reason that it harbors exactly the same principle of indeterminability within itself [...] “Context” can always be extended; it is subject to the same process of mobility that is at work in the semiosis of the text or artwork that “context” is supposed to delimit and control. (Bal and Bryson 177)

Essentially, context is assumed to stabilize and constrain the dynamic array of meanings a text may elicit because context itself is assumed to be more stable by virtue of its self-evident independence from the subject. But demarcating and qualifying the context are themselves acts of interpretation.

For example, what is the implicit meaning of a film like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, dir. Don Siegel)? Is the film concerned about communist infiltration and indoctrination or the conformist ideology of the capitalist organization man? The answer depends not only on the film’s genre and period—e.g. 1950s sci-fi and/or horror—but on how we would characterize the 1950s (and its anxieties) and the thematic preoccupations of science fiction and/or horror in that period.<sup>36</sup> But those characterizations have to be derived ex post facto from the totality of texts

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Kawin’s “The Mummy’s Pool” opposes science fiction and horror to one another along the lines of whether a film validates progressive scientific discourse or the conservative military. Kawin concludes that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Robert Wise) is science fiction while *The Thing from Another World* is horror. The interpretation of each film clearly relies on presuppositions about the ideological valances of each genre, as well as the ideological character of these institutions in the 1950s. See Kawin.

that belong to it. This structural circularity is isomorphic with Andrew Tudor's "empiricist dilemma."

To take a genre such as a western, analyze it, and list its principle characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the "principal characteristics," which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. That is, we are caught in a circle that first requires that the films be isolated, for which purposes a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films. (Tudor 5)

Tudor here is questioning the very definition of a genre, but this circular structure applies beyond abstract logical relations and to what we *do* with events and contexts or texts and genres, how we interpret them in light of each other and how they function in discourse. Because the meanings of contexts are determined by their constitutive events, contexts are themselves bounded by the very interpretive strategies that determine what events belong in what contexts. Hence, contexts like genre are not given but are instead produced by the very discourses that rely upon them for interpretive structural models. As a function of its non-fixity, moreover, context is potentially unlimited in its extension,<sup>37</sup> and its bounds are determined pragmatically by argument and other speech-acts rather than by any internal logic or external constraint.

Culler and Bal and Bryson point here to a set of formal relations similar to those implied by our reconstructed notion of genre. Just as the meaning of an historical period is not given but is constituted through the often contested significance and meanings of its events, so a text's

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<sup>37</sup> See Bordwell's list of category schemata above for examples of the degrees of extension under which a single film could be contextualized.

genericity or a genre's definition is dependent on the relative coherence or best fit and functional utility of a certain organization of facts—attributes or texts—and not of external independent verification. The genre or 'generic context' doesn't help to explain the text without begging the questions of 1) which other texts constitute the generic corpus and 2) according to what criteria. This is not to say that genre isn't useful for explaining the text; indeed, that is one of its defining functions. But appeal to generic context is effectively a deferral, and its termination can only be an act of pragmatic circumscription, not the arrival at a logical conclusion.

### *Academic Discourse, Interpretation, and Framing*

Just as texts and genres are deployed in a strategy of mutual explication, so are texts and historical periods. These texts may be films, but they may also be letters, diaries, memoranda, legal documents, government reports, advertisements, speeches, and other written artefacts that historians rely upon as data and evidence. We do not have access to the past, only to our current experiences of the texts that date to it, and it is from these that we attempt to reconstruct the past as best as we can understand it. But these textual forms, too, participate in their own genres and serve their own rhetorical functions, which vary over time.<sup>38</sup> In the case of films, for example, we have print, radio, TV, and digital reviews and interviews; posters, trailers,<sup>39</sup> TV spots,

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<sup>38</sup> A missive between friends, for instance, could be a correspondence, a family keepsake, evidence in a trial, and/or an archived historical document. These written genres are defined not by their internal form but by the rhetorical exigence they are called upon to meet. Each of these rhetorical genres can be "taken up" or incorporated into artistic genres, as well, such as in the case of epistolary fiction from Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* to Tom Waits' 1978 song "Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis." I will discuss a particular instance of rhetorical framing later in this chapter and will go into further detail about the relations of uptake between filmic and rhetorical genres in Chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> For example, in a video posted by *Cracked.com*, Cracked writers analyze and discuss the differences between the American and British trailers for *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* and conclude that the American audience is being sold an action zombie film set in the early 19th century, rather than an ironic parody of a specific historical

pressbooks, and other promotional materials (“ballyhoo”) for audiences and exhibitors; home video packaging and bonuses like commentary tracks and featurettes; box office returns and industry analysis in trade publications; fan letters, blogs, video essays, message boards, and other digital discourse; and internal studio correspondence and memos.<sup>40</sup>

This evidence does not constitute a reliably neutral context that can be referred to in order to define a film. It has to be brought to bear on the problem actively. “Since,” Culler writes, “the phenomena criticism deals with are signs, forms with socially constituted meanings, one might think not of context but of the framing of signs: how are signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms?” (xiv) Thorough attention to the milieu through and in which texts operate and are operated upon requires consideration of the critical activity and procedures of scholars. In advocating a framing approach to art history, Bal and Bryson remark that “not only is this more truthful, it advances the search for social history itself. For by examining the social factors that frame the signs, it is possible to analyze simultaneously the practices of the past *and our own interaction with them*, an interaction that is otherwise in danger of going unnoticed” (175 emphasis added). This is to say that, for our purposes, an investigation and reconstruction of genre along these lines must recognize first the active role of the scholar as participant in the ongoing construction and reconstruction of genres.

Altman’s various case studies, such as the emergence of the biopic (38-44), the buddy cop movie (46-7), or the woman’s film (82), stress the historicity of genrefying and regenrefying

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novel. This is of course an instance of a paratext from one rhetorical genre commenting on another as they both pertain to an actual filmic text. See “Why Hollywood Thinks Americans Are Stupid - Cracked Responds.”

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Schatz’s historiographic use of the studio “recapitulation,” a specialized weekly or semi-weekly production memo in the classical studio era. (Schatz 40). I will discuss recapitulations in more detail in Ch. 4.

practices of the early studio system, 1980s Hollywood, and academic film studies in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. These examples demonstrate that neither the historical context nor our standpoint on them can be taken for granted. Historical contexts are not neutral periods in which genre emerges independently; rather they are pragmatic constructs that dynamically shape and are shaped by their contemporaneous discourses, our retrospective understanding of those texts and discourses, and the texts and discourses that constitute our own contextual standpoint. There are many moving parts we must consider in conceptualizing genre historically, and historical context cannot simply be tacked on to a catalogue or chronicle of genre. The historical aspect introduces transformations of the object that must be dealt with in their ontological and epistemological dimensions.

By way of illustrating the historical positionality of critical discourse, consider the following example. In his seminal work *The Fantastic*, literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov provides a now well-known distinction between *theoretical genres* and *historical genres*. The former are normative or hypothetical genres deduced from critical works on poetics,<sup>41</sup> while the latter are descriptive categories “derived from observation of literary reality” (13). Todorov critiques Northrop Frye’s synchronic genre theory for its failure to distinguish genres posited according to the internal structure of literary works from those recognized and actively used at given point in time. Altman contends that Todorov’s distinction rests on a fundamental, unreflexive assumption broadly shared among scholarly critics—namely, that there exists some historical Archimedean point, or a space outside time from which theorists can posit purely theoretical genres. Consequently, Altman questions Todorov’s premise that Frye’s classifications are somehow not historical, as if Frye’s critical use is removed from history and “literary

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<sup>41</sup> E.g. those of Plato, Diomedes, Lessing, and Frye. (Todorov 14).

reality.” Altman points out moreover that Todorov’s own proposed genre, ‘the fantastic,’ is itself historical, not because (or not only because) it developed in or became familiar to situated milieux of readers, writers, and critics, but because Todorov’s definitions so clearly bear the imprint of French structuralism and its generation. Altman writes, “the ‘fantastic’ as defined by Todorov is already (*was always already*) a historical genre [...] Just as the critic is always a part of culture, thus undermining and attempt to oppose the critical to the cultural, so the theoretician always stands on the historically marked ground of a particular era” (9, original emphasis). In pointing to the historicity of Todorov’s own proposed theoretical genre, Altman seeks to collapse Todorov’s distinction by showing that all theoretical genres are in fact historical. By the same token, since genre use is inherently performative and involves some degree of interpretation in Bordwell’s sense, historical genres are also necessarily theoretical.

While we cannot justify a definition of a genre that is removed from its empirical use, neither can we responsibly omit ourselves from the history of that use. Genre use, even and especially in genre history, is performative in an Austinian sense; it activates or calls into being and transforms one or more genres through differential framing. Though the critic may not occupy the same time or place from which her object of study arose, or may not participate in the discourse groups that initially formed it, this in no way removes her from its history. On the contrary, the critic actively participates in writing the history of her text—whether or not that is her stated project—and, in the case of genre, she actively reshapes it. Scholarly use is use par excellence, and it is use that is actualized in its own discourse groups. A given instance of that use implies 1) a particular way of configuring textual elements, emphasizing certain attributes over others, and drawing explicit or implicit comparisons with other texts such that their attributes are similarly framed. It also implies 2) a use such a configuration is put to, a

proposition or premise framed as evidence for an argument advanced by someone and for someone.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the theoretical and methodological problems that arise when scholars do not recognize the interpretive and rhetorical dimensions of their active genre use. Before moving forward, however, I want to take a moment to reiterate that these examples are just that: examples. They are not meant to be exhaustive case studies that establish definitively what critics or scholars or filmmakers or fans in general thought about a film or genre or how a genre was defined at a certain point in time. They are rather documented instances meant to illustrate the principle of rhetorical genreification, of pragmatic genres as produced through some social activity under certain rhetorical conditions. As I shall propose in the concluding chapter, my model here could inform future scholarship of this type, which might look at how explicit or implicit genre definitions change under variable historical and rhetorical conditions or how genre is employed by a particular user group and its particular modalities. But the reader should not take my examples here as any kind of exhaustive description of the particulars of my examples and should note instead the structures and general principles of adaptive interpretation and rhetorical framing.

### American Film Cycles

In her 2014 book *American Film Cycles*, Amanda Ann Klein sets out to build on the genre theories of Altman and others through a series of applied genre case studies. She offers her own concept of “film cycles” to complement existing film genre theory and to refine its approach to historically specific instances of film production and reception. Klein posits that short-term

cycle reception and production are symptomatic of social history— that popular cultural interests and tastes translate to short-term box office returns. “Cycle studies’ focus on cinema’s use value—the way filmmakers, audiences, film reviewers, advertisements, and cultural discourses interact with and effect the film text—offers a more pragmatic, localized approach to genre history” (Klein 5). This use value connects texts’ themes to their historical moment and, so considered, proffers these groupings of films as social documents (9).

Klein’s project is compelling, and her goal of connecting film pragmatics to historical cultural climates suggests a worthy direction for genre history. However, where early genre theory was inadequately historical, Klein has swung too far the other way and undertheorized the concept of genre in which she grounds her historical project. Though she cites Altman extensively, her working conceptualization of genre doesn’t capture the nuances of or address the radical challenges *Film/Genre* presents. This is no small problem, because Klein builds her concept of cycles in contrast to genre, but many of the theoretical and methodological problems with genre that Klein’s cycles address are already accounted for in Altman’s later model. Klein begins from a textualist model of genre and, as a result, her selection criteria rely on the durability of genres and the independence of historical context and thus founder on Culler’s incipient positivism.

I should note first that Klein is not alone in neglecting the dramatic turn Altman makes from his earlier structuralist work in his “Semantic/Syntactic” essay and *The American Film Musical* to the pragmatic poststructuralist *Film/Genre*. Indeed, one of the goals of this project is to work through and extend the radical principles Altman lays out but have not taken hold. Barry Keith Grant, in a 1996 article, critiques Altman for failing to recognize the flexibility of the horror genre (17). In 1996, this is perhaps a fair claim. But Grant’s article was republished in

2016—eighteen years after *Film/Genre*—without updating or revising the critique of Altman, although the edition of *Film Genre Reader* from which Altman’s essay was sourced was updated to 2003. This may suggest that Altman’s early work was so successful and influential that it has overshadowed his attempts to rethink and revise his own models. It may also indicate that *Film/Genre* appeared at the tail end of genre *theory* as an active field of study, and a sort of systematizing fatigue had set in among genre scholars, who preferred to pursue more modest, localized, and concrete projects. In any case, the fundamental overhaul of genre theory *Film/Genre* attempts seems to have gone unnoticed by most scholars.

Klein’s theory of cycles is inextricably bound to her own understanding of genre. She defines a genre in textualist terms, as a “series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes” (4). Genres are “stable and coherent” across time (79) because they are “founded on a large corpus of films that accumulates for decades” and “address a profound psychological need” in audiences (16). Cycles, on the other hand, though also a series associated through repetition of textual elements, are defined primarily through use (4). They are produced to capitalize on box-office success of a particular trend—e.g. juvenile delinquency films in the 1950s (12)—and intensified through inter-textual relay and broader socio-cultural discourses (4). The sudden intensity of popular interest means that cycles are typically short-lived; market saturation precipitates backlash or parody (14-15) within five to ten years (4).

She explains that cycles garner neither the cultural capital of prestige features nor the critical value associated with durable genres (8-10). Cycles are antithetical to quality Hollywood cinema because they are associated with vulgar commercial appeal, with deviant subject matter, with sensationalist promotion, and with low production quality and a high degree of didacticism

(6-8). These associations all point to cycles' timeliness—rushed through production to capitalize on the intense but fleeting interest of a fickle audience market in some social issue. It is this timeliness that makes them valuable social documents (9). The study of a cycle and the inter-textual relay surrounding it reveals a “small, detailed snapshot” of audience tastes and attitudes regarding particular social topics during a limited time frame (19).

In distinguishing her concepts from Altman's, Klein elides some subtle but crucial characteristics of Altman's genre theory. Whether through equivocation or general misunderstanding, Klein misrepresents Altman's conceptions of both genre and cycle. It is important to clarify the distinctions between each author's understanding of the terms “genre” and “cycle.” Not only will this facilitate a more precise contrast between the authors' general approaches, it furthermore will direct our attention to their respective theoretical assumptions and, in turn, to their theories' historiographic and methodological implications.

Altman, too, offers a specialized definition of “cycle,” one which Klein claims to “disprove” (Klein 199 n.5). She correctly notes that Altman defines a cycle in terms of studio production. For Altman, a cycle is the immediate output of a single studio seeking to capitalize on a recent success by reconfiguring what are believed to be the popular proprietary elements, including “contract players, house directors, proprietary characters, and patented processes” (Altman 115). What separates a cycle from a genre here are the legal dimensions such as copyright and trademark protection whereby one studio can distinguish its products from others. Hence, when publicizing their films, studios have no incentive to appeal to generic elements, which any other studio can imitate, as opposed to those legally protected, name-brand elements owned by or contracted to one production studio (59). In her chapter on the *Dead End Kids* and their imitators, Klein claims that because the concurrent, industry-wide proliferation of “*Dead*

*End knockoffs*” never developed into a “stable and coherent genre,” Altman’s conception of cycle is wrong (Klein 79).<sup>42</sup> Exploring this this argument will help to illustrate Altman’s and Klein’s different approaches to genre history.

Klein’s claim that she “disproves” Altman’s theory of cycles is curious and prompts three related objections. First, Altman uses cycle in a specialized sense and as an integral part of a theory of genrefication. It seems strange to claim to disprove a defining characteristic of a theoretical concept, especially through appeal to the characteristics of a second specialized sense. A closer look at their underlying assumptions shows the incommensurability of their definitions of “cycle.” Whereas Altman’s general definition rests on the filmic output of a single studio or the concrete written work of a discourse group, Klein’s definition relies on a general range of years and her own interpretative sorting of films relative to contemporaneous events. Appeals to historical period do not make her competing conceptualization of cycle any more positively correct, since it begs the question of context discussed above. I shall address this general issue in more detail later.

Second, insofar as Klein repeatedly refers to Warner Bros.’s *Dead End Kids*, Monogram’s *East Side Kids*, etc. as separate cycles, she uses the term at least partly in Altman’s sense of it. This objection requires a little explanation. The *Dead End Kids*, *Little Tough Guys*, *East Side Kids*, and *Bowery Boys* all consisted of at least some of the same contract actors as the initial *Dead End* (1937, dir. William Wyler) troupe. For future films, they were either loaned out to or their contracts were acquired by the other studios. This means that, in the legal context of

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<sup>42</sup> The cycles include The *Dead End Kids* cycle (UA and Warner Bros., 7 films 1937-1939); The *Dead End Kids* and *Little Tough Guys* cycle (Universal, 15 films 1938-1943); the *East Side Kids* cycle (Monogram, 22 films 1940-1945); the *Bowery Boys* cycle (Monogram, 47 films 1946-1958); and miscellaneous imitators of the original *Dead End Kids* cycle (Monogram, Columbia, MGM, Warner Bros., RKO, Million Dollar Productions, and Goldseal Productions, 9 films 1938-1942) (Klein 192-5).

the star system, they remained proprietary assets. Hence, none of these groups of films would qualify as generic imitations (in Altman's sense) anyway, because the featured semantic element remains the property of one studio. These films remain studio cycles, which, incidentally, have no guarantee of becoming genrefied (Altman 67-8).

Finally, and most crucially, Klein distinguishes her use of "cycle" from Altman's in terms of cycle's relation to genre, and her characterization of genre—and specifically Altman's definition of genre—appears to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. This may be due to her intermingling of concepts from Altman's older semantic/syntactic model with his more recent work on pragmatic genrefication (Klein 4-6). In any case, she repeatedly contrasts her notion of cycle with a structuralist notion of genre.

Even though the themes and images of the Dead End Kids were expanded into an industry-wide, intergeneric cycle (that is, a cycle whose films are released by multiple studios at the same time) within one year of their cinematic debut in 1937, this juvenile delinquent cycle never developed into a *stable and coherent genre* (Klein 79, emphasis added).

Altman already acknowledges that few cycles ever become genrefied (68). Moreover, Klein uses the word "stable" to define genres three times in this same paragraph, this despite the fact that Altman devotes multiple chapters to challenging the notion of generic stability (Chapter Four of *Film/Genre* is actually titled "Are genres stable?"). Recall that, for Altman, genre is a process born of critical reading positions by which filmic elements, proprietary and generic, are repeatedly reconfigured by a variety of readers and discourse groups. Genres are not "stable" or "coherent," and appeals to longevity are misleading. Generic *terms* may endure, but the corpus

of films—and their own relevant textual attributes—that constitute the genre are always already subject to negotiation and revision. Hence genre is an ongoing *process*, not a stable or coherent category

Many cycles begin as what we might call studio cycles, or the corpus of textually similar variations on proprietary elements. However, industrial discourse is not the defining force here, but critical institutional discourse more broadly. Altman does not privilege film producers as solely responsible for generating cycles. Chapter Five of *Film/Genre* examines the productive role of critical academic discourse in rethinking genres, cycles, and other bodies of films, and Altman traces the genealogy of the woman's film in the scholarly literature.

Family melodrama, first constituted as a cycle by Thomas Elsaesser, became a genre virtually replacing melodrama when first Thomas Schatz (1981), and then the feminist critics [such as Mulvey, Modleski, and Doane], reiterated in their analyses Elsaesser's implied corpus, context, and reading formation. The woman's film in turn remained no more than a cycle, slightly redefined from contemporary critical usage, until the removal of its quotation marks and assertion of its affinities with the newly redefined family melodrama (82).

For Altman, cycles are descriptive signifiers that refer to a negotiated set of texts and that are distinguished from genres by the breadth of their use. Where genres have widespread, shared cultural or industrial use (59), cycles are limited to relatively closed institutional user groups, such as studios (59) or scholarly criticism (82). I shall return to this distinction and question Altman's justification for defining genre and cycle quantitatively, but for now note that part of what makes cycles and genres so *unstable* is their capacity to be rethought and reorganized *ad*

*infinitum*. Both Klein and Altman see cycles as constituted by use, but where Klein defines cycles according to the relation between textual features and the socio-historical context of their production, Altman's theory of genre claims that cycles and genres are necessarily constellated through repeated acts of critical imagining among particular discourse groups or general users.

Contrast between Klein's and Altman's terms brings into relief fundamental theoretical differences in how they understand their objects of study and how they as scholars relate to them. First, Klein appears to treat cycles and other historical phenomena as independent, accessible objects. Her definition of cycles, for instance, presupposes that cycles' semantic elements—or relevant semantic elements—are somehow self-evident. This leads to a version of Tudor's empiricist dilemma by way of a reliance on historical context.

Klein acknowledges the empiricist dilemma as a problem for genre study, and she rightly criticizes evolutionary models of genre for founding historical generic trajectories on theoretical or ahistorical genres such as an idealized gangster genre (30). However, though her own methodology relies on textual features and paratexts to define her cycles, she doesn't subject her own selection method to the same examination. She doesn't recognize the empiricist dilemma as applicable to her project because apparent semantic similarity seems both to prompt and to be verified by production histories and contemporaneous industrial materials. But this of course begs the questions of context discussed above. Justification of generic definition is deferred to industrial context, which has to be assumed to terminate the semiotic mobility of text and genre. This reliance on contextual deferral indicates a tacit self-fulfilling methodology. Textualist justifications such as these reify the critic's interpretive schemata by virtue of their correlation with the putatively independent empirical phenomena that those schemata order in the first place.

The critic's schemata by themselves don't have the force of genrefication, but have to be posited and systematized rhetorically. Though Klein doesn't explicitly address historiography or epistemology, her empirical assumptions are evident through telling metaphors: "We can therefore view film cycles as a mold placed over the zeitgeist, which, when pulled away, reveals the contours, fissures, and complicated patterns of the contemporary moment" (Klein 20). The verb "reveals" suggests that cycles serve as a sort of plaster cast of the zeitgeist—that the nuances of spirit of the age remain as legible traces in the temporally localized corpus of texts. Indeed, she describes the book's project as investigating "how and why [film cycles] form, why they thrive, and why they disappear" (Klein 24). The active verbs Klein gives to film cycles point to her conception of those cycles as independent historical objects that can be identified and examined without essential deformation rather than configurations of and constructed links among experiential phenomena. Furthermore, her language here points to the assumption that problems of generic transformation over time can be surmounted if the historical scope is more precisely defined and localized to only a few years.

Klein's appeal to the zeitgeist as 1) an independent phenomenon that is 2) separable from the interpretations it informs and 3) is knowable as such effectively mystifies her own performative role in genrefication. Where Klein sees the strength of her cycle model in its historical specificity, it falters precisely insofar as it takes historical context as an empirical given rather than a configuration of her own experiences and received models. Moreover, the apparent precision of a smaller historical window and body of films may actually exacerbate the problem, since it *seems* more accurate even if it is just as problematic in principle.

Before moving on to a concrete example, let's recap. Klein's approach generally runs into two fundamental problems. The first is that it appeals to context to resolve (actually, to

defer) the empiricist dilemma. That is, the empiricist dilemma begs questions about the relations between text and genre, but those questions are deferred to historical context without examination of the criteria of selection and interpretation of the texts—including but not limited to film texts—that constitute context's meanings. Second, and related, Klein's approach begs questions about the textualist critic's relation to cycles and genres. If, as Tudor and Culler point out, we cannot take context as given, then we must turn our attention to the critic and her framing activities, which, as Bordwell and Redfern point out, are constrained by her own available schemes/schemata and the rhetorical conditions that obtain.

Note, moreover, that there are ideological stakes involved. If we fail to recognize the proliferation of genres as an active, adaptive process carried out by critical discourses among user groups, we also risk neglecting and thus perpetuating the cultural dominance of particular kinds of films. Klein characterizes cycles as akin to exploitation cinema in their shared opportunistic and often sensationalist commercialism. In so doing she implicitly accepts the premise that cycles and exploitation films in general are a deviation from the Hollywood norm of the artistically worthwhile quality picture, and this opposition structures her general argument. A careful application of Altman's model shows how major productions also participate in genres and the economy of cycles even as they mystify that participation under the pretense of artistry and cultural value.

Klein claims that certain films, no matter how popular, can't be effectively imitated and thus don't produce cycles. Her example of a cycle non-starter is *Forrest Gump* (1994, dir. Robert Zemeckis). The movie's outstanding box-office take and pop cultural impact should have flagged it for imitation as an "originary film" in a mid-1990s cycle. However, though it was the top-grossing movie of 1994 and won six Oscars, the film's "most successful elements—its

folksy, handicapped protagonist and its historical vignettes—could not be easily duplicated in a series of films” and no film cycle developed (Klein 11). It is against this kind of film that Klein defines cycles.

The mistake in this approach is assuming that the exact same semantics are present in the imitations, and it impacts Klein’s selection method. Studio cycles did not operate that way, according to Altman. In one example, he explains that the cycle that spawned the biopic genre imitated *Disraeli* (1929, dir. Alfred E. Green) by repeating the star (George Arliss) and replicating features like set-pieces (speech-making), settings (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), and certain themes (political intrigue, Jewishness), but not necessarily all or all at once (39-42). In the Producer’s Game, studios rely on initial box-office figures to identify a hit and proceed to dissect and imitate what are believed to be the most successful features. These features may be proprietary, such as franchised characters or contract actors, or they may not. Variations are introduced so as not to replicate too closely past films or to correct for mistaken guesses, and so the cycle changes: “Not even the simplest description of a film holds up throughout the game, because each new film undermines our previous understanding (41)” Moreover, “since producers don’t stop evaluating successful films in order to produce further hits, no film can ever achieve a stable definition in the Producer’s Game” (42). In our terms, we would say that the producers’ adaptive mechanism of interpretation transforms not only the films about to be produced, it also transforms what were believed to be the salient features of the earlier films as they are revisited and their success reassessed interminably. .

In the case of *Forrest Gump*, we might provisionally accept the “originary film” conceit and arbitrarily limit the span to five years, since this is Klein’s rough window. We can include in the semantics the mentally disabled character, southern setting, and historical vignettes, but,

since recognizable stars and directors are also thought to be box-office draws—and since Altman includes them as significant factors in cycle production—we might also include “Tom Hanks” and “Brand-Name Director” (i.e. one with significant box office and/or critical successes and broad market recognition). Six more films immediately jump out: *Apollo 13*, *Sling Blade*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *That Thing You Do!*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Green Mile*. The tabular comparison below shows that, though not all elements match up in all categories, there is strong set of family resemblances among the films. Moreover, certain, more specific similarities present themselves, such as an historical setting at least partly in the 1960s (which conveniently offers a baby boomer-friendly soundtrack) and Gary Sinise as costar.

	<b>Starring Tom Hanks</b>	<b>Set in American South</b>	<b>Mentally Disabled Character</b>	<b>Period Piece</b>	<b>Brand-Name Director</b>
<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994, dir. Robert Zemeckis)	X (and Gary Sinise)	X	X	X (1960s)	X
<i>Apollo 13</i> (1995, dir. Ron Howard)	X (and Gary Sinise)			X (1960s)	X
<i>Sling Blade</i> (1996, dir. Billy Bob Thornton)		X	X		
<i>Ghosts of Mississippi</i> (1996, dir. Rob Reiner)		X		X (1960s)	X
<i>That Thing You Do!</i> (1996, dir. Tom Hanks)	X			X (1960s)	X
<i>Saving Private Ryan</i> (1998, dir. Steven Spielberg)	X			X	X
<i>The Green Mile</i> (1999, dir. Frank Darabont)	X (and Gary Sinise)	X	X	X	X

From this table we can see that all six films share at least two elements in common, and period pieces by brand-name directors appear to have been popular in this five-year span as well.

There are, of course, other relevant semantic axes, such as source material. In this case, since we don't have a candidate for originary film, we can begin to move backward as well as forward from *Forrest Gump* to include films adapted from historical literary works. This would include *Dances with Wolves* (1990, dir. Kevin Costner, novel by Michael Blake); *Goodfellas* (1990, dir. Martin Scorsese, book by Nicholas Pileggi); *Legends of the Fall* (1994, dir. Edward Zwick, novel by Jim Harrison); *Interview with the Vampire* (1994, dir. Neil Jordan, novel by Anne Rice); *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994, Darabont, short story by Stephen King); *Casino* (1995, Scorsese, book by Pileggi); *Apollo 13* (book by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger); and *The Green Mile* (novel by King). Surely this seems arbitrary, but despite being prestige pictures, these films can be easily reconfigured into an historically localized grouping based on semantic axes.

Finally, the notion that, because of its financial and cultural success, *Forrest Gump* might have been an originary film—if only its textual elements were easier to replicate—ignores the broader tropes it exemplifies. For example, *Forrest Gump*'s portrayal of an extraordinary mentally disabled man carries forward a tradition that goes at least as far back as *Harvey* (1950, dir. Henry Koster), and includes *Charly* (1968, dir. Ralph Nelson), *Being There* (1979, dir. Hal Ashby), *Rain Man* (1988, dir. Barry Levinson), and *The Green Mile*. If we extend this to extraordinary characters with mental illness or disorders more broadly, then we can include *A Beautiful Mind* (2001, Howard), *The Aviator* (2004, Scorsese), and *The Imitation Game* (2014, dir. Morten Tyldum), all three of which, incidentally, are 20th century period pieces with bankable stars.

This exercise is meant to illustrate two points. First is the principle of adaptive genre historiography. Even without deeper research into these potential cycles/genres, I can provide the

beginnings of multiple schemes based on the configuration of various filmic and extrafilmic attributes, and the viability of our contradictory schemes is testable by the degree of internal consistency and potential utility. In so doing, however, it would behoove me to acknowledge that my proposed cycles are not historically or empirically guaranteed, but are instead ad hoc configurations of experiences that must be revised and adapted to emerging exigencies.

Second, the unreflexive, empirically oriented nature of Klein's model leaves it more vulnerable to the effects of unexamined biases in selection and adaptation. Klein's *Forrest Gump* example doesn't consider that prestige pictures might also potentially constitute cycles and genres; they might also exploit audience interest in a topic by imitating each other's textual elements; and they might also be didactic. This has to do with the material and discursive conditions that frame her understanding of cycles. But there is another dimension to it. While low budgets and sensationalist discourses guide Klein to look for cycles framed in those terms, reports of large budgets, auteur filmmakers, and certain kinds of didacticism can frame prestige pictures as not-cycles.

The satirical comedy *Tropic Thunder* (2008, dir. Ben Stiller) cynically and bluntly points out that although the Academy awards movies about mentally disabled people with extraordinary gifts, actors who "go full retard" go home empty handed.<sup>43</sup> *Tropic Thunder*'s radical move is not criticizing Academy hypocrisy regarding the mentally disabled. Rather, in asserting that the Academy rewards specific forms of filmic representations of the mentally disabled, the film implies that certain genres—such as the Vietnam combat film the characters are shooting—are Oscar-worthy and others are not. While it is conventional wisdom that certain genres such as

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Oscar nominees Sean Penn (*I Am Sam*, 2001, dir. Jessie Nelson), Robin Williams (*The Fisher King*, 1991, dir. Terry Gilliam), and Billy Bob Thornton (*Sling Blade*).

comedy, horror, and science fiction do not win in the major categories, the notion of genericity (with its implication of commercial appeal and formal imitation) is anathema to Hollywood's branding of prestige pictures as *ars gratia artis*. And if they must be assigned a genre, it is usually the vague and vaguely sophisticated designation "drama."<sup>44</sup>

This is a particularly unsettling demonstration of the mystifying function of *drama* as catch-all for high-art, self-important Oscar bait. Application of a more nuanced approach to genres and cycles recognizes the diversity of imitable semantic and syntactic axes. Moreover, it allows us to interrogate the discourses that disavow the generic operations at work, which in turn reinscribe the hierarchical cultural politics of taste. Prestige is part of marketing, and it is also part of framing. A historiographic methodology that demands consideration of the function of schemata—like genres or cycles or historical periods—as defined in terms of their present utility for the critic may be more successful at recognizing and adapting discourses that reify art, culture, taste, or history.

### Genre as Rhetorical Frame

In this section I will propose that film genres are functions of rhetorical conditions. Genres only exist insofar as they are used, that is, defined by shared use among a user group. Genre thus indexes the rhetorical social activity of multiple, overlapping groups of users and their discourse about films. Interpretation is necessary but insufficient for genre; those interpretations must be conveyed as a social act to other users. A genre is a shared framing based upon similar (but probably not identical) configurations of attributes. Genres are flexible or protean because the

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<sup>44</sup> I shall discuss the evaluative dimension of genre distinctions more thoroughly in the next chapter.

rhetorical conditions under which they are employed vary. They serve the differing purposes of differing user groups under differing circumstances.

First, I would advance the skeptical question, how do we know genres exist? Altman, Gunning, Tudor, and others have demonstrated how unreliable both historical and textualist explanations are. Without appealing to a metaphysical realist conception—viz. genres as abstract Platonic ideals—all we can say, without trying to define genres, is *that* they are used. This skeptical attitude would direct us to look to how genres are used, by whom, and for what purpose. They are invoked explicitly in a range of discourses manifest in historical and contemporary texts, written and circulated among a variety of overlapping user groups. Before they are expressed, genres are essentially category schemata, mental structures used strictly for interpretation. But genres are inherently social and serve many social purposes beyond personal interpretation.<sup>45</sup>

There are approaches to genre-as-use, such as that of literary theorist Thomas O. Beebee, who, like Janice Radway and Will Wright, groups texts according to the uses their content is put to, such as escapism or empowerment or ideological interpellation. This is a conception Beebee describes as “genre as use-value” (Beebee 3-7).<sup>46</sup> Another literary approach to genre would be that of Adena Rosemarin, who emphasizes the reciprocal dynamic between text and genre as ongoing constructions of critical activity. For Rosemarin, genre is not a class but a classifying statement, invocation of genre is not a neutral description but a performative speech act, one that explicates the text through propositions about internal and external similarities (Rosemarin 46).

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<sup>45</sup> Though conventional genres are mental structures, this is not to say that they specifically are innate in a Kantian way. Bordwell describes genres as a type of category schema, the distinguishing character of which appears to be that genre is received by the viewer marked as such by external social discourses. I will address the question of received genres as meta-genres in Chapter 3.

<sup>46</sup> See Radway, *Reading the Romance* and Wright, *Six-Guns and Society*

The reciprocity she locates between text and genre and the pragmatic ends they serve is fundamental to any genre use—including and especially as schemata—and is thus fundamental to constructing meaning even at the most basic referential level.

Rosemarin has been criticized for a overemphasizing the critic—and a very particular kind of critic—at the expense of the writer. (Devitt 170). Moreover, and perhaps more consequentially for us, she seems to posit a peculiarly abstract sense of critical activity. Beebee claims that

Rosemarin's exclusive concern with the critic presupposes a completely atomistic world devoid of social forces and conventions, a world in which writers write their texts oblivious to readers and their generic expectations, and readers read these texts, apparently oblivious to genre distinctions, even though such distinctions stare them in the face every time they go to the bookstore, the supermarket, or the library. Only critics are left to worry about genre. (Beebee 254)

Beebee's critique is provocative, but I might make two objections. First, the extent to which genres are normalized, in which they function as day-to-day instrumental schemata and don't break down, they likely aren't a worry to readers or viewers. Genres function well—or well enough—for an audience who has no major stake in their consistency, and who, unlike institutional critics, have little to no interest in defining or building systematic analyses upon those genres that stare them in the face. In the case of this kind of use, genres are doxic in a Bourdieusian sense and thus operate largely unnoticed.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> I shall expand on this question of day-to-day use and explore generic contestations in popular discourses in Chapter 3.

Second, if we expand the scope of critical activity from isolated analysis to the fundamentally social practice of producing written critical arguments about genre, then we see this movement from interpretation to framing. Where Rosemarin may be less explicitly concerned with social forces and conventions than Beebee is, her theoretical writing is no less fundamentally social than his. Her arguments, published in academic books, imply an audience. This is similar to Altman's objection to Todorov's critique of Frye; the critic is both inescapably historical and inescapably social.

Moreover, for Bordwell, rhetorical concerns are inherent in institutional criticism. "Although their theoretical commitments differ, [symptomatic and explicatory] approaches utilize similar inferential moves and persuasive devices" because "criticism is shaped by the institutions that house it, and the practices by which institutions guide the act of interpretation are constant across critical schools" (Bordwell xiii). Even the object of study is contingent upon these institutional rhetorical concerns,

"the speaker," writes Aristotle, "must frame his proofs and arguments with the help of common knowledge and accepted opinions." Rhetorical argument is adjusted to the audience's preconceptions, even if the rhetor aims to change some of them. If the critic's audience will not assume that a home movie or an educational documentary or a "slasher" film is an appropriate object of interpretation, the critic must generate arguments for discussing such despised genres. (Bordwell 206)

Bordwell emphasizes the motivational role of critical rhetoric but misses the performative function of those arguments in defining and redefining those genres. The question isn't only one of the value of those genres—which I shall discuss further in chapter 3—but of their ontology. That is, rhetoric shapes not only the arguments about the genres, but the genres themselves. What

films belong to a genre, its history, its defining characteristics—all of these dimensions are intrinsically bound up in the rhetorical operations of critical interpretation and are subject to its changing exigences.

By defining genre relative to its functional use for the critic we can think of it first in terms of private interpretation and then, insofar as these interpretations are expressed, in terms of public argumentation. This is a move from comprehension to social action, or from genre as schema to genre as frame. This emphasis on the utility of genre in social contexts is the principle that will allow us to mobilize a reconstructed concept of genre toward broader discursive applicability. Our synthesis of Altman and Bordwell democratizes Rosemarin's critic by showing how inferential schemata are integral to all meaning construction, not just that of academic critics, and especially insofar as a viewer adopts a critical reading position, like that of Altman's film producers.

### *Genre as Framing*

Recall that in *Film/Genre*, Altman describes how film reviewers in the early studio era identified stylistic or structural similarities among contemporaneous films, which were usually expressed in negative reviews. When systematic imitation among producers had exhausted fresh material, critics pounced on the latest weakest example as “another gangster picture” or “another musical.” The films might closely resemble one another, and this was due to producers' calculated attempts to replicate the significant elements of past successes. But it was the critical discourse of reviewers and general acceptance of the categories in popular use among other reviewers and audiences that constituted them as genres. Once readers understood what reviewers meant by “gangster picture” as opposed to “urban crime melodrama,” the genre was up and running.

This genre-fying discourse is not limited to reviews of first-run pictures. For example, Altman examines a mid-1950s press packet aimed at exhibitors, which unsurprisingly brands its new creature feature *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954 dir. Jack Arnold) as a science-fiction film. However, the document also *re-brands* studio backlists of gothic horror films—including *Dracula* (1931 dir. Tod Browning), *Frankenstein* (1931 dir. James Whale), *The Wolf Man* (1941 dir. George Waggner), etc.—as science fiction as well, thus regenrefying the films in order to capitalize on a hot industry trend (Altman 78-9). The ultimate purpose here is to find an audience for the studio back catalogue in the face of flagging interest and to wring further revenue out of an older property. The immediate purpose, however, is to provide a model exhibitors can imitate, one which frames these films for an audience in terms of an appeal to current popular tastes. And audience has to be understood not only as film audience but as a rhetorical audience.

While many of us might be inclined to accept *Frankenstein* as science fiction from a structural or historical position, *Dracula* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939 dir. William Dieterle) are harder sells. But as Gunning points out in his comparison of the Biograph and Blockbuster categories, the differences in classification point to a pragmatic industrial approach. The films are grouped in such a manner as to be “very clear in their purposes and communication, effectively allowing potential buyers to range through a gamut of interests without concerning themselves about strict logical principles” (Gunning 55). Gunning does not, however, consider how those interests are consolidated and reified, how genre and audience are constructed, through precisely these rhetorical appeals.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> I will discuss in more detail audience construction through fan discourse and through digital streaming algorithms in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively

*Rhetorical Conditions*

Bal and Bryson's advocacy for the term 'framing' turns largely upon its inherent acknowledgement of the active, productive role of the critics in defining the nature and scope of the object of study. As a general principle, framing can seem a little abstract, and, without further qualification, could lend itself to a critique similar to the one Beebee levels at Rosemarin regarding the putative isolation and potential caprice of the framer. On the other hand, full consideration of the totality of social forces under which a critic writes is an overwhelming if not impossible task. The context of a critic's framing practices is still a context, and it is subject to the same problems of extension as the text she examines. How do we justifiably rein in the extension of a critic's context in order to usefully examine her genre-fying activity? How do we frame framing?

I have used the phrase "rhetorical conditions" a few times already, but it is only now following these questions of framing and critical rhetoric that I can explain what I mean and why it is necessary to introduce this term to film genre studies. The problem of "context" has already been discussed, and "situation" has a specific technical meaning in rhetoric that has been the subject of debate in rhetorical genre studies and must be applied precisely. "Rhetorical conditions" here is meant to convey a general sense of the variable textual and power relations among rhetors (speakers and writers) and audiences (listeners, readers, viewers), and the social structures that inform their own relations to filmic texts and paratexts in a given instance. Methodologically, and the way I use it most often, the term ought to be understood in the sense of weather conditions, localized and variable, and which may have a broad scope, such as in the case of mass media advertising, or a narrower one, such as among niche fan communities. The relations one has toward a film, a genre, a paratext about a film, and/or writing about a genre in a

given instance are all to one degree or another qualified by one's rhetorical position as rhetor or audience and the exigences, appeals, and dynamic constructions that describe the relation. I hope also that the phrase will convey a theoretical sense of rhetorical relations as a prerequisite for interpretive schemata to become film genres; that discourse about films—and its purposes and participants—are what create, maintain, and transform film genres.<sup>49</sup>

### *Genre Users*

Who are the genre users? In the broadest sense, we all are, insofar as we, as senders and/or receivers, use the classical genres and other category schemata like “Spike Lee joint” or “Oscar bait” or “direct-to-video” in communicative exchanges with other users. I employ the term “users” for a number of reasons. First, it keeps the pragmatic dimension of genre—its “use”—in the picture and maintains the association with subjects actively constructing and reconstructing genres. Second, “user groups” is general enough to capture range of possible relations among people who use genre for different kinds of social activities. Contrast this with “discourse communities,” defined by John Swales as “sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals” (Devitt 37). The term that has been criticized as naïve and idealistic, while failing to capture the dynamism and fluidity of flesh-and-blood communities, whose members may move in and out of and among one or more groups (Devitt 36-8). While some have tried to refine the term, Amy Devitt contends that

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<sup>49</sup> Anis Bawarshi has his own sense of the phrase “rhetorical conditions,” which is specifically geared toward the concerns of rhetorical genre studies (RGS) in the field of rhetoric and composition. See the introduction to Bawarshi.

the concept of discourse community privileges discourse above other group activities, motives and purposes; and it disguises the social collectivity that shapes the very nature of the group and of its discourse [...] As a result, it emphasizes too heavily the role of discourse in constructing groups and not enough the role of groups in constructing discourse. (Devitt 39)

Common kinds of speech or writing, Devitt concludes, “are significant to the extent that they reveal underlying commonalities of identity or values [...] Communities are thus better defined by their common goals, values, or identities than by their common discourse” (39).<sup>50</sup> Because, in establishing a theoretical framework, I am aiming for general applicability, and because (recalling the skeptical question that began this section) we can at least say that genres are used, genre users and genre user groups are sufficiently precise for the time being.

While everyone uses film genres in *some* way, not all people or institutions use them in the *same* way. One theoretical shortcoming of certain kinds of structural genre theory and criticism is the failure to recognize that within a single industry or even within a single company, different groups operate with different, even conflicting goals.<sup>51</sup> This is characteristic of approaches that locate the genrefying power in the industry and filmic paratexts, what Steve Neale calls “inter-textual relay,” or the “discourses of publicity, promotion, and reception that surround Hollywood’s films, and includes both trade and press reviews” (Neale 2-3). Altman has

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<sup>50</sup> Devitt goes on to suggest a breakdown of user groups into *communities*, *collectives*, and *networks*, defined not by their forms of expression but by these values and goals and distinguished from one another by the nature of their concrete interactions. (42-6) I shall discuss these group divisions further in subsequent chapters, and especially in Chapter 4.

<sup>51</sup> In reassessing his older “Semantic/Syntactic” essay, Altman observes that  
 While the article acknowledged a genre’s ability simultaneously to satisfy differing needs, which I attributed to two collective singulars (the ‘audience’ and ‘Hollywood’), I never awakened to the fact that genres have multiple and conflicting audiences, that Hollywood itself harbors many divergent interests, and that these multiple genre practitioners use genres and generic terminology in differing and potentially contradictory ways. (208)

shown that the interests and practices of film producers, distributors, exhibitors, and reviewers are not identical, nor are they static, and their various discursive framing practices—memos, posters, trailers, reviews—indicate both a fluid set of institutional user groups as well as a variegated and protean rhetorical public audience.

Altman provides illuminating examples of promotional materials, but among the simpler examples of the variety is that of how genres are framed in film reviews.<sup>52</sup> Mark Jancovich, in “Genre and the Audience” and “A Real Shocker,” extends the Bourdieusian analysis of paracinematic fan communities advanced by Jeffrey Sconce to an explicit focus on film genres and how genre functions as a medium of cultural distinctions among user groups.<sup>53</sup> In the former piece, Jancovich examines film reviews of and critical responses to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991, dir. Jonathan Demme), especially in publications like *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Nation*, periodicals aimed at middle-class, educated readers. He shows how the film’s genre designation—whether or not it is labelled a horror film in a particular review—is bound up in the aesthetic, moral, and political value judgments a given reviewer makes about the film and the horror genre in general, as well as the class-oriented taste formation a given publication both reflects and contributes to.

In the latter article Jancovich focuses on genre fan discourse within niche publications like *Fangoria* or *Fear*. In letters to the editor Jancovich finds genre functioning as a medium for establishing and expressing subcultural capital within a discourse community. The authenticity of a particular text is of paramount concern in these disputes, and Jancovich finds abundant

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Altman 55-9, 63, 78-9.

<sup>53</sup> See Sconce “‘Trashing’ the Academy.” Jancovich critiques Sconce’s concept of paracinema and its application in a later article. See Jancovich, “Cult Fictions.”

argument about whether a film like *Alien* (1979, dir. Ridley Scott) belongs to the horror genre, or whether it's *really* a science fiction film. These intra-communal contestations turn on disparate readings as well as different ideas about what constitutes an authentic genre film—what the essence of the genre is or ought to be. For example, the slick production value of *Alien* disqualifies it as 'authentic' horror for some readers, for whom the horror's transgressive nature dictates that a film ought to offend aesthetic as well as moral values.

Both of Jancovich's examples use a sociological framework to understand how different but potentially overlapping user groups frame a film and genre. Importantly, these framings are not strictly denotative, but entail normative claims and evaluative judgments about the moral, political, and/or aesthetic worth of a given film or genre. This evaluative dimension of genre and the presuppositions that inform it will be the subject of the next chapter. For now, note how the values and identities of the group dovetail with how the film is framed. And which genre a film is said to belong to depends on whether 1) a film violates or exemplifies those values and 2) whether the genre *in toto* is believed to violate or exemplify those values. The social goals and values of a user group inform the rhetorical framing of the film and thus also frame its genre.

These films are more plausibly contestable because they are both studio productions that straddle received genres; horror and science fiction for *Alien*, horror, detective, thriller, and/or serial killer for *The Silence of the Lambs*. Other films may seem more self-evidently to belong to a specific genre. But we must remind ourselves that neither the text nor the director, nor the advertisements, reviewers, or scholars has the power to discover or fix a film's genre. In some cases, there are no other plausible contenders because the iconography appears self-evident. In other cases, a film may be so little known that there are no stakes or no point in genre-fying the film because it just isn't discussed much. And in some other cases, such as that of *Alien* and

Altman's example of the woman's film, the controversy may be restricted to a smaller, more insulated user group. In all cases, however, the genre arises not from the text, or even from its use in an abstract sense, but from how actual users frame concrete texts for specific user groups via specific kinds of writing genres for specific social purposes. This would lead us to ask not *whether* a genre exists, but *for whom* it exists. Not whether a film is a horror film or a sci-fi, but what user or group goals it serves to frame it one way rather than the other.

Before moving on to an extended example, I would like to mention three concerns regarding Altman's approach. First, his working definition of the scope of a genre wavers, depending on where the term is applied. I posit the general claim that the conditions for and definition of a filmic genre are as follows: *an expressed configuration of some common textual and/or extratextual attributes applied to a film relative to a body of films that is meaningful and useful for some group*. This definition entails no requirements for capacity of the genre or size of the group. Its internal consistency or precision vary with the degree to which these are necessary to communicate meaningfully with group members and achieve social goals. Broad industry acceptance or widespread cultural recognition are not prerequisites: in principle the participants in an amateur film club or graduate seminar can produce their own working genres no less effectively than studio publicity departments, video store chains, or the entertainment press. This is because genres are defined by the group and the purposes they serve for it.

Second, Altman's historical scope disposes him to available evidence of past genre-fying rhetoric, which is largely institutional. Absent are recorded configurations and genres produced by fans in the past. This methodological limitation as much as anything, I think, is responsible for the top-down character of many conventional conceptualizations of genre. This "production-driven definition," Altman acknowledges, "needs to be matched by a reception-driven definition

recognizing that genres do not exist until they become necessary to a lateral communication process, that is until they serve a constellated community” (162). But lateral communication and constellated communities, by Altman’s own definitions, are inherently imaginary, since they involve imagining oneself as part of a group that shares interest and enjoyment in certain kinds of films but without any direct interaction with other members (161-2). Jancovich’s attention to fan discourse in letters to the editor of niche publications is valuable methodologically because it points us toward concrete textual evidence of bottom-up and lateral communications, which Altman conceives of as indirect and ‘imagined’ (162).<sup>54</sup> Though Altman recognizes the potential of the web to facilitate direct communication among genre fans, he is writing before the so-called digital revolution. Targeted marketing and exhibition, niche web publications, and increased connectivity among users mean that fan communities and user groups generally are more fragmented but also less imaginary. Multi-platform interactivity and social media not only allow precisely that kind of direct, localized communication Altman anticipated, but they also preserve abundant concrete instances of rhetorical genrefication as evidence for the researcher.

Finally, Altman’s critiques of conventional genre theory and criticism are thorough and devastating, but this does not mean that we ought to dismiss or discard these approaches altogether. Though they may not be well-grounded theoretically, they still serve as useful and often influential models of criticism and therefore of genrefication. If, as I suggested in my introduction, the proper task of genre theory is to describe the processes by which genres come into being and what their nature is, then the proper object of study for genre theory is not the films themselves, but the discourses that produce and transform and sustain genres, as well as the

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<sup>54</sup> I shall address Jancovich’s concerns with Altman’s model and will advance a more thorough critique of my own in the next chapter.

purposes those discourses serve for user groups of varying sizes and compositions. The goal of pragmatic genre theory should not be to demolish conventional genre theories and criticism, but to deconstruct them: to identify their schematic logic and rhetorical moves and from there to study which realms of popular discourse they resonate in, which social groups they serve, and to what ends. This approach is not about supplanting genre-fying practices, like those of traditional genre theory, but analyzing and situating them and understanding their rhetorical and social functions. The final section of this chapter will provide an example of this approach.

### *Torture Porn and “Spectacle Horror”*

In a 2011 journal article titled “Spectacle Horror and *Hostel*: Why Torture Porn Does Not Exist,” Adam Lowenstein takes aim at the term ‘torture porn.’ Coined in a 2006 *New York Magazine* review essay on *Hostel* (2005, dir. Eli Roth), the term was initially applied by film critic David Edelstein to films like that are characterized by cruel gorey violence, identifiable characters, and mainstream exhibition. Lowenstein seizes on the question of identification as the primary mode of engagement with a film. He argues that identification with a character, while a conventional way of viewing Hollywood films, is ill-suited for the visceral cinematic mode of *Hostel* and similar films. Moreover, the clear value judgment implicit in the term forecloses the possibility of moral critique within the film. Lowenstein instead suggests the term ‘spectacle horror,’ which he associates with Tom Gunning’s notion of the cinema of attractions. As an attraction, *Hostel* and other ‘spectacle horror’ films involve “the staging of spectacularly explicit horror for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as shock or terror, but without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development or historical

allegory” (Lowenstein 42). For Lowenstein, having worked in literary trauma studies, identification is less important than embodied engagement, as the latter allows us to acknowledge the impossibility of witnessing history—say, the torture at Abu Ghraib—while still feeling history as a visceral experience. Thus *Hostel*’s spectacular theatricality potentially conveys a more complex political critique than a conventional Hollywood realist mode would afford. Without contesting Lowenstein’s analysis of the film itself or his advocacy of spectacle as a mode of filmmaking and method of critical spectatorship, I would point to a couple of issues specific to genre theory that his article raises.

The first is his titular claim that the genre ‘torture porn’ does not exist, a claim he repeats as part of his thesis. This is in a sense an empirical question, and is easily but productively refuted. Lowenstein argues from a textualist position, but, as we have seen, there isn’t ground to claim that any genres can be justified strictly on textual qualities. On the other hand, from the perspective of a pragmatic genre theory, genres exist insofar as they are used, and the evidence of a genre’s existence comes from discourse about films, not the films themselves. In a 2013 book, Steve Jones reports that the term ‘torture porn’ appears in English-language articles over 200 times per year between 2008 and 2011, and 308 times in 2009 alone. Quick Lexis Nexis and Google searches show several results from as recently as October 2017, mostly in reviews of *Jigsaw* (2017, dirs. Michael Spierig, and Peter Spierig), the latest in the *Saw* franchise (2004-present). In short, the genre persists, whether Lowenstein and other critics like it or not.

But just because the term persists, does that mean that the genre does? Considering genre pragmatically, yes, because the phrase ‘torture porn’ both signifies the shifting corpus of films and indexes the organizing principles by which relevant textual similarities are reconstituted every time the label is invoked. The body of films changes because the rhetorical exigence the

genre is called upon to respond to also changes. For instance, though torture porn is now commonly described as a subgenre of horror, Edelstein's review cites *Irreversible* (2002, dir. Gaspar No ), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, dir. Mel Gibson), and, more obliquely, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992, dir. Quentin Tarantino) along with *Hostel*, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005, dir. Rob Zombie), and *Wolf Creek* (2005, dir. Greg McLean). Lowenstein argues that the grouping of these apparently generically and tonally disparate films betrays the imprecision and inadequacy of the term (43). I would argue instead such a grouping illustrates emergent genrefication in action and moreover points to its users' own rhetorical interests.

The question of torture porn's generic rhetoricity is the second issue Lowenstein's article raises. It's not that Lowenstein has no case, simply that he overstates it. Without explicitly backing down from his polemical titular claim about the non-existence of torture porn, Lowenstein does end up advancing the softer argument that the term is not useful for academic practices (43). He makes a persuasive case that the term torture porn lends itself to a less useful analytical frame, and that its pejorative connotations potentially belie sophisticated strategies of representation and complex political and moral themes (51). Hence, the generic label limits the extent of *scholarly* inquiry into this body of films by undercutting its institutional acceptability as a worthwhile field of study. This does not mean, however, that the term is not useful for other users with other purposes.

Lowenstein's goals and methods are a function of his user group, that is, academic film scholars—especially those engaged in textual analysis—and we might provisionally discern separate user groups according to the readership of the two publications: Lowenstein's audience reads *Critical Quarterly*, Edelstein's reads *New York Magazine*. The former is an academic, refereed humanities journal and the latter is a popular-press news and culture magazine. Each

writer responds to a different rhetorical situation: establishing ethos, constructing audience, and making appeals in different ways. This is not to say that academic film scholars are a wholly distinct group—clearly Lowenstein has read Edelstein. But that is the point. Lowenstein belongs both to the group of horror cinema scholars *and* he belongs to a broader audience for popular film criticism and thinkpieces.

Lowenstein disputes Edelstein's claims using methods specific to Lowenstein's own genre user group in a helpfully contrastive way. As a journalistic film critic, Edelstein cannot write a seventeen-page essay that cites eighteen separate scholarly sources and then wait months and months for peer review and revisions. He has short deadlines. And certainly most of Edelstein's audience does not have the formal training in film history and theory to be able to assess the kinds of arguments, evidence, concepts, and methods that Lowenstein brings to bear. Instead, Edelstein relies on pathetic appeals to disgust and befuddlement, his own ethos as a "horror maven," and nods to the authority of writers Will Self and Stephen King and scholar Carol Clover (which, incidentally, further bolsters his credibility by showing some familiarity with academic horror studies). Now, this is not to say that Lowenstein doesn't have to establish his own ethos: that his heavy uses of Mary Ann Doane and Tom Gunning do not contribute to the strength of his appeals; that the connections he draws to historical execution films and the traumas of Operation Iraqi Freedom don't demonstrate his awareness of film history and concern with current politics; or that his own adroit textual analysis does not inspire trust in his conclusions.<sup>55</sup> But the aims of the two pieces of writing are very different. Edelstein seeks to raise public concerns about a what he sees as a violent, sadistic trend in early twenty-first century popular film by way of reviewing a recent example. Lowenstein aims to further advance a

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion on the rhetorical construction of academic arguments, see Bordwell Chapter 9.

particular specialized mode of critical textual analysis among film scholars and to draw attention to the aesthetic and political importance of horror cinema and his concept of the “allegorical moment,” a project he has been pursuing at least since his 2005 book, *Shocking Representation*

What this all comes down to is the a question of the usefulness of the term ‘torture porn’ for each writer and for his respective audience. Torture porn does exist, and it is distinct from spectacle horror—if that term eventually gains traction—because each genre is employed toward a different end. Though torture porn has come to refer more specifically to the kinds of horror films Lowenstein would like to redeem in 2011, Edelstein uses it broadly in 2006 because it suits his general point about cruel and excessive graphic violence in contemporary cinema. Edelstein’s is a self-consciously performative grouping that later scholars like Jones would study and employ constatively, as if the designation were a neutral description of a self-evident body of concrete texts. This last point is striking as among the more peculiar features of Lowenstein’s argument.

Jones never questions torture porn’s existence, but instead adopts a more conventional genre criticism position by clarifying the genre’s textual features. Lowenstein, by contrast, denies one genre exists on textual grounds while self-consciously trying the create another. He and Edelstein are each aware that they are involved in a performative grouping, in an act of genrefication, but they each still argue as if the texts were self-evident and independent of the critic. This imaginary Archimedean distance between the critic and the text is a pre-condition for any textualist use of genre. Jones takes the genre as given and tries to outline its salient features, going so far as to suggest that while only forty-five films released theatrically between 2006 and 2013 had been labelled “torture porn,” many direct-to-video releases had been neglected by critics, the implication being that the texts determine the genre and not the critical discourse,

nevermind Jones' own critical discourse (14). Lowenstein, on the other hand, takes the textual features as given but hitherto misunderstood. Though Jones, like Lowenstein, seeks to describe the genre as if it were independent of his own analysis, he does not also try to self-consciously will a new genre into existence in the way Lowenstein does.

This unusual case lays bare the contortions required of genre criticism that recognizes the utility of genres without acknowledging the reflexivity that use implies. Furthermore, it illustrates the point that genre is rhetorically situated among user groups, which may be provisionally discerned according to the writing genres they participate in, especially in the case of specialized, paywall-blocked publications like academic journals. These groups may have different priorities and goals and thus find certain framings more or less useful than others, depending upon the purposes those framings are constructed to serve. Despite its connotations, torture porn remains a useful and even celebrated genre among some scholars and fans. But Lowenstein's efforts are not wholly unreasonable or unprecedented. As in the case of the woman's film and film noir, user groups like film scholars can plausibly try to coin their own genres—in Lowenstein's case, "spectacle-" and "atmospheric horror"—and may or not be successful, depending on the terms exposure and demonstrable utility among the user group. And, as Jancovich has shown, though user groups may overlap, it doesn't mean that consensus is involved in a particular generic framing. Conflict can arise between opposing framings, depending upon the orientation of users to other groups and their goals.

## Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have laid out the theoretical foundations for a radically pragmatic approach to film genre theory, one which addresses the pitfalls of textualist definitions while still recognizing genre users' engagement with the text. By locating genre in discourse about films rather than in the films themselves, we can account for the historically and socially situated nature of those genres, their forms and uses. In the next chapter I will discuss the evaluative dimension of genre: what values are associated with a given genre for a given group? How do the denotative mechanics of interpretation and framing come to be imbued with variable connotations? To answer this, as well as the question of how received genres inform interpretation and framing, I will introduce the concept of *meta-genre*. Unlike genres, which require the explicit invocation and framing of one or more concrete films, meta-genres are multi-valent, syncretic accretions, the sum total of semantic, syntactic, and extratextual attributes plus the axiological or evaluative valences of a given genre as understood by a given user based on her experience of films and filmic paratexts. I will revisit Jancovich to explore a synthesis of his Bourdieusian approach with the pragmatic model I have advanced, suggesting that meta-generic connotations allow named meta-genres and genre-fied films to serve as vehicles for rhetorical and social distinction.

### Chapter 3: Meta-Genre and Social Action

#### Genre and Social Action

Mark Jancovich opens his article “A Real Shocker: Authenticity, Genre, and the Struggle for Distinction” by briefly recapping the turn from traditional genre theory to historical genre study, noting that by the late 1990s genre scholars had all but given up on defining genres, and directed their attention instead toward how genres have been understood in the past. Though Andrew Tudor’s identification of the empiricist dilemma led him to conclude that “genre is what we collectively believe it to be,” Jancovich’s research into fan and critical activity prompts a critique of Tudor’s pluralist approach. Through attention to the arguments and negotiations among fans, Jancovich shows that, even if genre theorists have abandoned the project of defining individual genres, fans have not; there is no collective agreement about genre definitions, hence genre cannot be “what we collectively believe it to be.” (Jancovich “A Real Shocker” 23).

Jancovich contends that while Altman had already made this point about negotiated definitions, Altman still does not devote attention to the concrete classifications of flesh-and-blood fans as social acts of distinction or, for that matter, as acts of social distinction (24). That is to say, Altman largely neglects specific instances of genrefication among fans and the localized social factors that motivate and inform them—how classification and other generic discourse shapes and is shaped by individual fans’ milieux and their struggles for status among certain kinds of social groups. As I mentioned in the last chapter, this is a theoretical and methodological issue for Altman that leads to a larger gap in his work, although I would qualify this critique by raising two points.

First, Altman's book is a work of poststructuralist genre theory that seeks to define genre philosophically by appeal to historical use; he is more interested in defining big-G *Genre* than individual *genres*. While Altman grounds his theory in instances of historical use, his goal is an account of how genre per se operates as a textual and historical system. Jancovich's fans, on the other hand, are more concerned with acts of concrete classification than with the abstract historical and discursive processes that render those classifications meaningful. And Jancovich himself is interested less in a systematic description of genre in this sense than in examining how its fluid variability informs sociological relations.

Second, Altman's broader historical focus privileges institutional discourses as engines of genrefication. One reason for this is that he has to respond to ideological genre theorists and show that, without contesting the broad audience and cultural influence of mass communications media, it is intra- and inter-institutional conflict rather than collusion that is responsible for genrefication. This approach directs us to the different kinds of institutional discourses, their different purposes, even the calculated polysemy of their generic significations.<sup>56</sup> The other reason has to do with the availability of evidence; little written evidence of fan genrefication survives from the classical studio era and before, whence Altman dates the emergence of film genres, and certainly not so much as to compete effectively with the genrefying practices of mass media.<sup>57</sup> Jancovich notes that this kind of lack of evidence has led historical reception studies

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<sup>56</sup> For instance, Altman discusses the competing interests among studios and the generic multivalence of a studio-era movie poster. By incorporating images and phrases that (e.g.) evoke adventure *and* comedy *and* romance, a poster "downplays direct generic references in favor of coded appeals to multiple categories of viewers," thus appealing to the widest possible audience (Altman 54-9).

<sup>57</sup> Altman does discuss genre-film spectatorship as a kind of "lateral communication" among fans, who imagine themselves as part of a community of viewers who enjoy similar "genre excesses". This account describes a kind of localized reading practice that dovetails more closely with what I am calling meta-genre. Direct (i.e. non-lateral) communication among genre fans is far more widespread in the digital era, and the resulting rhetorical genrefication tends to reinscribe and remystify conventional generic boundaries, as Jancovich points out ("A Real Shocker" 23). I

more broadly to over-rely on published film reviews as trace evidence of audience reception, contrary to the methodologies of scholars like Janet Staiger. Jancovich, following Ien Ang and Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, sees reviews as bringing the evaluative methods and criteria of a particular taste formation to bear on a film and framing it for a particular reading audience (Jancovich “Genre and the Audience” 36-7). This perspective is of course in line with Altman’s conception of generic critical discourse as performative and situated rather than constative and broadly representative. Hence, the issue is not so much that Altman misconstrues film reviews as definitive as that he does not paint a fuller picture of genrefication at both institutional and non-institutional levels. In this way, Jancovich’s work helps to flesh out Altman’s account by attending to genre-fying discourses among various groups as well as identifying the social processes and stakes involved.

Jancovich has done extensive work in pursuing questions of how genre manifests among users and what social functions it serves. For Jancovich genre distinctions are social distinctions in the full Bourdieusian sense of the word: fans, scholars, and reviewers define genres not positively but in opposition to other genres, and these distinctions are not based on neutral descriptions but rather are informed by cultural tastes and values indicative of one’s social positioning. For example, in “A Real Shocker” he demonstrates how defining and policing generic boundaries is instrumental in acquiring and exercising subcultural capital among members of fan communities. In “Pale Shadows” he shows how academic historiographies frame bodies of cinematic horror differentially and hierarchically.<sup>58</sup> And in “Genre and the Audience,”

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will discuss some theoretical and methodological problems with Altman’s model of primary and secondary discursivity in Chapter 4. See Altman Chs. 9-10.

<sup>58</sup> Specifically, “most accounts [of horror cinema history] privilege the 1930s so that the character of the 1940s can only be a matter of inferiority rather than difference, corruption rather than transformation” (“Pale Shadows” 17). In a similar vein, Steffen Hantke has examined the “rhetoric of crisis” in academic horror studies, which seems always

Jancovich examines the rhetorical moves of film reviewers in framing *The Silence of the Lambs* as ‘Gothic’ or ‘terror,’ labels which “are not constructed as the Other to legitimate culture (as they have been in other contexts) but rather are associated with legitimate culture through a series of distinctions in which ‘horror’ is constructed as their own Other” (Jancovich 43).

This principle of generic social distinction extends to the putatively radical tastes and ‘counter-aesthetic’ of so-called paracinematic cult fans, or those audiences identified by Jeffrey Sconce who celebrate ‘trash cinema’ in opposition to both the commercial Hollywood mainstream and the institutionally legitimated canon of avant-garde and art film.<sup>59</sup> Though Sconce, too, incorporates a Bourdieusian framework, he nevertheless seems at times to celebrate the paracinematic sensibility. Jancovich argues that, by virtue of its ironic and anti-illusionist attention to the form of trash cinema and the strident flexing of cultural capital in its discourses, “paracinema is at least as concerned to assert its superiority over those whom it conceives of as the degraded victims of mainstream commercial culture as it is concerned to provide a challenge to the academy and the art cinema,” and consequently “paracinema is a species of bourgeois aesthetics, not a challenge to it” (Jancovich “Cult Fictions” 311-12).

The common theme here is that genrefication, like other social actions, is embedded in and expresses the complex social relations of its agents. Genre serves as a medium through

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to point back to a privileged canon. Matt Hills has shown how the *Friday the 13th* franchise (1980-2009) has served as “para-paracinema”: too trashy to be considered among the legitimate canon of quality horror films, but too mainstream to be authentic trash cinema, and constantly coupled with *Halloween* as that film’s less respectable Other. Finally, Jones argues that horror films since the early 2000s have been framed largely in opposition to torture porn. See Hantke, Hills, and Jones.

<sup>59</sup> Examples of trash cinema include “‘badfilm’, splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography” (Sconce 372). I will discuss paracinema as challenging the distinction between artistic and rhetorical genres in the Conclusion.

which conflicts among different social groups are played out, such that “the definition of genre becomes, like the definition of the literary canon, both the site and the stake of contention as these groups compete for the legitimacy of their definition in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of their claim to cultural authority” (“Genre and the Audience” 43). This approach has much to recommend it, especially in terms of accounting both for personal motivations for arguing about genre and for the broader social arena in which these arguments may take place, as well. The value of a given film or genre is, in Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s terms, “*contingent* (that is, a changing function of multiple variables) rather than *subjective* (that is, personally whimsical, locked into the consciousness of individual subjects and/or without interest or value for other people)” (Smith 11). Jancovich, by way of Bourdieu and of Sarah Thornton—whose concept of “subcultural capital” is crucial to his work—provides a sense of what those variables and their broader implications might be: viz., the acquisition and exercise of cultural and subcultural capital among user groups of varying size and composition.<sup>60</sup>

Jancovich provides a bridge from the mechanics of inferential interpretation and the discursive transformations of genre labels—i.e., my synthesis of Bordwell and Altman—to an account of the conflicting values between and among different discourse groups and the associated taste formations that frame and indeed suffuse acts of genrefication. This added dimension brings into relief the motivations and sociological stakes of generic discourse within, without, and among industrial, academic, and journalistic institutions. “Motivations” here should not be understood in any kind of furtive or disingenuous sense, as if users deliberately miscategorize films to suit an agenda; such a suspicion would have to entail that there is a “right” genre to which a given film objectively belongs. As we shall see in the examples of popular

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<sup>60</sup> See Bourdieu and Thornton

discourse around *28 Days Later* below, “motivations” would be better thought of in the sense of purposes or rhetorical exigences. Indeed, to understand genre in the multivalent, pragmatic sense offered here we would need to accept that genre is defined by its rhetorical use: for one or more groups of genre users, toward some purpose. Jancovich shows us that social functions of this use-value implies a *social* use-value, that the standpoint and values of a user or group of users informs the reading position and inferential strategies, as well as how the user frames the film in communicative acts. However, two open problems remain.

First is that Jancovich’s sociological focus provides no interlocutor between brute referential interpretation and the social realm of conflict and contingent values. It is as if a text’s genre and a genre’s value are self-evident—not to all users or even uniformly among certain groups of users, but to some readers contingent upon their social milieux, which is where Jancovich’s attention is primarily directed. If the value of a given genre varies from group to group, then genre functions as a matrix for and instrument of social conflicts, rather than being itself simply a localized instance of social conflict. Second, and related, while Jancovich attends to different “mediations” of generic discourse, his definition of genre’s structural relationship to those forms of mediation remains unsystematic. He cites film reviews and letters to the editor of fan magazines that index or host the social actions, but he doesn’t recognize that these user texts instantiate *rhetorical genres* or “genres of writing,” which reflect their own regularized discursive formations that construct writer and audience in particular ways depending upon the social action they are called upon to meet.

I will address these two issues in this and the following chapter, respectively. I will first introduce to film genre theory what I am calling *meta-genre*, a concept that integrates both interpretive and evaluative dimensions of genrefication. Meta-genre can account for users’

performative work of invoking a genre without citing a film while also locating genre—as the mutually constitutive act of classifying a specific film—within the realm of public discourse and rhetorical communication genres. Second, in Chapter 4 I will more fully discuss rhetorical genres and the theoretical complications as well as the methodological possibilities they introduce to filmic genre theory. The rhetorical construction of writer and audience further complicates the textual and social dynamics at work in genrefication, but the regularized nature of rhetorical genres and the body of concepts and methods available via rhetorical genre studies offers a way of unifying the broadly contingent realm of meta-generic interpretation and framing with rhetorical genrefication as a concrete and relatively stabilized social action.

### Meta-Genres

I have defined film genre in terms of the explicit rhetorical classification of a film or body of specific films. But what about general statements such as ‘I don’t like musicals’ or ‘Horror films reflect the anxieties of the time’? Surely these are meaningful declarations, even if by themselves they don’t actually genrefy anything. The term ‘musicals’ or ‘horror films’ cues the audience (listener or reader) to access her or his own particularized experience of films, paratexts, and associated attributes and substantize the statement based on their own understanding of what those terms signify. The rhetor (speaker or writer) might go on to cite a specific film or films, and then that would be an instance of genrefication, of genre as process: speech-acts that both help to set the parameters of the discussion and that define the genre for that rhetorical situation. But prior to invoking concrete films as examples or objects of analysis, the genre label signifies a range of possible associations not yet organized through a text. The

speaker might narrow the range through modifiers like ‘backstage’ or ‘Freed’ or ‘Bollywood,’ and the extent to which this is effective depends on the audience’s familiarity with the corpuses and attributes associated with each kind of musical, or that these modifiers effectively signify distinct kinds of musicals for that audience.

These generic terms are not simply denotative, but carry evaluative valences—judgments and invitations to judgment—according to which certain groups and certain viewers construct social distinctions. Jancovich describes the broader hierarchical structure.

First, there is the distinction that is often constructed by those who wish to distinguish themselves from the consumers of genre films. Hence there is the distinction between mainstream cinema, which is defined as a genre cinema, and art-cinema, which is somehow seen as a cinema which is anti-genre: a cinema which is either free from genre or else subverts the genres of mainstream culture. A similar strategy is also employed at more legitimate and middlebrow levels in which supposedly ‘non-generic’ genres such as the ‘drama’ are used to distinguish specific classes of films from ‘generic’ genres such as westerns, romances, [science fiction], or horror. (Jancovich “A Real Shocker” 26).

Recall the examples of *Get Out* and *The Martian* and the Oscars’ would-be ‘Popular Film’ category from the Introduction, and recall the othering function of genre in constituting serious, ‘non-generic genres.’ I also discussed examples of non-generic genres in the last chapter and noted how even some scholars like Klein accept the non-genericity of legitimate Hollywood dramas. Among the lower, “generic genres” are further hierarchies, further distinctions. For instance, Linda Williams points to the low cultural value of melodrama (“weepies”), “gross-out” horror, and pornography in particular. Unlike art cinema or high commercial drama, cast as

intellectually or spiritually edifying and appreciable from an aesthetic distance, these excessive, sensational “body genres” are feminized and feminizing because they provoke involuntary embodied, emotional responses in a pacified viewer. (4). Even within one genre, such as horror, are distinctions among fans and scholars regarding the authenticity or artistry of certain bodies of horror films, which may align with certain periods, such as the 1930s or 1970s; certain studios or filmmakers, such as Universal or H.G. Lewis; and certain distribution and exhibition structures, such as grindhouse versus multiplex.<sup>61</sup>

To help bring together both the denotative and connotative dimensions of a genre—that is, its definition and value—I propose the concept of *meta-genres*: generalized performative utterances about film genres that are dislocated from concrete textual examples. Meta-genres contain the sum total of possible semantic, syntactic, extra-textual, and evaluative attributes a given viewer associates with a genre designation. When we speak of “westerns” or “torture porn” or “art cinema” generally without direct, explicit reference to specific films, we are using a meta-genre.

My formulation of meta-genre is adapted from rhetoric and composition and specifically rhetorical genre studies (RGS). In that field, meta-genre refers to ““atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations that surround a genre and indicate how readers and writers should appropriately take it up” (Giltrow 195). Meta-genres, as their name suggests, are genres about genres. They are instrumental and normative, which is to

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of the canonization and differential construction of 1930s studio horror and 1970s independent horror, see Jancovich (“Pale Shadows”) and Hantke, respectively.

say they direct the form and value of genre use in social action, its “uptake.”<sup>62</sup> These may include explicit proscriptions or more subtle normative guidelines for the use of rhetorical or written genres.

For our purposes, we might think of meta-genres as informing our interpretations and guiding our classifications of films as part of broader rhetorical acts. In *interpretation* meta-genres inform inferential meaning construction by providing potential structured catalogues of semantic/syntactic attributes, semantic fields, and schemata. They help to configure adaptive systems of meaning against the non-integrated “noise” of atomistic textual data. That is to say, they help sort and order the experienced film into relevant textual systems—e.g. *West Side Story*’s (1961, dir. Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise) rhythmic editing or *White Heat*’s (1949, dir. Raoul Walsh) climactic shootout—while filtering out attributes like three-point lighting or the appearance of a bit-player like Bruno VeSota. The former pair may suggest something about stylistically or thematically integrated textual or generic systems, while the latter pair might be too commonplace to be meaningful or just generally unnoteworthy for most viewers.<sup>63</sup> Of course, what is or is not noticed and considered noteworthy depends on the viewer, her interests, her past experience of related films, and what she attends to and how closely when watching a given film. But knowing Robert Wise’s past as a film editor or having seen (or read about)

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<sup>62</sup> “Uptake” is another RGS concept that refers to the actualization of one rhetorical genre through its use in another in a social action (See Bawarshi and Reiff 83-4). I will have much more to say about uptake and the relations between film genres and rhetorical genres in Chapter 3.

<sup>63</sup> Beebee borrows this opposition between *noise* and *systems* from Ross Chambers’ application of communication theory to ideological literary study. Systems of meaning emerge from the background of “noise” —i.e., non-categories, non-systems, the totality of disconnected data that constitute categories and systems negatively and from without. For Beebee, genre, like ideology, configures systems in this way. (Beebee 17). I shall return to the systems and noise opposition in Chapter 4’s discussion of Netflix’s recommendation system.

climactic shootouts in other gangster films help orient the viewer's interpretation of those films by providing extra- or intertextual frames of reference.

Meta-genres also serve as a rhetorical shorthand for those discourses and values through *framing*, or by pointing to common filmic and extra-filmic attributes and valuations believed to be shared among a user group.<sup>64</sup> For example, 'independent' and 'low-budget' may well have a denotative overlap, but have very different connotations: the former suggests artistic integrity and the freedom to experiment and/or transgress in filmic form and content. The latter suggests low production value and a shabby, poorly executed product. However, as in interpretation, how each of these is valued depends on the user group for whom the phrase is being framed. While "low-budget" may be pejorative for most users, among Sconce's paracinematic communities the gritty connotations of "low-budget" might be more highly valued than the pretentious and self-important connotations of "independent." Similarly, as I noted in Chapter 2, the pejorative connotations of the meta-genre "torture porn" limits the academic study of associated films, such that Adam Lowenstein seeks to rename and reconstitute the genre under the less disreputable phrase "spectacle horror."<sup>65</sup>

In these two functions we see much of the work that has traditionally been attributed to genres: informing expectations denotatively and connotatively. But the distinction between genre and meta-genre is crucial. Genre, pragmatically defined, is the public use of interpretive schemata in framing a film for some communicative purpose—such that that genre is always already subject to reconstitution through its application to a concrete film and that this

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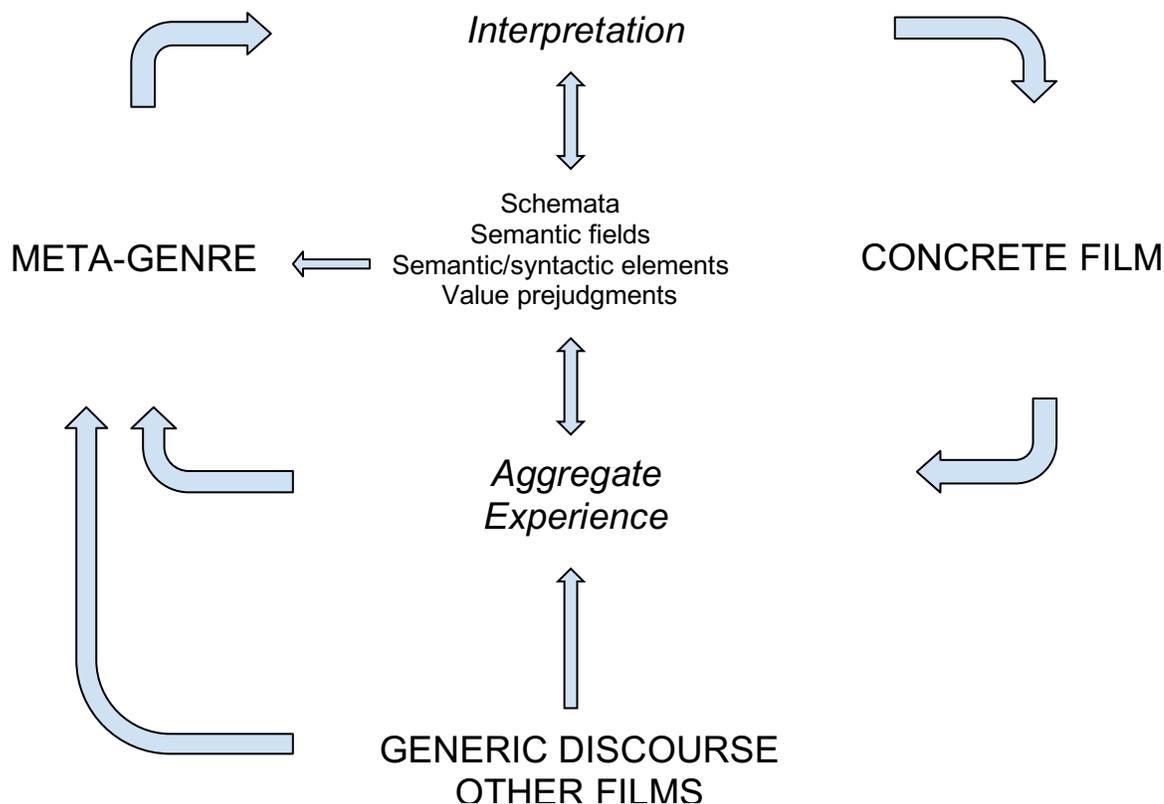
<sup>64</sup> Or imposed on a user group. The normative evaluative function of meta-genre—what Jones identifies as "rhetorical interpellation" (30)—is part of the reciprocal construction of rhetor and audience that is inherent in any rhetorical situation in which genre or meta-genre is invoked. This mutual construction will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>65</sup> See Lowenstein ("Spectacle Horror").

reconstitution is available to some broader social group for affirmation, revision, or denial. In a sense genre must be spoken, and it must cite a specific film or films. Meta-genres need not meet such strict criteria. They are floating signifiers that lack broad denotative power because of their superabundance of potential referents, and their precise application may be localized among a user group and perhaps in some cases even idiosyncratic to a given user. Because they represent the *idea* of a genre as understood by a given user, and an idea informed by the her unique set of experiences, meta-genres can and indeed must tolerate apparently contradictory or incomplete denotative attributes. Even two hypothetical viewers who have seen the same films will not necessarily have noticed and attended to the same attributes or encountered the same paratexts, and as a result their understanding of a meta-genre would differ. Moreover, meta-genres entail certain evaluative valences, associations with aesthetic and/or moral values that, like denotative attributes, are contingent upon a given user's exposure to and experience of cinema and related genrefying discourses.

To summarize, meta-genres inform private interpretation by providing a catalogue of attributes such as visual and auditory elements, character types, emotional tone, production value, or period and conditions of production on which to found a classification. Similarly, they inform value judgments on a particular film by associating with a given meta-genre certain axiological prejudices (in the strict sense of the term) regarding artistic or moral virtues—or lack thereof. This, for example, is why Jancovich's reviewers wrestled with genrefying *The Silence of the Lambs* ("Genre and the Audience" 39-43). Both the film's aesthetic quality and its perceived

feminist politics contradicted the prejudgments associated with the horror meta-genre as understood by those users at that time.<sup>66</sup>



“At that time” is a crucial qualifier. Meta-genre is an accretion of attributes, associations, and judgments that inform the interpretive schemata that the user employs going forward. One’s understanding of a meta-genre changes with time, but is not necessarily adaptive because it is essentially an aggregated catalogue of experiences that can tolerate inconsistencies without perturbation. We don’t need to square everything we hear about a kind of film with our personal experience of it, or even recognize potential incongruities, unless we have some compelling

<sup>66</sup> Note that genericity in a popular sense and quality are often differentially related even outside film. “‘Science fiction’ and ‘literature’ are not mutually exclusive terms. I propounded this as a heresy in 1952, and it is still so regarded, not only by hostile critics, but by many of s.f.’s defenders. The proposition ‘If it’s s.f., it isn’t literature’ is self-proving: ‘But this looks good.’ ‘Well then it’s not s.f.’ And around we go again” (Knight 274).

reason to do so. Hence, one's conception of a meta-genre is not only shaped by the actual films one has seen but also and perhaps more importantly by what one has heard or read or inferred from paratexts and other discourse about films explicitly or obliquely grouped under a given generic label. Meta-genres thus have none of the precision or order or universal applicability that traditional genre study has sought in its definitions, but they have the flexibility to locate a user's generic interpretation and judgment in a network of historical and discursive contingencies.

To try to get a sense of what meta-generic prejudgments might have vexed reviewers of *The Silence of the Lambs*, we can frame it relative to the recent history of the genre those reviewers were so anxious to distinguish it from. The pejorative connotations of popular horror, especially those that violate multiple axiological norms, not only legitimate those norms negatively, they also exert an anchoring effect as is a function of meta-genre's normative dimension. Meta-genre directs users to look for its associated rules, not its exceptions, to attend to and confirm those characteristic elements that organize the text in a particular way and affirm the social relations in which it is employed. As a result, these connotations become harder to dispel and require less textual evidence to support while inconsistencies and counterexamples become easier to elide. The quantity of films offered and the egregiousness of the violations associated with them color the meta-genre such that the rule can hold despite demonstrable exceptions, which can be explained away or ignored, depending on the rhetorical conditions under which the meta-genre is used. So to frame *The Silence of the Lambs*, we need to understand not what genre it *really* belongs to, but what connotations and associations might have constituted and anchored the horror meta-genre leading up to that films' release.

### *The Slasher Meta-Genre*

*The Silence of the Lambs* premiered on Valentine's Day, 1991, after over a decade of horror cinema dominated by the slasher films. By the end of the 1980s slasher films had become regular fixtures in multiplexes and video stores and had, in James Kendrick's words, "lodged themselves into the cultural unconscious, where they continue to exert their influence over the horror genre while being regularly reinvented via parodies, remakes, and new sequels" (310). Kendrick writes in present tense in 2014, but even by 1991 slasher sequels had proliferated to the extent that three prominent franchises had been firmly established; these include four Michael Myers *Halloween* films, five *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, and eight *Friday the 13th* films.<sup>67</sup> By itself this association of slasher films with sequels—inherently derivative—distances the genre from the values of quality cinema, but their conditions of production and content are also important factors in their pejorative evaluation .

Horror in general flourished throughout the 1980s, but it did so largely outside the legitimating sphere of the major studios. Kendrick figures that of the over 700 horror films released theatrically in that decade, fewer than 80 involved the major studios, which

tended to lean toward productions that had some air of respectability, usually via the involvement of an important filmmaker like Stanley Kubrick (*The Shining* [1980]) or Steven Spielberg (*Poltergeist* [1982]), or a known literary figure such as Stephen King,

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<sup>67</sup> This list doesn't count one-off pictures or the lesser-known properties that were also deep into franchises by 1991, including *Prom Night*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Slumber Party Massacre* (three films each) and *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (four films). It could be argued that the anchoring effect was perhaps stronger in 1991 than in 2014, since the intervening years saw the recuperation of the genre through more polished, less edgy, and more conspicuously self-aware slasher homages and remakes that were less likely to shock parents who had themselves been the audience for the early slasher films.

whose works supplied material for more than fifteen films between 1980 and 1989 alone. (Kendrick 311)<sup>68</sup>

By the mid-1980s, the box office had begun drying up for slasher films, and (even) lower budgets and direct-to-video distribution added to the popular impression that the films in general were not only derivative but poorly made, as well, circulating in the relatively unregulated sphere of home video among the schlock and pornography. The evidently lower production values of indie slasher horror in this period contrasted with the large budgets, big stars, and/or expensive special effects of the studio-affiliated, critically acclaimed fantastic horror cinema such as *The Shining* and *Poltergeist*, but also *The Thing* (1982, dir. John Carpenter, produced and distributed by Universal) and *The Fly* (1986, dir. David Cronenberg, distributed by Twentieth Century Fox).<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps most notable, though not the only significant factor, was the content of slasher horror films. As early as 1983, scholars like Robin Wood, John McCarty, Vera Dika, and Carol Clover began noting the emergence of an apparently distinct genre that appeared to borrow from past thrillers like *Psycho* (1960, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) and exploitation films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, dir. Tobe Hooper), and had apparently coalesced into a set formula (Kendrick 317). Informed by structuralist genre theory, these critics sought to distill the texts

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<sup>68</sup> N.B. The scholarship cited in my extended example sections is no less subject to a pragmatic critique. Like Steve Jones' attempt to enumerate the torture porn titles released (14), Kendrick's numbers ought not to be accepted without question, since what does or does not count as a horror film is precisely the question under discussion. We can probably consider his numbers roughly accurate, however, since the criterion of genre is not textual precision but practical agreeability, and, for our purposes here, the ratio of studio-produced to independent films popularly considered horror (about 1:9) illustrates the broader point that horror cinema in the 1980s was largely an indie concern.

<sup>69</sup> Significantly, *Friday the 13th* (1980, dir. Sean S. Cunningham) was a notorious slasher that was also associated with a major studio after Paramount picked it up for distribution. Shannon Skelton's ongoing research into horror pressbooks has found that the film's promotional materials played up the film as a psychological thriller, wholly avoiding the label "horror" and promoting Tom Savini's name over Sean S. Cunningham's, probably due to Cunningham's work in sexploitation films.

down to their essential formal and thematic elements. In the cases of *Dika* and *Clover*, they largely withheld evaluative judgment of the films, aiming instead for a textualist description of the generic formula, which could then be analyzed for its deep structure and cultural implications.

This is Altman's Critic's Game, a retrospective construction that is either synchronic or teleological and produced from a critical Archimedean point (Altman 38). The problem with this approach should by now be clear to the reader: it requires the critic A) employ a selection process that runs afoul of the empiricist dilemma; B) creatively reframe textual elements and prior popular discourses; C) construct anachronisms in service of a stable structure; and D) assume the independence of the textual object and genre from the critic's own discourse. Even later critics like Nowell and Kendrick take this textualist approach, pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions in the generic corpuses as described by popular press and academic critics alike, as if a precise classification were possible or useful. As we saw in Chapter 2's discussion of Lowenstein and Edelstein, textualist corrections are rather beside the point, since they miss the social and rhetorical function that grouping the texts serves. Those textualist moves also serve a rhetorical purpose for the scholar who employs them, and in principle she is not any more positively right than other writers who frame the films differently for their own rhetorical ends—textualist framing strategies are just more acceptable and more useful for an academic user group. Genres cannot exist apart from how they are used among various groups, and the slasher genre was formed and used perhaps most widely in emphatic axiological judgments. Popular press reviewers routinely savaged the genre even as they were constituting it, or constituted it in order to savage it.

For example, in late 1980 Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert dedicated an entire thirty-minute episode of their public television review show *Sneak Previews* to condemning what they saw as an emerging genre. The episode, entitled “Extreme Violence Directed at Women” (aired 23 Oct 1980), takes aim at low-budget independent horror films from 1978 through 1980, some of which might not be considered slasher films today, but which Ebert repeatedly calls “women in danger pictures.”<sup>70</sup> The critics unanimously condemn the named films’ graphic and often sexualized depictions of violence toward women, especially assertive and independent female characters, framed in POV shots that Ebert suggests encourage the viewer to identify with the killer. The critics build upon their highly questionable premise that “all movies tend to argue in favor of the behavior that they show,” and Siskel speculates that these films’ apparent misogyny and evident popularity are symptomatic of a backlash against the women’s movement, while Ebert likens the films’ audiences to “vicarious sex criminals.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The hosts name *When a Stranger Calls* (1979, dir. Fred Walton); *Prom Night* (1980, dir. Paul Lynch); *Don’t Go in the House* (1980, dir. Joseph Ellison); *The Howling* (1981, dir. Joe Dante); *Terror Train* (1980, dir. Roger Spottiswoode); *The Boogey Man* (1980, dir. Ulli Lommel); *He Knows You’re Alone* (1980, dir. Armand Mastroianni); *Motel Hell* (1980, dir. Kevin Conner); *Phobia* (1980, dir. John Huston); *Mother’s Day* (1980, dir. Charles Kaufman); *Schizoid* (1980, dir. David Paulsen); *The Silent Scream* (1979, dir. Denny Harris); *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978, dir. Meir Zarchi); and *Friday the 13th*.

Some of these choices are curious, since *Friday the 13th* in particular undercuts the critics’ already shaky generalizations regarding the films’ content, including male killers, voyeuristic use of POV shots, scenes of rape, and disproportionate number of female victims (Kendrick 316-17). Siskel would have known all this, since that previous May he had written an infamous review in which he gave away the film’s twist ending, and which he discussed with *Fangoria* magazine the following year. Moreover, *The Howling* would not be released until April of 1981, and would receive favorable reviews from both critics in their respective columns. (see Ebert and Siskel “Taste Will Tell...”)

<sup>71</sup> It is worth noting that these kinds of judgments about horror film and fans persist. One reader echoes Siskel and Ebert’s condemnation in a comment on the digital version of Edelstein’s “Torture Porn” article:

I feel that the torture-porn genre is created by diseased minds, catering to other desensitized, disordered, or possibly masochistic minds.

How can swallowing the massive doses of sadism in these movies (and thinking nothing of it) be considered harmless entertainment? (User ChloeBlue)

The comment dates to December 2011, over five years after the article was first published, and over thirty years after Siskel and Ebert’s *Sneak Previews* episode aired. I will discuss the dissemination of these discourses via digital

The two emphasize that they are not opposed to all horror films, and they remind their audience that they both liked *Halloween* (1978, dir. John Carpenter), a film they nevertheless identify as having inspired the current crop of inferior imitators.

Ebert: The first movie of this whole series of women-in-danger films was obviously *Halloween* [... which] captured an enormous audience, did millions of dollars worth of business. And then the sleaze merchants who came along looked at that movie and tried to put their finger on what it was about it that was so successful. And they said ‘women being chased by a killer, that’s it. Let’s go out and hire us some more women and some more killers and make us some money.’

Siskel: That’s why they call these things exploitations films—these rotten ones—because they exploit one element and make it sort of sick.

Ebert has hit on what Altman calls the Producer’s Game, in which film producers attempt to identify and replicate the key elements of their own or their rivals’ successful films, which accounts for particular similarities among subsequent films (39-42). In this case, it might be a general structure (e.g. “stalk and slash” or “body count”), setting (wilderness, suburbia, high school or college), formal technique (POV ‘stalking’ shots, violent set pieces), costuming and

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remediation in Chapter 4. For discussion of similar critical tropes leveled against torture porn and the comparisons between slasher films and torture porn, see Jones ch. 1.

props (mask, weapon), holiday/calendar motif,<sup>72</sup> or star (Jamie Lee Curtis).<sup>73</sup> Note first that Siskel associates this kind of imitation with disreputable exploitation cinema, though as Altman shows—and as I demonstrated in the last chapter—this kind of imitation is typical of commercial filmmaking in general. But the particular similarities in toto do not amount to a genre on their own. Again, we must think back to the genrefying process identified by Altman, in which genres are constellated and promulgated through critical discourse, of which the *Sneak Previews* episode is a prominent example—not as a foundational, definitive text, but as a recognizable marker in the process.

Siskel and Ebert's evaluation is familiar, even if their descriptions, labels, and examples seem incongruous or strange. Richard Nowell explains this in textualist terms, arguing that the emergence of a new genre was evident, even if, as late as 1982, there was no single label for what was otherwise a clearly coalescing body of films. Nowell's examples warrant a longer quotation.

Alongside terms like 'horror', 'thriller', and 'mystery', which Jancovich shows have often been used interchangeably by reviewers to describe films now commonly thought of as 'horror movies,' countless sobriquets spotlighted the combination of young people and blade-wielding killers that industry personnel noted as distinguishing the film-type.

Ed Blank wrote in the *Pittsburgh Press* of 'slash-your-local teenager features;' the *Los*

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<sup>72</sup> E.g. *Halloween* inspired *Friday the 13th*, *Prom Night*, *Mother's Day*, *New Year's Evil* (1980, dir. Emmett Alston), *Graduation Day* (1981, dir. Herb Freed), *My Bloody Valentine* (1981, dir. George Mihalka), *April Fool's Day* (1986, dir. Fred Walton), as well as a range of Christmas-themed slashers, including *To All A Good Night* (1980, dir. David Hess), *Christmas Evil* (1980, dir. Lewis Jackson), and *Silent Night, Deadly Night*.

<sup>73</sup> After *Halloween*, Curtis starred in *The Fog* (1980, dir. Carpenter), *Prom Night*, *Terror Train*, *Road Games* (1981, dir. Richard Franklin), and reprised her role as Laurie Strode in *Halloween II* (1981, dir. Richard Rosenthal), *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998, dir. Steve Miner), *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002, dir. Rosenthal), and the reboot *Halloween* (2018, dir. David Gordon Green).

*Angeles Times*' Linda Gross discussed the 'young-folk-getting-killed-genre;' and, at the *New York Times*, Aljean Harmetz examined the 'homicidal maniac-pursues-attractive-teen-agers' sweepstakes. But *Washington Post* employees were the most gleeful participants, with Tom Shales commenting on 'endangered teen-ager movies,' Joseph McLellan speaking of 'the 'kill-the-teenagers' cycle,' and Judith Martin taking aim at 'the teen-age Blood Film.' Not to be outdone by these epithets, Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* described *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981) as a 'typical "teen-age girl takes violent revenge on kids who have been mean to her" flick' (Nowell 18-19).

Nowell and Kendrick each see these as steps toward the full recognition of a genre, but this is a teleological presupposition that builds backward from a contemporary (and academically situated) understanding of slasher films. Moreover, Nowell and Kendrick assume a correspondence between the concrete, factual cinematic attributes and the rhetorical generalizations of reviewers, which can be demonstrably true or false in a given case. Instead of looking at the concurrences among critical assessments as they build toward the genre we (or some of us) recognize today, it would behoove us to attend to the disjuncts among reviews, or where they seem to be on the wrong track, and to think about the aims of each of these pieces on their own terms, rather than as more or less accurate classifications relative to an inchoate genre.

For instance, Siskel and Ebert's early condemnation of what would become known as slasher films leans heavily on depictions of rape as evidence of the films' collective depravity, though, as Kendrick points out, rape is extremely rare in slasher films as understood today (Kendrick 317). The reviewers' inclusion of *I Spit on Your Grave* among their examples appears, through family resemblance, to associate the bulk of the films with rape and therefore with a more egregiously sexualized, gendered violence, which is the general theme of their

presentation. For Kendrick, Siskel and Ebert's inclusion of *I Spit on Your Grave*—along with *The Howling*—indicates that, by 1980, “a thorough understanding of the slasher film’s parameters was not yet fully in place” (317). But this is the same error Lowenstein commits when he accuses Edelstein of misclassifying torture porn 26 years later. Neither Edelstein in 2006 nor Siskel and Ebert in 1980 are interested in classification as a positivist project; film reviewers do not discover genres through comparative analysis, they construct them through and for the purposes of argumentation. The reviewers are not concerned with grouping films according to iconographic or structural similarities, or in making fine analytical distinctions, except where it strengthens their ethos: just as Edelstein assures his readers he is a “horror maven,” Siskel and Ebert go out of their way to praise *Halloween*’s craft and ethical responsibility. All three frame their distinctions in terms of artistic paucity and moral turpitude because they are above all preoccupied with warning moviegoers about what they see as a distasteful and even dangerous new cinematic trend, and their grouping is instrumental in this rhetorical purpose.

It should be noted as well that despite their conventionally disinterested posture, academics, too, have participated in the formation of the slasher genre. From as early as 1983 to as late as 2006, scholars have echoed popular terms like “teenie kill-pics,” “stalker films,” “slasher movies,” and “teen slasher films” (Nowell 17).<sup>74</sup> In so doing, they have adopted the language and evaluative valences of the meta-genre as aggregated by contemptuous reviewers.

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<sup>74</sup> While Nowell attributes “the slasher film” to Clover’s 1992 book, the Oxford English Dictionary dates this term’s first use in this sense to a 1982 *Forbes* review of *Friday the 13th, Part III* (1982, dir. Steve Miner), though James Kendrick identifies film titles and reviews referring to characters as “slashers” as far back as the 1930s (316). Significantly, in the mid- to late-1970s—before the *Forbes* review—“slasher” was used interchangeably with “snuff films,” and this appears to be the first use of the term to label a class of films. Hence, we might surmise that the pejorative connotations of “slasher” in the early 1980s were comparable to and perhaps worse than “torture porn” in the late 2000s. See Kendrick and OED “slasher.”

The single most influential academic voice has undoubtedly been that of Carol J. Clover, who—in her 1987 article “Her Body, Himself” and subsequent 1992 book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*—not only solidifies the now-common term “slasher,” but also adds the term “final girl” to academic and popular lexicon. Clover argues that slasher films play out a much more sophisticated gender politics than has been allowed by crusading reviewers or structuralist academics, one that embraces the performativity of gender in both the characters and the adolescent viewer, such that the killer, final girl, and viewer all embody or identify with different fluid gender positions at different points throughout the narrative.<sup>75</sup> Clover’s sympathetic if not exactly celebratory take on the teen slasher film has exerted a profound influence on scholarly and popular perceptions of the meta-genre, although her arguments are not without objections.

Nowell has criticized Clover on textual grounds, claiming that her “assimilation of the two distinct film types that Robin Wood, four years earlier, had called the ‘teenie kill-pic’ and the ‘violence against women film’ [formed] a critical category that [...] did not exist on celluloid in the years before her piece was published” (17). Moreover, for Nowell, Clover’s influence brought to public awareness what otherwise might have been a limited academic debate and gave misleading impressions of what the genre was really like. “Appearing in what was widely received as groundbreaking film scholarship, Clover’s definition provided an immediate reference point for academic and popular writers [...] who, by restating its key tenets, proliferated, gave credence to, and reinforced misconceptions of teen slasher content” (Nowell 17). It may seem peculiar that Nowell accepts the accounts of scholars like Wood and Dika and of numerous contemporaneous popular reviewers but not of Clover. However, this is because Nowell’s textualist approach assumes that those sources have more or less correctly identified

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<sup>75</sup> See Clover (*Men, Women, and Chainsaws*).

and organized independent textual data into their proper genre. We ought to consider instead that all parties were actively forming the meta-genre itself as they go. Clover re-frames the genre in her work—just as Siskel and Ebert, Dika, Nowell, and Kendrick all have—by selectively grouping films and textual attributes in service of a rhetorical point, whether that point has to do with the degeneracy of exploitation horror, its deep structure, its industrial conditions, or its filmic history and genealogy. In a way, the reviewers’ playful word salads cited above are more precise and transparent than the terms “slasher” or “teen slasher” have become, because generic labels like “homicidal-maniac-pursues-attractive-teen-agers” clearly indicate the rhetorical purpose they are meant to serve in evaluating a body of films: they are to be seen as violent, puerile, formulaic, tasteless, and they are not to be taken seriously.

Regardless of the scholarly disagreements among later critics, illustrative as they are, we can productively frame Jancovich’s critics’ reception of *The Silence of the Lambs* in terms of the evaluative valences that the horror meta-genre had acquired by the end of the 1980s, especially given the fuzzy distinctions between slasher and serial-killer films. We might suppose that after a decade of pejorative discourses surrounding “homicidal maniacs” and “extreme violence directed at women,” any horror film that didn’t feature ghosts, werewolves, aliens, or bravura fantasy special effects might be confused or conflated with slasher movies as a meta-genre and its associated artistic and moral deficiencies. Hence, a well-crafted studio production that exemplifies classical Hollywood structure, stars an Academy-Award winner, and explores feminist themes but which also features a homicidal stalker, scenes of graphic violence and mutilation directed at women, subjective POV shots, and a “final girl” could understandably perturb reviewers’ classificatory schemata and challenge them to square the contradictions between denotative and evaluative attributes. This is an effect of the accretion of slasher

genrefication within the horror meta-genre and its anchoring of horror interpretation and framing in the years leading up to the film's release. The question then becomes whether (and how) the horror meta-genre might be adapted to accommodate quality attributes from a picture like *The Silence of the Lambs*—which some scholars seem happy to do<sup>76</sup>—or whether the connotations of horror are irreconcilable with the film's conventional merits, as Jancovich finds among his reviewers.

### Meta-Genre and Popular Discourse: *28 Days Later*

I have thus far focused entirely on the critical discourses of professional film reviewers and academic critics. But as I asserted in Chapter 2, my theory of rhetorical genrefication applies to rhetorical genre use in general, and meta-genre is a crucial feature, since it informs interpretation and judgement and orients rhetorical framing among user groups while accreting attributes and associations through public use. In this section I will explore the role of meta-genre in the framing of *28 Days Later* (2002, dir. Danny Boyle) at different points in time and under different rhetorical conditions. This particular film serves as a productive example since its genre was and has remained contested, even as the meta-genre it is most often associated with—i.e. zombie films—has itself undergone a radical change in the years since the film's release.

*28 Days Later* has proven to be a transitional film. Its apocalyptic setting and hordes of violent, mindless, contagious humanoid monsters make it easily assimilable to the zombie meta-genre. However, its “infected”—not dead—monsters do not shamble clumsily but sprint toward their victims, shrieking and snarling rather than moaning. Though the narrative structure of

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<sup>76</sup> See Clover (*Men, Women, and Chainsaws*), Crane, and Jancovich (“Genre and the Audience”).

‘flight-siege-flight’ and the drama of the barricaded survival space reflect the influence of zombie films in the Romero tradition, the living, viral infected challenge the symbolic power of a contranymic ‘living dead’ figure.<sup>77</sup> Peter Dendle has argued that the rabid, running infected of *28 Days Later*—followed by those from *Dawn of Dead* (2004, dir. Zach Snyder), *28 Weeks Later* (2005, dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo), and those from video games like *Left 4 Dead* (2008, Valve)—represent an evolution in the zombie genre, a new permutation that reflects the speed and ferocity and violence of a media-saturated, post-9/11 culture.<sup>78</sup> But the question of whether or not Boyle’s infected are or are not zombies—and therefore whether *28 Days Later* is a zombie film—gets to the heart of genrefication as historically, socially, and rhetorically situated.

### *Filmmaker Discourse*

In 2003 director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Alex Garland sat down with *Filmmaker* magazine’s Kim Newman for an interview about their new film. First we should note that this should be considered part of the press junket for the film; Boyle and Garland are out to promote the film’s theatrical release. Newman is a film critic, horror and science fiction novelist, and author of *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film* and the *BFI Companion to Horror*. But in his capacity as interviewer, he is representing a publication that bills itself as “the magazine of independent film.” Each party has a degree of rhetorical authority already established by virtue of his institutional position, as filmmaker or interviewer.

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<sup>77</sup> For a Derridean take on the undecidability of the living dead figure, see Leverette. For more on the zombie narrative structure in the Romero tradition, see Swanson.

<sup>78</sup> There are significant issues with Dendle’s history—in particular his tendency to elide texts that don’t suit his thematized periodization—but they are beyond the scope of this discussion. In any case, the soundness of his arguments are less important here than the systematicity and rhetorical authority of his framing. See Dendle.

Over the course of the brief interview, Newman and the filmmakers dance around the question of the film's genre, offering "horror," "science fiction," "apocalypse," "action films," and "British films," each of which supports various points about the film's structure, style, or budget. Though the term "zombie" pops up a couple times, both interviewer and interviewees do their best to distance the film from zombie cinema and to associate it with science fiction, independent film, and cinematic political commentary in general. Newman's introductory paragraph describes it this way:

This is a terrific s-f/horror hybrid, evoking American and Italian zombie movies but also a very British end-of-the-world tradition that takes in *War of the Worlds*, *The Day of the Triffids* and *Doctor Who*. Shot on digital video by Dogme specialist Anthony Dod Mantle, who gives the devastated cityscapes security-cam-look realism, *28 Days Later* grips from the first, with its understandably extreme performances, its terrifyingly swift monster attacks and its underlying melancholy. A box office success in England, it may just be the best British science-fiction/horror film since *Death Line* in 1972 ("The Diseased World" ¶ 2).

Newman introduces the film and immediately frames it evaluatively. Acknowledging the stylistic similarities, he cites but immediately undercuts the association with "American and Italian zombie films" through the legitimating association with British literary science fiction. Newman adds further polish by invoking the Danish art cinema movement Dogme 95 as a way to explain the choice of an SD "security-cam-look realism" and cue indie cinephiles, while also nodding to its accessibility via reference to the film's box office success.

For their part, Boyle and Garland unequivocally deny that they have made a zombie film, telling with Newman that it is, rather, an apocalypse film (§ 27-8). This creates something of a tough spot, as the film features numerous, rather specific nods to *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, dir. George A. Romero) and *Day of the Dead* (1985, dir. Romero), forcing Boyle and Garland to acknowledge Romero's influence, especially given Newman's credentials as a horror critic (§ 12, 14).<sup>79</sup> But even in this acknowledgement the filmmakers hedge. By citing Romero but not zombies explicitly, they effectively connect *28 Days Later* to an independent, politically radical filmmaker while sidestepping the genre of horror films for which he is most often noted. Romero's tendency to construct thinly-veiled political allusions have helped to associate his films with a body of canonical horror that has been legitimated by virtue of its social commentary.<sup>80</sup> For instance, one of Romero's stylistic strategies that evidently inspired Boyle and Garland is a use of visual allusions to historical photos.<sup>81</sup> Boyle and Garland make this strategy explicit, referring to photojournalistic images from Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Cambodia as inspiring certain visual elements in their film (§ 19-21). Though they explicitly cite both Romero as a filmmaker and his most celebrated zombie film (*Dawn of the Dead*), Boyle and Garland nevertheless deny that *28 Days Later* is a zombie film (§ 26-8).

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<sup>79</sup> I.e., the scene in which the protagonists stop at a gas station for fuel and Jim (Cillian Murphy) kills an infected child is almost beat-for-beat like a similar scene in *Dawn of the Dead*. And the second half of the film, in which the heroes are trapped with a sinister military commander and his lecherous soldiers, mirrors the general premise of *Day of the Dead*.

<sup>80</sup> For commentary on *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, dir. Romero) in this vein, see Hervey, Lowenstein ("Living Dead"), and Wood ("An Introduction to the American Horror Film"). For commentary on *Dawn of the Dead*, see Bishop ("The Idle Proletariat") and Wood (ibid.). For an overview of Wood's et al. ideological approach to 1970s horror and some of its critics, see Hutchings.

<sup>81</sup> E.g., historical lynching photos during the end credits of *Night of the Living Dead* and the self-immolating Buddhist monk in *The Crazies* (1973). See Lowenstein ("Living Dead").

This might seem disingenuous. Surely, the filmmakers are distancing themselves from that genre, even though they know *28 Days Later* is *really* a zombie film.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps, but perhaps not. Absolutely there is a question of the relative value accorded to zombie films versus other genres, but those values need to be situated relative to the films available at a given time. To think our way through this, we need to understand what generic frames of reference—what meta-genre—would be most immediately available to Boyle and Garland in 2003 when the interview was conducted as well as what rhetorical conditions obtain as they genrefy their own film in this instance.

Other than *Dawn of the Dead*, the only zombie film cited by name in the interview is *Resident Evil* (2002, dir. Paul W. S. Anderson), a digital effects-heavy action-horror film based on a Capcom video game and made with a budget over four times that of *28 Days Later*.<sup>83</sup> According to zombie film historian Jamie Russell, Capcom and production company Constantin Film had approached Romero to pen a script, which he had worked on through 1998 and 1999, but he was ultimately dropped from the project, to the dismay of zombie fans (131). Russell notes that

Romero, who had once railed against “The McDonaldization of America,” seemed to have been sidelined by the corporate forces now running the movie business. Big companies like Capcom and [distributor] Sony didn’t really have a place for a radical,

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<sup>82</sup> My use case is from 2003, but, as I mentioned in the introduction, this preemptive generic framing persists as a key strategy in a film’s promotional discourse and in directorial interviews in particular. For instance, Mark Bernard observes that *Hereditary* (2018) director Ari Aster hesitates to describe his film as horror, opting for instead for “family drama” or “domestic melodrama” (“Cult Conversations” ¶ 12). While *28 Days Later*’s framing reflects the generic course of zombie films at the turn of the 21st century, as I argue below, *Hereditary*’s framing ought to be understood relative to the recent critical subcategories of “art house-” or “elevated-” or “post-horror” of the 2010s (e.g. *The Bababook* [2014 dir. Jennifer Kent], *The Witch* [2015, dir. Robert Eggers], and *Get Out* [2017 dir. Jordan Peele]). See Bernard “Cult Conversations,” especially ¶ 14-18.

<sup>83</sup> *Resident Evil*’s \$33 million budget is still relatively modest, but considerably higher than *28 Days Later*’s \$8 million (*BoxOfficeMojo*).

indie filmmaker from Pittsburgh like Romero [...] There was a suspicion that Romero's old-school approach was too gory and that the *Resident Evil* movie was not going to be a rough and ready genre classic but a mainstream popcorn movie. It was indicative to some of the general trend in American horror as the golden age of the 1970s faded and a new, corporate sensibility took over. (131)

As genre fans had feared, *Resident Evil* focuses far less on atmosphere, splatter, and ghouls than action set pieces and CGI monsters. As a result it succeeded in appealing to the broadest possible audience, pulling in nearly \$103 million worldwide and launching a billion-dollar franchise.

In their interview, Garland in particular gets testy about comparisons to *Resident Evil* (¶ 14), and Boyle recalls that they “were very worried about people thinking it was a zombie movie,” adding “I think if you're a zombie fan, you'll be disappointed” (¶ 28).<sup>84</sup> We shouldn't necessarily think of Boyle's comment here as reflecting any kind of genuine concern for the interest of zombie fans; *Resident Evil*'s box office returns cannot be denied, but Boyle and Garland can denigrate its audience according to their tastes. We might suppose that, rather than being embarrassed at having made a zombie movie, even if it is a good one, Boyle and Garland sincerely believe that *28 Days Later* is not a zombie movie at all, despite its acknowledged

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<sup>84</sup> Even years into the zombie renaissance, upon the release of Colson Whitehead's acclaimed novel *Zone One*, literary critics were still anxious to distinguish Whitehead's zombie novel from the rest of the genre (Swanson 379-80). One strategy of distinction involved characterizing zombie fans themselves negatively. Consider Glen Duncan's *New York Times* review:

Colson Whitehead is a literary novelist, but his latest book, “Zone One,” [sic] features zombies, which means horror fans and gore gourmands will soon have him on their radar. He has my sympathy. I can see the disgruntled reviews on Amazon already: “I don't get it. This book's supposed to be about zombies, but the author spends pages and pages talking about all this other stuff I'm not interested in.” Broad-spectrum marketing will attract readers for whom having to look up “cathected” or “brisant” isn't just an irritant but a moral affront. These readers will huff and writhe and swear their way through (if they make it through) and feel betrayed and outraged and migrained. But unless they're entirely beyond the beguilements of art they will also feel fruitfully disturbed, because “Zone One” will have forced them, whether they signed up for it or not, to see the strangeness of the familiar and the familiarity of the strange. (Duncan 2011)

influences. For these filmmakers in 2003, *Resident Evil*, with all its vapid spectacle and blatant commercial cross-promotion, is characteristic of the zombie genre, and one effective way of asserting the aesthetic and political qualities of *28 Days Later* is to distinguish it from zombie films in general. But rather than question why Boyle and Garland wouldn't think of *28 Days Later* as a zombie film, perhaps we should question why we might. And once again, we need to understand the aggregative function of meta-genre.

*Resident Evil's* source material is the video game of the same name, developed by Shinji Mikami for Capcom and released in 1996 for the Sony PlayStation. The game's style and atmosphere pay homage to the zombie films of Romero and Lucio Fulci, and its success spawned a game franchise and inspired a whole series of other survival horror games. Moreover, Russell argues, the success of the *Resident Evil* game "reinvigorated zombie cinema in the late 1990s and paved the way for the zombie renaissance that occurred in the 2000s. It was the first sign of the zombie's impending mutation into a crossmedia monster—a creature so adaptable it could jump from movies to games to comics and novels with ease" (Russell 127-8).<sup>85</sup> *Resident Evil* had primed a generation for an explosion of zombie-related cultural phenomena.

From the early 2000s on and as of this writing, zombie-themed content has suffused TV shows, novels, comic books, fan conventions, console and mobile video games, web videos, restaurants, beers, apparel, toys, board games, live-action role playing and survival simulations, and athletic and community events and organizations (e.g. "zombie walks" and Zombie Squad). In the introduction to the second (2014) edition to his *Book of the Dead*, Russell claims that more feature-length zombie films were released in the eight years between 2005 and 2013 than in the

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<sup>85</sup> The so-called zombie renaissance has received considerable attention from scholars, but it is beyond the scope of this project to rehearse or critique their analyses and explanations. See Bishop (*American Zombie Gothic*) and Dendle.

seven decades prior (6). Produced by countries around the world, many of these films embrace both the form and content of Romeroesque zombies, using the shambling figures as vehicles for social commentary—in some cases as wry satire and in others as brutal allegory. Zombies would eventually gain some respectability in mainstream popular culture, especially through critically acclaimed television shows and novels like *The Walking Dead* (2010-2018, AMC) and like Max Brooks' 2006 *World War Z* and Colson Whitehead's 2011 *Zone One*. However, this zombie renaissance was still nascent when *28 Days Later* was released in 2002; zombies then were still, in Russell's words, "the great unwashed of horror cinema, low-rent and disreputable" (6).

Boyle and Garland's frame of reference for the zombie genre in 2003, then, is limited to: 1) decades of low-budget, marginal cinema—Poverty Row, drive-in, exploitation, and direct-to-video releases; 2) one horror auteur, Romero, whose commitment to radical social politics already distinguishes him from other zombie filmmakers; and 3) a recent shallow, insipid action blockbuster from which Romero had been fired. That Romero hadn't been able to get a zombie movie made as director in the seventeen years since *Day of the Dead*;<sup>86</sup> that 1990s zombie cinema was dominated by no-budget, shot-on-video, amateur productions (Russell 120-4); that zombies re-emerged first through a medium, video games, not associated with serious art; and that the most recent notable zombie film was itself a video game adaptation loaded with CGI and a juvenile action sensibility—all these factors hurt the legitimacy of the zombie genre and, by contrast, suggest that *28 Days Later* was indeed something different.

The low cultural value associated with zombie films at the end of the 20th century is one of the markers that define the meta-genre at that point. As with *The Silence of the Lambs* and

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<sup>86</sup> Romero did write and executive produce the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead* (dir. Tom Savini), which was a modest commercial and critical success. Nevertheless, it would not be until after the success of *Resident Evil* in 2002 that he would secure funding for his fourth *Dead* film, *Land of the Dead* (2006) (Russell 133).

slasher films, *28 Days Later*'s production quality, thematic depth, and evident political engagement serve to distinguish it from a disreputable genre because these kinds of evaluative attributes are central to meta-genre. For some, *28 Days Later* could not be a zombie film in 2003 because it is too good, too thoughtful, too earnest. This is one way of explaining Boyle and Garland's insistence on distinguishing their film from zombie cinema. We still might suspect that they are aware of and sensitive to the similarities the films bear, and it is perhaps a wise rhetorical move to distance *28 Days Later* from such similar films, especially when describing it to the readers of a publication that bills itself as "the magazine of independent film." But we cannot say that the film positively belongs to the zombie genre then or now, because, despite whatever textual similarities it shares with the zombie meta-genre, genre is always contingent upon the rhetorical conditions under which it is invoked.

Boyle and Garland are to some extent aware that they are genrefying the film in the sense that they are clearly framing it for an audience, but it is important to note here that their framing is differential, that "genre is a system of differences without positive terms" (Beebee 256). Hence, to identify *28 Days Later* as science fiction or apocalypse is already to identify it implicitly as not-horror, or as not-zombie, by virtue of their structural opposition. But since *genre* in my formulation is less an abstract system of semiological relations than a performative utterance, this phrase still holds true but with an added dimension of rhetorical purpose and of active if indirect denial. This structure of negation is not only denotative but evaluative as well, as Bourdieu avers:

Tastes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference [...] when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is

negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others. (49)

The stakes of this kind of adamant distinction involve the exercise of cultural capital through the re-legitimation of certain kinds of art forms and the maintenance of the authority of certain subjects and institutions to arbitrate on matters of art. This example would involve the authority of indie filmmakers (and authors) like Boyle and Garland and the authority of institutional critics and publications, like Newman and *Filmmaker Magazine*. But in this case, it is not enough to call *28 Days Later* a science fiction or apocalypse film.

The textual attributes it shares with the zombie meta-genre require that *28 Days Later* be explicitly designated ‘not a zombie film,’ because the pejorative connotations that term entails at that point in time raise the stakes by risking association with a particularly low genre. In other words, the lower the associated meta-genre, and the greater the textual similarity, the higher the risk of undesirable genrefication; it is imperative to distinguish the film explicitly. Hence, Newman, Boyle, and Garland point to specific stylistic and thematic attributes to direct their readers’ interpretations away from the similarities with zombie films and toward those stylistic and thematic attributes the zombie meta-genre is supposed to lack. Years later, however, the conditions have changed, and we shall see now how fans consider the film.

### *Reddit and Fan Discourse*

We shall continue with *28 Days Later*, but this time I will not be discussing the genrefying discourses of critics and scholars and filmmakers. Their authority, while not unassailable, is nevertheless to some degree guaranteed by the very institutional milieu and

rhetorical genres in and through which they operate and which constitute them as critics and scholars and filmmakers. Instead, I will be discussing fan discourse and the radically different rhetorical conditions under which fans have to construct their arguments and build appeals in arguing over the genre of a particular film.

The document here is an /r/AskReddit thread, which, on the one hand, provides a relatively neutral ground in terms of user authority—relative, specifically, to institutional critics and scholars. On the other hand, however, Reddit also has its own system of ranking responses based on users' upvoting or downvoting, and thus is less neutral than might appear. While it is not a truly equal intersubjective space, Reddit does give us a more transparent sense of the necessity of users to consider and appeal to their audience, who, while anonymous and depersonalized, can still interact with one another. To reiterate and add to my earlier point, this section is not an ethnographic case study and is not particularly concerned with postdemographic digital research methods.<sup>87</sup> Rather, it is meant to illustrate how the principle of rhetorical genrefication extends beyond traditional institutional media and its variations and is active in the discourses of everyday users.

More specifically, this section is meant to illustrate the role of meta-genre in interpretation and framing zombie films and *28 Days Later* in particular. Recall that the zombie meta-genre contains the sum total of connotative and denotative attributes associated with a particular kind of film as available to a given user. This element is intimately connected with the rhetorical conditions under which the film is framed. While Boyle and Garland are chary of naming specific films—except for *Resident Evil* as a negative example—as filmmakers they

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<sup>87</sup> For an overview of postdemographics and social media research methods, See Rogers ch.7.

enjoy the apparent authority to frame their own film, especially as sanctioned by the mediation of a professional critic, Kim Newman, and as published in a film magazine. For Redditors, the rhetorical conditions necessitate different framing strategies, those built on *logos* rather than *ethos*. That is to say, because they lack institutionally defined authority, they must rely on different appeals and build their arguments on textual and intertextual evidence. If *28 Days Later* were broadly accepted as a zombie film—like, say, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978)—there wouldn't be much to talk about or much reason to talk about it because the film's genre would appear self-evident to the user group. But since there is disagreement and enough subcultural capital at stake to make contestation worthwhile, users are obliged to build their arguments on persuasive evidence. The relative anonymity makes it imperative to 'show your work,' so to speak, and reveals how meta-genre serves to inform genre as genrefication, that is, as negotiation and rhetorical appeal among a user group.

On May 24, 2011, user *IamShartacus* posted a question to */r/AskReddit* and began a thread that generated 125 user comments.<sup>88</sup> The humorous references to a good-natured disagreement between romantic partners sets the initial exigence, and the thread is dotted with nods to that initial question, including the occasional sexist remark.<sup>89</sup> For the most part the discussion turns on the definition of a zombie and whether the monsters in *28 Days Later*—the “infected”—are or are not zombies, and the thread is fairly evenly split on the question.

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<sup>88</sup> The full thread can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>89</sup> E.g. “I'm pretty sure she should be making sandwiches for you to eat while watching 28DL rather than being in the living room watching 28DL” (User *MaoChan*)

▲ 16 ▼

Was *28 Days Later* a zombie movie? My relationship hangs in the balance. (self.AskReddit)  
submitted 7 years ago by [IamShartacus](#)

I consider myself something of a zombie movie connoisseur, a zombophile, if you will. I'm sure many of you can relate. I'm no expert by any means, but I've seen the complete Romero series, most of the recent "fast-zombie" movies, and the zombie comedies (zomedies?) *Shaun of the Dead*, *Zombieland*, *I Sell the Dead*, etc.

Anywho, I've always considered *28 Days Later* to be a zombie movie, as do most people, from what I can tell. The antagonists are hordes of bloodthirsty, mindless, humanoids, whose "disease" is spread through biting (among other means). The whole premise just screams zombie.

My fiancée, who only recently took an interest in zombie movies, firmly believes that *28 Days Later* is **not** a zombie movie, but just a good horror apocalyptic horror movie. I'll summarize her evidence:

- Infected humans don't die and come back as zombies; they make the transition straight from living to **BRAAAAAAAAAAINS!!** without skipping a (heart)beat.
- There is little evidence that the *28DL* "zombies" are eating their victims. For the infected, biting might just be another way to inflict pain. Notably, in the [sequel](#), the "zombies" just beat the crap out of their victims (spoiler: there is some eye-thumbing in this movie too).

I recognize that *28DL* falls outside the traditional Romero canon because of these facts, but I still believe that it is a zombie movie in spirit. This argument has put a considerable strain on our relationship, and I'm considering leaving her over this\*\*. Zombie compatibility is a crucial part of any relationship.

I leave it to the experts of Reddit to decide who is right.

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\*\*Not intended to be a factual statement

125 comments share save hide report

The author of the original post (OP) acknowledges that “Infected humans don’t die” and that there is “little evidence that the *28DL* ‘zombies’ are eating their victims,” concluding that “I recognize that *28DL* falls outside the traditional Romero canon because of these facts, but I still believe that it is a zombie movie in spirit.” Subsequent commenters stick fairly close to the framework provided in the OP—viz. whether the infected share observable characteristics with zombies as popularly understood, whether the film shares a similar structure with other zombie films, and whether the film addresses similar social themes as other zombie films. Some users suggest different taxa of zombies who may or may not be alive, may or may not eat human flesh, and may or may not be controlled by a virus or voodoo.<sup>90</sup> Others agree with the OP and make a special case for the film, claiming that, though the infected are definitely not zombies—because

<sup>90</sup> Users [leevs11](#), [nickname](#), [misplacedme](#), and [TheyCalledMeMad](#).

of the aforementioned characteristics—they would consider *28 Days Later* a zombie film.<sup>91</sup> Still others deny the authority of the standard definition, pointing to misplaced notions of canonicity and generic stability.<sup>92</sup> And some commenters point to structural and figurative conventions to suggest that the infected perform the same functions as zombies in their own narrative contexts.<sup>93</sup>

Throughout the thread users cite specific textual attributes characteristic of zombies and, to a lesser extent, other zombie films to qualify and/or support their claims one way or the other. First, the OP suggests that the “antagonists are hordes of bloodthirsty, mindless humanoids whose disease is spread through biting,” adding—without contesting—the author’s fiancée’s criteria that zombies are anthropophagic and dead. Other users add to and elaborate on these criteria, beginning subthreads on, for example, whether zombies can starve or not—and whether the infected starve or not—since having a metabolism would indicate that one was actually alive and therefore not a zombie since zombies must be dead. Some point to etiology and etymology, suggesting that the word’s origin in “voodoo” indicates that any person, living or dead, controlled by magic could be a zombie. This is a specific counter to the claim that since the infected are living, they cannot be zombies, and therefore *28 Days Later* is not a zombie film. Other users appeal to the film’s structure by way of analogy.

Die hard is an action movie about a police officer who has to stop terrorists using guns and explosives. Mission impossible is about a secret agent who has to stop terrorists at first by using stealth operations, and then guns and explosives. Both are basically the same action movie formula, just variations thereof. I consider *28 Days Later* to be a

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<sup>91</sup> Users Advancedphish, M\_Me\_Meteo, Nethius, ChickMD, itchydot, and goxilo.

<sup>92</sup> Response to TheyCalledMeMad (username deleted), bolxrex, jelives, and TheCloned.

<sup>93</sup> Users HSOK, science\_diction, and lolmonger.

zombie movie because it is very obviously made in the same formula of a zombie movie.

(user HSOK, *sic*)

This appeal to structure appears in a handful of claims that agree with the OP's assertion that the film is a zombie movie in spirit. While some others agree about the structure, or concede it has the "heart" or "spirit" of a zombie film, even though the infected aren't really zombies, a few commenters appeal to themes and implicit meaning.

It's more of a zombie movie than half the zombie movies you mentioned in your post.

There's a reason zombie movies gained huge popularity in the 70s. They were created as allegories to race riots and what many people believed would be the end of civilization or democracy. That's why they move in mobs. That's why everyone they attack gets "infected."

[...]

Zombies, when done in the classic style, are allegory. (user science\_diction)

For user science\_diction, a given film's politics and its commitment to social commentary are better indicators of its generic status than the particulars of the monsters it uses as vehicles for that commentary. So while the OP and many comments draw on the attributes of the monster, some users attend more closely to narrative and theme as the more significant, definitive attributes, even if, like science\_diction, they hedge through qualifications like "when done in the classic style."

It should be noted when considering the semantic characteristics of the monster versus the syntactic narrative and thematic structures, the inclusion of one to the exclusion of the other

would entail exclusions of otherwise intuitive cases, including and especially classical-era films like *White Zombie* (1932, dir. Victor Halperin) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943, dir. Jacques Tourneur). But the consolidation of the ‘dead, slow, flesh-eating’ zombies of the Romero tradition against the infected of *28 Days Later* serves to elide inconsistencies and contradictions among those same films, even those of the Romero canon, thus reconstituting the genre negatively. Hence, the various assessments of *28 Days Later* and its textual attributes turn largely upon criteria that are dislocated from the concrete films: users have a conception of what a zombie film looks like and does that may or may not wholly agree with actual films or with more than one.

This is not to say that no users appeal to specific films. Indeed, many users cite specific films, just as the OP does.<sup>94</sup> Like Boyle and Garland, some also use auteurs as shorthand for a particular kind of zombie, citing Romero, Val Lewton, Lucio Fulci, and *Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman, but few acknowledge more than one, perhaps because their monsters and themes diverge so greatly. Even Romero is contested in his authority: although user lesmalan claims “Romero's zombies are the only zombies, we literally CANNOT advance this conversation otherwise,” user TheCloned takes an opposite view:

I know r/zombies would downvote me to hell if they heard me say this, but as one zombieophile to another, you need to stop putting Romero on a pedestal. [...]

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<sup>94</sup> In total, these include *Shaun of the Dead* (2004, dir. Edgar Wright), *Zombieland* (2009, dir. Ruben Fleischer), *I Sell the Dead* (2008, dir. Glen McQuaid), *Weekend at Bernie's II* (1993, dir. Robert Klane), *Stardust* (2007, dir. Matthew Vaughn), the graphic novel and TV series *The Walking Dead*, *Return of the Living Dead* (1985, dir. Dan O'Bannon), *Outbreak* (1995, dir. Wolfgang Peterson), the game *Resident Evil*, *28 Weeks Later*, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988, dir. Wes Craven), *1408* (2007, dir. Mikael Håfström), *I Walked with a Zombie*, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

Sure, he created the modern zombie and whole culture of zombies. But have you seen his recent work? It's absolute shit. The culture has gotten away from [him], it evolved past him and he couldn't adapt. I personally don't think Romero is a good authority on zombies anymore.

Yes, 28 Days Later was a zombie movie, as long as you're not constricting yourself to Romero's zombies. (user TheCloned)

This user doesn't offer an example of what other criteria define zombies in the absence of Romero's authority and perhaps doesn't need to. Along with Romero, TheCloned defies the authority of the fans on the /r/zombies subreddit. User beastduels appeals to the collective authority of the niche fans, "Try starting a poll in r/zombies and i'm sure >80% will say not zombies [*sic*]," but others are wary of that subreddit group and of "hardcore zombie fundamentalists" in general.<sup>95</sup>

One particular response captures some of the frustration of other users at the rigid definitions and exclusions advanced by some of these hardcore fans.

Yes, of course it is a zombie movie. People act like there is some consensus about what a "zombie" is, but that's complete bullshit. Some zombies are dead, reanimated corpses. Some zombies are living creatures infected with a pathogen. Some zombies are mind-controlled people, forced to obey their master (with drugs, diseases, voodoo, etc).

Hell, the original zombie myth didn't include them being undead, they were living slaves.

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<sup>95</sup> "Hardcore zombie fundamentalists irritate me because they act like there is some defined standard that needs to be rigidly adhered to in order to qualify zombies as 'real' zombies. 28DL was a zombie movie as much as any other zombie movie. One of the few good zombie 'action' movies (versus the typical zombie horror movies). (user deleted, response to user TheyCalledMeMad)

There are zombie infections, there are zombie-like infections, and they're the *same damn thing*. (user TheyCalledMeMad *sic*)

While acknowledging the lack of consensus, this user gestures toward two of the popular approaches for including films: taxonomy and generic evolution. The taxonomic approach, implicitly subgeneric, allows for a diversity of zombie types within one genre while still maintaining some ordered sets of conventions. It sets voodoo, undead, and viral zombies side by side as different species of zombie that populate different subgenres of zombie films. As I suggested in my introduction, for pragmatic genre theory subgenre makes no sense as a concept, since it presupposes genre as a stable class of films that can be subdivided according to evident distinctions. Here, however, we can see how appeals to subgenre or hybrid genres are useful critically and rhetorically because they allow the user to acknowledge inconsistencies and contradictions and to reconcile them without sacrificing the sense of a coherent genre as organizing principle. Similarly, generic evolution imagines those differences as functions of the change of artistic conventions and thematic concerns over time.

This acknowledgement of referential differences among presumably intuitive instances of zombie films could threaten the coherence of the genre without an explanation and/as a stabilizing factor. That might be appeal to acknowledged similarities and influences among artists (Koven 5).<sup>96</sup> Or it might have to do with the dynamic tension inherent in genre conventions—as both “accepted standards” of representation and experimental “dramatic

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<sup>96</sup> Mikel J. Koven proposes “*filone*,”—roughly, the patterns and directions of influence among filmmakers working in the same industry and traditions—as an alternative to “genre” for explaining the coherence and variability among Italian *gialli* (5-10). As with other textualist and auteurist conceptions, however, Koven’s concept does not properly foreground the social uses those films and their groupings are put to. While *filone* might be a useful concept for historical poetics, Koven’s configurations of textual attributes, auteurs, and production histories are just as contingent on his own interpretive and framing practices. See Koven Ch. 1.

method”—as they express a period’s structure of feeling (R. Williams 32-3).<sup>97</sup> One user’s response along these lines is particularly interesting.

By definition not a single modern day zombie movie has zombies in it.

Zombies have their roots in voodoo mysticism. Traditionally zombies are mindless, but living, humans under the control of a witchdoctor who unquestioningly / unthinkingly perform the tasks given to them.

Romero changed everything. Zombies became the undead risen from the grave or the recently slain who's only purpose was to eat the flesh of the living. Being bitten by a zombie didn't turn you into a zombie. Being dead turned you into a zombie.

Modern zombie revival changed everything. Zombies became infectious pseudo-dead unrelenting monsters.

Kirkman changed everything. The Walking Dead brought the "whatever the fuck you want it to be" back in to fiction.

If you need to draw a distinction between zombies and the rage filled infected from 28 Days Later then you are over thinking everything. Zombie movies are meant to show us what humanity is capable of when we actively ignore our brains and pursue our tasks mindlessly. They are meant to show us how fragile our grand civilization is as we ignore

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<sup>97</sup> Though Raymond Williams’ description of and attitude toward “structure of feeling” as a concept changed throughout his career, his earliest articulation of the term in 1954’s “Film and the Dramatic Tradition,” according to John Higgins, represents Williams’ challenge to the economic determinism of orthodox Marxist literary criticism (38). The concept is meant to describe the total experience of a work of art—reflective of social consciousness of the period—in which the material life, social organization, and dominant ideas are all represented but in which none is necessarily determinant. (Higgins 38).

everything & eachother spiraling into the future on the back of progress. Hang on to your humanity for the (brain)dead already walk among us.

The infected is just a hipster word for zombie. Deal with it. (user bolxrex, *sic*)

User bolxrex is not the only commenter to highlight the change in zombie conventions over time, and even more allude to the zombie figure's voodoo origins. But bolxrex's post brings together several threads. First, it acknowledges the inconsistency of semantic and syntactic elements in the zombie meta-genre and attempts to explain them through appeal to a partially auteurist genealogy and generic evolution. Second, it unifies the body films through a proposition regarding the theme of loss of humanity. Third, it makes a direct, second-person address to an unspecified reader or group of readers: perhaps to the author of the OP, IAMShartacus, in particular but certainly with the awareness that it can be read by all the other Redditors. In its annoyed tone and dismissal of the "hipster" fashionability of the term "infected," as well as in demonstrating familiarity with auteurs and genre history, the post constructs a rhetor who has an authoritative knowledge of the genre and locates it not in the trivial matter of monster mechanics but in the graver, more urgent themes those films address. In other words, while the other posters—so constructed—quibble over the surface accidents of various zombie films, bolxrex has identified the deeper essential properties of the genre and their relevance for the world beyond the film.<sup>98</sup> While some construct the genre around shared referential meanings (in Bordwell's sense), others like bolxrex frame the genre in terms of the implicit meanings that

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<sup>98</sup> For an academic treatment along these lines, see Kevin Boon's "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh," which sets out to define the zombie in terms of consciousness. Boon does not take lack of consciousness as given, but attempts to trace similarities among zombie texts throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and across literature and film. Rather than elide differences among diverse zombie texts, Boon instead posits a classificatory schema of seven zombie types. Boon's zombie *sine qua non* is a disjunct between conscious identity and embodiment; zombies must "summon the ontological anxiety associated with the human survival instinct and the life/death, self/other binary" to be zombies proper (37).

require more attention and skill to construct, but which allow the viewer to accommodate stylistic and formal variations while preserving the sense of a unified genre. In this way xbolxrex reproduces the logic of conventional academic genre criticism while also framing that criticism for the present rhetorical situation.

In contrast to the Boyle and Garland interview, there is a strongly dialogic dynamic to the genrefication of *28 Days Later* in the r/AskReddit thread. The Redditors cannot assume the authority of filmmakers or a professional film critic. Those who are so interested have to work to establish their ethos and the legitimacy of their claims by demonstrating their erudition and subcultural capital as zombie fans even as they construct their arguments. By the nature of the forum, the respondents self-select, and none characterizes the zombie genre as a whole negatively. Indeed, many who deny that *28 Days Later* is a zombie film do so after expressing their appreciation for both the film and genre. Whereas Boyle and Garland's zombie meta-genre in 2003 was apparently based on decades of low-budget schlock and a recent blockbuster, the self-selecting Redditors eight years later have a larger body of more legitimate texts to draw from, including *28 Days Later* and Romero's return with *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). Moreover, the zombie renaissance in popular culture precipitated a struggle for authenticity, in which viewers who already know and already appreciate the corpus of pre-renaissance zombie films can gain and exercise their subcultural capital by defining and policing the boundaries of the genre and subordinating those newcomer fans who only recently caught on via later mainstream, often "hybridized" texts.<sup>99</sup> Hence, the

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<sup>99</sup> Cf. Jancovich ("A Real Shocker")

borders and value of the genre—and of contiguous genres—are constantly in flux insofar as there is occasion and stakes to argue about them among a user group.

### Conclusion

In pursuing the implications of a radically pragmatic genre theory, we have seen that we need to attend more closely to instances of genre use and try to reconstruct what principles make those uses meaningful and what purposes they serve. I have argued that Bordwell's constructivist theory of interpretation provides a more granular account of the kinds of reading practices that constitute genre-as-process. Moreover, Jancovich's Bourdieusian framework describes what kinds of social uses those interpretations might be put to. There appeared, however, to be a gap between strictly denotative constructivist arguments and connotative dimensions of genre-as-distinction, between the abstract hypothetical viewer and the viewer as member of a social group. I have contributed meta-genre, a concept that bridges these dimensions of genre by informing a user's interpretive and framing practices. A floating signifier, meta-genre doesn't genrefy a specific film, but instead invokes the set of textual and extra-textual denotative and connotative attributes that a given user associates with a particular kind of film. Meta-genres carry these associations into rhetorical situations, but are always imprecise because two users' experiences of a given kind of film—and thus its denotative and connotative attributes—vary historically, culturally, and subculturally. Meta-genre is thus distinct from genre—pragmatically defined as genrefication via rhetorical, performative speech acts—by virtue of the interpretive and rhetorical functions it serves in acts of genrefication. These functions, confused or conflated, have been traditionally ascribed to genre and have thus mistakenly granted all manner of social powers to variegated and protean constellations of texts and their attributes. As a result, every act

of genre criticism has to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, framing the denotative and connotative parameters of the meta-genre under discussion, but appealing to textual and intertextual characteristics as static and self-evident generic stabilizers.

In the next chapter, we will explore how these framings are articulated in regularized social discourse—that is, in rhetorical genres like film reviews, journal articles, or online message boards, and how film genre is put into social action through its integration or *uptake* into rhetorical genres. I will discuss both the methodological benefits and theoretical complications of approaching film genre this way: first, because rhetorical genres are defined by the kinds of social actions and activities they serve, they are not tied to textual form but they are relatively stable because of their institutional uses they serve. As a result, genrefication can be studied as part of recurring social activities among specific kinds of user groups who employ specific kinds of rhetorical genres that meet the needs of that group. Hence, where film genres are identified with the speech-acts that articulate them and are thus in some sense singular, the rhetorical situations and genres those speech-acts participate in are regularized, and this regularity allows us to apply generalized research methods to localized problems in genre study. Second, as rhetorical genre studies shows us, the uptake of film genre into a rhetorical genre introduces complications regarding the parties involved, e.g., how the rhetor and audience construct one another as social subjects through their relative positions in the rhetorical situation. We have already touched on the rhetorical dimension of film genrefication in a couple of examples. In Chapter 4 I will lay out a set of basic concepts and methods imported from Rhetorical Genre Studies, and I will show how the rhetorical dimension of genrefication can add to the study of film genre in the age of digital streaming.

## Chapter 4: Rhetorical Genre and Film Genre Uptake

In this chapter I will turn to a methodology for studying the kinds of discourse that genrefy films and disseminate and transform meta-genres. First, I will introduce some key concepts from Rhetorical Genre Studies that help to orient and organize the genrefying texts and the social groups who use them. Next, I will briefly revisit some of the use cases from Chapters 2 and 3 to show how some of these terms and concepts can enrich and complicate discussions of generic texts and user groups. Finally, I will devote a good deal of the chapter to discussing Netflix and the challenges that its digital recommendation system poses to conventional genre criticism and theory. I will show that a pragmatic film genre theory, coupled with a rhetorical understanding of genrefication can go a long way toward accounting for the relationship between Netflix's algorithmically variable "microgenres" and the social dynamic between the streaming service and its customers. Before moving on to a methodology for and non-traditional applications of an approach to rhetorical genrefication, it may be helpful to recap its theoretical foundations.

Genres cannot be coherently defined through appeal to textual features or historical use. Instead, film genre ought to be understood as genrefication, or the social act of framing a concrete text relative to others such that a configuration of textual and extra-textual similarities appears to present itself. Genrefication involves the active reconfiguration and reconstitution of named meta-genres while accommodating, ignoring, or explaining away recalcitrant textual data

that do not fit received models.<sup>100</sup> In this way, the mechanics of generic inclusion and exclusion are performative and adaptive. Which textual attributes belong to which received genre is guided by meta-genre, which I have defined as the totality of textual and extra-textual attributes plus the evaluative qualities that a given user associates with a particular genre label. Meta-generic labels circulate through paratexts and are shared among users, but their precise denotative and connotative substance is contingent upon the experiences of each historically and culturally situated user. The invocation of a meta-generic label will likely evoke some common but not identical associations. The more similar the experiences and values of the two users—likely as a result of social and cultural positioning—the more similar the evocations are likely to be. Without wading too deeply into semiotic terminology, we could say that the meta-generic representamen “horror film” would produce similar interpretants in the minds of two users who already had similar experiences of horror cinema so labelled. However, that correspondence is radically contingent upon the users’ respective experiences and not upon independent textual structures or some transcendent “horror-ness.” Hence, the sign encompasses a range of associations that bear varying degrees of similarity along different axes and that may or not be precise enough, depending on the use it is being put to.<sup>101</sup>

I have also demonstrated that uses of genre and meta-genre are rhetorically situated, that they are grounded in social communicative acts. Indeed, genre is and can only be a social communicative act, a classifying statement about texts rather than a class of texts. Interpretive

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<sup>100</sup> Appeals to subgenre, genre hybridity, and generic periodization and evolution are common strategies of accommodating perturbations without having to abandon a textualist conception of genre. For an earlier critique of generic hybridity, see Staiger.

<sup>101</sup> There is potential for a fuller systematization of this approach under the rubric of Peircean semiotic and phenomenological models, and this represents another direction that this project can take.. Suffice it to say, this endeavor is beyond the scope of an already complex and heavily synthesized theoretical overhaul.

category schemata become genres when they are framed for someone else, and this grouping may make more or less sense to that someone else, depending on how the classification is justified or framed and to what degree the users share a mutual frame of reference. These communicative acts are also inherently rhetorical. They involve appealing to the experiences, preconceptions, biases, values, reason, and/or emotions of one's audience such that 1) the classification makes sense and 2) the classification can be useful. This rhetorical dimension opens up the issue of what genre is for. That is, why would one classify texts, not in a general sense, but in particular instances? What does a genre *do* for the individuals and groups who use it? We have seen in earlier chapters how the uses genre is put to varies broadly, but that its use is nevertheless inextricable from the social and rhetorical purposes it serves. Therefore, rather than reflecting independent, empirical relations among texts that are revealed through neutral discourse, genres are actively constructed and expressed by users to other users as part of situated social activity. Hence, genre is a function of rhetorical conditions. But since social activities, rhetorical situations, and user groups are so varied, it would seem that genre study would be hopelessly particularized. How do we study genre and genre use?

In the last chapter I suggested that Jancovich's attention to "mediations" of film genre—e.g. film reviews, letters to the editor—was on the right track insofar as he is looking to writing about texts rather than the texts themselves. Moreover, Jancovich recognizes that not only genre definition but cultural authority is at stake in these mediations.<sup>102</sup> However, he lacks a systematic account of the structural relationships between film genre and those mediations as a

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<sup>102</sup> Jancovich writes that "any review, or any other act of criticism, is in itself 'an affirmation of its own legitimacy,' a claim by a reviewer of his or her own entitlement to participate in the process by which cultural value is defined and distinguished, and thus to take part not only in a legitimate discourse about the film, but also in the production of its cultural value" ("Genre and the Audience" 37).

kind of writing, namely, how typified kinds of writing and the social groups that employ them are mutually constitutive. Already we have explored several such kinds of mediation: academic articles and books and popular press film reviews in Chapter 2, magazine interviews and internet message boards in Chapter 3. Rather than mediate genre or genre use, I have argued that these instances of writing effectively *are* genre. More precisely, they exemplify instances of genrefication, of the adaptive configuration of meta-generic attributes in correspondence with the experience of a concrete film text and framed rhetorically for some social group. Having established the theoretical principles of film genre and meta-genre in adaptive interpretation and framing, and having emphasized the inherently rhetorical and (therefore) social nature of framing, we turn now to the nature of those mediations and their own rhetorical genericity.

This chapter moves us from theory to methodology, to a set of concepts and methods for studying film genre as rhetorical genrefication. But this move is recursive. That is, the rhetorical concepts and principles I introduce here will direct us to turn back to specific kinds of genrefication and to think about how the form and modality and of their expression directs us to the middle-level power dynamics inherent in their very rhetoricity. The introduction of rhetorical genre as a concept not only centers and orders paratexts as the foci of attention, it also requires we re-theorize those paratexts as loci of textual and sociological production and transformation.

What do I mean by middle-level? No crude quantification can really describe the middle-level here, since user groups vary widely and shift in size and composition, so the term should be understood relative to micro-level and macro-level approaches. Film genre has been studied at the macro-level for some time, as illustrated by ideological genre criticism. The broadly political and ideological significance attributed to genre texts and to (meta-)genres is framed in terms of top-down sociological systems and *weltanschauungen* that can conflate the contradictory and

competitive interests and practices of various institutional parties (Altman 72).

Methodologically, smoothing over the various intra- and inter-institutional tensions and disjuncts requires eliding important textual and rhetorical differences among industrial and publicity paratexts and other non-filmic generic discourses. Such discourses are framed in terms of how they promote correct ideological readings among audiences, thereby complementing and reinforcing broader hegemonic cultural discourses. Concepts like “inter-textual relay” assume that the discourses unproblematically stand for themselves, based either on their content or the institutional milieu that generate them, and that genrefying discourses are stable and more or less unified. This macro-level approach is ultimately a study of social forces and how they are articulated through genre, which is relegated to a tool of ideology.

By contrast, studying rhetorical genrefication at a micro-level might involve identifying the rhetorical conditions of an instance of genrefication and examining the functions it serves, as indeed we did in Chapters 2 and 3. This atomistic approach swings too far the other way, however. While it helps us to illustrate the nuances of rhetorical genrefication in principle, it lacks general applicability and a sense of the interconnections and conflicts among user groups as part of the social world. Methodologically, such a piecemeal approach would be ad hoc and tedious and probably not very useful beyond a localized study. Hence, we need a middle-level approach that will recognize and can account for the complex social relations among institutions and user groups as well as the instability of both filmic texts and their paratexts but with a flexible, generalizable methodology.

## Rhetorical Genre Studies: Some Key Concepts

I have mentioned Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) once or twice already, and I have hinted at the utility of RGS concepts for a pragmatic film genre theory. Before moving on, it is important to position my use of RGS for this project. The study of rhetorical genre is a rich, dynamic field with its own disciplinary conventions and concerns. Rhetorical Genre Studies and Theory developed out of applied linguistics, education, communication, and rhetoric and composition studies, and its objects of study are the genres of non-literary, non-fiction writing and other modes of communication understood as recurring social actions.<sup>103</sup> Much recent RGS scholarship focuses on teaching writing, and many of its concepts and examples deal with pedagogical methods and ethics. However, as we shall see, many of those concepts are generalizable to genres of writing per se, and I have borrowed and adapted those that will best serve this project. I do not propose to represent the complexities of past or present disciplinary controversies or to provide a general overview of the field. Instead this chapter will introduce a few core concepts in order to argue that pragmatic genre theory should understand instances of genrefication as inherently rhetorical and situated within rhetorical genres and the user groups and purposes they serve.

In a seminal article Carolyn Miller defines rhetorical genre as *social action*, or “a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of a rhetorical action [that] acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose” (163).

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<sup>103</sup> How one distinguishes between rhetorical genres and literary or artistic genres in general is a tricky question. For example, while the fiction film is an artistic genre and writing about films is typically rhetorical, what about documentaries about films? What about an aphoristic historiography, like Usai’s *Death of Cinema*? I will expand on these questions and try to answer them in the Conclusion. For now, though, we will have to provisionally imagine filmic and rhetorical genres as clear and distinct.

While Miller's insight about the social dimension of rhetorical genres remains influential, we shall see shortly that later scholars like Devitt and even Miller herself will push back against the preoccupation with lexical discourse as the only kind of relevant rhetorical activity and will question the kind of situational determinism Miller's early definition implies. For now it is important to understand that while an instance of writing entails formal, historical, and intertextual dimensions, its genre is defined by the social groups and purposes it serves. Rigorous discernment among rhetorical genres is thus crucial, both as a matter of analytical precision and because the rhetorical situation varies according to the users and purposes of each genre, as do their corresponding power relations. Audience in any rhetorical situation is always to some degree a construct of the rhetorical process (Devitt 31). This rhetorical construction is reciprocal but not symmetrical; the interests of the rhetor, speaker or writer, and the ability of the audience to push back or construct itself vary broadly depending upon the situation.<sup>104</sup> Already we have seen this in the use cases from Chapters 2 and 3, even where rhetoricity was not the main focus of the example. The authority of a studio executive or the ethos of a reviewer; the audience as employees, consumers, cinephiles, or fellow scholars; and the activities of writing, financing, producing, marketing, reviewing, discussing, awarding, analyzing, historicizing, or deconstructing a film are all rhetorical issues, and the extent to which they employ film genres—directly or obliquely—is the extent to which they performatively reconstruct those film genres via rhetorical genre.

It is important to note that in principle there is no reason to exclude non-lexical systems of communication from this methodology. Indeed, even within the study of film genre, image-

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<sup>104</sup> This power relation and its social implications mark this kind of rhetorical construction as different from the implied reader or ideal reader concept employed by literary critics. See Ong.

based communication like posters and trailers actively genrefy films as well. In some cases, imitation establishes a recognizable audio and/or visual code that evokes a particular genre without invoking it. Movie poster and trailer codes and conventions are so broadly recognizable as to enable satire and parody of the paratexts themselves, especially on social networks.<sup>105</sup> However, prior to the MPAA rating system and especially among the major studio releases, promotional material might be less unified and more polyvalent. As Altman points out, and as I shall discuss further below, those modalities of signification trade in polysemy; the lack of explicit invocation of a genre label is a rhetorical strategy, aimed at piquing the various interests of a wide audience. Further study of visual genrefying rhetoric in filmic paratexts is one direction inquiries in the area of rhetorical genrefication could go. For now, we will focus on lexical rhetorical genrefication since 1) this is an outline of a methodology *toward* a method for studying rhetorical genrefication, and linguistic genrefying practices serve as clearer examples; and 2) because while generic ambiguity may serve some institutional ends, the critical modes of argumentation we have seen in past chapters' use cases require greater precision and, even in the case of audiovisual genres, still rely on speech and writing in delineating topic and audience.

My use case for this chapter will focus on industrial discursive use of film genres by Netflix in its streaming algorithm. I will first recap some work by Schatz, Altman, and Gunning demonstrating: 1) the variety of genres inside and outside of industrial use, 2) the difference of genres between different time periods, and 3) the industrial regenrefication of films. These examples will help clarify how Netflix's digital recommendation system (RS)—which

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<sup>105</sup> There are a few genres of fan-manipulated trailers on YouTube in which users will recut and add new voiceover and music to film footage, reimagining *Jaws* (1975, dir. Spielberg) and *The Shining* as uplifting family movies, or *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993, dir. Chris Columbus) and *Mary Poppins* (1964, dir. Robert Stevenson) as horror films. For an extended discussion of fake and fan trailers in terms of anticipation and hype, see K. A. Williams.

reconfigures<sup>106</sup> textual elements to match curated “microgenres” to precise user tastes—engages in the same pragmatic regenrefication that has characterized industrial filmic genre use through its history, if now on a scale at once broader in terms of number of titles and more focused on individual consumers. The Netflix case will also demonstrate how rhetorical “uptake” functions in the digital realm, whereby classical film genres, along with other genrefied schemata, are taken up into the social act of recommendation *qua* rhetorical genre. Moreover, framing the Netflix RS rhetorically will underscore the asymmetrical construction of Netflix and its users, as well as how the other genres in its genre system (such as user agreements) and genre set (such as the *Netflix Tech Blog*) function to maintain and elide this asymmetry.

### *Rhetorical Genres and Rhetorical Genre Theory*

Much RGS focuses on institutional settings as dynamic contexts and may incorporate ideological implications in its analyses. Examples of such genres include student papers, lab reports, business memos, grocery lists, or the State of the Union Address. Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff broaden the definition from Miller’s to include “forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations” (4). A rhetorical approach, simply put, looks at how addresser and addressee relate to one another in a given concrete situation; how exigencies, purposes, forms of address, and other rhetorical genres shape the genre and situation; and how genre and situation shape one another. Hence, Devitt defines genre in less inert terms, as “a reciprocal dynamic within which

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<sup>106</sup> N.B. Though “configuration” has a range technical definitions specific to computer science and programming, I use the term here exclusively in the broader sense of ordering or arrangement, especially with the connotation of impermanence and potential, even imminent reordering.

individuals' actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genre" (Devitt 31). This description requires some unpacking

First, one must understand the "reciprocal dynamic" between situation and genre. Traditionally, rhetorical genres have been defined by the pre-existing situation to which they respond. "Rhetorical situation" denotes

a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence [...] Any *exigence* is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be [...] An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse. (Bitzer in Devitt 16-17 emphasis original)

Rhetorical situation here is defined by the problem, gap, or task—the exigence—that can be remedied or at least addressed discursively. Rhetorical genres are thus defined as typified forms of discourse that respond to repeated or ongoing situations and exigences. For example, the need to assess student learning over various periods of time calls for quizzes, writing assignments, projects, and/or term papers. Likewise, the need for production crews to keep raw footage organized for editors calls for camera reports. Hence instances of rhetorical genre are identified and understood in terms of the recurrent situations that call for them.

Devitt takes issue with this earlier approach to rhetorical genres that sees genre as a "unidirectional response to context of situation" (18). Such an approach constrains the dynamism and flexibility of rhetorical genres while privileging exigence and situation as prior to and

determinative of genre. Devitt—like Culler, Bal and Bryson, and, in a way, Tudor—recognizes that a context does not unproblematically define a text or a recurring textual form (19).<sup>107</sup>

Instead, context must be continually reconstructed by readers and writers. Following from Miller's insight, Devitt avers that genre and situation are reciprocal, and recurrence itself is an ongoing construction based on users' perception:

If genre is based on recurrence at all, it must be a recurrence perceived by the individuals who use genres. [...] A writer or reader recognizes recurrence because she or he recognizes an existing genre. But for existing genres to exist at all, people must have perceived similarities among disparate situations. Paradoxically, then, people recognize recurring situations because they know genres, yet genres exist only because people have acted as though situations have recurred. (Devitt 21)

No two textual instances of a rhetorical genre are identical, and neither are the material conditions of any two rhetorical situations. Indeed, from the radical constructivist perspective discussed in Chapter 2, even the material conditions of an apparent situation are inaccessible *in themselves*, and have to be constructed based on perceived regularities of experience and assimilated into existing schemes, which are marked by and addressed via genres.<sup>108</sup> Situations must be framed, in the sense I have been using, as if they are similar enough to be treated similarly for the user's present purposes. Genre and situation each function as the other's marker

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<sup>107</sup>“The very notion of context ‘surrounding’ genre gives it a separation from discourse and yet a physical materiality that reinforces a container model of meaning, with artificially separated text and context” (Devitt 19).

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Redfern section 3

and organizing principle—through genre users construct situation and through situation, genre (Devitt 25).

How, in light of this rejection of conventional notions of the context of situation, does Devitt justify her definition of rhetorical genre as “a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genre” (18)? The sticking point here is “context,” the problems of which were discussed at length in Chapter 1. For the sake of precision and consistency, I have thus far tried to avoid the term “context,” opting instead for the more implicitly dynamic and reflexive gerund “framing.” However, the differing semantics ought not to obscure the analogous thinking of Culler and Devitt. Devitt recognizes the connotations of independent objectivity—its “incipient positivism” (Culler xiv)—and both implicitly and explicitly rejects “context” in that sense.<sup>109</sup> The contexts of situation, culture, and genres each have “both a material and constructed reality, for what makes them ‘contexts’ is the extent to which people give them significance” (Devitt 29). Hence, though she uses the common term, Devitt’s concept of context acknowledges and attempts to avoid the pitfalls identified by Culler and Bal and Bryson by keeping the framing activities of the user in play. With this subtle understanding of context in mind, let us move on to culture and genres.

### *Context of Culture*

Devitt argues that rhetorical genres must be understood not only in terms of situational contexts, but in cultural and generic contexts as well. This former, macro-level perspective has

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<sup>109</sup> See note 12.

been hitherto absent in scholarship on rhetorical genres, perhaps because it introduces so many contested variables. Devitt asserts the need for a broader understanding of the role of culture in genre use, but she also no doubt recognizes the risk of getting bogged down in defining “culture,” which Raymond Williams famously calls “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (*Keywords* 87). Context of culture, Devitt suggests, encompasses the broad sense of “a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and templates,” while emphasizing that she is “arguing for culture as more than an interpretive context for genre but as an element in the dynamic construction of genre” (25). By including in her definition of rhetorical genre a consideration of how culture dynamically interacts with the micro-level mechanics of genre, Devitt believes that we can expand the scope of genre study and gain a fuller picture of how ideology and material conditions partially construct genres while being themselves reconstructed or reproduced by genre users (26-7).

For our purposes, Jancovich’s and Sconce’s studies of fan magazines would serve as examples of Devitt’s articulation of genre and culture. While both scholars attend to film genre as a medium of social distinction, implicit in their arguments is Devitt’s principle of rhetorical and cultural reciprocity—how social groups and cultural values inform not just the language or classifications of films, but the “mediations” or, more precisely, the rhetorical genres through which those classifications are expressed. Publications like *Fangoria* and *The Wall Street Journal* and *Critical Quarterly* and their respective readers are mutually constitutive: who reads *Critical Quarterly*? Humanities scholars. What do humanities scholars do? Among other things, they read journals like *Critical Quarterly*. In the case of a niche publication like *Fangoria*, as Jancovich suggests, reading the magazine helps to constitute *authentic* rather than casual horror fandom, and thus serves as point of subcultural distinction within a user group. In both cases, the

publication and the readership construct one another in terms of the range of values, interests, and activities that distinguish humanities scholars or horror fans as a social group.

### *User Groups*

Before moving on to “context of genre,” it is important to note that Devitt advances a precise model of such user groups. I touched on this issue in Chapter 2, but it merits some more detail because rhetorical genres and the groups who use them are intimately related. Devitt argues that to understand rhetorical genres in terms of their utility for social groups requires that we make careful distinctions among different kinds of user groups and their internal and external relations. While the idea of “discourse communities” had usefully specified the vague abstractions of “contexts” and grounded texts in the social world, it nevertheless reductively defines groups strictly according to discourse, excluding other kinds of activities, motives, and purposes. In so doing, the concept of discourse community mystifies the processes by which groups produce discourse as part of those broader social activities (36-9). Instead, Devitt proposes three divisions of user groups defined by the frequency and intensity of their members’ interaction and the rhetorical genres they share.

1. *Communities*, for Devitt, consist of groups who work closely together, interact frequently, and share common goals and activities pursued through sets and systems of related genres. Often these communities are easily identified through nameable institutional membership—such as a university department—and regular use of institutional genres. (42-3)

2. *Collectives* are perhaps less formal but in any case less firmly established. Examples include members of a hobby club or students in a seminar who meet infrequently or for a short period, usually with a well-defined purpose and/or a narrow range of interests and activities furthered by a small number of genres. (44)
  
3. Finally *networks* are defined by infrequent or irregular communication among loosely connected members who might never meet in person but participate in one genre. Devitt's examples include wedding invitations and email jokes (44-6). Though she is writing before the advent of MySpace and Facebook, Devitt captures the sporadic and ad hoc nature of rhetorical relations among social network users via email. However, since the digital revolution of the mid-2000s, digital genres have appeared, vanished, and transformed rapidly with the frequent emergence of new platforms and shifting user demographics.<sup>110</sup>

One can belong to multiple user groups simultaneously and at multiple levels. A film scholar might be a part of her departmental community, a monthly film club, and a film appreciation Facebook group, as well as university committees, volunteer organizations, a neighborhood watch, an editorial board, a national charity's listserve, a frequent shopper program, a political party, a book club, a dog-walking group, and so forth. The goals, purposes, and activities of each group are different, as are the degrees and frequency and nature of participation that constitute both the individual members and the group as such. Moreover, as this list suggests, membership

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<sup>110</sup> One interesting phenomenon is the aging of Facebook users. The largest growth has been among users 55 and older as teenagers and young adults have been leaving for social networks with markedly different but still modular platforms, like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. The shifting user demographics and chaotic, protean melange of rhetorical genres make this a fertile area for rhetorical genre research. See Sweney.

in these groups collectively also indicates something about the individual's personality, an implication that will be explored shortly in the subsequent discussion of Netflix and taste profiles.

Each of these groups use and is constituted by what Devitt terms *genre sets* and *genre systems*. Genre sets are the total number of genres used by a group, and genre systems are the collections of genres that function together toward a group's purposes and activities.<sup>111</sup> The nature of sets and systems depends on the nature of the group—as community, collective, or network. Clearly defined communities, such as those with named professional affiliations, are likely also to employ sophisticated *genre repertoires*, the set of sets and systems a group uses to advance its specialized goals and activities. A collective focused on one or only a few activities will have less of a discernable repertoire but will often act through a well-defined genre system, while a network is usually defined by one genre interacting with the broadest context of genres. (Devitt 56-8). Devitt's example of the email-chain joke as defining a social network is complicated considerably by the advent of the modularity, multi-modality, and various temporal structures of social media after the digital revolution. Devitt does recognize in 2004 that, though the discourse "email" appears to be understood as a single genre, the situation and register can vary broadly, and thus groups distinguish themselves through different classifications of email, implicitly constructing distinct genres (45). Now, however, a single Facebook page can incorporate posts; comments; replies to comments; individual and group instant messaging;

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<sup>111</sup> A familiar example might be that of a restaurant. A rhetorical genre *system* among restaurant employees might include reservation books, wait lists, menus, recited specials, server's notepads, kitchen tickets, called orders, dessert upsells, printed checks, coupons, and comment cards. These genres would all contribute toward the activity of serving customers and would thus constitute a genre system. The genre *set* would include not only these genres but also W2s, W4s, labor and food cost spreadsheets, equipment receipts and manuals, opening/closing checklists, employee schedules, health inspection window displays, employee vaccination records, pay stubs, incident report forms, OSHA regulation charts, CPR posters, food/alcohol handling certification cards, and liquor permits—genres used by the user community of employees but not all toward the same activity.

embedded images, videos, audio players, and GIFs; polls; event invitations and notifications; and multimodal advertisements, not to mention hypertext links beyond that page to other web pages, social networks, and documents. Facebook users, then, as a network, must navigate a dozen broad genres as built into the platform even before discerning whether, say, an image is a personal photo, a Twitter screengrab, or a dank meme. While the medium has grown more sophisticated and the range of interactions among digital genres more complex, intense, and even chaotic, the principle that different social groups and the genres they employ mutually construct one another still holds, even if—or perhaps especially since—those collectives have become more intensely ephemeral and ad hoc.

### *Context of Genres*

The pre-existence of other genres in a genre set or system exemplifies what Devitt refers to as the “context of genres,” or “the already existing textual classifications and forms already established and being established within a given culture, the set of typified rhetorical actions already constructed by participants in a society” (28). Users do not assess a situation and construct a genre *ex nihilo*. Instead, their appraisal of the rhetorical situation is contingent upon their recognition of the rhetorical genre and vice versa. Interactions within social groups and experience with the rhetorical genres that constitute and serve those groups functions as a kind of ground for recognizing and responding to new and ongoing situations.

For example, discriminating between a film advertisement and a film review involves recognizing the situation and the purposes involved. While it is certainly true that film criticism is an industry, and it is true that film critics participate in and reinscribe certain kinds of taste

formations, film criticism is not on the whole a cog in a totalizing publicity apparatus. Film reviewers have their own ethos to protect and are not typically shy about bad reviews. Indeed opinions vary enough to make aggregation sites like MetaCritic and Rotten Tomatoes possible. As one might guess, the scores a critic gives has less to do with the studio than with the publication she or he writes for and the readership that constitutes their rhetorical audience. For example, negative reviews from conservative publications can help create an aura of subversive edginess for a film and energize a cult fanbase to see and celebrate the film in their own publications.

All past and present genres constitute a broader context for the use of particular genres because these genres interact in important ways. Thomas Beebee notes, following Saussure, that “genre is a system of differences without positive terms” (256). But it is crucial to recognize the various axes of difference among genres, or *how* they are different and differing. One kind of relation among genres we have seen is as part of a set, system, or repertoire, which we might image synchronically in a sort of horizontal relationship with complementary genres. These genres are distinct but are employed alongside one another as parts of an activity system. Some genres, on the other hand, are formally and situationally distinct and also do not participate in the same activity system; instead, they serve as a constitutive outside to that system. For example, a university faculty member’s genre repertoire would include a variety of formally and situationally distinct rhetorical genres: syllabi, CFPs, grant proposals, committee meeting agendas, student evaluations, recommendation letters, etc. But all of these genres function as part of her or his identity as an academic and member of her or his department community and other intersecting groups. This person may also write grocery lists, Mother’s Day cards, and Ebay reviews, but none of these participates in the same activity system as those she or he uses in her

or his role as member of an academic community. Less obvious but perhaps more consequential cases might be genres like blogs, tweets, poetry, collections of interviews, or essayistic writing. The question of whether or not these genres belong to the sphere of scholarly activity in a given department can be significant when it is job search or tenure review committees making that distinction.

A second relation would be temporal. Users build on their prior experiences of *antecedent genres* to construct new genres to meet new situations and cultural contexts. Devitt points to examples of writing students who draw upon familiar genres like personal narratives or plot summaries when asked to write critical analyses (28). In film studies courses, students might also draw on online written film reviews as an antecedent genre, which would be evident in informal and evaluative rather than formal and analytic diction and in shorter, screen-friendly paragraphs. *YouTube* film reviewers, in turn, may be drawing on written or televised film reviews, video essays or Powerpoint presentations.<sup>112</sup>

It is worth noting that Devitt's writer-oriented understanding of antecedent genres is different from how the term first appeared. Kathleen Jamieson coined the term in a 1975 article to show that situation alone does not determine the form of a rhetorical address, but that genres like papal encyclicals and the State of the Union address followed from imperial Roman decrees and the English King's Speech from the throne, respectively. Modern rhetorical genres bear textual traces of the earlier genres from which they were adapted, genres which may not be the most situationally efficacious, and this genetic relationship constrains the rhetor's formal options

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<sup>112</sup> There is a range of formal approaches to amateur and professional film reviews on YouTube, most of which involve direct address by one or more hosts, and feature some balance between clips or animations and footage of the host(s). Among the more creative is Screen Junkies' *Honest Trailers*, which parodies (takes up) a film trailer—complete with voiceover à la Don LaFontaine—in a humorous if uncharitable satirical criticism of a particular film. See, for example, “Honest Trailers - Fight Club.”

(414). Devitt, on the other hand, contends that the writer understands the situation itself in terms of antecedent genres; since genre and situation construct one another reciprocally, antecedent genres provide a frame of reference for understanding and responding to new situations (28). From this perspective, antecedent genres do not constrain the rhetor, they make rhetorical response possible by constituting situation as such.

The third and for our purposes the most important relation is called *uptake*. Uptake, as developed by Anne Freadman from J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, describes the ways genres interact with each other when one is brought into meaningful social action. Uptake is how rhetorical genres articulate with the social world and the pre-existing genres through which social activities are carried out. In Freadman's analogy, a tennis ball becomes a shot by virtue of being played between players, on a tennis court, within the context of the rules of tennis. A physical ball does not gain the meaning of a "shot" until it moves in a way that is determined to be significant by a complex of other recurring social concepts and practices, such as the rules of tennis, the concept of a game, etc. ("Anyone for Tennis?" 43-4).<sup>113</sup> In another example, Freadman discusses criminal trials and describes the genre of sentencing as taking up the genre of verdict. Both are part of the genre of trial, but the sentence takes up the verdict—the performative act of declaring guilt—into the social action of juridical administration, which may entail legally enforced fines, community service, incarceration, or execution, relative to the laws and sentencing guidelines relevant to the current situation and verdict.

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<sup>113</sup> Early on, Freadman had described this complex as "a ceremonial, a ritualized sequence in a formalized space and time, enacted by fit persons to effect a specified outcome" ("Uptake" 44). In a later essay, she adopts Lyotard's notion of "jurisdictions" to describe the regulatory power of those complexes of relations and explores the social stakes of uptake as intergeneric translation across jurisdictional boundaries. See Freadman "Uptake."

One kind of uptake relationship that will be relevant for our use case can be described in terms of as primary and secondary genres. The former are simpler utterances tied to their contexts, while the latter are more complex configurations of discourses, such as a novel (Bakhtin, as in Bawarshi and Reiff 83). Typically, secondary genres take up primary genres, such as a conversation in a novel, or a lullaby in a film. However, this leaves open the question of whether film genres are primary or secondary. Film genre is, as I have stressed, the act of configuring a particularly complex constellation of textual, inter-textual, and extra-textual attributes for an audience. While genre is invoked in rhetorically localized instances, the meta-generic structures that guide and inform genrefication are constituted by much broader social actions.

But isn't there an inconsistency here? If film genre only exists in its expression, and that expression only exists in other rhetorical genres, then the rhetorical genres would appear not to take up but to *create* film genres. Technically, we might say that film genres are produced by the uptake of meta-genre into rhetorical genre when applied to a concrete film. Indeed, "novel" is itself a literary meta-genre, one which frames works of literature under various rhetorical conditions.<sup>114</sup> In any case, we have to consider not only my theoretical model of genre-*qua*-genrefication but also how genres are popularly understood and used by critics—what users think genres are when they use them. The presupposition of an independent existence of film genres is a powerful rhetorical tool insofar as it gives normative, genrefying criticism the appearance of objective description. More generally, precise demarcations are difficult here, since one of the goals of this project is to untangle the various interpretive and communicative

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<sup>114</sup>Consider my remarks from Chapter 2 on Beebe and Jameson and whether "bestseller" counts as a genre (n10). In the Conclusion I will discuss the extension of this model to literature and other arts, as well as how one distinguishes between artistic and rhetorical genres.

functions that have been attributed to genre. So exactly how and where and when meta-genre transforms into genre in a given instance can be difficult to generalize.

Genre, from a theoretical perspective, cannot be understood apart from its networks of users and use. In critical practice, however, the uptake of a film genre into the rhetorical genre of “film review” or “journal article” arrests generic discursivity and treats genre as if it were a static, stable, and neutral class of texts. Typically, genre serves as a organizing principle, but its apparent, momentary stability is produced by the very performative discourse that relies on it for organizational clarity and argumentative authority. As we shall see later in the chapter, Netflix’s digital RS first reduces film genre to meta-tag before combining it with other attributes to generate micro-genres in the process of taking them up into the rhetorical genre of “recommendation.”

### Rhetorical Genre, Film Criticism, and Historiography

With these concepts from RGS in mind, we can now return briefly to the our use cases from the previous chapters. Klein’s book, Lowenstein’s article, Edelstein’s review, Boyle and Garland’s interview, and the Reddit thread are all examples of writing within a rhetorical genre. I selected each of them to illustrate a specific point for the chapter each appears in, but they also could be analyzed on their own terms *qua* generic writing. However, none of these chapters is a proper case study. Each of these examples would require at least an article-length inquiry into their antecedents, audiences, purposes, and uptakes. Instead, I want to indicate some directions that inquiry into the rhetorical genre of an example might take and to show how we can get a

more concrete sense of film genrefication by incorporating consideration of the rhetorical genres through which that genrefication is expressed.

For example, in comparing Lowenstein and Edelstein, I stressed the rhetorical dimensions of their arguments without specifying that these were characteristic of the genres in which they are writing. Their respective register, audience, and purpose are marked as distinct and hence their conceptions of “torture porn” as a filmic genre (or not) vary as well. In the case of Lowenstein, I showed how his weaker argument that the label “torture porn” is not useful for scholars explicitly invokes his audience as a user group, while his method of textual analysis— itself an uptake—and his citation of film historians Tom Gunning and Mary Ann Doane more obliquely circumscribes the community of scholars whose repertoires might include close readings and silent film histories and the peer-reviewed articles that take them up.

The major issue arises from Lowenstein’s uptake of Edelstein’s popular-press review into an academic argument. Edelstein has neither the space nor the reading audience that would allow him to form an argument like Lowenstein’s, with its lengthy textual analysis, semi-discrete subsections, and referential and discursive footnotes. Edelstein’s audience likely could not access the kind of paywall-blocked journals Lowenstein cites anyway. Most importantly, the roles of rhetor and audience are radically different in each case and this is a function of the rhetorical genres and the social purposes they serve. Lowenstein writes for an audience of “peers,” fellow scholars who might conceivably have been called upon to assess his research, analysis, reasoning, and conclusions, and whom Lowenstein is expected to try to persuade through conventional academic appeals to *logos*.

Edelstein, on the other hand, writes from the position of a film critic, who, like an art critic, is tasked with arbitrating aesthetic and moral taste for a general audience of non-specialists. Even in a middlebrow publication aimed at an educated audience—or perhaps especially in such a publication—Edelstein is expected to position himself as a trusted authority on film and its cultural relevance. Yet the film review-*cum*-essay exceeds the conventional subject matter of the former, and, rather than rely on pathetic indignation and repulsion (like Siskel and Ebert do), Edelstein nods to essayists and academics. These intertextual uptakes may not be a part of his whole audience’s repertoire, but the generic markers of Clover’s book and Self’s essay carry a cultural weight that helps to shore up Edelstein’s ethos.

In the final use case, we will explore the uptake of film genres into industrial rhetorical genres. We have already seen in past chapters’ examples of how industrial exigences shape generic frameworks. In the 1950s, distributors pitched regenrefication of back-catalogue gothic horror titles to exhibitors, using promotional materials to reframe *Dracula* or *The Wolf Man* as science fiction in order to capitalize on the sci-fi trend (Altman 78-9). The orientation of the industry toward genre has traditionally been much more pragmatic (in the non-technical sense) than either academic or fan discourses; distributors are more concerned with framing the product for the audience’s tastes than with establishing and enforcing strict, logical criteria of categorization (Gunning 55). Within a studio user community, filmic organizing principles reflected the exigences of film production, and were expressed through a repertoire of rhetorical genres that defined the executive community and the studio hierarchy: memos, reports, and weekly or bi-weekly “recapitulations” (Schatz 45).

These rhetorical genres, internal to the studio, reveal an organizational strategy that unsurprisingly centered on production status and star. Since stars were highly-paid studio

employees in the classical era, they represented a financial as well as textual dimension of the production, and these practical concerns governed the standardized classification and framing of films among the various internal studio documents (Schatz 46). While Schatz uses these documents to get a “freeze-frame” of classical and especially pre-sound studio organization for historical insights, for our purposes it is enough to note that a set of rhetorical genres circulating among and defining a select user group constituted and regularly took up its own system of filmic genres keyed to the purposes and activities of that user group. For MGM executives in the 1920s, as expressed through internal rhetorical genres, “Lon Chaney,” “Norma Shearer,” and “Lillian Gish” were not only stars but (meta)genres of films unto themselves, complete with plot structure, emotional tone, and budget range (Schatz 40-1). The star-vehicle labels are themselves genres, not only because they order other intra- and intertextual relations, like Foucault’s author function, but because they are employed by a user group in social activities, and they are constituted via rhetorical genres. This is not to say that “Norma Shearer” was a genre for popular pre-sound audiences, or at least it likely wasn’t meaningful for those audiences in the same way it was for MGM producers, and it’s certainly not a genre for most 21st century audiences.

There are two important points to take away here. First is the observation, relevant to genre theory, that industrial discourse is less precious about filmic genres, especially non-public discourse. Since planning, producing, distributing, and exhibiting films are, on the whole, rather higher-stakes enterprises than watching or writing about them, industrial framing needs to be more sensitive and responsive to localized and variable rhetorical conditions. The processes of production, distribution, and promotion present a number of recurring exigences that institute and iterate the rhetorical genres through which particular pragmatic framings are expressed. Though Schatz and Altman concentrate primarily on studio-era practices, this principle extends

to digital-era streaming services, as we shall see in the next section. The second point is the significance of recapitulations *qua* rhetorical genre. For Schatz, such documents serve as windows into the past and a corporate structure. From the twin perspectives of radical constructivism and rhetorical genre theory, documents like recapitulations are more than passive evidence. Historians construct the past through the adaptive schemas constituted by documents like memos. At the same time, a rhetorical methodology directs us to consider how the documents constructed the corporate structure itself; the production, circulation, and reception of documents like recapitulations performatively reconstitutes its executive user group in service of the activities and purposes that concern them. Recapitulations, understood as a genre, point further to sets, repertoires, registers, user groups, purposes, and activities.

### Netflix and Film Genre Uptake

In early 2014 an *Atlantic* article began circulating through the blogosphere and conventional news media platforms. A contributor had determined that Netflix, the premiere movie distributor and upstart television (and soon film) producer, had generated over 76,000 genres of film and television shows. The number was far beyond any familiar brick-and-mortar video store classifications, and it challenged commenters to name anywhere near that many genres.

As it turns out, the number refers to “alt-genres” or “microgenres,” specific combinations of elements from a variety of movies and shows that are designed to match the personalized tastes of Netflix subscribers. In this light the number now makes more sense, and it is still impressive, but it challenges us to consider exactly how Netflix defines those genres and what

the implications might be for film genre theory. Classical genre theory designations that focused on gangster pictures, musicals, or the woman's film overlapped very little with the aisles in Blockbuster labelled "Drama," "Family," or "Special Interest," or, for that matter, with industrial genres like "Lillian Gish" and "views of notable persons."<sup>115</sup> They share little consistent criteria for determining the labels in the first place; they just served as given categories. This isn't an insurmountable practical problem, however. We recognize different rhetorical situations, and can interpret rhetorical framings accordingly. If nothing else, the numbers of actual and potential film genres and video-store classifications are at least manageable. 76,000 genres seems unworkable analytically and unlikely to catch on in public use. So who uses that many microgenres and under what conditions?

### *Netflix's Recommender System*

Founded in 1997 as a web-based movie rental service, Netflix began shipping DVDs to customers for a flat monthly subscription rate in 1999. By 2007, Netflix had begun video on-demand (VOD) streaming of films and television shows as part of its service. (Netflix Media Center "Company Overview"). The benefits of instant access and platform mobility of VOD was counterbalanced by small number of videos available to stream relative to Netflix's DVD catalog<sup>116</sup>. The company's streaming library grew, however, and in 2000 Netflix introduced Cinematch, a collaborative filtering recommender system (RS) that was designed to suggest

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<sup>115</sup> See Schatz pp. 40-1 and Gunning pp. 54-4.

<sup>116</sup> Though updated concrete numbers are hard to come by, in 2008 Clive Thompson of *The New York Times* reported a total library of 100,000 titles, compared to the 4078 film titles available for VOD, as estimated by the website *InstantWatcher* at the time of this writing. For a more thorough history and analysis of Netflix beyond its RSs, see McDonald.

content to viewers. Cinematch functioned by soliciting active feedback from users, asking them to rate the titles they had rented by number of stars (1-5). These numbers were combined with those of viewers with similar viewing histories to predict a given viewer's rating of a recommended film. This system is comparable to the RSs of web retailers like Amazon, which suggest products to a user based on what "Customers Also Bought"—e.g., if customers A and B both bought product X, and customer A also bought product Y, then the collaborative filtering system will suggest product Y to customer B (Cohn 6). When this kind of consumer behavior is multiplied by hundreds of thousands or even millions of times, then the RS is capable of identifying patterns and predicting some customer preferences, which has made collaborative filtering the most popular and widely used technique among recommender systems (Ricci et al. 12).<sup>117</sup>

Dissatisfied with Cinematch's accuracy, Netflix announced the Netflix Prize in 2006: \$1 million to be awarded to the team that improved the system's accuracy by 10%.<sup>118</sup> The winning team, BellKor's Pragmatic Chaos, used a larger number of collaborative filtering algorithms to reach the modest improvement goal in 2009. In the meantime, however, Netflix had been developing a new RS (Cohn 121).<sup>119</sup> Netflix VP of Product Todd Yellin and a team of engineers began work on a new RS that would complement the older Cinematch model (Madrigal "How

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<sup>117</sup> For an overview of collaborative filtering specifically and recommender systems generally, see Ricci et al.

<sup>118</sup> To facilitate the research teams, Netflix released a large amount of user data that had been "anonymized." Two researchers discovered that the data encryption was faulty, and Netflix had inadvertently, perhaps negligently, publicized private user data that included viewing material such as LGBT-related films or TV shows, which could be potentially compromising for users who were not out. See Cohn ch. 2; Hallinan and Striphas pp. 9-11; and Petruska and Vanderhoef.

<sup>119</sup> For a discussion of the Netflix Prize as a cultural phenomenon, see Hallinan and Striphas. For industrial perspectives on the Netflix prize, see Amatriain and Basilico "NR" and "RSI" pp. 388-90. For consideration of the Netflix Prize relative to the company's Big Data practices and content production, see Bellanova and González Fuster, esp. 238-241.

Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood.”). While Cinematch, as a collaborative filtering algorithm system, based its recommendations on comparing explicit viewer feedback, Netflix’s newer content-filtering algorithms would generate recommendations based on similarities between the titles themselves (Cohn 6). A technique called singular value decomposition (SVD), borrowed from linear algebra, allows an algorithm to track recurrent terms in a large set of data.<sup>120</sup> Some Netflix Prize teams were working along these lines, focusing on stars, sequels and remakes, or qualitative data drawn from Wikipedia or other sources (Cohn 120-1; Hallinan and Striphas 7-9; Thompson).

Yellin and his team sought to design a system that would take advantage of the data-gathering capabilities of the growing streaming service and more precisely personalize title recommendations to Netflix’s subscribers. Where Cinematch could tell what DVD titles a customer had rented, there was no way of knowing how much of the film or show s/he had watched—or whether s/he had watched it at all—and so feedback was completely dependent on the optional rating system. In addition to users’ ratings, queues, and search queries, the streaming interface allowed Netflix to gather *play data* about what titles a particular user selected, previewed or screened partially, or watched all the way through and how many times (Amatriain and Basilico “Recommender Systems in Industry” 398).<sup>121</sup> This growing pool of data was complemented by a turn toward content and a complex method of indexing textual elements of the titles.

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<sup>120</sup> For a fuller but accessible description of how SVD works, see Hallinan and Striphas pp. 7-8.

<sup>121</sup> Henceforth, “RSI”.

In June of 2012, Netflix announced its new system via its *Tech Blog*, describing the technical side of the RS and explaining the advantages it had over Cinematch (Amatriain and Basilico “Netflix Recommendations: Beyond the 5 Stars”).<sup>122</sup> With the newer personalization system, Netflix sought to match its massive demographic and behavioral data on its customers to a meticulous catalogue of textual data, thus developing a precise taste profile that relies more on customer viewing behavior than on customer ratings.<sup>123</sup> In other words, Netflix aimed to be able to say exactly what textual elements appealed to a particular customer by cataloguing and cross-referencing the titles s/he had watched and comparing their textual similarities. This involved coupling SVD with a rigorous process of tagging titles’ characteristics carried out by contracted screeners who are “responsible for watching and analyzing movies and TV series” and who “deconstruct the movies and shows and describe them using objective microtags” (“Brazilian Tagger”).

In September of 2012, an *LA Times* piece profiled a tagger and provided a look at the human side. Netflix contracts out about forty taggers, typically with some background in film studies or production. A job posting on Netflix’s company page describes the tagging position and is worth quoting at length:

Successful applicants will be responsible for watching and analyzing movies and TV series that will be streaming on Netflix in the future. The tagger will deconstruct the

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<sup>122</sup> Henceforth, “NR”.

<sup>123</sup> This textual data can be broken down into two further categories. The first is the ostensibly objective *metadata*, such as “synopsis, genres, actors, directors, subtitles, parental rating, and user reviews.” The second is *tag data*, or the “human-provided annotations on each video that describe aspects such as mood (e.g. witty, dark, goofy), qualities (e.g. critically-acclaimed, visually-striking, classic), and storyline (e.g. marriage, time travel, talking animals)” (Amatriain and Basilico “RSI” 398). The theoretical implications of this distinction will be discussed shortly.

movies and shows and describe them using objective microtags. This "tagging process" is the first stage of the Netflix recommendation system and works in concert with advanced algorithms that generate highly personalized suggestions for every one of Netflix's nearly 60 million members, offering them an individualized set of titles matching their tastes [...] The role will offer flexible hours working from home and would suit those with a passion for movies and TV series, as evidenced by a degree in film or film history and/or experience directing, screening writing or filmmaking. Applicants with analysis experience (e.g. as a critic or work in development) would also be well suited. ("Brazilian Tagger")<sup>124</sup>

We will return to some of the implications of this role shortly, so note the way this is framed: "objective microtags," "highly personalized suggestions" and "individualized set of titles matching their tastes," and the requirement to have a "degree in film or film history" or formal "analysis experience." For now, I want to emphasize how Netflix 1) treats textual elements as independent, "objective" phenomena; 2) frames its relationship rhetorically, i.e. as appealing to (but not as *constructing*) its customers' personal tastes; and 3) incorporates the traditional authority of institutional discourses via formal film studies or industrial experience.

The taggers view titles and assess them qualitatively along set parameters, describing the film not only in terms of its genre or country of origin, but also its degree of gore or romance and

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<sup>124</sup> The posting also mentions some duties specific to the Brazilian position: "Other responsibilities may also include acting as a Brazilian cultural consultant, highlighting cultural specificities and taste preferences" (ibid.) The extent to which international taggers are expected to speak for their cultures merits further study which is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this posting does highlight the cultural and (therefore) ideological authority granted all taggers under the Netflix apparatus, a point I will attend to below.

with adjectives such as “quirky,” “dark,” or “cerebral” (Fritz). Figure 1 below shows a screenshot of Madrigal’s crowd-sourced microtag spreadsheet.<sup>125</sup>

Region	Adjectives (Popularity)	Genre	Descriptors	Area	Time Period	Content Areas	Ages	Etc	
1	Region	Adjectives (Popularity)	Genre	Descriptors	Area	Time Period	Content Areas	Ages	Etc
2	British	Romantic	Movies	Based on Real Life	Set in Europe	From the 1960s About Marriage	For Kids	With a Strong Female Lead	
3	French	Classic	Dramas	Based on Books	Set in Asia	From the 1970s About Royalty	For Ages 8 to 10	For Hopeless Romantics	
4	Asian	Dark	Comedies	Based on a Book	Set in Ancient Times	From the 1960s About Parenthood	For Ages 8 to 12		
5	French	Critically Acclaimed	Action Movies	Based on Children's Books	Set in Australia/NZ	From the 1950s About Reunited Lovers	For Ages 11 to 14		
6	Italian	Suspenseful	Thrillers	Based on Classic Literature	Set in the Victorian Era	From the 1940s About Fame	For Ages 5 to 7		
7	Spanish	Gritty	Fantasy Movies	Based on Contemporary Literature	Set in the Middle East	From the 1930s About Couples	For Ages 0 to 2		
8	German	Independent	Sci-Fi Movies		Set in India	From the 1960s About Cats	For Ages 2 to 4		
9	Japanese	Visually Striking	Documentaries		Set in Latin America	From the 1920s About Cats & Dogs	For Ages 0 to 4		
10	Canadian	Violent	Period Pieces		Set in Biblical Times	From the 1910s About Horses			
11	Chinese	Feel-Good	Musicals		Set in Prehistoric Times	About Art & Design			
12	European	Emotional	Mysteries		Set in the Edwardian Era	About Friendship			
13	Scandinavian	Cerebral	Animation		Set in Africa	About Food			
14	Mexican	Goofy	Westerns			About Trucks, Trains, & About September 11			
15	Indian	Witty	Satires						
16	Portuguese	Biographical	Fairy Tale						
17	Russian	Oscar-Winning	Slasher						
18	Nordic	Scary	Mockumentary						
19	Southeast Asian	Understated	Horror						
20	Swedish	Political							
21	Thai	Military							
22	Norwegian	Gay & Lesbian							
23	Filipino	Gory							
24	Polish	Mind-Bending							
25	Iranian	Sentimental							

Figure 1 (Madrigal "Netflix-Matrix")

A film school graduate himself, Yellin and his team composed the so-called Netflix Quantum Theory document, a 36-page manual that includes over 1,000 microtags (Fritz). As a result, the genre options range from “familiar high-level categories like ‘Comedies’ and ‘Dramas’ to highly tailored slices such as ‘Imaginative Time Travel Movies from the 1980s’” (Amatriain and Basilico “NR”). While this textual precision—along with the streaming interface—increased

<sup>125</sup> It should be noted that this image is only a partial representation. First, the screenshot cut off both the “Roles” column, which includes tags such as “Starring” or “Directed by,” as well as 122 of the 147 rows of the “Adjectives” column, which includes tags such as “Race Against Time,” “Sexual Awakening,” “Chilling,” and “Jazz Greats.” Second, Madrigal composed this spreadsheet as a shared document, in which Netflix users added new tags as they encountered them. Hence, neither my screengrab here nor the spreadsheet itself should be taken as an exhaustive list of Netflix’s tags, but is meant to provide examples of the paradigmatic range of tags and the variations possible in their syntactic arrangement. For the full spreadsheet, see Madrigal “Netflix-Matrix”.

Netflix's recommendation rate from 60% in 2008 (Thompson) to 75% in 2012 (Fritz),<sup>126</sup> it has also reimagined of the notion of genre in a counterintuitive but not unprecedented way.

### *Netflix and Filmic Genres*

By breaking films down to their “quanta” and then using an algorithm to manage them as metadata and tag data, Netflix has developed what they refer to as “microgenres,” those appellations that range in specificity from “Horror” to “Scary Cult Mad-Scientist Movies from the 1970s.” In the aforementioned *Atlantic* piece, journalist Alexis Madrigal, working with media scholar Ian Bogost, determined that Netflix had generated a possible 76,897 of these unique combinations of microtags, or microgenres. (“How Netflix”). The microtags are arranged according to a specific syntax:

*Region + Adjectives + Noun Genre + Based On... + Set In... + From the... + About... + For Age X to Y*

They are also trimmed to no more than four descriptors. Some microtags are scalar: all films are labelled “romantic” on a scale. Some are generated by the RS algorithm as a function of certain combinations: “feel-good” is triggered by a combination of microtags, most importantly “happy ending” (Madrigal “How Netflix”). The 1,000+ microtags and nearly 77,000 microgenres, when combined with constant data-gathering from the nearly 60 million Netflix users, add up to an immense feat of information management.

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<sup>126</sup> The “recommendation rate” represents the ratio of movies viewed based on RS recommendations as opposed to those a viewer selects on her own. The higher number can be partially attributed to the user’s homepage, on which every visible title is a recommended and ranked title, even though the scrolling action gives the impression that one is browsing a neutral catalog (Amatriain and Basilico, “NR”).

Netflix's streaming business model demands the flexibility to configure and reconfigure microtags according to a given user's taste profile, which itself is also being reconfigured depending on what s/he chooses to watch (more about that in a moment). We might think of these these configurations of microtags as "systems" that appear and disappear against a background of "noise" —i.e., non-categories, non-systems that constitute categories and systems negatively and from without (Beebe 17).<sup>127</sup> Consequently, we have to understand that neither the multi-term microgenres nor the texts themselves have any sense of integrity or permanence. This might be best illustrated by a negative example. In arguing that Netflix constructs rather than describes user's tastes, E.E. Lawrence proposes the following hypothetical:

Confirmation bias may well play an essential role here in shoring up the user's sense that Netflix has successfully identified their actual preferences rather than made an argument inferring certain preferences. For example, if I watch and enjoy *Dog Day Afternoon* as a token of the altgenre "Visually-striking Crime Movies from the 1970s," I am apt to assume that Netflix got it right: visually-striking '70s crime movies are in fact the kind of thing I enjoy for the reasons Netflix presented to me at the outset. Yet, regardless of how much I enjoyed the film, Netflix's recommendation-argument still might not be sound because its diagnostic premise (i.e., that I watch certain movies because they share these specific features) could still be inaccurate. Which is to say, I might have actually enjoyed any number of different things about *Dog Day Afternoon*. Perhaps the rawness of the dialogue or the hopelessness of the protagonist's downward spiral appealed to me most. It

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<sup>127</sup> For a discussion noise and literary canonicity and the complications of irony, see Chambers.

is therefore conceivable that a recommendation can actually obscure my own latent aesthetic justification. (Lawrence 360)

The two related problems here are that 1) Lawrence isolates their example from past viewing behavior, and 2) they assume altgenres/microgenres pre-exist the rhetorical moment of recommendation rather than being ad hoc configurations of textual attributes (tags). First, unless a user specifically searched for and watched only *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975, dir. Sidney Lumet), with no prior viewing activity, then the film was already a recommendation built on previous activity and ratings. Second, the film does not only belong to “Visually-striking Crime Movies from the 1970s,” but also each of those terms separately, as well as to “Award-Winning,” “Critically Acclaimed,” and “Starring Al Pacino,” among other microgeneric terms. It is as likely that Lawrence was recommended the film because they enjoyed *Dead Poets Society* (1989, dir. Peter Weir; another Best Original Screenplay winner), *The Big Lebowski* (1998, dir. Joel Coen; also critically acclaimed), or *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997, dir. Taylor Hackford, also starring Al Pacino) as it is that they watched *The Godfather* (1972, dir. Francis Ford Coppola) or *Chinatown* (1974, dir. Roman Polanski) or *The French Connection* (1971, dir. William Friedkin). So, while Lawrence may be right that there is a confirmation bias at work in this case, they underestimate the granular degree of curation that Netflix’s RS affords by decomposing the text into its component attributes and reconfiguring it

Netflix constantly reconfigures boundaries between microgenres and the noise of its total catalogue using microtags as axes. Any single film could belong to multiple microgenres, because its microtags are (infinitely?) reconfigurable. The film appears in only one microgenre at a time and at the moment of configuration, that is, at the moment that microgenre is taken up into

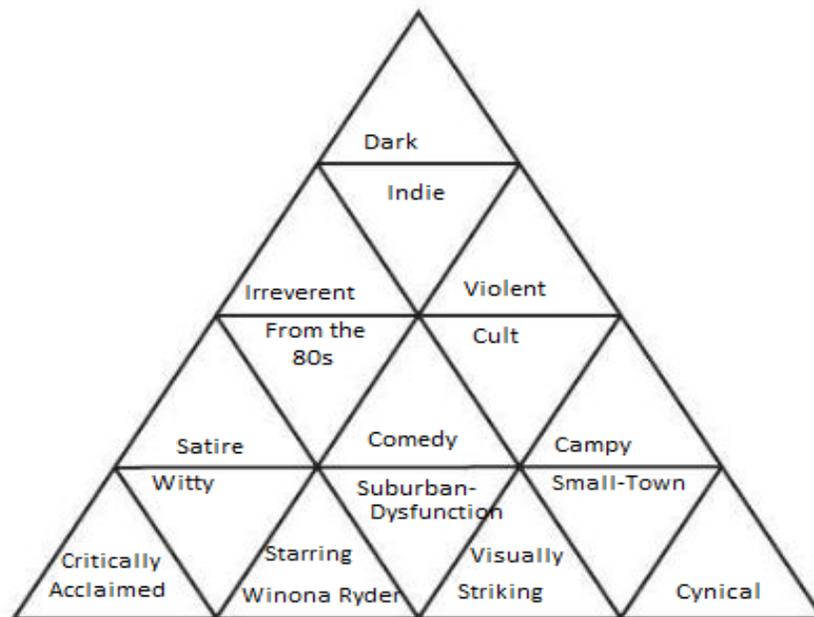
the genre of recommendation. For example, under “Details,” *Heathers* (1989, dir. Michael Lehmann) is listed with the following genres:

Teen Movies  
 Critically-Acclaimed Movies  
 Comedies  
 Dark Comedies

For the sake of illustration we might also imagine that, in addition to being ‘From the 1980s’ and ‘Starring Winona Ryder/Christian Slater,’ it is probably tagged by the following adjectives (Madrigal “Netflix-Matrix”):

“High School”  
 “Cynical”  
 “Dark”  
 “Irreverent”  
 “Witty”  
 “Violent”  
 “Campy”  
 “Satire”  
 “With a strong female lead”  
 “Suburban-Dysfunction”  
 “Small Town”

Any combination of these microtags—including the filmic genres—that obeyed the microgenre syntax would be taken up into the recommendation. The remaining films and microtags would temporarily be relationally constituted as noise. A visual example might help illustrate the point.



Above I have taken a well-known visual puzzle and added microtags to each small triangle. By staring at the triangle, one can see the mid-size configurations of smallest triangles that compose it. By looking at four of the smallest triangles in the proper configuration, one can make out a mid-sized triangle that also provides a four-term microgenre, such as *suburban-dysfunction cult comedy from the 80s* or a *critically-acclaimed witty satire starring Winona Ryder*. However, one has to concentrate on the present configuration and, as a result, the other triangle/tags recede into the background as noise. With a slight shift in focus, the first microgenre triangle disappears and a new configuration emerges.

This illustration is of course inadequate to capture how all the possible microtags associated with a film interact with one another (e.g., a “cynical independent comedy” is not possible in this rough model), but it is intended to show how microgenres and microtags interact as systems and noise, respectively, and how they reconfigure in various ways to describe the

same text. Hence, Netflix's RS reconfigures its microgenres by evacuating filmic genres of their discursivity and by dispersing textual attributes among microtags, thus treating filmic genres as primary genres and simple, given data instead of complex cultural and textual relationships, while always already positioning other texts and possible genres as excluded noise. This gives the RS the versatility not only to match a user and a text, but also a text to multiple users. For example, if Person A likes witty teen comedies like, say, *Clueless* (1995, dir. Amy Heckerling), Person B likes violent satires from the 1980s like *Robocop* (1987, dir. Paul Verhoeven), and Person C likes critically acclaimed cult movies starring Winona Ryder like *Beetlejuice* (1988, dir. Tim Burton), Netflix might recommend *Heathers* to all three of them. This is the essence of Netflix's personalization RS, and while numerous media scholars have criticized the company, the significance of its RS for genre has not been fully explored.

First and foremost, Netflix's gathering and use of customer data has been criticized on ideological terms. Jonathan Alan Cohn, for instance, argues that Netflix, along with other RS-driven web technologies participate in "culture industries of choice" that "produce standardized shopping choices and life decisions in the form of recommendations that generally uphold the status quo and steer mass culture toward greater conformity" (2). Cohn argues that, despite an apparent ideological neutrality, RSs in general frame choice as burdensome and conformity as freedom.<sup>128</sup> Netflix's and other web-based companies' "digital technologies use guided choices to shape user behavior" and "actively preclude the formation of actual communities" (8). While indulging in the "rhetoric" of free choice, these companies employ technologies that prompt not blind consumption, but specific patterns of consumption, such that "algorithmically-determined

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. the *Recommender Systems Handbook*: "RSs are primarily directed toward individuals who lack the sufficient personal experience or competence in order to evaluate the potentially overwhelming number of alternative items that a website, for example, may offer" (Ricci et al. 1).

recommendations [...] replace free choice as the primary architect of contemporary subjectivity” (9).<sup>129</sup> Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas add that the discourse around the Netflix Prize points to an emerging new definition of culture itself. “Algorithmic culture” entails not only the question of “what happens when engineers—or their algorithms—become important arbiters of culture, much like art, film, and literary critics?” (Hallinan and Striphas 15). It furthermore points to the growing use of “computational processes to sort, classify, and hierarchize people, places, objects, and ideas, and also habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relation to those processes” (Hallinan and Striphas 3). Rocco Bellanova and Gloria González Fuster have imagined digital data as “*translations* of people, things, behaviors, and relations into information that can be stored, computed, and visualized by computers” (231). These translations are a second step in a system of surveillance; after data is gathered and translated (a process that is not automatic or neutral, but which requires extensive but largely invisible labor), it is mobilized toward some end. The narrative content of Netflix’s original programming, specifically *House of Cards* (2013-present), normalizes the very kind of digital surveillance that Netflix itself employs (234-8).

Cohn, Hallinan and Striphas, and Bellanova and González Fuster contribute important insights to our current issue, but they have their limits. For example, none of the three articles examines Netflix’s current RS and its tagging process. Cohn only addresses Cinematch, the collaborative filtering algorithm which was both opaque and based on a sort of mass popularity/mass conformity logic. Hence Cohn does not address the separate set of issues raised by the *personalization* of Netflix’s recommendations, which the company sees as a valuable

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<sup>129</sup> Cohn’s broader interests lie in how culture industries of choice participate in neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies in general, as part of an interpellative, regulatory matrix of digital discourses. See Cohn, especially Introduction and Ch. 2.

feature not offered by popularity-based RSs (Amatriain and Basilico “RSI” 394). Netflix’s current personalization systems, which do also employ collaborative filtering, lean heavily on genre—and an idiosyncratic understanding of genre at that—as part of a content-filtering algorithm. While Hallinan and Striphas do look to the SVD systems that Netflix has ultimately adopted, they do not discuss Netflix’s tagging operations and the human activities involved in genrefication. For Bellanova and González Fuster, the quantitative intensification of the circulation of data amounts to a

qualitative shift, precisely in asserting and strengthening its circularity [which, in turn] affects content design—users are surveilled to know what they might want, so it can be reproduced—and the purposes of such tailoring: users are to be given what they want, so they might continue to be under surveillance, to make sure what they want can be produced. (240)

Neither pair of writers considers the possibility that industrial and cultural discourses are less appropriated by engineers, or obviated by computers, so much as they are intensified and disseminated in an unprecedented manner. While I will not address Netflix’s role as content producer here, I will note that the process of gathering audience data to shape production decisions is, in principle, not new. Producers have always pored over box office returns or test audience responses to gauge a film’s popularity and, importantly, they also speculated which were the particular attributes—such as star, setting, or structure—that appealed most to audiences and could be incorporated into future productions.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> This is Altman’s “Producer’s Game,” as I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. See Altman 39-42.

*Limits of Pragmatic Genre Theory*

Netflix's RS presents several challenges to Altman's model of pragmatic genre theory. Note first, however, that the idea of shifting a film's genre to suit a given situation is not what is new. Altman and Gunning have shown this in historical studies, and I have argued that rhetorical contingency is inherent in genre. Moreover, Netflix's expansive digital catalogue, algorithmic sorting, and streaming interface do not per se represent a radical break from genre as we know it. Indeed, Yellin's background in academic film studies and the company's requirement that its taggers have film studies or production experience suggest that the site is not run by coders unfamiliar with the conventions and practices of film scholarship and criticism. At issue, rather, is how the nature of film genre changes via its uptake into the "digital recommendation" rhetorical genre. How and to what extent Netflix perpetuates conventional film industry practices is complicated considerably given the company's roles as producer, distributor, and exhibitor of film and television content. Nevertheless, because its RS operates in a manner structurally analogous to earlier promotional models—that is, via rhetorical genres—how films are genrefied is different less in kind than in degree. However, the algorithmic complexity of translation of film genre to data and the reconfiguration of that data to suit addressable users requires some retooling of pragmatic genre approaches.

One reason that Altman's theory is inadequate to explain Netflix's RS and microgenres is that it takes up and responds to genre histories and theories that took classical Hollywood as its object of study. Altman's model is based on observations of historical industrial discourses and the dynamic of imitation and genrefication as an industry- and culture-wide phenomenon. Prior to direct-to-video, and especially during the Code era, the studios' productions and promotions aimed broadly, via mass media, hoping to capture a widest possible audience. Netflix, by

contrast, is a single entity with a one-on-one relationship with its consumers. Neither uses genre in the rigid way traditionally employed by critics, scholars, and fans, but the strategies for stabilizing genre by these different entities are distinct and operate according to the affordances of the rhetorical genres in their set.

Altman notes that, traditionally, major studio film producers have had no interest in associating their products with a particular genre (57). The first reason for this is that the notion of genre suggests imitation and imitability; here, genre works contrary to product differentiation. A second reason is that promotion and exhibition technologies were such that virtually every film and every poster was for a general audience. Studios aimed to sell as many tickets as possible and worked to appeal to varying tastes and demographics; explicit invocation of a genre might alienate some potential viewers. Altman shows that classical-era film posters avoided direct reference to genre, instead exploiting the rhetorical genre's multimodal multivocality to suggest or allude to multiple film genres simultaneously in one paratext. Instead of invoking one genre explicitly, posters would use imagery and copy that evoked multiple genres, thus targeting fans of many separate genres without alienating fans of others.<sup>131</sup>

Netflix, by contrast, uses other attributes beyond received genres to triangulate or whittle down the relevant attributes for a given fan, translating genre to data. The first challenge to pragmatic genre theory, then, is that Netflix in a sense evacuates genres of their discursivity in order to reduce them to quanta. Recall that one of the variable paradigms in the microgenre syntax is simply "genre,"<sup>132</sup> or, as Madrigal puts it, "Noun Genre" ("How Netflix"). Where

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<sup>131</sup> See Altman 54-62.

<sup>132</sup> See column B in "Netflix-Matrix" above.

classical genre theory may not be able to account for, say, “Family-Friendly Horror Movies”—a possible microgenre—the challenge for a discursive genre theory is that “Horror” here is treated as a given. Indeed, Netflix includes *genre* among the ostensibly self-evident or uncomplicated attributes that go into metadata, along with “actors, directors, subtitles, parental rating, and user reviews.” (Amatriain and Basilico “RSI” 398). By reducing traditional genre terms to equal footing with the descriptors of a particular film, the microgenre structure elides the discursive complexity of the genre.

Consider our running example of the horror film and the thicket of meanings and uses that have constituted it. We have already looked at torture porn, slashers, and zombie movies, but even the broader class is unstable. Its historical definitions are murky, and its early, eventually canonical films often weren’t considered “horror films” at the time (usually because the genre didn’t yet exist).<sup>133</sup> The most systematic attempts to define the genre formally have proven controversial among scholars.<sup>134</sup> Symptomatic readings have for decades framed the genre,<sup>135</sup> its so-called subgenres (e.g. slasher or zombie films)<sup>136</sup>, certain periods,<sup>137</sup> or style of aesthetic strategies<sup>138</sup> in terms of progressive or reactionary cultural politics, gender performance, historical trauma, and so forth. Yet we lose even this limited range of scholarly definitions and its array of possible meanings in the Netflix system. The RS elides the discursivity and dialogic richness of the contested filmic genre “horror” when its textual attributes are 1) exteriorized in

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<sup>133</sup> See Skal, ch. 1 and 2; and Worland, ch. 1 and 2.

<sup>134</sup> See Carroll’s *Philosophy of Horror* and “Horror and Humor” for the most notorious attempts to systematize the genre; for examples and discussion of objections to Carroll’s formulation, see Hills (“An Event-Based Definition of Art-Horror”), Schneider (“Toward an Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror”), Smuts, and Solomon.

<sup>135</sup> See Wood, e.g.

<sup>136</sup> See Clover and Dendle, e.g.

<sup>137</sup> See Brophy, Hantke, and Pinedo, e.g.

<sup>138</sup> See Lowenstein (“Living Dead”) and L. Williams, e.g.

the adjectival descriptions and 2) put on the same footing with the genre label itself. The microgenre paradigms prescribe content, tone, and meaning in a manner that evacuates the genre as a site of semiosis and dynamic, transtextual discursivity.

The second, related challenge that microgenres pose to pragmatic genre theory is that Netflix presents genres as static and not in-process. Just as treating genres as quanta elides their discursive complexity, it also arrests their historical dynamism. Translation calcifies genre. Altman demonstrates that the endless variations on popular cycles are what generate textual similarities and new genres. This process occurs over time and as a result of conflicting institutional discourses. Consider the following illustration, adapted from Altman (67).

1. [→]Drama (noun 1) (Industry Genre)
2.           →Comic Drama (adj.1 + noun 1) (Proprietary Cycle)
3.                   →Comedy (noun 2) (Genre)
4.                           →Romantic Comedy (adj. 2 + noun 2) (Cycle...)
5.                                   →Romance (noun 3)
6.   →Musical Romance (adj. 3 + noun 3)
7.   →Musical (noun 4)

At each even-numbered step, an adjective indicates a producer's proprietary variation on an industry genre, or a cycle. By the following odd-numbered step, the number of imitations—and the industrial and critical discourses surrounding those texts—have stripped the proprietary distinctions. The previous adjective has become substantized as a noun and genre in its own right. This is particularly evident in the terms “musical” and “western,” which retain their

adjectival form. This diagram is not meant to indicate that “drama” appeared *ex nihilo*, nor that other forms of comedy never developed. A much more elaborate chart would be needed to map a full history of genre-as-process. The point here is that a taken-for-granted genre like the musical was and continues to be enmeshed in a long-term discursive process, the traces of which are evident in the current and historical genre designations.

The challenge here is that Netflix implements an adjective-noun form that is synchronic or, at least, parasynchronic—that is, an institutionally stabilized synchronicity. In a sense, this is an issue of scope. Altman accounts for the ways in which multivocal discourses employ genres at different points of time from different institutional positions toward different ends, and there is a sort of organic if not linear quality to the processes of genrefication and regenrefication. What he doesn’t account for, however, is the genrefying practices of one massive and influential corporate entity interested less in the success or failure of one particular film than in the continued patronage of its service. In other words, pragmatic genre theory will only take us so far in explaining how Netflix uses filmic genres to position itself in relation not to broad audiences or even audiences of genre fans, but to an individual viewer.

Thus, the final challenge to filmic genre theory is how to account for the role that genre plays in the institutional relationship between Netflix as an exhibitor and an individual viewer as mediated by a content-based RS. Altman is concerned with the viewer and genre, and he spends a good deal of time developing a theory of mass media communication based on genre. Even in private settings, viewers imagine themselves as part of a “constellated community” of genre fans, those who enjoy the same forms of genre excess as themselves. The community is “constellated” in the sense that “like a group of stars their members cohere only through repeated acts of imagination” (161). This imagined community coheres through “lateral communication” among

fans. Some communication may be direct, but since genre is defined through its use, genre spectatorship is defined as lateral communication in the sense that fans commune with other imagined fans through the corpus of texts and kinds of texts that they enjoy (162). This is a problem for mass media, according to Altman, because once this lateral communication of genre fandom is acknowledged *qua* a form of communication, institutionally defined genre categories lose their discursive authority to constellate broad communities of fans because the “inadequacy of existing genres becomes apparent” (162). What Altman may not have seen coming is that the inadequacy of existing genres would sooner become apparent to a distributor.

In some ways this is not surprising, since distributors and exhibitors have closer contact with the audiences to whom they try to sell the products. As Altman and Gunning have shown, distributors and exhibitors by necessity approach the marketing of films pragmatically (read: “rhetorically”). When they are dissatisfied with institutionally defined genres and genre-framing, Altman points out that fans sometimes generate their own specialized genres, such as “railroad films” (162-3), which are products of spectator regenrefication via constellated communities. I will have much more to say about the methodological inadequacy of “constellated communities” as a concept shortly. For now, however, note that Altman can’t account for either the narrowing of genres or the narrowing of audiences by a single institution to the level of personalized microgenres. Moreover, there is a fundamental problem with Altman’s imaging of fan communities that I will explore in the next section.

We have here partial accounts. Cohn describes the broader ideological context of RSs in general, but doesn’t account for the internal qualities of the recommended goods and how they participate the construction of subjectivity. Hallinan and Striphos describe the potential for unprecedented technological intervention to transform our notion of culture, but they don’t

consider the long trajectory of genrefication and how institutional practices extend into algorithmic culture. Altman provides historical precedent and theoretical groundwork for viewing filmic genres as discursive processes in which producers, distributors, exhibitors, marketers, reviewers, and spectators all participate from varying critical perspectives, but there is no consideration—in Altman or the other two works—of how spectators as individuals interact with a personalized interface via a radically modified notion of genre. What is needed is some account of the mechanics of film and viewer construction via the microgenre.

*Constellated Communities v. Rhetorical Genre User Groups*

Netflix doesn't operate in the same way as traditional film distributors and exhibitors, even though their pragmatic approach to genre is not unprecedented, and I shall attend to this question in just a moment. First, though I want to point out a set of problems with Altman's concepts of "lateral communication" and "constellated communities," problems that a rhetorical approach to pragmatic genre theory could address to make the whole enterprise more theoretically sound and methodologically practicable. The critique has to do with the inadequacy of "constellated communities" to capture the often contentious relations among users such as described by Jancovich, for example. Altman's model is really one of schematic interpretation as informed by meta-genre; it does not consider the complicated rhetorical and social relations among flesh-and-blood fans that the operations of genrefication entail. Indeed, this section might well have appeared in Chapter 3, but it requires the reader understand something of RGS and Altman's constellated communities for my criticism to make sense.

Altman's rather nebulous understanding of community is a critical shortcoming in his model. His conception borrows from Benedict Anderson's suggestion that modern nations emerged as "imagined communities," articulated, consolidated, and reproduced through mass media and standardized national languages.<sup>139</sup> For Altman, enjoying a genre film entails imagining other absent genre fans enjoying that film and others like it. The communities are imagined during spectatorship and constellated in the sense of being repeatedly imagined. Already we have muddled functions. Without actually talking to someone else about the film, the viewer isn't using genre anyway. Genre is genrefication *of a film, to someone, for some purpose*. I introduced meta-genre in Chapter 3 as a way of distinguishing the various functions attributed to film genre, and the private processes of interpretation, evaluation, and imagination are certainly guided by one's personal understanding of a given meta-genre. However, genres are public, and a good thing, too, since as scholars we don't have access to the content of an individual's meta-genre without them telling us about it and probably genrefying some films along the way. That kind of interaction among fans or users more broadly *is* genre, and it occurs via the rhetorical genres that constitute the user group. So Altman's understanding leaves communities speculative and genres arbitrarily defined according to one user's sense of a meta-genre. As a result, Altman's definition has limited usefulness for scholars who may require a better defined user group—if not a *precisely* defined one—to study user interactions and bottom-up genre use. Communities cannot be defined and studied concretely through genre fandom understood in this way, but user groups can be more carefully delineated according to the how they speak for and to and about themselves.

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<sup>139</sup> See Anderson.

How and by what means genre users and fans speak about themselves are crucial questions if genre is to be defined by use. However, this use cannot be examined as long as communities (in this common sense of the word) remain imaginary. To understand what a genre is and what it means for a given group at a given point in time we must have discursive evidence. What ties constellated communities together for Altman is “lateral communication,” or the imagined relations among multiple viewers of the same text (171). Altman associates frontal and lateral communication with what he calls primary and secondary discursivity, respectively. Primary discursivity relates the spectator to the film; secondary discursivity relates the spectator to other spectators (171). The discursive relations among spectators simultaneously support the continued existence of an imagined genre community while also reflecting the community’s concerns back onto the text, thus producing a “doubly authored” genre that depends “both on the encoding practices of an obvious sender and on the decoding recipes of a dispersed reception community” (172). Altman makes very clear that lateral communication is imagined, and that the dispersed reception community is constellated (171-2).

But why is secondary discursivity lateral? Why can it not be conceived of as frontal in its own right? Altman’s answer is not wholly satisfactory. Writing in 1998, Altman observes that

with the rise of recording and broadcasting, coherent face-to-face genre audiences have increasingly been replaced by disseminated ‘audiences’ [...] As a result, texts and genres have labored to provide substitutes for lost ‘presence,’ primarily by making genres and genre texts essential to communication among members of constellated communities.

(194)

Altman is talking not about the *mediation* of a community by digital or analog communication platforms but the absence of community altogether except in imagined form. On one hand, this abstraction of audiences to ‘audiences’ is theoretically convenient; it obviates empirical study of genre fandom and justifies traditional methodologies, especially examination of industrial discourses and speculations about an ideal spectator. To be fair, Altman does occasionally nod to the Internet, but he could not have foreseen the rise social media and the intensification rather than decline of connectivity that it would bring about. On the other hand, however, we saw in Chapter 2 how analog media like fan magazines already provided opportunities for interaction among fans via rhetorical genres like letters to the editor.<sup>140</sup> Similarly, Matt Hills has argued that Altman underplays the persistent face-to-face fan phenomena of fan conventions and genre film festivals, especially among horror and science fiction fans (87-90).<sup>141</sup> So even 20th-century analog technologies and live, in-person events give lie to the idea that genre communities were wholly or even mostly imagined. Moreover, as we saw at the end of Chapter 3, the radical connectivity afforded by post-digital-revolution social media platforms allows for less formal, more spontaneous, and further-flung fan interactions. Face-to-face communication has not been wholly obviated by mass media technologies, and in none of the three cases is the community imaginary. The development of mediation has in fact intensified rather than diminished actual fan communities. This is not to deny lateral communication among fans altogether, only to suggest that secondary discursivity should also be thought of in more concrete terms. Perhaps a viewer imagines a community at the moment of viewing, but the more dynamic, productive, and significant group activities—not to mention the activities that produce and reproduce genres—

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<sup>140</sup> See Jancovich, “A Real Shocker”

<sup>141</sup> Like Jancovich, Hills theorizes these events under the Sarah Thornton’s Bourdieusian concept of subcultural capital, arguing that “co-present” participation in “flesh-and-blood genre community” events often enhances status and defines authentic fandom. See Hills “Attending Horror Film Festivals and Communities.”

are observable through frontal discourse among fans and the rhetorical genres through which institutional and spectatorial user groups are constituted.

One consequence of focusing on constellated communities rather than rhetorically-constituted user groups is an omission of the power dynamics at work among these groups. Because Altman's notion of imaginary fan communities isolates an ideal spectator, we get a picture of harmonious imagined relations among fans. This appears to be a vestige of the "ideological v. ritual" theoretical framework Altman sought to transcend—that is, "whether genres are ideological constructs delivered from above or ritual experiences confectioned by audiences" (172).<sup>142</sup> Altman resolves this dichotomy by appeal to lateral communication and the doubly-authored nature of genre texts: primary discursivity is ideological, secondary discursivity is ritual. Part of the ritual of genre viewing is reading the community's concerns back into the film/genre. But fan communities are not monolithic, and Altman's approach, though largely defined by use, neglects the logic of distinction at work in genre use among audiences and fans. Indeed, while Altman critiques Neale for conflating the interests and activities of different entities in the film industry, e.g. film promotion and film criticism, Altman himself elides divergent fan interests and activities by abstracting genre user groups under constellated communities. Indeed, Altman at one point qualifies the term "community" as misleading, not because individual flesh-and-blood users are socioculturally diverse and often compete with one another for cultural and subcultural capital, but because the genrefying practices of commercial interests are so carefully hidden. (169).

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<sup>142</sup> It would not be unfair to frame this in terms of Marxist versus structuralist genre theory. For a brief overview of the opposing theoretical perspectives, see Altman 26-8.

Because Altman's communities are imagined, his account misses exactly the internal conflicts among fan communities that Jancovich and Hills each observe, and which I illustrated with the Reddit use case in Chapter 3. Indeed, only communities imagined by individual fans or by scholars could be quite so harmonious as Altman's description suggests. As we saw in Chapter 3, Jancovich, Hills, and Sconce find groups defined essentially by conflicts related in some way to a meta-genre. These conflicts can be both external, by which means groups define their genre in opposition to other genres or the "mainstream," and they can also be internal: some generic fan communities—especially in the so-called geek areas of horror, SF, fantasy, comics, etc.—are famous for gatekeeping, boundary policing, and struggling over authenticity and subcultural capital.<sup>143</sup> So while these groups often define themselves negatively relative to the taste politics advanced by institutional discourses—the "ideological" conflict—concrete evidence of group discourse also points to fragmentation, hierarchy, in-fighting, and struggle for status.<sup>144</sup>

While secondary discursivity is a valuable insight, we should also consider that discursivity as rhetorical. The advantages of a rhetorical approach to this problem should now be clear. First is that a rhetorical approach recognizes that fans communicate with one another through recurring frontal textual means. This communication is inherently rhetorical and entails such concerns as rhetor, audience, register, and their reciprocal construction. These instances of generic fan discourse—e.g. letters to the editor, amateur film reviews, social media posts and comments—both reconstitute the filmic and rhetorical genres while also reconstituting the user

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<sup>143</sup> This is certainly not limited to cinema fans cultures. Indeed, Thornton's work that inaugurated the study of "subcultural capital" focuses on dance club and rave subcultures in the UK, and Keith Kahn-Harris has applied this paradigm to black metal and death metal fan groups. See Thornton and Kahn-Harris.

<sup>144</sup> For examples of internal and external distinctions among trash cinema fan groups, Sconce.

group, its tastes and values. Next, these groups may be defined with more precision as communities, collectives, or networks, depending upon the frequency and scope of their activities and interactions. They are also sites of contestation where taste politics and the struggle for subcultural capital play out. The relationships between fan groups and the institutions that create popular art are complex, as are the internal relationships among group members. The rhetorical genres that feature institutional and fan voices has the featured benefit of bringing together spectator and group, text and paratext, exigence and discourse, and positioning them in such a way as to re-connect issues of subcultural capital and authentic fandom to social and intersectional identity. None of these dimensions of genre as social action is available under the constellated communities model.

### *Netflix and Rhetorical Genrefication*

Netflix's uptake of meta-generic terms illustrates a number of points I have asserted about film genre in Chapter 1. Indeed, the complexity and precision of its rhetorical genrefication—as made possible by its RS—reveal and underscore textual and rhetorical processes that are inherent in the concept and functions of genre. First, the functional fungibility of received genres with other attributes reduces genre from the panacea of textual and ideological relations to an interpretive schema and to one among many axes along which a text may be framed. Second, the multi-term structure of microgenres makes the rhetorical contingency of genre a feature of the system. That is, where subgenre and hybrid genre imply the insufficiency of genre per se—even if they are situationally functional—microgenres point to the degrees of generic subdivision as functions of rhetorical precision. For example, 'horror' is adequate for

Blockbuster, ‘zombie films’ is (sometimes) adequate for a Subreddit,<sup>145</sup> ‘dark zombie comedies from the 2000s’ is specific enough for the taste profile of an individual user. Third, Netflix’s explicit focus on personalization fundamentally ties rhetor and audience to the text and how it is framed under specific rhetorical conditions. I have expanded on these first two points above. Now I want to address some of the rhetorical implications and how the RS involves the construction of its users via its personalization.

To understand the significance of Netflix’s use of microgenres for film genre theory and criticism, it is crucial to understand that Netflix’s relationship to its customers is fundamentally rhetorical, and furthermore that the company is fairly straightforward about it. The personalization system demands that Netflix understands and constructs its audience. Netflix’s publicity material freely admits that every action in the streaming interface gathers information: beyond explicit viewer feedback, those titles selected, watched partially, or watched all the way through go into building the taste profile.

Amatriain and Basilico express the company’s concern with establishing and maintaining trust (ethos) with customers through recommendation awareness and explanations (“RSI” 391), and Yellin evinces a concern with audience and kairos (i.e. opportunity and timing) when he tells an interviewer

Predicting something is 3.2 stars is kind of fun if you have an engineering sensibility, but it would be more useful to talk about dysfunctional families and viral plagues. We wanted to put in more language [...] We wanted to highlight our personalization because

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<sup>145</sup> Note in Ch.2 that even on thread I discuss, fans still divide up the genre along the lines of Romero vs. non-Romero zombies or voodoo vs. viral zombies.

we pride ourselves on putting the right title in front of the right person at the right time.  
(Madrigal “How Netflix”)

The language of personalization suggests a one-way dynamic whereby Netflix gets to know the viewer, whose identity remains autonomous and independent from the context of the interaction. Yet the relationship is in fact more complex.

While Hallinan and Striphas, Cohn, and Bellanova and González Fuster, provide some of the broader insights on RSs and algorithmic culture, RGS provides concepts and methods to help sort out the reciprocal dynamic of RS interactions and in digital “curation” in general. Where social media, RSs, and other digital tools are often understood as helpful services that connect users with their preferred media, the relationship is less than neutral. Chuck Tryon suggests that “it would be more precise to argue that audiences are being organized into recognizable demographic and taste groups that can be reached more effectively through targeted advertising campaigns, a process that Intel futurist Brian David Johnson refers to as ‘addressability’” (126). Rather than organize products according to an individual user’s unique tastes, instead users and products are mutually reconfigured as groups with tastes as the organizing principle. This notion of addressability directly connects this kind of consumable digital media to rhetoric. Tryon’s point goes a long way in explaining how, even as the RS alters its recommendations, it is also constructing the viewer in a taste profile. Just as a reader may be asked to adopt a certain reading persona or position in an encounter with literature, or as a politician may constitute her audience as “reasonable people” or “true Americans,” so RSs craft the audiences they address.

In light of these framings, we ought to study the Netflix personalized recommendation as a social action genre. “Recommendation” may be taken in a couple senses here, so I want to be

clear. What is to be studied here is not the content or direct object of the recommendation (i.e. the film that is being recommended). Rather, we ought to examine the act of recommending as a social practice, specifically as executed by Netflix's RS algorithms in the context of an interaction with a subscriber via the digital streaming interface. This is not so counterintuitive if one considers RS's antecedents. Film reviews take up recommendations, as do advertisements. More broadly, recommendations take a number of different forms for different kinds of user groups. Consider the following passage from the Introduction to the *Recommender Systems Handbook*.

The development of RSs initiated from a rather simple observation: individuals often rely on recommendations provided by others in making routine, daily decisions. For example, it is common to rely on what one's peers recommend when selecting a book to read; employers count on recommendation letters in their recruiting decisions; and when selecting a movie to watch, individuals tend to read and rely on the movie reviews a film critic has written, which appear in the newspaper they read. (Ricci et al. 2)

Note how the authors position RSs as following not only from the recommendation as an antecedent, but also from a variety of other rhetorical genres that take it up and their attendant social relations: peer to peer, educator to potential employer, critic to consumer. Each communicates through different formal means. More importantly, each recommendation is predicated on a different kind of ethos, trust or authority. Peers share similar or similar enough

experiences and preferences, institutional recommenders have the gravitas of their degrees and titles, and film critics perform their authority.<sup>146</sup>

As a rhetorical genre, the digital recommendation can be usefully mapped out in RGS's analytic terms. The situation varies in its specifics from user to user and from time to time, but is more generally typified. The exigence is a customer's desire to watch something enjoyable and Netflix's need to gather information about a paying customer and keep her/him on subscription. As a social action related to film, Netflix's digital recommendation's antecedent genres might include publicity and marketing materials, film reviews, and other mass audience addresses, as well as communication among genre fans, such as the kind of genuinely personalized recommendations among people who know each other's tastes. The variety of genres Netflix employs—among them filmic genres, blogs, user agreements, viewer taste profiles, microtags, tagging guideline documents, microgenres (not to mention the coding and algorithms)—all constitute Netflix's genre set, which it shares with users under a variety of situations (Devitt 54-5). Most important for our purposes, though, is the mechanism of uptake.

Now, the question of when meta-genres become genres is somewhat tricky to generalize, but it involves the uptake of a meta-genre into a rhetorical genre for the purposes of genrefying a specific film or body of films. In the case of Netflix, a genre designation is included in the meta-data for a given item (film or TV show) as an objective attribute. Genre is already taken up into an internal institutional genre. But, as with the industrial uses discussed above, such a

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<sup>146</sup> For an example of critics performing ethos, see the discussion of Edelstein and Lowenstein in Ch. 2. Note too that there are certainly cases in which the prestige of the publication also adds to the critic's authority. There are also cases of journalistic film critics like Mark Kermode and David Bianculli, whose academic bona fides add to their credibility: Kermode holds a PhD in English from the University of Manchester and is referred to by fans as "the Good Doctor," and Bianculli is Associate Professor of TV and Film at Rowan University, as is noted in his recurring reviews for NPR's *Fresh Air*.

genrefication is not necessarily suitable for every rhetorical situation. Indeed, the main advantage of an RS is being able to pivot from one set of relevant attributes to another in genrefying a film effectively for a given user.

This functional contingency means that, from the point of view of rhetorical genrefication, microgenres *are* genres. Whether a given title is genrefied according to that designation is contingent upon the specific user being addressed. A film's received genre, in being treated as an uncomplicated property of a text, can be foregrounded, omitted, or shuffled around to suit a particular recommendation situation. Specific, conventional meta-genre designations may or may not be taken up into a given rhetorical interaction with a user: the recommended films may not be cited as westerns, musicals, or science fiction films. However, this doesn't mean that the films are not genrefied at all. Rather, they are genrefied according to some other configuration of quanta that more closely aligns with the user's taste profile. Again, from the point of view of rhetorical genrefication, the microgenre *is* a genre because it is produced according to the same principles and serves the same function as other genres: viz. the framing of a filmic text under given rhetorical conditions. That this rhetorical framing of the text also entails framing the user raises questions about the ideological implications of Netflix's genre-based recommendations.

Both filmic genre theorists and rhetorical genre studies scholars would agree that genre is a social process with ideological implications, if not a *structure* unto itself. Indeed, Thomas Beebee notes that "what makes genre ideological is our practice of speaking of it as a 'thing' rather than as the expression of a relationship between user and text" (18). I would add at least one more user, i.e., genre is the expression of a relationship among no fewer than two users and a text. Nevertheless, Beebee's point is that there is always a trace of a power whenever social

relationships are treated as fixed, uncomplicated objects. Though Netflix is certainly neither the first nor the only alone industrial entity to reify received genre(s)—even as it reduces their significance—its RS both mystifies the social processes that produce filmic genres and furthermore takes them up into its rhetorical construction of its users.

Even at first blush, Netflix’s personalization relationship with its users is clearly unbalanced. Netflix builds a user’s taste profile by collecting data on her or him through basic profile information, ratings feedback, and viewing activity. Every interaction on a Netflix homepage collects data, since every title that appears is in fact a recommendation whose ranking correlates to its horizontal and vertical position on the screen (Amatriain and Basilico “NR”).<sup>147</sup> Control over discourse and the collection of information is a form of power that facilitates other forms of power.<sup>148</sup> In every action Netflix collects information about the subscriber while releasing information about itself (as a largely faceless corporation) at its own discretion. Bellanova and González Fuster point the self-perpetuating function of data collection and translation, and Cohn and others have alerted us to how damaging that information can be if leaked.<sup>149</sup> However, the matter is not simply one of gathering data, but of constituting subjects.

The reciprocal constitution inherent in the rhetorical situation is not an equal one. The composition of addressable subjects that Tryon points to is achieved through specific means. Cohn describes what we might call a data feed cycle, where what appear to be neutral options are in fact a small slice of available titles, carefully selected and positioned on the personalized account. When the user selects a ranked title, it reconfigures the options around the selected titles

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<sup>147</sup> For a fuller description of personalization and the user interface, see Amatriain and Basilico “RSI” 391-7.

<sup>148</sup> See Foucault, especially *History of Sexuality*, Pt. 2, Ch. I, “The Incitement to Discourse.”

<sup>149</sup> See note 118.

to present a new set, all of which steer the user toward an addressable taste profile (Cohn 7-8).<sup>150</sup>

In general the recommendation genre facilitates the construction of, on the one hand, a user identity constituted by steered “personalized” tastes and, on the other hand, a corporate persona that offers products tailored to putatively a priori consumer preferences. Furthermore, Netflix constructs its own identity through other components in its genre system, including its corporate blog posts, executive interviews, and other institutional discourses that address trust and transparency explicitly. Hence, Netflix’s power comes not only from the brute data it collects, but also from how it positions itself and its users rhetorically and how these positions are constituted by generic uptake.

Beebee’s work on genre and ideology can inform a structural account of the constitution of both microgenres and taste profiles. Beebee proposes that, since post-positivist accounts can no longer appeal to material reality to expose ideology, it must be gleaned from how it positions the material in certain configurations (18). One way ideology exercises power is by constituting and positioning subjects within configurations as well, such that it appears different, non-uniform, opaque (17). Recall Altman’s metaphor of constellated communities. Astronomical constellations come into existence as patterns or systems only through their repeated imagining qua configurations among the noise of other adjacent stars. Power operates both in the configuration of these systems—in which the tacit exclusion of noise is a fundamental process—and also in the disavowal of its operations through appeal to objective reality. Such an appeal is

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<sup>150</sup> There may be a variety of reasons beyond evident taste for the options presented. For instance, profit maximization incentivizes Netflix to steer users toward backlist titles that are cheaper to license than new releases (Cohn 117).

patently absurd in the case of constellations—no one believes constellations are independent-existing phenomena—it is less obviously false in the case of genres, especially where textualism predominates.

Netflix's personalization RS exemplifies precisely this operation of power through its shifting configurations of textual systems and noise. Perhaps the more disturbing implication is that the user, reduced to a taste profile, is likewise reconfigured. The system operates not by tailoring recommendations to an independent subject, but by tailoring text and addressable viewer to each other. RGT provides us with the principle of reciprocal constitution in the context of the rhetorical situation, and the mechanism for constitution is the recommendation. Netflix uses microgenres as a discursive matrix between text and viewer in order to determine viewer taste, both in the sense of ascertaining and in the sense of prescribing. So while Netflix positions the viewer as utterly dependent on the RS to navigate its 100,000 titles, it also interpellates her into an ideological system wherein the range of possible actual tastes is circumscribed within a constantly shifting structure of microgenres and noise, manifest now and again in the moment of recommendation.

### Conclusion

RGS presents us with a method for understanding and studying instances of rhetorical genrefication. Moreover, it provides a methodology for locating film genre itself in the paratextual discourse about films. In Chapter 2, saw that film genre use is rhetorical, that films are genrefied performatively and for an audience. In Chapter 3, we distinguished among the different functions attributed to film genres and saw that the connotative functions both of

genrefication and meta-genre are bound up in micro-level group dynamics and broader issues of cultural values and taste politics. In this chapter I have argued that RGS at once addresses practical methodological needs and adds further nuance to a theory of genre. While I am not quite comfortable saying there can be *no* genrefication outside of rhetorical uptake, I have a difficult time imagining what that might look like. For the purposes of comparative textual analysis, historiography, discourse analysis, or other conceivable scholarly work in film and media, a rhetorical genre approach can help avoid the naïve prescriptivist tendencies of textualism while keeping analyses socially grounded and reflexive.

In defining genre as rhetorical genrefication, I have repeatedly described genre use as use by someone, for someone else, and under specific and variable conditions. This set of qualifications introduced a danger of particularism, which threatened the generalizable utility of the model. By focusing on rhetorical genres, however, we are able to orient our analysis toward recurrent and *typified* social actions, defined not by their form, nor by the constitution of its user group in any crude demographic sense, but by the ongoing social uses, purposes, and activities that those rhetorical genres participate in. In this way, rhetorical genrefication decenters appeals both to the text and to a sort of positivist sociological identity. The genericity of the text is defined according to the social and rhetorical activities it is taken up into. The composition of user groups is determined not according to a priori social categories but relative to demonstrable participation in social activities and rhetorical genres. The principle of rhetorical genrefication and the mechanism of uptake thus undercuts the totalizing and logocentric tendencies of traditional genre theory while identifying situated but typified instances of pragmatic genre use as sites of generic reconstitution and social negotiation.

## **Conclusion: Lingering Questions and Future Directions**

In this final chapter I will concisely recap the entire model advanced in the preceding pages. I will discuss the practical implications of rhetorical genrefication for genre theory, genre criticism, and genre pedagogy. Finally, I will address the question of whether my model simply shifts the burden of theoretical foundation from filmic genres to rhetorical genres and how I justify that distinction in the first place. In confronting these issues I will be able to point toward some potential applications of this model for a philosophy of art in general and for film studies in particular.

### Recap: Rhetorical Genrefication

Genre is not a class but a classification, a performative social act of categorization that implies a particular configuration of textual and extra-textual attributes into systems of denotative and connotative meaning, into descriptions and judgments. Genres are adaptive in an epistemological sense; i.e., those systems can change to assimilate or accommodate the introduction of new data. Genres are also adaptable in a rhetorical sense; i.e., they allow users to frame a film or body of films differently to suit a rhetorical need. Understanding genres-as-use breaks out of the textualist/realist mode of thinking by directing us to study discourse about films rather than the films themselves. But it also implies a radically ad hoc definition of genre, such that 1) genres only exist as instances of performative communication about film, leaving open the question of how genres help users group and interpret films; and 2) genres may seem so particularized as to make generalization impossible.

My responses to these two issues involved:

1) *Positing “meta-genre” as the sum total of textual and extra-textual attributes and connotations a given user associates with a generic label.* When applied to a concrete film, the interpretive function of genre is understood as a cognitive schema, informed by meta-genre but not yet framed socially as a genre. The polysemic nature of generic labels make them versatile but in themselves undecidable. In a given exchange among users genre labels can serve denotative or connotative functions or both, depending on how receptive each party is. This receptivity to a particular generic label—its meaningfulness in one or another sense—is in turn contingent upon the users’ social, cultural, and historical positioning. Thus the criteria, boundaries, and axiological valences of a given meta-genre is a matter of intersubjective negotiation, radically contingent upon the degree of shared experiences, values, and knowledges—the frames of reference, in other words—of the participating users.

2) *Locating genre and meta-genre use not within singular rhetorical situations, but within recurrent rhetorical genres.* Often these are types of commercial paratexts like reviews or advertisements, but they also include kinds of scholarly and fan discourse like books, articles, letters to the editor, or social media posts. Though instances of discourse are in principle non-identical and infinite, recurring social needs call for recurring forms of discourse, adaptable to the particularities of a given exigence but general enough to frame a recurring situation as such.

The turn to rhetorical genre solves a methodological problem of how to study genre as use, but it also implies more directly the social and ideological functions of film genres that textualist

scholars had searched for in and among the films themselves. The nature of rhetorical genres is such that they entail user groups of different sizes and compositions engaged in different kinds of social activities as facilitated and partly constituted by systems of other rhetorical genres. Moreover, the synthesis of pragmatic genre theory and its implications with the principles of rhetorical genre studies suggests that film genres are radically contingent upon rhetorical uptake.

The conflation of interpretive schemata, meta-generic labels, and concrete instances of genrefication has given genre a kind of mystical utility, helpful and convenient but inexplicable and ultimately untenable. One goal of this project has been to distinguish among these three functions, but doing so has left us with a gap where generic ontology ought to be. Even describing genres as relations among texts still begs a number of ultimately vexing questions. However, recognizing genre's social functions demystifies it. Genre ought to be identified with its role in mediating relations among multiple users and one or more texts. Genre is a mode of engagement with and communication among mediated and immediate social actors, not an independent structure unto itself. It is a matrix of performative interpretation, judgment, and social distinction and not a guarantor of them. Genre, then, ought to be considered as rhetorical genrefication, as a function of the rhetorical conditions under which a given film is discussed, by given set of users for a given rhetorical purpose.

### Genre Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy

This rhetorical understanding of film genre can be seen as a logical extension of the pragmatic principles of genre and genrefication as laid out by Altman. Regardless of the intentions or training of critics and scholars, there is no special case of genre use that is not

performative, that is not rhetorical. This has profound practical implications for genre theory, criticism, and pedagogy. First, genre theory should redirect its inquiry, from focus on films to discourse about films as the primary object of analysis. If we want to understand how and why genres develop and what uses they serve, it does no good to anchor ourselves to our own textual analysis of the film in the hopes of revealing its *true* deep structure. Genre is inherently public and shared among users, otherwise it would simply be a schema. Even if we were able to uncover some hidden absolute truth about a text or corpus that its producers and reviewers and fans never knew, this revelation would be *ipso facto* irrelevant to the study of its genre. In this way, critical analysis and close reading strategies alone actually take us farther away from understanding genre. Instead, we ought to aim for a sympathetic analysis of genre-fying discourse, bringing our acumen to bear not only on the text but also and primarily on those paratexts that genrefy it and trying to reconstruct the values, priorities, and moves that led the author to the interpretation and judgment s/he has articulated.<sup>151</sup> This does not commit us to agree with the author's conclusions, but proving her/him wrong is not particularly useful in coming to understand the various perspectives on a film's genre as part of its social history.

While the details of a clear method would have to be worked out in application to concrete case studies, I can tentatively suggest what that method might look like. Sympathetic analysis is just the first of three steps or degrees. First, sympathetic textual/paratextual analysis—of, say, an academic article on film genre or a film review—would investigate how the author interprets the film, as well as the presuppositions and values that configure the genre and structure the secondary text. The point is not to classify the film but to understand how and by

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<sup>151</sup> “When we try to understand a text [...] we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which [the author] has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right” (Gadamer 292).

what reasoning the genre user classifies it without pronouncing her/his classifications correct or not. Next, rhetorical analysis would reconstruct the audience, appeals, and purposes suggested by the writing's provenance and by how the film and/or film genre was framed. Not all classification is based on sober comparison of textual family resemblances; what evaluative appeals does the author make, and how do these reveal/construct an audience of like-minded users? Finally, rhetorical genre analysis would explore what ongoing social exigences were met by this kind of writing, which overlapping groups were involved and what their nature was, and what other rhetorical genres constituted the genre sets or systems involved in the groups' related activities. This tiered analytical method can be applied to genrefying discourses of any sort, and the full century of film criticism and genrefying writing potentially provides monumental insights into how film genre constituted and structured the social interaction of various groups throughout that time.

Genre criticism and pedagogy are somewhat different matters. In its capacity as an interpretive schema and rhetorical frame, genre is absolutely inescapable and indispensable. On one hand, our own associations predispose us to classification of this generic sort, as does the need to be able to talk about more than one film at a time and to make comparisons and distinctions among them. On the other hand, regardless of one's intentions, simply citing a film's director is a kind of genrefication. That is, "Sergei Eisenstein" or "Maya Deren" or "Michael Bay" can generate associations with other films, periods, movements, nations, cultures, personal styles, moral judgments, influences, biographies, and so forth that might frame that film for the rhetorical audience, whether that audience is composed of scholars, students, or moviegoers. This is really a matter of the capacity of any filmic descriptor to function as a sign, and the scope

of its referents is limited in principle only by the past experience and cognitive activity of the audience.

While I do not believe we can control this kind of semiosis, we ought at least to acknowledge and take responsibility for our own performative, genre-fying discourse as such, whether in critical scholarship or teaching. We ought to recognize that we, too, are genre users and that our own use is rhetorical. Primarily this ought to involve a distancing from positive claims about a film's genre. A more reflexive way of teaching film genre would involve stepping back from making one's own textualist claims while acknowledging the textualist claims of scholars, critics, and advertisers as historically, socially, and rhetorically situated.

Similarly, genre criticism ought to make explicit the implied step in its enthymeme, namely, that for X, Y, and Z reasons, the author agrees with or disagrees with the conventional genre-fication of a particular film because it is useful or not useful to a particular critical project. I hope that the preceding chapters have illustrated just why it makes no sense to say that one can prove or disprove a film's purported genre, or that a widely-used genre can be shown not really to exist. I have aimed to problematize genre as an independent phenomenon and uncomplicated premise for critical arguments. Yes, genres do function as premises, but for the sake of intellectual rigor and honesty we ought to mark them out as provisional premises, as rhetorically stabilized for the moment, with due acknowledgement to their deferred foundations and performative use.<sup>152</sup> Some might argue that this approach overly complicates matters, that discussion of generic rhetoricity undercuts and distracts from the critical activity at hand. I would reply that critical arguments that rely on genre as a foundational premise are and were always

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<sup>152</sup> See Schreyer.

already undertheorized and weak to exactly the degree that they take genre for granted as stable and uncomplicated. In any case, genre criticism can and indeed must continue to use genre as an ad hoc device for textual exploration, but it ought to acknowledge it as such and should adopt reflexive qualifications regarding the kinds of claims it makes and for whom it makes them.

### Rhetorical vs. Artistic Genres

The shrewd reader will no doubt have noticed that my model turns on an opposition between filmic and rhetorical genres, focusing on the latter as sites of temporary stabilization and destabilization, configuration and reconfiguration, framing and reframing, and affirmation and contestation of the former. This might have given the impression that I in some way am relying on the stability of rhetorical genres to guarantee the functioning of filmic genres, and I promised to address that concern in this conclusion. More radically, one might ask how I justify the distinction between the two as clearly discrete categories. Certainly there are clear differences in mode and modality between narrative, fiction, commercial feature films and written paratexts, but what about video essays or documentaries about film? This issue of rhetorical and filmic genre distinction requires some discussion, both because it is an important theoretical “i” to dot, and also, more practically, because it isn’t difficult to imagine cases like documentaries or biopics that appear to have both artistic and rhetorical attributes. In anticipation of readers ‘turning the theory back on itself,’ I want to devote some pages to addressing the problem, and in doing so I will point to this model’s broader applicability to questions in literary theory and the philosophy of art.

Theoretically, I have staked out an anti-foundationalist position against film genre, and I argued that its lack of stability jeopardizes critical projects that rely on genre itself as a foundation. But in proposing that textualist theories of genre mystify rhetorical genrefication as a social practice am I just deferring foundation to rhetorical genres? I would argue no, for two reasons. First, and most simply, rhetorical genres, as described in detail in Chapter 4, are always already understood as shifting, multiform, and relationally defined. Rhetorical genres constitute a matrix of social activity, and textual forms, situations, and user groups all dynamically shape one another. Subjects, texts, and institutions are all in play, but none is ultimately determinate. Rhetorical genres can be “stabilized for now” or “stabilized enough,” for a user group—community, collective, or network—to pursue its activities and respond to changing exigences and situations (Schreyer 208). This is especially likely when those genres are situated relative to others in an institutionally defined genre set. But, like the adaptive function of filmic genres described in Chapter 2, rhetorical genres can define situations and users only to the extent that they can be assimilated into an existing generic scheme, beyond which point the generic forms must themselves be adapted to accommodate the emergent situation. Hence, rhetorical genres adapt—rather, are adapted by users—not to changing situations but to changing situational frames.

The second reason I reject the idea that this model assumes rhetorical genres as a foundation has to do with its generally reflexive and non-totalizing approach. Neither filmic nor rhetorical genres exist independently of the users who employ them. There is no special use case or critical Archimedean point in or from which subjects can neutrally describe or appeal to genre. Genre use is performative and adaptive, so that not only is genre actually an affirmation or contestation or transformation of genre, but its mechanism involves the dynamic assimilation and

accommodation of data and schemata, respectively. The relation of *text* to *attributes* is isomorphic with the relation of *genre* to *texts*, and users reconfigure textual and extra-textual attributes into systems and noise such that an apparent textual or generic totality emerges long enough to operate toward some rhetorical end. But there is no stable system or boundary, only a temporary arrangement whose organizing principle is contingent upon variable rhetorical conditions.

I would suggest that this principle of adaptive configuration extends beyond filmic or artistic genres generally and to rhetorical genres as well, such that the distinction between them is always tentative and likewise contingent upon the interpretive and rhetorical circumstances of their employment. Altman's pragmatic genre theory implies a radically contingent text as one implication of its deconstructive sensibility and critical moves. That is, it tracks the reconfiguration of textual elements and the reconstitution of genres, but it leaves lacunae where there might be the stable, unified textual whole. Instead, the appearance of the text is a function of the momentary (rhetorical) stabilization of variable configurations and reading strategies. In other words, not only is "western" or "film noir" a function of the rhetorical conditions of its invocation, so is the attribution of a text *as such* to an artistic or rhetorical genre. Attribution of this sort may often seem uncomplicated and self-evident, but there are less obvious cases that I shall discuss in a moment, and anyway, there seems to be no other way of defining artistic and rhetorical genres oppositionally without recourse to textualism. This is a non-totalizing way of accounting for the shifting functions of some kinds of art and even the social boundary crossing between art and rhetoric.

While this posited model would require extensive work to flesh out, I hope I can illustrate it with a couple of examples to show what I mean. First, neither rhetorical nor artistic genres are

recognizable as such according to textual features on their own; they are framed as such by user activity according to configurations of attributes. Second, users organize these configurations according to broader social, cultural, and historical frames. Whether a text is considered at a given moment to belong to an artistic or rhetorical genre—or whether a genre is broadly artistic or rhetorical—is a matter of the taste politics and general activities that dominate a given group at a given time, whether that group is, say, formal and institutional or informal and subcultural. Third, this model has significant implications for film studies, especially in areas in which artistry and rhetoricity can be evidently quite fluid.

I would suggest that texts exist on a spectrum between rhetorical and artistic orientations. We select particular characteristics to emphasize when proffering a text as art, or we stress others when employing a text rhetorically. Below is a tabular comparison of some characteristics or values or functions we might associate with artistic and rhetorical texts and genres.

Artistic	Rhetorical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Universality</li> <li>● Expression</li> <li>● Abstraction</li> <li>● Implicit Meaning</li> <li>● Affect</li> <li>● Art for Art's Sake</li> <li>● Truth</li> <li>● Allusion</li> <li>● Ambiguity</li> <li>● Showing</li> <li>● Form</li> <li>● Interpretation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Locality</li> <li>● Communication</li> <li>● Concreteness</li> <li>● Explicit Meaning</li> <li>● Cognition</li> <li>● Instrumentality</li> <li>● Persuasion</li> <li>● Referentiality</li> <li>● Clarity</li> <li>● Telling</li> <li>● Content</li> <li>● Comprehension</li> </ul>

I want to be clear that I am not describing these as rigid or exhaustive categories. Instead, I offer them as examples of the kinds of dichotomies that might structure the cultural and practical

distinctions between artistic and rhetorical texts. These artistic attributes are historically and culturally situated, as are their relative values, and they ought not to be thought of in any totalizing sense: not all art possesses all or only the attributes to the left and not all rhetorical texts possess all or only those attributes to the right. Rather, these attributes and values frame and are framed by a text, relative to the social use the text is put to for a given group, and according to historically and culturally variable criteria. Consequently, texts can shift across between artistic and rhetorical genres, and what counts as art is contingent on 1) what attributes count as artistic at a given place and time and for a given group and 2) whether those attributes are framed as present or prominent or dominant in a given text.

Now, the idea of a text's meaning or utility as contingent upon a socially-situated subjectivity is not particularly radical for either literary or rhetorical studies. Devitt acknowledges reader response theory's insight that "readers recreate texts in their own contexts" and that this "fits in easily within rhetorical genre theory and the idea that readers construct the genre's situation out of their differing material realities" (182). On one hand, this idea suggests that a reader has some degree of *a priori* awareness of what s/he is supposed to do with a given text under given circumstances. But, on the other hand, s/he may not be aware of *why* one kind of text seems to cue a certain kind of reading response. To return to Bordwell's constructivist terminology, how does our reader know whether to search for implied or symptomatic meaning in a text or to stop at the referential and explicit—whether to interpret or just to comprehend the text? The apparently individual and ad hoc nature of that relationship between reader and text abstracts it from the broader system of values and genres that frame art as such and, more to the point, distinguish it from non-art.

Consider the first of the values listed above. *Universality* is indeed a conventional distinguishing feature of artistic genres—at least of post-Romantic art—but it is not a feature fixed or guaranteed by the text’s internal functions or structure.<sup>153</sup> It is instead read into the text as part of meaning construction, a semantic field that is constructed and highlighted by readers such that the text can be assimilated into the genre of “art” without perturbation. That is to say, the text and the genre “art” have a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship, and one that has to be framed in terms of the priorities and values of a given period. To illustrate this point, let’s borrow an example from literature.

We might ask whether *Hamlet* is about existential angst, or a Freudian family drama, or if it is really about the complications that arise in a monarchic system of dynastic succession when primogeniture is not formally codified. We can say that in some sense all three are correct, but the referential and explicit meanings are more historically and politically localized than the others; they speak more directly to the political concerns of 16th century English subjects. So maybe we could say that the plot, which is referentially local, is a vehicle for the general, more abstract themes, but now we are constructing symptomatic meanings and a hierarchy among them. Making Shakespeare a philosopher of the human condition or the psyche in this way minimizes the extent to which *Hamlet*—as well as, say, *King Lear*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV 1* and *2*, or *Titus Andronicus*, among others—are all in some way about questions of dynastic succession

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<sup>153</sup> Devitt discusses universality as a function of the genre poetry, noting that literary genres “strive to act not just in their contemporary situation but in future situations as well,” such that “it seems to be a defining function of at least some literature to universalize” (182-3). While there is no space to distinguish our approaches point-by-point, suffice it to say that I do not take universality or any other feature associated with literature or art generally to be internal to the text so much as constructed by a reader and more or less agreed upon by her or his relevant social group. Hence, universality is constructed and reconstructed through subsequent readings and uptakes. See Devitt Ch. 6.

and the political transfer of monarchical power more broadly.<sup>154</sup> These political questions are somewhat remote to 20th- and 21st-century readers, but would have been particularly urgent to Elizabethan English audiences, who faced multiple succession crises between Henry VIII's death in 1547 until James I's ascendance in 1603. This is not to say that there are absolutely no transcendent questions, only that *Hamlet*, like other art, is not inherently universal. It had to be universalized and by users with a stake in doing so.

Who made Shakespeare universal and why? This process didn't begin in the post-Freudian era. Rather, it is the result of 18th, 19th, and 20th century editing, commentary, and pedagogy, as various editions and critical interpretations re-framed a Shakespearean text and passed their situated perspectives and values along.<sup>155</sup> Other authors, too, are subject to these processes of critical revisions. For instance, William Empson complained about the "Christianizing" tendency of early- and mid-20th century literary critics, who not only read Milton as a pious Christian, but attributed spiritual allegories to anything supernatural in the works of authors like Marvell or Marlowe.<sup>156</sup> One explanation for why Shakespeare or Milton or Marlowe or any other historical writer of English literature might be framed in a particular way can be found in Terry Eagleton's essay, "The Rise of English." Eagleton argues that the emergence of English literature departments in Victorian universities corresponds to the influx of urban, middle-class students into higher education. These upstart students lacked the training in Greek and Latin traditional for upper-class undergraduates, and hence were ignorant of the classics. Moreover, their bourgeois pedigrees signified an absence of cultural and moral refinement, especially as the Church's influence waned in British social life. English literary

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<sup>154</sup> I am indebted to Kurt Schreyer for this perspective on Shakespeare's histories and tragedies.

<sup>155</sup> See McLeod.

<sup>156</sup> See Culler Ch.4

study, then, was instituted to construct a cultural heritage befitting Britain's hegemonic ambitions and to socialize the newly empowered middle class into a more sensitive, cultured version of the liberal, imperialist ideology of Victorian England.<sup>157</sup> This involved not only elevating the work of Shakespeare under the Romantic rubric of creative genius, but also recuperating the social radicalism of Romantic writers like Blake and Shelley (Eagleton 17).

Eagleton's thesis, and the point I wish to emphasize, is that aesthetics as a discipline is ideological because the traditional, institutionalized study of artistic form involves abstracting and fetishizing the artwork.

It is, in fact, somewhat improbable that the *Iliad* was art to the ancient Greeks in the same sense that a cathedral was an artefact for the Middle Ages or Andy Warhol's work is art for us; but the effect of aesthetics was to suppress these historical differences. Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish. (Eagleton 18-19).

Eagleton underscores the fetishization of artworks at the expense of the material conditions of their production. But this process of reification, we should note, is discursive and rhetorical. The extrication and abstraction of artworks from their immediate rhetorical situations is a matter of framing that is carried out through particular kinds of writing and discourse.

Artworks are not inherently universal, nor do they become universal on their own.

Certain textual characteristics are selected for in a manner that assimilates well into a present

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<sup>157</sup> Eagleton quotes George Gordon, an early Professor of English Literature at Oxford: "England is sick, and [...] English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State" (20)

interpretation and the text is framed according to a rhetorical need for a group. In this way, we might say that rhetorical genres become artistic genres through their uptake into other rhetorical genres. But what group decides? Here we could borrow from concept of an *art world*, or the social worlds of artists, critics, patrons, scholars, curators, educators, and so forth, who produce, write about, fund, study, preserve, and teach about art. These are the groups to whom a work is presented as a candidate for consideration as art, which, *ipso facto*, defines the work as an artwork.<sup>158</sup> This doesn't tell us whether the artwork is good or not, but it does allow us to define art beyond the accepted conventions of canon or a sort of internal formalism. These actions and activities that various members of the art world are involved in are carried out by means of sets and systems of other genres geared toward the art world's material and axiological infrastructure. In short, a given text or, more precisely, a given configuration of textual attributes that more or less comply with the values of the art world has to be presented to said art world via uptake into the rhetorical genres that 1) constitute and facilitate the user group and 2) negatively define the artwork *qua* art via a paratextual relationship.

In the sections that follow, I will lay out some examples of topics or concepts in film studies that can be productively framed in terms of an artistic/rhetorical opposition while also illustrating some finer nuances to this distinction. These ought to be understood as inchoate reflections and in need of elaboration and revision, but which nevertheless demonstrate the potential of rhetorical genrefication as a model to offer new ideas about the relations among texts, paratexts, users, and user groups.

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<sup>158</sup> See Becker.

*Paracinema*

Literature is something of a hard case because the common modality of written language makes potential slippage between artistic and rhetorical generic valances a constant worry. But what about film? The decentering of filmic texts in terms of meaning construction does not necessarily entail a one-for-one swap with their rhetorical paratexts. Two cases I have already mentioned will show the need to account for slippages between artistry and rhetoricity. The first and, in a way, simpler case is that of paracinema. In “Trashing the Academy,” Sconce uses that term in a few different ways:

As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm', splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. (Sconce 372)

It is notable that Sconce uses the term for both the category and the reading protocol, since it is the latter that constitutes the former, especially as expressed through the then-vibrant network of paracinema fanzines.<sup>159</sup> These publications rail against the aesthetic and cultural authority assumed by media and academic institutions and what they see as the conservative and elitist tastes that keep art boring.

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<sup>159</sup> “Publications devoted to this 'trash' cinema include such magazines, fanzines and ersatz journals as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, *Subhuman*, *Trashola*, *Ungawa*, *Pandemonium*, and the RE/Search volume, *Incredibly Strange Films*” (Sconce 372).

Though their object choice is different from conventional art worlds, paracinematic audiences seek similar effects. In distinguishing scholarly from paracinematic reading protocols, Sconce notes that:

while the academy prizes conscious transgression of conventions by a filmmaker looking to critique the medium aesthetically and/or politically, paracinematic viewers value a stylistic and thematic deviance born, more often than not, from the systematic failure of a film aspiring to obey dominant codes of cinematic representation. For this audience, the 'bad' is as aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating as the 'brilliant.'

(Sconce 385)

Important for our purposes is that paracinematic audiences function as an art world, albeit as informed by oppositional values—the counter-aesthetic—and aimed devalued, rejected, or ignored texts. In some cases, though, paracinema fans do not simply reverse the values of institutional art, trading high-brow art cinema for low-brow schlock movies, for instance. Instead, they look beyond narrative fiction film to rhetorical genres like the aforementioned government hygiene films, fast food training videos, or televangelist sermons, which mingle with liminal cases like juvenile delinquency documentaries and soft-core pornography (Sconce 372).<sup>160</sup>

Sconce emphasizes how the defamiliarizing and surreal effects of a paracinematic film's "formal bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity" translate its cinematic excess to a kind of art unto itself (386). However, we should note that rhetorical genres like instructional or safety films,

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<sup>160</sup> The paracinematic ethic is evident in more recent digital platforms, like the found footage website/live touring show *Everything is Terrible!*, and in original creative productions such as Adult Swim's *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, BBC Channel 4's *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace*, or Amazon's *Comrade Detective*.

hygiene shorts, or work-out videos are likewise subject to an aesthetic reading protocol—even if an ironic one—and are thus re-framed. Not only are they exhibited outside of their original, localized, and instrumental contexts, but insofar as they are assessed and evaluated according to aesthetic rather than rhetorical criteria, they have been reconfigured as art for an art world, even if a limited one.

### *Operationalism*

If paracinema ‘artifies’ rhetorical genres, then its counterpart would involve ‘de-artifying’ texts, or reading them as rhetorical in the broad sense described above. An example of this perspective would be the operational aesthetic, as described by historian Neil Harris. In his biography of P.T. Barnum, Harris introduces the term “operational aesthetic,” which he defines as “a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth” (79). This brief definition is hardly satisfactory, and it takes Harris an entire chapter to tease out the various forms and instances of this phenomenon of spectatorship. Briefly, the operational aesthetic, or simply “operationalism,” describes a particular relationship to an artwork or other textual object in which the observer gains pleasure from witnessing and coming to understand the various parts and how they function. More simply, it is the pleasure of learning how things work and an embrace of informative and explanatory texts as such.

Though they serve Harris’s starting point, operationalism was not limited to Barnum’s sophisticated hoaxes, but was an emerging cultural value in antebellum America, especially in the industrial northeast. Education reform for the public and populist appeals to the good sense of the common man fed a growing distrust and even contempt toward experts and specialists.

Americans sought to educate themselves, or to feel like they had done so. Public lectures and how-to manuals on any conceivable subject exploded in popularity (Harris 73-5). The growing presence of technological marvels also accustomed the public to jargon and specialized technical language as literary discourse.

Harris writes that “the language of technical explanation and scientific description itself had become a form of recreational literature by the 1840s and 1850s. Newspapers, magazines, even novels and short stories catered to this passion for detail” (75). The preternatural detective stories of Poe exemplify operational pleasure in literature, as does the popular genre of sea novels. Melville’s novels in particular appeal to operational aesthetic. They featured not only detailed accounts of seamanship and whaling, but also “immense and erudite discussions of anatomy, geology, and physiology [...] floods of data, anecdotes, measurements, [and] whaling lore. Such detail satisfied the same relish for acquiring knowledge that led to travel literature, how-to-do-it manuals, and almanacs of useful information” (76-7). Harris argues that the influence of American writers like Poe and Melville carried operationalism through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>, informing the genres of science fiction, detective fiction, and exotic travel narratives and expanding beyond the US through authors like Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, and Jules Verne (88).

I would suggest that the operational aesthetic is evident through the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well, in the jargon-packed novels of Michael Crichton, John Grisham, and Tom Clancy or the technical-language-as-poetry dialogues of Aaron Sorkin; in television police procedurals, true crime TV, cooking shows, travel programs, and *The Joy of Painting*; in the self-conscious illusions of Penn and Teller and the myth-debunking of *Mythbusters* or *Adam Ruins Everything*; in behind-the-scenes featurettes on DVD special features and in all manner of DIY,

pop culture criticism, and edutainment YouTube videos; in web listicles and professional and amateur expertise podcasts on all sorts of topics.

It is crucial to note that these are popular forms of media and that operationalism is not associated with formal experiment for its own sake so much as it is with recreation and learning as entertainment and intellectual exercise. A key takeaway, returning to Harris, is that the operational aesthetic developed in America as a populist, pragmatic phenomenon. It formed out of a trend of amateur curiosity.

No great galleries existed for the public to stroll through [in the 1840s and 1850s], no historic buildings featured ancient murals and statuary. Instead, paintings and sculpture stood alongside mummies, mastodon bones, and stuffed animals. American museums were [...] repositories of information, collections of strange or doubtful data. Such indiscriminate assemblages made artistic objects take on the innocent yet familiar shape of exhibition curiosities. (Harris 78)

Artworks were framed in such a way as to be treated as curiosities and assessed along similar lines—for their literal truth, their pragmatic utility, their efficient functioning, their clever design or skillful execution. “Onlookers were relieved from the burden of coping with more abstract problems. Beauty, significance, spiritual values could be bypassed in favor seeing what was odd, what worked, or was genuine” (Harris 79). This trade-off—the celebration of skillful or clever form at the expense of challenging or profound content—is not so alien to us today. Accusations of the vacuity of popular artworks persist, as do such popular sentiments as ‘my kid could paint that.’ These sentiments carry the genes of the operational aesthetic, and they do not indicate

something inherent to the artwork itself—something that would justify distinctions between high and low art or between art and rhetoric—so much as the attitude or perspective of the art viewer.

There are several key points to take away from this.

1. First is the broader historical frame. As Harris argues, operationalism constitutes a cultural value in the United States from the antebellum period forward, one that continues to be evident because it is generated by the sociological interactions among art, technology, and an increasingly literate if not refined mass population. Even if the conditions that birthed it in the Jacksonian period have changed, operationalism persists because its values have become acculturated into American middle-class taste cultures.
2. Second, operationalism is a reading position. It involves a set of attitudes, values, biases, and blind-spots in the eye of the beholder, not in the art itself. It may privilege some artworks over others, and certain artists themselves may embrace those valued elements—such as puzzles or technical jargon—but ultimately operationalism is defined by the pleasure of the audience.
3. Third, since it rests with the reader and not the text, any and all art may be subject to an operationalist gaze. Recall Harris' point that paintings and statuary shared exhibition space with archeological and biological curiosities. High art and low art are equally open to operationalist assessment, as are artworks from the different media. However, art considered along these lines is approached in a mode of analysis and cognitive stimulation, not of reflective meditation.
4. Hence—point four—the lines between art and technology may be blurred because the operational aesthetic seeks the same kind of pleasure from both.

5. Fifth and finally, the unclear distinction between kinds of aesthetic pleasure and the perhaps vulgar fetishization of technique can re-frame artworks as rhetorical and didactic. Hence, period pieces and biopics are read as *about* the eras and lives they depict. Espionage or legal thrillers are *about* spy tradecraft or courtroom procedures. Science fiction films like *The Martian* (2015, dir. Ridley Scott) or *Interstellar* (2014, dir. Christopher Nolan) are *about* illustrating the practicalities of terraforming Mars or concepts from theoretical physics.

Operationalism privileges the apparent technical accuracy of referential content over thematic profundity or formal nuance.<sup>161</sup> One consequence of this is a complicated web of various forms of rhetorical genres taking one another up, as fictional films and TV shows become educational tools,<sup>162</sup> and expert commentary on historical or technical accuracy serves as criticism.

### *Documentary Mode*

While paracinema and operationalism complicate the art/rhetoric distinction through their own readerly practices, documentary as a genre has such problems baked in, so to speak.

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<sup>161</sup> There is another kind of operationalism, though, which is focused on the form of the artwork at the expense of its content. One might think of Christopher Nolan's experiments with character and plot in films like *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006), and *Inception* (2010), or the complex intertwining plots and frame narratives of television shows like *Arrested Development* or *How I Met Your Mother*. Even the use of unconventional time signatures, polyrhythms, chord progressions, and song structures in popular music from Dave Brubeck to Frank Zappa to so-called progressive metal, "mathcore," or technical death metal bands like Meshuggah, Dillinger Escape Plan, or Necrophagist, respectively, exploits the audience's operational pleasure of figuring it out. For more on operationalism in television narratives, see Mittell's *Complex TV*.

<sup>162</sup> For example, clips of *My Cousin Vinny* (1992, dir. Jonathan Lynn) is famously used in law schools as a teaching tool. In 2003 the Pentagon advertised an internal screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo) with fliers that read "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film." See Kaufman.

Documentary is as fraught as other filmic genres with definitional complications, but its peculiar conceit as non-fiction cinema makes it something of a special case and a good one to close on. By now it should be clear that, if we are to treat documentary as a filmic genre, then it is subject to and defined by the same process of rhetorical genrefication as westerns or musicals. Dirk Eitzen argues in a similar pragmatic vein, claiming that “there is no such thing as a text that is intrinsically and necessarily a documentary. It is a particular kind of reading frame that makes a text a documentary. In other words, a documentary is what people are accustomed to make of it, no more and no less” (98). For Eitzen, a documentary is a film that people *presume* makes truth claims, based on paratextual “indexing” or conventional stylistic cues, whether the film makes truth claims in fact. A film’s “documentariness,” its ability to make truth claims (or to lie) is contingent upon the interpretive framing of a given viewer.<sup>163</sup>

The meta-generic label “documentary” likely evokes generally similar but non-identical kinds of textual and extra-textual attributes among similarly situated users. But whether those attributes add up to art or rhetoric in a given instance is a different matter. *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982, dir. Godfrey Reggio), for instance, makes extensive use of experimental photographic and editing techniques and pairs them with an avant garde minimalist score. Yet its non-fictional referential content, and the way its form frames that content, makes a powerful implicit case for the environmentally destructive and dehumanizing effects of modern life. It presents strong case

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<sup>163</sup> Eitzen’s model shares my focus on the definitional practices of viewers and the influence of “indexing” discourses. He is primarily occupied with the question of documentary specifically and its particular relation to truth claims and its reception among everyday viewers along those lines. My project, however, applies a similar pragmatic principle to all film genres and examines the idea of genre in light of the functions ascribed to it. Moreover, this project points to concrete expressions of genre as taken up into rhetorical genres and therefore indicative of broader social relationships, activities, and conflicts.

for both artistic and rhetorical readings, as both narrative and argumentative, both poetic and didactic.

Bill Nichols notes well this slippage among operations within one text, and it necessitates a parsing of documentary aesthetics in terms of his now-famous modes: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative (*Introduction* 31-2).<sup>164</sup> It is significant that Nichols chooses the “mode” as a concept—as opposed to something like “subgenre”—to distinguish among different kinds of documentary approaches.<sup>165</sup> This is significant because, on the one hand, like subgenre mode is a way of acknowledging variation within a genre (conventionally understood) without sacrificing the sense of a coherent and stable organizing principle that “genre” suggests to users, as we saw among the *28 Days Later* fans in Chapter 3.<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, “mode” implies flexibility, a non-totalizing suggestion that a text can move into and out of and among different modes at different points and still maintain its integrity.

[Modes] give structure to the overall film, but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization. [...] A more recent film need not have a more recent mode as

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<sup>164</sup> Nichols’ consistently uses documentary history and his proposed modes to structure and illustrate one another. There is not space here to attempt even a brief overview of documentary history, but it is worth noting that 1) documentary and avant garde/experimental film share a complicated history of influence and cross-pollination, but 2) histories of documentary have traditionally treated the two in isolation, to the effect that documentary has been able to maintain its expository utility for the scientific, social, and political “discourses of sobriety” involved in knowledge production and dissemination and social control. For historical accounts along these lines, see Nichols (*Representing Reality* ch. 1-2 and *Speaking Truths*), McLane, and Rees.

<sup>165</sup> I did cite observational documentary as an example of a genre in Ch. 1, and Nichols likely would object to this characterization, at least when understood in terms of conventional notions of genre. My point was that, when applied to a specific text—say, *Salesman* (1969, dir. Albert and David Maysles)—the label “observational documentary” organizes textual and extra-textual attributes in such a manner as to suggest a certain interpretation and framing. Furthermore, in this particular hypothetical case, both the film and especially the label index the social group for whom such a label is meaningful, namely scholars and students in film studies, a field in which Nichols’ writings on documentary are influential and widely taught.

<sup>166</sup> In adaptive terms, subgenre and mode are both ways of accommodating perturbations in a scheme. Logically, this strategy is self-defeating, since variable concrete instances can be accommodated only if the principle is sufficiently abstracted or qualified through ad hoc stipulations. This is not to say that the strategy is not pragmatically or rhetorically effective.

its dominant. It can revert to an earlier mode while still including elements of later modes. [...] The modes do not represent an evolutionary chain in which later modes demonstrate superiority over earlier ones and vanquish them. Once established through a set of conventions and paradigmatic firms, a given mode remains available to all.

*(Introduction 32)*

Where expository and poetic documentaries would seem to be one another's antithesis, Nichols admits each mode as potentially coexisting alongside its counterpoints within the text, available to a filmmaker as aesthetic options for different kinds of subject matter. In this way, "mode" suggests the sort of variation within a single text that "subgenre" would imply among multiple texts.

Perhaps because of the aesthetic orientation of his scholarship, Nichols is at least partially committed to a textualist account of documentary history and form in the manner of conventional genre criticism and theory. But his awareness of the variety of social uses documentaries and documentary form has historically been put to—e.g. propaganda or resistance—imbues his models with a pragmatic sensitivity. Despite his own Archimedean system building, Nichols makes room in his models for the the variegated uses of documentary by filmmakers. Hence, "mode" allows Nichols to acknowledge the formal coexistence of different approaches to non-fiction filmmaking operative within one text while still being able to claim that there is some such thing as "documentary" as a meaningful category.

As it relates to documentary as a genre, "mode" is functionally the same as "subgenre." But in terms of organizing a particular text, mode is less totalizing and determinate than "subgenre." In this way "mode" provides enough latitude for a documentary text to be read both

artistically and rhetorically in a way we don't typically expect from a fiction or experimental or instructional film. Documentary in this sense doesn't disavow its rhetorical and artistic slippage but wears it proudly as a function of its peculiar philosophical issues. Where the most referential of instructional films can be attended to for their form, and where any fiction film can be framed in terms of its various representations' relations to reality, documentary's dominant axis of meaning construction appears to be exactly the questions of when, where, and to what extent it is rhetorical and/or artistic. This looseness of meaning construction makes documentary in all its modes particularly versatile in terms of its social use and its uptake into various other genres.

## Appendix

IamShartacus. "Was 28 Days Later a zombie movie? My relationship hangs in the balance." *Reddit*, 24 May 2011.

[Below are screenshots of the full thread analyzed in Chapter 3. User comments are cited in-text by name.]

POPULAR ALL RANDOM USERS ASKREDDIT WORLDNEWS VIDEOS FUNNY TODAYILEARNED PICS GAMING MOVIES NEWS GIFS MILDLYINTERESTING AV

askreddit

COMMENTS

Welcome to Reddit,  
the front page of the internet.

BECOME A REDDITOR and subscribe to one of thousands of communities.

Was 28 Days Later a zombie movie? My relationship hangs in the balance.  
(self.AskReddit)  
submitted 7 years ago by IamShartacus

I consider myself something of a zombie movie connoisseur, a zombophile, if you will. I'm sure many of you can relate. I'm no expert by any means, but I've seen the complete Romero series, most of the recent "fast-zombie" movies, and the zombie comedies (zomedies?) *Shaun of the Dead*, *Zombieland*, *I Sell the Dead*, etc.

Anywho, I've always considered *28 Days Later* to be a zombie movie, as do most people, from what I can tell. The antagonists are hordes of bloodthirsty, mindless, humanoids, whose "disease" is spread through biting (among other means). The whole premise just screams zombie.

My fiancée, who only recently took an interest in zombie movies, firmly believes that *28 Days Later* is **not** a zombie movie, but just a good horror apocalyptic horror movie. I'll summarize her evidence:

- Infected humans don't die and come back as zombies; they make the transition straight from living to **BRAAAAAAAAAAINS!!** without skipping a (heart)beat.
- There is little evidence that the *28DL* "zombies" are eating their victims. For the infected, biting might just be another way to inflict pain. Notably, in the [sequel](#), the "zombies" just beat the crap out of their victims (spoiler: there is some eye-thumbing in this movie too)

be another way to inflict pain. Notably, in the [sequel](#), the "zombies" just beat the crap out of their victims (spoiler: there is some eye-thumbing in this movie too).

I recognize that *28DL* falls outside the traditional Romero canon because of these facts, but I still believe that it is a zombie movie in spirit. This argument has put a considerable strain on our relationship, and I'm considering leaving her over this\*\*. Zombie compatibility is a crucial part of any relationship.

I leave it to the experts of Reddit to decide who is right.

\*\*Not intended to be a factual statement

125 comments share save hide report

all 125 comments

sorted by: [best](#) ▾

Want to add to the discussion?

Post a comment!

[CREATE AN ACCOUNT](#)

[-] [Prufrock451](#) 45 points 7 years ago

You have a fiancée who cares about the difference between fast zombies and real zombies. You should just stop worrying about this question and go take the day off to stare at her adoringly.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#)

[-] [emkat](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Apt username.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#)

[-] [Prufrock451](#) 1 point 7 years ago

You might say she's a peach.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#)

[-] [odelay42](#) 3 points 7 years ago

stare at her adoringly

Chicks don't dig this. They wanna be around dudes that have shit to do.

Also, ๔\_๔

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#)

[-] [neodiogenes](#) 7 points 7 years ago

Chicks (or at least some chicks) dig the adoring stare when it's their chosen mate doing the staring. And accompanied by the usual tokens of affection: flowers, chocolates, promises you don't intend to keep ...

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[-] [lextenou](#) 3 points 7 years ago

...Cogsworth? Is that you?

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[-] [Prufrock451](#) 0 points 7 years ago

[Are you saying staring is creepy?](#)

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#)

[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 22 points 7 years ago

There is little evidence that the 28DL "zombies" are eating their victims.

I could be wrong, but when they get to the mansion towards the end, arent they trying to starve the soldier who

became infected to see how long they can last without food? I think that is implying that people are the food.

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↑ [-] [elguerra](#) 4 points 7 years ago

↓ Plus: No corpses on the streets. As far as I remember, empty streets were empty.

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↑ [-] [mercvr](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ Wasn't the premise of the 28 days later that they all died of starvation after 28 days? Or was it the disease that killed them after time?

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 5 points 7 years ago

↓ It's 28 Days Later because he wakes up 28 days after it begins. It take many months for them to starve. They did die of starvation, though. I think anything is food, but they've lost the cognitive ability to feed themselves. They appear to eat at people, but they aren't killing them to eat them.

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↑ [-] [Chipware](#) 9 points 7 years ago

↓ Cillian Murphy's character woke up 28 days later in the hospital.

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ 28 days later was when the main character woke from his coma. 28 days after he crashed.

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↑ [-] [Toastmaster\\_General](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ I could swear in 28 Weeks Later, they mentioned them starving off.

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ They actually mention itinerary the end of Days Later. When the jet zips across the countryside you see that they are starving. In the end of Weeks Later you see that they have begun spreading it to other countries.

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ I accidentally an itinerery. *mention it near the end of*

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↑ [-] [DylanFord](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ Yeah they do, they're waiting for the infected to starve to death which is taking longer then first thought. But they are waiting for it

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↑ [-] [ChickMD](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ I don't think it implies that people are food. I kind of always took it as a way for the soldiers to gauge how long it would take the infected to die off and for it to be relatively safe to go get supplies, try to get help, etc.

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↑ [-] [meltibsen](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ There are no people with any sizeable bites on them they are nearly rage infested not cannibalistic

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↑ [-] [Gonzobot](#) 49 points 7 years ago

↓ Not zombies, infected. You need to establish this clear and concise fact early on in a relationship; there are zombies, and there are infected; zombies can spread by infection, **but not all infected are zombies.**

30.8k  
[Sign](#)  
[what](#)

permalink embed save

[-] [lextenou](#) 16 points 7 years ago  
 Mmm. Quite. *sips tea, shotgun at the ready*  
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[-] [ProbablyHittingOnYou](#) 5 points 7 years ago  
 The key is really the definition of *zombie*, which I would say is the "undead". A person who's heart stopped and died, and was then re-animated.  
 IIRC, the 28-days 'Infected' never *died*. Is this right?  
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[-] [bolxrex](#) 4 points 7 years ago  
 Wrong definition of zombie.  
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[-] [Gonzobot](#) 1 point 7 years ago  
 One of several reasons why they're not really zombies, yes.  
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[-] [pietro187](#) 7 points 7 years ago  
 This. It is a "rage virus" movie.  
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[-] [neodiogenes](#) 2 points 7 years ago  
 Thirderd. Technically this is correct.  
 I should add that if this is critically important to both of you and the quality of your relationship -- you are **definitely** marrying the right woman.  
 Congrats!  
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[-] [Ace1999](#) 1 point 7 years ago  
 Like Quarantine?  
 permalink embed save parent

[-] [Hatetank](#) 2 points 7 years ago  
 THIS!  
 permalink embed save parent

[-] [Questions-Answered](#) 8 points 7 years ago  
 They don't eat their victims, but without biting fresh humans they appear to starve. So I'm not sure really.  
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[-] [Nitero](#) 1 point 7 years ago  
 -----this is a interesting point.  
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[-] [meltibsen](#) 1 point 7 years ago  
 They starve because after infection they stop eating altogether  
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[-] [leevs11](#) 22 points 7 years ago

There are living dead zombies, there are infected zombies, and there are voodoo zombies. Different strokes for different folks.

also... [r/zombies](#)

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[-] [lextenou](#) 4 points 7 years ago

I wish we could see more voodoo/magic zombies. Those ones are awesome.

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[-] [leevs11](#) 5 points 7 years ago

It's hard to do better than Weekend at Bernie's 2...

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[-] [thief88](#) 5 points 7 years ago

I know what you mean. I recently saw Stardust with my niece and I was pleasantly surprised to see a "voodoo zombie" towards the climax of the movie.

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[-] [ForeverAloneAlone](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Like sex zombies.

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[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Are normal people welcomed in [r/zombies](#)? Kinda don't want to find out the hard way.

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[-] [leevs11](#) 1 point 7 years ago

[-] [leevs11](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Yes as long as you don't say something like "Fuck George Romero, that fag that made those Twilight movies!"

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[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Not what I was insinuating. But good advice non the less.

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[-] [TheyCalledMeMad](#) 23 points 7 years ago

Yes, of course it is a zombie movie. People act like there is some consensus about what a "zombie" is, but that's complete bullshit. Some zombies are dead, reanimated corpses. Some zombies are living creatures infected with a pathogen. Some zombies are mind-controlled people, forced to obey their master (with drugs, diseases, voodoo, etc).

Hell, the original zombie myth didn't include them being undead, they were living slaves.

There are zombie infections, there are zombie-like infections, and they're the *same damn thing*.

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[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 8 points 7 years ago

Thank you. Hardcore zombie fundamentalists irritate me because they act like there is some defined standard that needs to be rigidly adhered to in order to qualify zombies as "real" zombies. 28DL was a zombie movie as much as any other zombie movie. One of the few good zombie "action" movies (versus the typical zombie horror movies.)

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[-] [BippyTheBeardless](#) 4 points 7 years ago

"Hell, the original zombie myth didn't include them being undead, they were living slaves" is the key point.

Zombies aren't animated corpses. They aren't undead.

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[-] **Gonzobot** 3 points 7 years ago

For a zombie who has his brains, there is nothing more in life than the acquisition of more brains.

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[-] **laxtenou** 1 point 7 years ago

braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiins...

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[-] **zombree** 2 points 7 years ago

I support this.

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[-] **2crz4u** 4 points 7 years ago

## zom·bie

**noun** /ˈzɑmbē/ zombies, plural

- Originally, a snake-deity of or deriving from West Africa and Haiti
- A soulless corpse said to be revived by witchcraft, esp. in certain African and Caribbean religions
- A person who is or appears lifeless, apathetic, or completely unresponsive to their surroundings
- A computer controlled by a hacker without the owner's knowledge, which is made to send large quantities of data to a website, making it inaccessible to other users
- A tall mixed drink consisting of several kinds of rum, liqueur, and fruit juice

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[-] **[deleted]** 9 points 7 years ago

It has the heart of a zombie movie, but I've always considered it an apocalyptic infection type of movie. The deaths aren't about feeding, they're about killing - just killing for the fuck's sake of killing. It's a rage virus and it doesn't kill a victim before it takes them over. The zombie virus kills the infected and then reanimates them. Also. the transfer of

fluids is what causes infection, so it can be spread without a bite. Such as when the crow drips infected blood into the dad's eye.

The infected to begin to starve to death, but I've always felt like it was related on their tunnel vision need to kill rather than a lack of food, they've just neglected eating and are totally focused on the rage within.

I'm a big zombie person myself. I'm a bit phobic and because of this I feel a need to do EVERYTHING zombie as a way to control them - which is purely and stupidly psychological, but I can't help it. That said, I file this one with my zombie movies, but I don't consider the infected actual zombies.

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[-] **Gonzobot** 2 points 7 years ago

The infected to begin to starve to death, but I've always felt like it was related on their tunnel vision need to kill rather than a lack of food, they've just neglected eating and are totally focused on the rage within.

Exactly. Zombies would be eating. But there are still entire grocery stores still full of food, not even looted.

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[-] **[deleted]** 2 points 7 years ago

Also, zombies don't succumb to the weakness of their body from said starvation. They just continue to move about as they decompose. The rage infected become too weak to move.

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[-] **bolxrex** 1 point 7 years ago

Of course they succumb to their bodily weaknesses. Didn't you see / read Walking Dead ep 1 / book 1? The zombie laying out in the field after Rick leaves the hospital can't move because it's body was torn apart. You don't see it flying around chasing after people regardless of what state it's body is in just because it's the living dead.

So you're saying shooting a zombie in the head doesn't kill it? Why would it die just from losing its brain if it's corporeal body has no bearing? Zombies are magic undead right, that don't succumb to the weakness of their own body right?



Zombie aren't people. That's not your mother anymore. Run -or- Shoot? BOTH!

If every zombie movie was the same we'd all have been bored of them by now. =) *coughRomerocough*

My favorite zombies are the ones I see at the mall / freeway / movie theaters / sporting events / work ... none of them are dead but I wouldn't really call them living either.

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ \*Zombies don't fly.

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↑ [-] [bolxrex](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ They'd never get past TSA.

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↑ [-] [mrwright98](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ To be honest I think you both are right in a way. Her findings are true, In order to be a zombie you have to die, hence the living dead. In 28DL, they are not out to eat brains, but to just hurt people basically and spread their rage. Being a fan of the movies ima have to go with Derpina on this one. its not a zombie movie, just a really good apocalyptic movie

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↑ [-] [Mexican\\_Man](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ If a Zombie was bit by a vampire what would happen? Or If a zombie bit a vampire...what would happen then?

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↑ [-] [IamShartacus](#) [S] 2 points 7 years ago

↓ I don't know, but there's [one way](#) to find out.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#)

↑ [-] [CartoonShowroom](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ Cursed by a mummy's tomb, stabbed by a werewolf bone, bitten by a zombie vampire - that's Monster Nash.

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↑ [-] [distess\\_caloris](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ Pretty sure it was about a guy who every 28 days turned into AC Slater from Saved By The Bell.

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↑ [-] [finalremix](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ In the horror genre, I've always counted

| bloodthirsty, mindless, humanoids, whose "disease" is spread through biting (among other means) as meaning "Zombie".

If you want a good "infected but not zombies" post-apocalyptic story, see "[Survivors](#)" and "[Survivors](#)". A super-sickness kills *almost everyone* on earth (it spreads as quickly as Rage in the 28- movies), and the cast is dealing with surviving in an otherwise abandoned planet.

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↑ [-] [MHTLuca](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ I've been obsessed with zombies since childhood, and only had my views on what actually denotes a zombie phrased well in the book "The Zombie Autopsies". Anything that would be considered NLH(No Longer Human) denotes a "zombie".

I could write a damned essay on this, yes, the people of 28days are "infected", just like your resident evil game

genres. And they're still considered zombies to my knowledge.

Short Answer from one zombie buff to another, 28 Days is a zombie movie...28 weeks is an abomination...

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↑ [-] [bolxrex](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ The intro to 28WL was so good. I'd like to see your essay on this.

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↑ [-] [NotASaintDDC](#) 3 points 7 years ago

↓ Yes, the intro was VERY good, but the rest of the movie was shit.

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↑ [-] [bolxrex](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ Can not deny it went down hill after the intro.

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↑ [-] [MHTLuca](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ Which essay? The 28Days/28Weeks essay? (Which mostly has to do with the whole immunity thign as to how the RAGE virus works, and the fact that 28Days was an outstanding stand alone movie that didn't need a sequel) or my general zombie essay? I'll be more than happy to oblige when I get to my computer. (On phone currently.)

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↑ [-] [bolxrex](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ Yeah the one detailing why 28DL (Infected) are zombies despite apparent popular belief.

Or both!

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 8 points 7 years ago

↓ Yeah, it's zombies.

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↑ [-] [RevRaven](#) 6 points 7 years ago

↓ Zombies are the living dead. 28DL folks are very much alive.

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↑ [-] [Howard\\_Beale](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ It isn't commutative. The living dead are zombies, but not all zombies need to be the living dead. The term zombie actually comes from Voodoo, and relates to anyone who had become zombified.

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↑ [-] [bolxrex](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ well said

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#)

↑ [-] [M\\_Me\\_Meteo](#) 2 points 7 years ago

↓ As far as I'm concerned, in cinema a zombie is a person who dies and is still able to function. Therefore, a zombie will continue feeding until his or her body falls apart.

An infected person is still technically alive. The concept that the zombies will eventually starve and die implies that they have a metabolism and are not zombies, but infected people.

Does 28DL and 28WL deserve to be genre'd as zombie flicks? Yes. Are there any actual zombies in those films? In my opinion, no.

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↑ [-] [nicknamex](#) 2 points 7 years ago

[-] [nicknameex](#) 2 points 7 years ago

I love zombies, movies, etc - but don't think I am as experienced in the matter as others. However, my take on zombies, is that there are different flavors of zombies. I consider a reanimated flesh seeking/biting/ravenous person that is not of rational-mind at all, that has no control other than to seek out and bite/infect others are all "zombies". Some are fast, some are slow, some are big, some are small.. but in the end they're all zombies. I would consider that in 28DL, they are zombies, but the "infected" kind.

I'd also like to consider that maybe an "infected" is a new zombie. Meaning in that they've just changed, so they still have good skin, muscles are still in-tact, are in better shape and can move quickly and actually beat someone to a bloody pulp. Where as, as they age, and their skin starts to rot, they're muscles weaken and rot, they have to resort to biting as they can't muster up the strength to punch/hit/beat.

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[-] [HSOK](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Die hard is an action movie about a police officer who has to stop terrorists using guns and explosives. Mission impossible is about a secret agent who has to stop terrorists at first by using stealth operations, and then guns and explosives. Both are basically the same action movie formula, just variations thereof. I consider 28 Days Later to be a zombie movie because it is very obviously made in the same formula of a zombie movie.

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[-] [Ubermensch655321](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Of course they are Zombies. In that AMC show Walking Dead its a disease as well but those are definitely some mother fucking zombies.

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[-] [science\\_diction](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Its more of a zombie movie than half the zombie movies you mentioned in your post. There's a reason zombie movies gained huge popularity in the 70s. They were created as allegories to race riots and what many people believed would

be the end of civilization or democracy. That's why they move in mobs. That's why everyone they attack gets "infected". Its a safe way to talk about racial or class based rioting without looking like a black panther or a commy pinko in the 70s.

Hence why in Dawn of the Dead the "survivors" hang out in the mall - perhaps the biggest image of over excess super capitalist white America.

28 Days Later touches on those themes. 28 Weeks Later takes those themes and crams them down your damn throat. I haven't seen another zombie movie yet that pushes the "the world you live in is an illusion and if everybody went crazy everything would be fucked" that is anywhere as close to hammering the point home than 28 Weeks Later. Without 28 Days Later, 28 Weeks Later wouldn't have been, so you have to give it a cornerstone there.

Zombies, when done in the classic style, are allegory.

They wouldn't be scary otherwise.

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[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Both of you are correct because you have different views of what a zombie is.

There are three types of zombies.

- 1: The walking dead. As the name says, these zombies are the ones who died and have risen from the dead.
- 2: Infected. These include zombies from the 28 weeks later movies. It also allows for other types of infections (think zombie ants)
- 3: Magical. These zombies are created by magical means to remove their will. To my understanding, the idea of zombies come from voodoo stories.

You appear to believe that it's the loss of basic "humanness" that creates a zombie, so I'm going to guess that you would agree that #3 is also a type of zombie.

Your girlfriend believes that a zombie is a animated corpse. She's not wrong, but she has a limited view on what a zombie is.

~~What you need to do is sit down and discuss with her the various methods of creating a zombie and their effects. You~~

What you need to do is sit down and discuss with her the various methods of creating a zombie and their effects. You need to be prepared for all types of zombie uprisings, so her view needs widened a little bit.

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↑ [-] **bolxrex** 2 points 7 years ago\*

By definition not a single modern day zombie movie has zombies in it.

Zombies have their roots in voodoo mysticism. Traditionally zombies are mindless, but living, humans under the control of a witchdoctor who unquestioningly / unthinkingly perform the tasks given to them.

Romero changed everything. Zombies became the undead risen from the grave or the recently slain who's only purpose was to eat the flesh of the living. Being bitten by a zombie didn't turn you into a zombie. Being dead turned you into a zombie.

Modern zombie revival changed everything. Zombies became infectious pseudo-dead unrelenting monsters.

Kirkman changed everything. The Walking Dead brought the "whatever the fuck you want it to be" back in to fiction.

If you need to draw a distinction between zombies and the rage filled infected from 28 Days Later then you are over thinking everything. Zombie movies are meant to show us what humanity is capable of when we actively ignore our brains and pursue our tasks mindlessly. They are meant to show us how fragile our grand civilization is as we ignore everything & eachother spiraling into the future on the back of progress. Hang on to your humanity for the (brain)dead already walk among us.

The infected is just a hipster word for zombie. Deal with it.

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↑ [-] **zombree** 2 points 7 years ago

"The infected is just a hipster word for zombie." I chuckled. Aloud, even.

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↑ [-] **physizhy** 2 points 7 years ago

↑ [-] **physizhy** 2 points 7 years ago

Definitely zombies.

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↑ [-] **jpaw33** 2 points 7 years ago

Not Zombies. They refer to them in the movie as the Infected. If they can bleed to death, or starve to death and don't come back, then they are not zombies. But they are very similar and actually a lot more believable, which makes them just as scary if not more so.

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↑ [-] **bolxrex** 1 point 7 years ago

Which zombie movie do the characters ever refer to the zombies as "zombies"? Very few, if any. Can't remember if the Romero classics do or not, but most modern zombie movies usually just have the characters referring to "them", "those things", "those muthafuckas", or some other nebulous title.

28DL are zombies that stem from a basis in science fiction rather than a basis in magic. 28DL are not undead, but they are zombies. As a result they are tied to more basic functions of life.. the necessity for blood for motor functions and sustenance for energy. The modern slant definitely makes it more terrifying and "real" for modern savvy audiences.

All zombies (even the magic ones) can be killed, or obliterated. . . however you want to think of it.

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↑ [-] **jpaw33** 1 point 7 years ago

I think only the cheezier of the '80s Zombie movies and Shaun of the Dead actually refer to them as Zombies, but I never said 28DL did. I just meant that they had a very distinct name for them which wasn't Zombie, and they probably did that for a reason. I totally see your point about how any mindless horde of what used to be normal humans and are now out for blood could be classified as Zombies in today's pop culture. I get that. But for me, personally, I view a Zombie as dead, and can only be killed for good by destroying the brain.

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[-] [bolxrex](#) 1 point 7 years ago

That's a very strict definition of the zombie genre handed down from Romero himself. I don't think Romero meant to unequivocally change zombies forever, just broaden the definition.

My argument is the nature of zombies was adapted from another culture's mythology to include something entirely different. Why limit it there.

Saying 28DL isn't a zombie movie is like saying Willow isn't a fantasy movie because it didn't happen in Middle Earth.

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[-] [Howard\\_Beale](#) 2 points 7 years ago

Not all zombies have to die to become zombies. As proof, I give you "The Serpent and the Rainbow". Zombie movie. QED.

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[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 2 points 7 years ago

I argue that zombie is a state of mind and not a medical condition. 28 days later = zombie film.

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[-] [rabidkillercow](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Take it from me, this conversation can *ruin relationships*. Some people are really uppity about their zombie taxonomy.

For me, the fateful argument was whether the reanimated corpses in the air vents in "Room 1408" were zombies.

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[-] [MaoChan](#) 1 point 7 years ago

I'm pretty sure she should be making sandwiches for you to eat while watching 28DL rather than being in the living room watching 28DL.

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[-] [cowpuck](#) 1 point 7 years ago

An argument contingent on the duration of a transition from "normal" to "diseased" is invalid; the transition still occurs.

To the second point, considering the phenomenon of *being* a zombie is (currently) completely hypothetical, there is no backed facts about how this disease actual affects its host's appetite; therefore, this second argument is moot.

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[-] [itchylot](#) 1 point 7 years ago

I never thought of the infected in 28 Days Later as true zombies -- they seem more intent on just fucking up people by any means necessary (scratching, pulling people apart) due to the rage virus than only going for the bite so they can eat someone. They turn quicker, can starve to death, and don't require a headshot to be killed. So no, I don't consider them to be a standard, "classic" zombie, but I suppose you could argue that they're a new form that adhere to an updated set of rules.

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[-] [deathcannon](#) 1 point 7 years ago

[28 Days Later is a movie about how liberalism failed in the War on Terror, and the terrorists won. The liberals' love of big government failed them and people had to learn to love the right-wing military. Or did they?](#)

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[-] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Nope

Although I place it next to my zombie movies, technically it is not

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[-] [Mr\\_Fix\\_It](#) 1 point 7 years ago

"28 Days Later" is not a Zombie movie in the same way that "I Am Legend" is not a Vampire book. Legend gives a

possible scientific explanation to how the vampire myth might come about, and then at the end, flips the mythos around. Of course, the Legend movie chose a different ending.

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↑ [-] [Chipware](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Yes, they are zombies. Remember the end? There was one laying in the road. If that is not a zombie, I don't know what is.

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 point 7 years ago

It's clearly not a zombie movie in the classic sense. However, the infected do closely resemble zombies. It is appropriate to refer to this movie as either a zombie flick or a post-apocalyptic movie.

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↑ [-] [ChickMD](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Zombie genre? Yes. Traditional, dead, brain-eating zombies? No. Just agree to disagree.

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↑ [-] [jclives](#) 1 point 7 years ago

They are zombies in the same context as Val Lewton's I Walked with a Zombie. They are not zombie's in the context of George A. Romero, or Lucio Fulci films.

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↑ [-] [techstepper](#) 1 point 7 years ago

Generally, zombies are considered "the walking dead."

The "zombies" in 28 Days Later are infected with a virus that causes rage, they are not re-animated after dying, and they do not eat people. Any biting is merely a primitive, animalistic method of attacking victims.

Technically, not a zombie film, but I would still keep it in the same general category. If anything, it's a thriller/horror/post-apocalyptic film.

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↑ [-] [DarrenEdwards](#) 1 point 7 years ago

This was a disease cocktail similar to rabies. The infected are still alive, until they starve to death after about 3 weeks. Although with vomiting large amounts of blood I would assume starving and dehydration would happen in a matter of days.

I am going to give the points to your so.

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↑ [-] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 point 7 years ago

I would consider them zombies, maybe not the "Classic" zombie that everyone's familiar with though. Zombies are "altered" people: Not the same person after infection, and never get better; They attack all normals regardless of situation.

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↑ [-] [RSvennson](#) 1 point 7 years ago

In reality, the zombies of 28DL and 28WL are not true zombies. They are too fast, too smart, and not as occupied with eating flesh as they should be. These movies are zombie movies in the sense of infected attacking non-infected, but are not true zombies. They are infected with what the movie calls the Rage Virus (I Believe). This virus basically causes the infected to go crazy and attack people, therefore transferring the virus. It is a different kind of infection that possesses true zombies. So in my opinion, it, in the basics of the movie, is a zombie movie, but in the details, it is more of a "attack of crazy people" movie.

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↑ [-] [TheCloned](#) 1 point 7 years ago

I know [r/zombies](#) would downvote me to hell if they heard me say this, but as one zombienhile to another, you need

▼ I know [r/zombies](#) would downvote me to hell if they heard me say this, but as one zombiephile to another, you need to stop putting Romero on a pedestal. (Or rather, she needs to.)

Sure, he created the modern zombie and whole culture of zombies. But have you seen his recent work? It's absolute shit. The culture has gotten away from, it evolved past him and he couldn't adapt. I personally don't think Romero is a good authority on zombies anymore.

Yes, 28 Days Later was a zombie movie, as long as you're not constricting yourself to Romero's zombies.

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↑ [-] [goxilo](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ Shaun of the Dead

... I think is not a "zombie movie". I mean, it's in the same boat as 28DL - they don't die, IIRC. But it's clearly a zombie movie. Therefore, 28DL is a zombie movie.

At any rate, it's in the same genre - loads of people infected/affected, infecting/affecting other people. Right?

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↑ [-] [Mexican\\_Man](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ So out of you two, who would survive Z-Day...?

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↑ [-] [IamShartacus](#) [S] 1 point 7 years ago

↓ Both, or neither. We have a detailed survival strategy that involves a no-killing-each-other pact. Either we live together or we *undead* together.

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↑ [-] [Acidyo](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ I believe the movie was about the menstrual cycle.

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↑ [-] [rougegoat](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ uh...being a zombie has nothing to do with being undead or eating the living or not dying or any of the things most people seem to believe it does. "Zombie" is just a mindless humanoid, regardless of reasoning or danger of being around them or how the "zombification" is spread.

It first meant undead following the release of "Night of the Living Dead", which never used the zed word. As these movies became more popular, movies with other kinds of zombies (such as disease, voodoo, or brainwash zombies) became less common. Pop culture began to associate "zombies" with being undead or eating flesh, and eventually began to believe that these were requirements for the classification of "zombie".

tl;dr You are correct, the 28 Days Later infected are zombies, but not exactly for the reasons either of you listed.

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↑ [-] [Snap65](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ They are Zombies 2.0

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↑ [-] [starkistuna](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ Leaving a girl over undead or zombies... wow she's got to be hot.

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↑ [-] [DylanFord](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ The infected from "28 Days Later" are rage infected not zombies as far as I can tell. With zombies you need to disable the brain to stop them, with the infected from "28 Days Later" whatever would kill a human would kill hem too if I'm remembering correctly. So not technically zombie no

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↑ [-] [DylanFord](#) 1 point 7 years ago

↓ But pretty damn close, close enough to not let it ruin a relationship bro.

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↑ [-] [deleted] 1 point 7 years ago

I'd like to say no, it's not a zombie movie. But there really isn't a strict guideline as to what a zombie movie is. When I read zombie, I picture decaying corpses that are reanimated. The "zombies" in 28 Days Later are just people infected by a virus that causes them to rage and kill. I don't know. It's a tough one, and maybe you'll have to bite the bullet and agree with your girlfriend so that you can continue hittin' dat.

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↑ [-] lolmonger 1 point 7 years ago

Your girl is objectively correct - the infected in that movie do not eat brains, nor are they rotting; they are simply insane human beings with accelerated metabolic processes and a need to kill things.

However, in the spirit of zombie movies that create those apocalyptic horror movies, you are in the right.

Remember films where the zombies would show up and walk shopping malls like they used to? Try using the telephone (or successfully use a telephone - "Send more ambulances!"), or try shaving? Try to salute a superior office? Use a razor? Be fascinated by fireworks? Try getting back into their old homes?

Zombies are terrifying because they represent *us*. They are *us*, but ultimately obsessed with fulfilling *their* needs at our expense - the ultimate in capitalist consumerism, the ultimate in communist collectivism; they are the devouring horde.

The most poignant scene in 28 days later is when the hero gouges out the eyes of the corrupt British officer - and the leading lady hesitates (as she insisted she wouldn't previously) as she is unsure whether or not *he is himself infected*. Then the little girl mistakes their embrace and kiss as an attack.

The point is that there is little separation between us and them - which is what makes zombies so horrifying in the first place. We constantly try to build up barriers against them and they constantly break them down.

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↑ [-] zombree 1 point 7 years ago

My favorite comment in the entire thread.

↑ [-] lolmonger 1 point 7 years ago

Thanks!

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↑ [-] beastduels 0 points 7 years ago

Absolutely not a zombie movie. Similar, and awesome, but not zombies. Try starting a poll in [r/zombies](#) and i'm sure >80% will say not zombies

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↑ [-] ChippedMetalCig 0 points 7 years ago\*

28 Day Later is not a zombie movie. The infected die of starvation, and we all know that the whole reason a zombie is a zombie is because it's dead to begin with and that also covers the fact that they do not eat their victims. Living, starving infected. Not zombies.

e: I also understand that the original zombie was not a dead person at all, but they have evolved over time and the more recent incarnation is that I'm using.

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↑ [-] Pullr -2 points 7 years ago

Its a zombie movie. Tell her to shut up and listen to her fiancee, you are obviously an expert!

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↑ [-] Iesmalan -2 points 7 years ago

Romero's zombies are the only zombies, we literally CANNOT advance this conversation otherwise.

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↑ [-] w1ngm4n -1 points 7 years ago

no

↑ [-] [wingm4n](#) -1 points 7 years ago

↓

no

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↑ [-] [elguerra](#) -1 points 7 years ago

↓

Not zombies.

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↑ [-] [netburnr2](#) -2 points 7 years ago

↓

I still believe this movie was only released so that chicks could watch Cillian Murphy run around naked. This movie was terrible, and seeing his wang in the first 10 minutes sealed the fate of this movie as shit.

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## Filmography

- 28 Days Later*. Directed by Danny Boyle, DNA Films, 2002.
- 28 Weeks Later*. Directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, DNA Films, 2007.
- 1408*. Directed by Mikael Häfström, di Bonaventura Pictures, 2007.
- Alien*. Directed by Ridley Scott, 20th Century Fox, 1979.
- Apollo 13*. Directed by Ron Howard, Imagine Entertainment, 1995.
- April Fool's Day*. Directed by Fred Walton, Hometown Films, 1986.
- The Aviator*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Miramax, 2004.
- The Babadook*. Directed by Jennifer Kent, Causeway Films, 2014.
- The Battle of Algiers*. Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, Rialto Pictures, 1966.
- A Beautiful Mind*. Directed by Ron Howard, Imagine Entertainment, 2001.
- Beetlejuice*. Directed by Tim Burton, The Geffen Company, 1988.
- Being There*. Directed by Hal Ashby, Lorimar Productions, 1979.
- Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler, Marvel Studios, 2018.
- The Big Lebowski*. Directed by Joel Coen, Working Title Films, 1998.
- The Boogey Man*. Directed by Ulli Lommel, The Jerry Gross Organization, 1980.
- Casino*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Universal Entertainment, 1995.
- Charly*. Directed by Ralph Nelson, ABC Motion Pictures, 1968.
- Chinatown*. Directed by Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1974.
- Christmas Evil*. Directed by Lewis Jackson, Edward R. Pressman Film, 1980.
- Clueless*. Directed by Amy Heckerling, Paramount Pictures, 1995.
- The Crazies*. Directed by George A. Romero, Cambist Films, 1973.
- The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Directed by Jack Arnold, Universal Pictures, 1954.
- Dances with Wolves*. Directed by Kevin Costner, Tig Productions, 1990.
- Dawn of the Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, Laurel Group, 1978.
- Dawn of Dead*. Directed by Zach Snyder, Strike Entertainment, 2004.

*Day of the Dead*. Laurel Entertainment, 1985.

*The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Directed by Robert Wise, 20th Century Fox, 1951.

*Dead End*. Directed by William Wyler, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1937.

*Dead Poets Society*. Directed by Peter Weir, Touchstone Pictures, 1989.

*The Devil's Advocate*. Directed by Taylor Hackford, Regency Enterprises, 1997.

*The Devil's Rejects*. Directed by Rob Zombie, Cinelamda, 2005.

*Diary of the Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, Artfire Films, 2007.

*Disraeli*. Directed by Alfred E. Green, Warner Bros., 1929.

*Dog Day Afternoon*. Directed by Sidney Lumet, Artists Entertainment Complex, 1975.

*Don't Go in the House*. Directed by Joseph Ellison, Turbine Films, 1980.

*Dracula*. Directed by Tod Browning, Universal Pictures, 1931.

*The Fisher King*. Directed by Terry Gilliam, Hill/Obst Productions, 1991.

*The Fly*. Directed by David Cronenberg, Brookfilms, 1986.

*The Fog*. Directed by John Carpenter, Debra Hill Productions, 1980.

*Forrest Gump*. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, Wendy Finerman Productions, 1994.

*Frankenstein*. Directed by James Whale, Universal Pictures, 1931.

*The French Connection*. Directed by William Friedkin, Philip D'Antoni Productions, 1971

*Friday the 13th*. Directed by Sean S. Cunningham, Georgetown Productions, 1980.

*Friday the 13th, Part III*. Directed by Steve Miner, Jason, Inc., 1982.

*Get Out*. Directed by Jordan Peele, Blumhouse, 2017.

*Ghosts of Mississippi*. Directed by Rob Reiner, Castle Rock Entertainment, 1996.

*The Godfather*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, American Zoetrope, 1972.

*Goodfellas*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros., 1990.

*Graduation Day*. Directed by Herb Freed, IFI/Scope III, 1981.

*The Great Train Robbery*. Directed by Edwin S. Porter, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.

*The Green Mile*. Directed by Frank Darabont, Castle Rock Entertainment, 1999.

*Harvey*. Directed by Henry Koster, Universal Pictures, 1950.

*Halloween*. Directed by John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.

*Halloween*. Directed by David Gordon Green, Blumhouse, 2018.

*Halloween II*. Directed by Richard Rosenthal, Dino de Laurentiis Corporation, 1981.

*Halloween H20: 20 Years Later*. Directed by Steve Miner, Dimension Films, 1998.

*Halloween: Resurrection*. Directed by Richard Rosenthal, Dimension Films, 2002.

*He Knows You're Alone*. Directed by Armand Mastroianni, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1980.

*Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann, Cinemarque, 1989.

*Hereditary*. Directed by Ari Aster, A24, 2018.

*Hostel*. Directed by Eli Roth, Next Entertainment, 2005.

*The Howling*. Directed by Joe Dante, Wescom Productions, 1981.

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Directed by William Dieterle, RKO, 1939.

*I Am Sam*. Directed by Jessie Nelson, The Bedford Falls Company, 2001.

*I Sell the Dead*. Directed by Glen McQuaid, Glass Eye Pix, 2008.

*I Spit on Your Grave*. Directed by Meir Zarchi, Cinemagic Pictures, 1978.

*I Walked with a Zombie*. Directed by Jacques Tourneur, RKO, 1943.

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