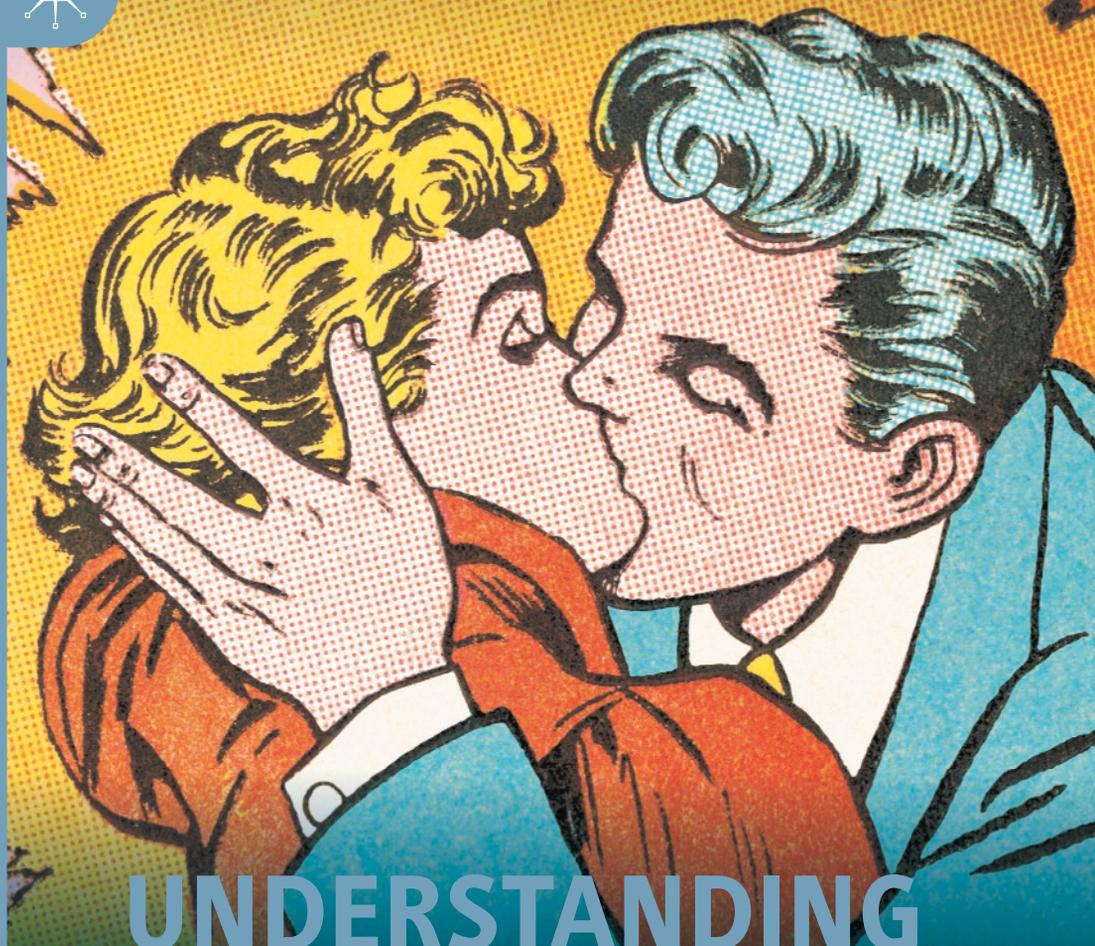




PALGRAVE STUDIES IN COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS



UNDERSTANDING GENRES IN COMICS

Nicolas Labarre

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Nicolas Labarre
UFR Lettres, langues et civilisations
Pessac Cedex, France

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Introduction: Genres as Formula, Genres Beyond Formula

Abstract This chapter examines the theoretical blind spots in common uses of the notion of genre in comics studies. It argues that genres cannot be understood solely at the level of the texts themselves and that they do not constitute stable, finite categories, although a text-centric model of ahistorical categories often proves convenient as a shorthand. Offering a brief account of relevant genre theory in film and literature studies, the chapter argues for a socio-discursive approach to genres and their uses, based on a study of the specific context of production and reception of comics in the United States.

Keywords Formula · Prototype · Prescriptive approach · Taxonomy · Architext

In *Popular Fiction, the Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Ken Gelder suggests that “one of the most productive ways to think about popular fiction is in terms of genre.”¹ Examples abound of creators, publishers, readers and critics of comics who appear to share this assumption and use genres as an interpretive framework to make sense of the medium. Famously, fan-produced histories of the comic book tended for a long time to measure the vitality and relevance of the industry with reference only to the superhero genre.² Genres also function as a frequent analytical

tool in contemporary comics scholarship with a variety of purposes, framing aesthetic and political inquiries, and offering boundaries to studies of industrial trends.

In most of these cases, genres are conceptualized as unproblematic encapsulations, convenient ways to refer to a vast body of work in the context of a different discussion. Genre therefore functions as a useful model of complex phenomena, which is efficient enough to suit for a variety of purposes, as long as one does not lose sight that it is, in fact, a model. Philosophers of science have long pointed out that while models are “a trade-off between factual content and explanatory power,”³ usage can obscure the nature of this compromise, leading to a disregard for methodological precautions and domains of validity. When genres become central to any argument in comics studies, a pragmatic, simplified conception is no longer operative, and a more detailed model becomes necessary.

The purpose of this book is to pave the way for such a modelization, through a study of North American comic books and graphic novels,⁴ although I may use examples from comic strips and from non-American publications occasionally. This corpus constitutes the aforementioned domain of validity for the arguments developed here, since I will argue that genres need to be understood within a specific cultural and industrial context. Covering manga, *bande dessinée* or comics produced in any other cultural sphere would therefore require significant adjustments.

GENRES IN TEXTS

Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith and Paul Levitz devote several chapters of their textbook, *The Power of Comics*, to the various genres of comics, with a special focus on superheroes (ch. 7) and memoirs (ch. 8). Paying attention to character types, settings, narrative patterns, themes and visual conventions, they define genres as sets of “conventions” and historically stable “shared characteristics,” which serve as a basis for a taxonomy used by critics, creators and publishers.⁵ This appears to be a standard approach to genre, used by scholars and fans alike, whenever the subject is not the object of the study. To use but one recent example, Brannon Costello’s thoughtful examination of the comics of Howard Chaykin consistently treats “science-fiction” as an unproblematic category of works about future events, even as Costello pays close attention to the history and functions of superheroes and of *noir*.⁶ because science-fiction is not

central to his project, it can be encapsulated by a standard and mostly non-historicized label.

This approach takes the comics themselves as a starting point, in a logic that is often simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive: General rules are deduced from core texts and these rules in turn serve to adjudicate whether new or marginal texts effectively belong to the genre. One of the most often quoted examples of this descriptive–prescriptive approach in comics studies is Peter Coogan’s “Definition of the superhero” from his 2006 book, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Using judicial decisions, close readings and editorial history centered on Superman and Batman, Coogan identifies three core elements to the genre—a pro-social mission, a secret identity and a distinctive costume. Although Coogan notes that canonical examples, such as the Hulk or The Fantastic Four, do not exhibit all these characteristics at once,⁷ he subsequently examines whether certain characters belong in the genre or not, paying attention to the trifecta of characteristics but also to the way the publishers frame these characters. Thus, Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, from the eponymous TV show, is “ruled out” of the genre because of a lack of self-identification as a superhero, and Nick Fury, in Marvel Comics, is similarly excluded by his lack of costume and of a secret identity, even though his stories take place in a superhero universe. Coogan concludes in both cases that they may be “super-heroes,” but are not “superheroes”⁸: While they share some characteristics of core characters, such as Superman or Batman, they do not belong to the genre. In this conception, genre functions as a catalog, a series of boxes to be ticked off with central features (mission, identity, costume) and elements of context (self-identification, presence of competing genre affiliation), to which the genre’s established name provides only a crude index. In Coogan’s article, this catalog of conventions is conceived precisely as a tool allowing one to rule *in* or *out*, to resolve ambiguities and taxonomic difficulties, much like scientific classifications since Carl von *Linné* have sought to divide the living world into non-ambiguous categories through ever-evolving tools, from external appearance to genetic markers. Though Coogan mentions the idea that generic characteristics function as clusters of characteristics, or resemblances, he concludes on a binary distinction, ruling in or ruling out.

A refinement of the list model used by Coogan can be found in the writing of film theorist Rick Altman in his influential 1984 essay entitled “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” which offers a two-dimensional approach to genre features.⁹ The issue of genre has been

thoroughly explored in film studies, especially within the corpus of Hollywood cinema, and provides numerous theoretical leads which I shall use throughout this book. However, as I argued before, theories and models require a domain of validity. Genre theory in film has been written based on extensive familiarity with the history and industrial structure of the medium and can only apply to comics following a thorough historical and cultural relocation, checked upon available scholarship.

In his article, Altman borrows the semantic/syntactic duality from Saussurian linguistics, to argue that genre conventions are best understood as a catalog of discrete elements (the semantic axis) along with certain organizational features (the syntactic axis). Thus, a horror narrative possesses only minimal semantic markers, maybe the presence of a monster, while a science-fiction narrative may follow a variety of narrative structures, but contains distinct settings and objects, from post-apocalyptic worlds to robots. This approach is fruitful, in that it explicitly maps genres over two dimensions and thus makes it possible to think of hybrid narratives as intersections and not as marginal cases.¹⁰ It also emphasizes the fact that genre boundaries are not based on a homogeneous set of criteria, with some genres correlated to specific affects they may generate (and even to specific bodily reactions)¹¹ while others are defined mostly through the features of the fictional world. Narratologist Jonathan Culler calls these the parameters of “*praisemblance*”¹² within the diegesis, while film scholar Steve Neale refers to them as “regimes of verisimilitude,”¹³ in other words, the boundaries of what is likely and expected: A fistfight is an unusual conclusion in a romance comic, but it is expected in a western comic. It is therefore not problematic to describe erotic comics as a genre, just as crime comics, even though the first label refers to an aesthetic and bodily emotion and the second to a plot structure. This non-homogeneity also implies that it is not necessary to create a hierarchy of genres, with humor as a super-category for instance¹⁴: These super-categories can be understood merely as genres with little to no semantic content.

Beyond its immediate usability and transposability to comics, Altman’s model demonstrates the usefulness of bidimensional conceptions of genre features, for instance to reflect on the way narrative and visual conventions may work at cross-generic purposes.¹⁵ Genre theorists commonly note that at the level of the individual text, genre functions as a balance between standardization and deviation,¹⁶ accepting editorial and cultural parameters or reworking them, even at the cost of altering

the genre's *vraisemblance*. Two-dimensional approaches—be they semantic/syntactic, narrative/visual or any other pairing—make it possible to account more precisely for the way a specific work negotiates this typicality. To take one example, Kevin Huizenga's 2012 redrawing of *Kona, Monarch of the Monster Isle* (Dell, 1962), a King-Kong-inspired monster comic book, works by juxtaposing a formulaic story with a graphic style more typical of contemporary alternative comics.¹⁷ The resulting work can be read as both typical and singular in *both* genres. Incidentally, this also implies that it is possible *not to* read the story in either genre and by extension calls attention to the limits inherent in a model that describes genres as a textual category (Fig. 1.1).

CLUSTER, RESEMBLANCES, AND EXEMPLARS

While adhering to a broadly textual approach and citing Peter Coogan, Duncan, Smith and Levitz put more emphasis on the “wide variety of conventions” and the flexibility of the superhero genre, beyond specific textual markers.¹⁸ This approach to a flexible taxonomy—literature scholar Guy Belzane expressively describes genres as “hesitant categories”¹⁹—has been theorized using Wittgenstein's conception of the family resemblance, developed in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein did not write specifically about genres, but about intellectual categories in general, arguing that no set list of features could account for the notions of “games” and “numbers,” and that understanding these categories required a more flexible approach, incorporating conventions, habits and “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing.”²⁰ Wittgenstein's approach does not establish a hierarchy between internal and external characteristics, between text and context, because he is not interested in collections of physical objects, but in the construction of linguistic concepts. Crucially, this approach discourages attempts at ruling liminal cases in or out of the category, since, as Wittgenstein writes about games: “We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn.”²¹

Wittgenstein's approach is commonly invoked in genre theory, though with varying degrees of precision, but prototype theory, which builds on his work and was developed notably by Eleanor Rosch and George Lakoff, provides a slightly more applicable model.²² It argues that the concept of family resemblance misrepresents the fact that to draw a distinction between core and liminal members in conceptual categories is feasible



Fig. 1.1 Kevin Huizenga, "Bona" (self-published, 2012). After *Kona, Monarch of Monster Isle* (Dell, 1962)

and often easy in practice: Prototypical examples empirically generate no problem of identification. Much like scientific models, conceptual categories only become problematic when they are the subject of the inquiry or when one tries to chart their margins. Prototype theory acknowledges the existence of central or most prominent members of a category, or exemplars, and makes it possible to conceive of various other examples as being close or distant to this core.

The use of prototype theory to conceptualize genres²³ implies treating them not as an objective index to a collection of physical objects, but as conceptual and discursive categories. This approach accounts for the perennial issue of genres' fuzzy borders but also for the absence of any defining and indispensable characteristic. It also removes the need to distinguish between internal and contextual characteristics, for context—i.e., usage—is precisely what makes exemplars central and what makes the generic label useful in the first place. For the superhero genre in comics, exemplars undoubtedly include Superman, Batman and Spider-Man, though depending on the community of users, these names refer to specific historical versions of these narratives, or to a continuously redefined trans-historical and transmedial *bricolage*, as described by Ian Gordon in the case of Superman.²⁴ Though unacknowledged as such, the prototypical approach to genres is fully compatible with the approach used in *The Power of Comics*, in which key texts receive more attention and more weight than examples perceived as marginal.

GENRES IN USE, GENRES AS USES

A prototypical approach and multi-dimensional models thus offer powerful tools to map genres and, in turn, make it possible to reflect on their functions. Broadly, genres play the same role as any intellectual category, by offering a convenient way to make complexity legible, and by enabling predictions based on regularity.

Genre theorists across media have thus highlighted the usefulness of genres for the audience, as a guide to consumption and a “horizon of expectation”²⁵ guiding consumption and generating specific pleasures; for creators, as reproducible narrative patterns, but also as ways guide and shape the readers' experience, and an intellectual and affective level²⁶; for publishers or distributors, as a way to create or identify expectations in order to market their products; and finally for critics, as ways to produce discourses encompassing more than discrete objects, but also to assert