From the French for “kind” or “sort,” and etymologically derived from the Latin genus, the word “genre” has connotations of biological kind, and its use in relation to the arts begins in the late eighteenth century, not long after the establishment of Linnaean taxonomy. Theoretical and critical work on commercial or popular genres - notably detective and science fiction, but also pornography, the erotic thriller, the western, the romance - are relatively recent developments, emerging in number first in the late 1960s and early 1970s against the backdrop of New Left cultural politics. In literature, genre - for example, detective fiction in Auster (1987) - has been used as a metafictional cast within which questions of individual, collective, and authorial identity, as well as ideas of “textuality” and a textual or linguistic self, are interrogated. Notions of genre are implicated to varying degree in all literary study; the more refined and complex the study of literature becomes, the less stable are the ideas of genre and genres themselves. In literary studies today, scholarly focus has to some degree shifted away from definition: volumes in a series such as the Cambridge Companions to Literature dedicated to science fiction, crime fiction, the Gothic novel suggest, implicitly, that such genres should be thought of in the same terms as, say, modernism, Victorian, African American, or even single-author studies - as broad fields of inquiry, rather than stably defined sets of texts.

Though the idea that the term “genre” conveys, of coherent and distinct classes of texts, is simple enough, the level at which distinctions are drawn and the criteria against which they are to be decided are not fixed or certain. “Genre” can refer to broad, overarching forms (poetry, the novel, drama), their defining characteristics and transformations over time and between cultures; or to subdivisions within certain artistic forms or media - one speaks of “genre film” or “genre fiction” when speaking, for example, of film noir, westerns, science fiction, detective fiction. In either case, discussion of genre always raises, implicitly or explicitly, questions of the relationship between parts and wholes, or, perhaps more accurately, smaller and larger systems - the relationship of “genre novels” to “the novel,” or “the novel” to “literature.”

Theories of genre sometimes form part of a broader investigation of literature as a whole, as in Wellek & Warren (1963) and Frye (1990). Though both works were first published before 1966 - in 1949 and 1957, respectively - Wellek & Warren went through second and third editions in 1954 and 1963, while Frye was republished in 1971, 1990, and 2006. Their appearance in Penguin editions indicates their (relative) popularity. Both works are important points of reference for Todorov (1990); both continue to inform discussions of literary theory and criticism. For Frye, genres are more or less universal, characterized first of all by their imagined or ideal mode of presentation. Frye is thinking of genre not as the distinctions of the novel, drama, and poetry, but as the differences between works meant to be acted in front of, spoken or sung to, or read by their audiences. Genres for Frye, then, are determined by the relationship of the work to its audience. In his work on commercial or popular fictions in the late 1960s, Cawelti takes his cue from Frye, distinguishing between genres, pace Frye, and formulas, understood as specific cultural embodiments of genres. Cawelti has since loosened and refined this distinction, suggesting different degrees of genre (the archetypal genres of tragedy and comedy, and the culturally or historically more limited genres of the western or romance, for example), and gesturing toward a subtler articulation of genres and formulas (see essays in Cawelti 2004). Wellek and Warren
recognize tragedy and comedy as genres, but not as archetypal genres in Cawelti's sense. “Genres” in Frye and Cawelti are, for Wellek and Warren, “ultimates”; only historically limited, second-order divisions of, say, prose fiction should be called “genres,” they argue. Moretti (2005), in his attempt to outline an abstract model of literary history, has argued that “the novel” does not exist in any ideal sense, but only as the system of its historically changing genres.

Genres might be conceived of “extrinsically” in terms of cultural history, or “intrinsically” in terms of poetics (see Wellek & Warren 1963); in terms of function (what they “do”) or structure (what they “are”) (see Todorov 1990). The stability of such distinctions as “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” critical methods, or structural and functional definitions, are not unproblematic, however, as determining what constitutes a genre involves identifying from “outside” the genre “rules,” trends, characteristics, forms, and so on, that are thought to recur “inside” that genre's constitutive texts. The presumed coherence of genres is in many ways an imposition made primarily from the side of criticism broadly conceived - whether the “critic” be an author, academic, journalist, or fan. Thus, Delany's (1978) influential essay on the functional character of science fiction is as much a blueprint for both ways of writing and reading, speculation as to what science fiction should be, as it is a description of what the genre “is.” Similarly, one might read Moretti’s (1983) analysis of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories - in which Moretti attempts to demonstrate the necessary, dialectical relationship between structure and function as being as much a product of his Marxist theoretical framework as of Doyle's works. Todorov (1990) argues that because no definition of literature - which is the always changing system of its genres - can be found that admits all that is literary and nothing that is not, and because neither literature nor nonliterature is a single, coherent entity, poetics must be replaced by the analysis of discourse. According to Todorov, the system of genres available in a given language originates in discourse, understood as the hardening of linguistic possibilities or choices into sociocultural rules or conventions. Similarly, at a more local level, in science fiction studies Suvin’s still often cited definition of science fiction as a literature of “cognitive estrangement” - simply put, nonrealism (estrangement) with recourse to reason (cognition) - has been criticized, notably by Delany, for admitting much that is not science fiction and for excluding much that is (Suvin 1979; Delany 1994).

Analysis of literary type extends back, of course, to Aristotle (indeed, Frye remarks that since Aristotle and the several genre divisions of classical Greek inheritance, precise terms and procedures for literary study have not much developed). In the Poetics, Aristotle distinguishes comedy, epic poetry, and tragedy typologically and hierarchically. The purpose of poetry, he states, is to arouse feelings of fear and pity in the audience. According to Aristotle, tragedy does this best of all, and so, by definition, it is the best kind of poetry (Aristotle expands “poetry” and “poet” to refer not to works and practitioners of verse forms only, but to all works and practitioners of mimesis). By distinguishing comedy, epic poetry, and tragedy typologically and hierarchically, and because Aristotle is concerned with what is most effective in and proper to each, the Poetics contains the principle that genres are and must be distinct, pure, unmixed - a critical axiom noted by Wellek and Warren and, in ironic fashion, by Derrida. Derrida (1992) argues that no text can exist without generic identification - the principle of literary identification presupposes the prior existence of models, rules, and so on - but that no genre can ever be “pure.” On the one hand, genres function like laws, pre- and pro-scribing. At the same time, as a genre incorporates ever more texts it cannot ever be considered closed or replete. For Derrida, genres are fundamentally contaminated by other genres that exist in parasitical relationship with one another, and it is, therefore, a model of “participation” rather than “belonging” that Derrida proposes for thinking about genre. This model of genre is rather close to Derrida's broader conception of what
he dubs the “strange institution called literature,” which is constitutionally always in excess of its own apparent boundaries (Derrida 1992).

Derrida is not much interested in genre fiction, but ideas of contamination or hybridity are increasingly to be found in dedicated genre studies. Botting (1996) provocatively suggests that, because it is a synthesis of literary and paraliterary genres, the Gothic can perhaps claim to be the only genuinely literary tradition. A recent issue of Science Fiction Studies - containing essays on science fiction and the gendered body, Latour, Castell, Serres, and Kittler - has attempted to move theoretically inflected work on science fiction away from the dominant influences of Jameson, Haraway, and Suvin, emphasizing ideas of sociological and discursive networks or assemblages, and topological relation (Luckhurst & Partington 2006).

L. R. Williams (2005) analyzes the erotic thriller as a composite genre formed from, among other influences, pornography and film noir. Referring to pornography as “the forgotten genre,” Williams points out that with few significant exceptions little has been done to define pornography, arguably the most controversial of genres. Definition would seem to be necessary for a genre that has been challenged on moral, aesthetic, and legal grounds, yet relatively little attention has been paid to what makes pornography pornography. The genre is often treated as monolithic, the differences between investigations and representations of “alternative” or “marginal” sexual practices and “hardcore” pornography seldom acknowledged. The tendency has been to argue “for” or “against” pornography from positions of antiscensorship or anti-sexism/exploitation, though historical, philosophical, and cultural work from L. Williams (1999), Kipnis (1996), O’Toole (1998), and Pease (2000), among others, has contributed to a more nuanced body of knowledge that is focused on the genre itself rather than its sociological implications.

Genre and its ethical significance have also been analyzed in scholarship on Holocaust literature. Eaglestone (2008) states that genre is a way of both writing and reading, the meeting point of the two processes. Fiction is shaped in large part by readers’ processes of identification; with testimony, the Holocaust has produced a new genre, in part, but not exclusively, because it alters the processes by which we identify when reading. Testimony, Eaglestone argues, attempts to foreclose identification.

SEE ALSO: African American Literary Theory; Derrida, Jacques; Hybridity; Jameson, Fredric; Marxism; Modernity/Postmodernity; Moretti, Franco; Scholes, Robert; Self-Referentiality; Žižek, Slavoj

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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