GENRE

John Frow

2nd edition

ROUTLEDGE

the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

GENRE

This second edition of John Frow's *Genre* offers a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the area. Genre is a key means by which we categorise the many forms of literature and culture, but it is also much more than that: in talk and writing, in music and images, in film and television, genres actively generate and shape our knowledge of the world. Understanding genre as a dynamic process rather than a set of stable rules, this book explores:

- the relation of simple to complex genres
- the history of literary genre in theory
- the generic organisation of implied meanings
- the structuring of interpretation by genre
- the uses of genre in teaching.

John Frow's lucid exploration of this fascinating concept has become essential reading for students of literary and cultural studies, and the second edition expands on the original to take account of recent debates in areas such as cognitive science and pedagogy, and the emergence of digital genres.

John Frow is Professor of English at the University of Sydney, Australia.

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

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Series Editor's Preface

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expand the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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First Edition

I am deeply grateful to Alastair Fowler, David Duff, and Dana Polan for their generosity in reading and commenting on the manuscript. Liz Thompson reminded me that the reader's eyes will see in ways other than mine do; John Drakakis did a masterly job of reducing the proliferating parentheses in the text he saw, and of bringing a greater 'clarity of exposition' to it. Sandra helped bring a much greater clarity to my life, and the book is dedicated to her.

The quotations from Rosmarie Waldrop's translations of Jacques Roubaud's *The Plurality of Worlds of Lewis* are used by kind permission of the Dalkey Archive Press.

Second Edition

I would like to thank Alan Liu, Anna Gibbs, and Carolyn Miller for their generous and detailed comments on the manuscript, and the readers who gave thoughtful and helpful feedback on the first edition. Carolyn road-tested the new section on emergent digital genres with her graduate students, and their generous comments challenged me to think some of my formulations anew. Finally, I'm grateful to Professor Anne Jerslev for bringing to my attention an inaccurate citation of Derrida in the earlier edition.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the kinds or genres of speech, writing, images, and organised sound: forms of talk and writing, of drawing and painting and sculpting, of architecture, of music, and mixed forms like film, television, opera, drama, and digital games. It is a book about how genres organise verbal and non-verbal discourse, together with the actions that accompany them, and how they contribute to the social structuring of meaning.

I take it that all texts are strongly shaped by their relation to one or more genres, which in turn they may modify. In certain areas of criticism it is assumed that genre is a term that applies to some texts and not to others: thus we speak of genre films, meaning strongly defined genres such as the Western or the heist movie; of genre painting, meaning a style of representation of everyday scenes, defined by opposition to paintings on larger historical themes; and of genre fiction, meaning for the most part such popular genres as the detective story or science fiction. Genre in this sense indicates the formulaic and the conventional. Now, it is certainly the case that this usage points to real distinctions between different textual functions, different audience structures, and different patterns of reading. But for the purposes of this book I treat this

way of speaking about genre as irrelevant because it obscures the extent to which even the most complex and least formulaic of texts is shaped and organised by its relation to generic structures. Genre, as I use the term here, is a universal dimension of textuality.

In what follows, I am not concerned with the question of how to classify or to recognise genres, and the book is neither a description nor an endorsement of existing classifications. It is not designed to be comprehensive, to 'cover' the range of genres, because I assume that there is no master list. Rather than developing a detailed description of all the genres that there are, what I do is try to think about the uses of genre: how do genres work in practice, what do we do with genre classifications, what are their social dimensions? In particular, the book is about how genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world; and about how generically shaped knowledges are bound up with the exercise of power, where power is understood as being exercised in discourse, as well as elsewhere, but is never simply external to discourse. In that sense I understand genre as a form of symbolic action: the generic organisation of language, images, gestures, and sound makes things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world.

The book's central argument, then, is that far from being merely 'stylistic' devices, genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk. These effects are not, however, fixed and stable, since texts – even the simplest and most formulaic – do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to 'a' genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation. Uses of texts ('readings') similarly refer, and similarly construct a position in relation to that economy.

I'm not unaware, of course, that this book itself has a generic shape, that of the 'introductory guide', which is lucidly described in the Series Editor's Preface. You will judge for yourself whether I manage to 'combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application'; more importantly, I hope that by the end of the book you will recognise the kind of

speaking position that is constructed for me and for you by this genre, and the kinds of effect of knowledge and truth it generates. Needless to say, I hope that you will be able to see a little further through them.

The shape of the book is as follows. In the first chapter, 'Approaching Genre', I set out what I take to be some of the basic problems in thinking about genre – questions about how genres incorporate and invoke structures of knowledge, about the kinds of classification they perform, about historical continuity and difference, and about the kinds of action they perform upon the world. I think about the material embedding of genre structures in bookshop shelves and filing systems and television guides and everyday talk, and about their organising force in everyday life. I think about how genres relate to recurrent situations. And I try to stress that genres are not fixed and pre-given forms by thinking about texts as performances of genre rather than reproductions of a class to which they belong, and by following Derrida in stressing the importance of edges and margins – that is, in stressing the open-endedness of generic frames.

In Chapter 2, 'Simple and Complex Genres', I take up from Bakhtin and Jolles the concept of certain 'simple forms' of textuality that they take to be the building blocks of more complex forms, and I explore the genre of the riddle to see how well the concept works. I find that, although it is in some ways useful, it can't really be sustained because even the most apparently basic forms produce complex effects. In the process, however, I hope to say some interesting things about how riddles work and, more generally, about how genres are structured. What this exploration opens up for me is an investigation of relations between genres, something that I take to be a central feature of how they function; I look at reported speech as an example of one such relationship, and then more generally at citation and other forms of intertextuality which I believe illuminate the core processes of textuality.

Chapter 3, 'Literary Genre Theory', begins by meditating upon the classificatory functions of genre and placing them in the context of human classification in general. I look briefly at biological models of taxonomy and at some of the metaphors through which genre has been understood: metaphors of the *family*, the *species*, the

contract, the *speech act*, and so on. Most of the chapter is taken up with a historical account of genre theory, from the poetics of Plato and Aristotle through the Romantic notion of a small set of 'natural forms', to a number of contemporary accounts that seek to deal with the diversity and historicity of genres. I follow Fowler and others in distinguishing genres from modes, and I finish the chapter by seeking to bring together the different logics involved in thinking about genre in terms of poetics (a systematic account of structures) and in terms of historical description of the genres that have actually existed.

Chapter 4, 'Implication and Relevance', extends some of my provisional conclusions by mapping out the three overlapping and intersecting dimensions along which I think genre is organised and by which particular genres produce their effects of truth and authority: the dimensions of *formal organisation*, of *rhetorical structure*, and of *thematic content* (roughly: how genres are shaped, the speaking positions they enable, and what they are typically about). I then move to think about how these structures project generically specific 'worlds': more or less coherent structures of meaning built up out of presupposed knowledges which genres at once invoke and reinforce. I use, though in a somewhat critical manner, certain theories from natural language philosophy and cognitive psychology to talk about the processing of information, and I argue that genre is central to the social organisation of knowledge. In the rest of this chapter I look, briefly and schematically, at how the various genres of philosophy and of history organise disciplinary knowledges in specific and distinctive ways.

Chapter 5, 'Genre and Interpretation', explores the idea that genre is a set of cues guiding our reading of texts. Here the notion of the frame becomes important: I use it to talk about how we recognise differences in genre, and about the contextual nature of cues. This chapter moves through a number of textual examples to examine the play between a structured text and a process of reading that responds to the text's strategic intentions, but which may, of course, productively ignore them. Genre is one of the ways in which texts seek to control the uncertainty of communication, and it may do so by building in figures of itself, models of how it should be read. The complexity of genre means,

however, that these models can never be taken as straightforward guidelines, and indeed that notions of a one-way flow between genre and text can never be particularly useful.

In Chapter 6, 'System and History', finally, I take up the idea that genres exist only in relation to other genres, and that these relations are more or less systemically ordered at any point in time. Genres belong to an economy: a set of interdependent positions that organise the universe of knowledge and value. Yet the content of such systems and of particular genres within them is constantly changing. I look at the history of the poetic form called the elegy in order to demonstrate how such changes are worked out in different historical circumstances as the relations between this poetic form and others mutate; and, using Hollywood movies as my example, I think some more about the institutional underpinnings by which genres come into being and are given authority and weight. I examine the emergence of new genres by looking at three digital genres (the blog, email, and the micro-blog), and I finish the book by turning these questions about genre back to the classroom in which genre forms are so crucially transmitted, and where we learn to think with and through them as we learn our culture.

1

APPROACHING GENRE

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

Consider the following piece of writing, displayed recently for a few hours on hoardings in the streets of Edinburgh:

RAPE CASE
JUDGE IN
NEW STORM

This very transient and very simple **text**, referring to a judge deemed to be handing down lenient sentences, works with a number of 'deep' suppositions. It supposes a reader walking or driving in the street whose attention needs to be caught by large and bold lettering, and who knows that these words are on display because they are tied to a story in the newspaper whose name is inscribed on the border of the poster. (The contemporary digital equivalent of the news hoarding might perhaps be the RSS feeds and news aggregators that send out, at regular intervals, a set of news headlines designed, by the use of click-baiting and search-engine optimisation, to entice readers to follow the link to the full news

story.) The text assumes that the reader believes the story it tells is factually true, and that it is newsworthy, not trivial; this is one reason why the word 'storm' here cannot be read literally, since judges caught in the rain are not news. And it supposes that the reader possesses the **information** necessary to understand what this 'case' was, and hence what the *old* 'storm' was in which this judge was involved. (The reader must also know enough about legal process to know what a judge and a case are.)

Most of the knowledge required to read and understand this text is knowledge about the *kind* of writing it is: knowledge about its genre. Some of the knowledge required of the reader looks like knowledge about the real world rather than knowledge about texts and genres; but the 'rape case' with which the reader is deemed to be familiar is defined by the fact that it was extensively written about in previous issues of the newspaper; the 'storms', both old and new, are storms in a newspaper, and the knowledge the reader is expected to have is **intertextual**: knowledge of earlier reports and earlier controversies.

This piece of writing establishes a set of **knowledges**, then, by invoking them in a compressed form; like all texts, this one is elliptical, setting out new information on the basis of old information which is not explicitly given but which it supposes its reader to have. (It may be that the reader does not have it, of course: they may not be able to read, they may be a child, or they may just not have heard about the previous story: they may not belong, that is to say, to the **discourse community** which is invoked and renewed by this hoarding.) In its small way, this text constructs a **world** which is generically specific. It is different in kind from the worlds performed in other genres of writing, although it will overlap with some of them.

In calling this story a 'world' I don't mean to imply that it is a *complete* world, the infinitely complex totality of everything that exists. This is a schematic world, a limited piece of reality, which is sketched in outline and carved out from a larger continuum. It has its own coordinates of space and time: a strip of time stretching from the 'old' to the 'new' 'storm', and the geographical and cultural space of Scotland. This world is populated by specific players (judges, criminals, victims, and ordinary people) and infused with

a moral ethos which brings with it certain attitudes to these players; for example, that judges are potentially out of touch with reality and so tend to be overly lenient in their sentencing, that criminals should be punished in accordance with their crimes, and that ordinary people have a stake in these issues because they are always potential victims.

The definition of space, time, moral ethos, and players is an effect of the genre which is actualised as story in the hoarding headlines and more fully articulated in the successively more expansive pieces of text (heading, sub-heading, first paragraph, subsequent paragraphs) in the newspaper itself. In addition to this **thematic** content, the headline is characterised by a number of distinctive **formal features** which set it apart as a genre: compression, nominalisation, or suppression of verb forms, the use of large and bold type, and a specialised vocabulary in which 'storm', for example, means 'furious controversy'. In another, even more strikingly nominalised headline from a few days earlier – **DEATH MUM TRAGEDY PROBE CALL** – the word 'probe' takes on a meaning ('enquiry' or 'investigation') that it possesses in few if any other contexts, and the syntax twists itself into a chain of implicit causal linkages which requires a quite specialised knowledge of the genre if it is to be translated into an expanded form ('there have been calls for an official investigation into the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of a mother of small children'). Note finally that, although the two texts belong to one of the simplest of genres, they nevertheless manage between them to refer, in the course of eleven words, to five other literary and non-literary genres: the legal *case*, the '*storm*' (controversy), *tragedy*, the '*probe*' (official enquiry), and the '*call*'. These texts are at once generically structured and **metageneric** in their reference: they refer from one genre to another.

Suppose, though, that I modified the words of the headline to produce a slightly different text – something like:

SCAPEGRACE
RAPE CASE
JUDGE IN
NEW STORM

and that these words appeared not on a street hoarding but in an anthology of poetry. Framed and lineated in this way, they would be read as a poem (of sorts), and we would attend to the sound of its words and the rhythm of its enjambed lines in a way that we didn't with the first text, where the lineation, the spondaic rhythms, the nearly equal letter count in each line (8–7–8), and the internal assonance (r*a*pe c*a*se) were disattended, treated as inconsequential. Certain formal features become salient in the new text which would have been disregarded in the hoarding: a dancing rhythm, for example, which generates a certain playfulness in the place of moral indignation.

Yet it is not the formal features in themselves that lead us to make a different generic assignment, although it helps that I have manipulated the text to call attention to them. It is, rather, the different *framings* of the two texts, their placing in different contexts, that govern the different salience of their formal features, and of all the other dimensions of genre that are entailed in this shift of **frame**: a different **structure of address**, a different moral universe, and different truth-effects. Or rather, there is an interplay between the cues given by formal features, such as assonance and rhythm, and the reframing that reinforces their role; and these intertwined effects of **form** and framing give rise to new patterns of meaning and tone.

Let me summarise the different structural dimensions that have emerged from my discussion of the genre of the headline to this point. In brief, they look like this:

- a set of *formal features*: the visual structure of the type size and its relation to the page; the organisation of sounds, much more strongly foregrounded when the text is rewritten as a 'poem'; a syntactic structure which works above all through nominalisation of verb phrases; and a vocabulary which is, in part, specific to the genre of the headline
- a *thematic structure* which draws upon a set of highly conventional ***topics*** or ***topoi*** (the lenient judge, the tragically dead mum) and projects a schematic but coherent and plausible world from these materials
- a *situation of address* in which an anonymous speaker addresses a random and undifferentiated reader passing by in the street.

This **speaking position** brings with it a certain kind of authority and moral force ('what I say is true, and I know that you share my moral concern'), or what I earlier called 'tone'

- a more general *structure of* ***implication***, which both invokes and presupposes a range of relevant background knowledges, and in so doing sets up a certain complicity with the reader
- a **rhetorical** *function*: the text is structured in such a way as to achieve certain pragmatic effects: to catch the attention of a distracted reader with sufficient force to persuade them to buy a copy of the newspaper; to reinforce a set of populist moral judgements
- finally, the generic structure of this text is established, and many of these other dimensions activated, by a physical *setting* which takes on the force of a regulative *frame*. This frame differentiates the genre of this text from other possible genres, alerts us to the way it works (its rhetorical function), and draws our attention towards some of its features and away from others.

Genre, we might say, is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning. In using the word 'constraint' I don't mean to say that genre is simply a restriction. Rather, its structuring effects are productive of meaning; they shape and guide, in the way that a builder's form gives shape to a pour of concrete, or a sculptor's mould shapes and gives structure to its materials. Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place. I take it that genre theory is, or should be, about the ways in which different structures of meaning and truth are produced in and by the various kinds of writing, talking, painting, filming, and acting by which the universe of **discourse** is structured. That is why genre matters: it is central to human meaning-making and to the social struggle over meanings. No speaking or writing or any other symbolically organised action takes place other than through the shapings of generic codes, where 'shaping' means both 'shaping by' and 'shaping of': acts and structures work upon and modify each other.

At the same time, there are real and perhaps intractable conceptual difficulties involved in thinking about genre. Assuming