

BOOK REVIEW

Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism. Edited by *Garin Dowd, Lesley Stevenson, and Jeremy Strong*. Bristol and Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2006. Pp. 178.

This work is a collection of eleven short essays, edited by members of the media subject group in the Faculty of Arts at Thames Valley University (UK), which presents several interesting new viewpoints on both the theorization and use of the concept of genre for contemporary media. Introduced in its preface as having as “a key objective” to “assert that genre *matters* in a manner not constrained by disciplinary boundaries,” it is nonetheless realistic in adding that it does not seek to “be comprehensive in the sense of collecting instances of genre-based criticism from all of the humanities disciplines,” but to “aspire to providing a balanced selection of new perspectives on enduring philosophical and methodological problems in genre theory, contributions to genre criticism based on an application of either a classification in itself, or a perspective linked to methodological predilection, and essays responding to aspects of contemporary cultural transformation” (7).

While concerned with the expansion or pushing out of boundaries within both traditional and not so traditional genres—in theory, literature, and film—the volume also does not attempt a full or consistent history of the concept of genre. Although its preface goes on to state that it includes “applications of thinking about genre from Aristotle to Derrida and beyond” (7), one essay starts with Plato as well as with Aristotle, while several differing views debate the dogmatic nature of the latter’s writings on literary “genres,” or (according to some English translations of the *Poetics* [ca. 330 BC]) the literary “species” of the time (29). The philosopher and zoologist Aristotle had spoken of discussing

“species” or kinds of literature such as the epic poem, tragedy, and comedy and their varying objects of imitation, as well as the differing “media” and “modes” of the forms of poetic imitation in his *Poetics* as we now know it. Although he had also attempted there to set out some criteria for the success of such poetic forms, it might have been observed that he had not explicitly ruled out the development or spread of the literary species that were to be found in his time that had in their turn derived (according to his own understanding of their history) from earlier forms and practices. Aristotle’s poetic categories are also compared with the ostensibly more dogmatic definitions of genre given by J. C. Scaliger in 1561 and by those following him in more modern times. No mention is made, however, of one of the earliest modern studies of the evolutionary development from Scaliger onward of literary “genres”—the French word for “kinds” or “species”—with Ferdinand Brunetière’s partially Darwinian-inspired lectures on the evolution of genres in the history of literature (*L’évolution des genres dans l’histoire de la littérature*) of 1890. In this present collection, the beginnings of modern genre theory are more often taken back to such early twentieth-century theorists as the Russian Formalists and their contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin and to their writings on the creation of literary forms from the transgression or refunctioning of others, or to even more contemporary French theorists such as Gérard Genette, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. (Even the work of the early nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel is presented in French via reference to a text by Jean-Marie Schaeffer.)

Following Garin Dowd’s introduction, the collection is divided into four parts. The first, “Re-framing Genre Theory,” includes discussions of theory by Brian G. Caraher, whose essay “Genre Theory: Cultural and Historical Motives Engendering Literary Genre” opens with a useful introduction to both Plato and Aristotle before suggesting a new way of using Northrop Frye’s categorization of literary myths for a historicizing and culturally based theory of discursive genres, as well as Paul Copley on the expectations of those receiving works as works of genre and Jeff Collins on montage, Derrida, and genre theory. The second section, “Genre in Adaptation and Translation,” begins with an essay by Dowd on Derrida as well as on Samuel Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu* (1980) and continues with informative contributions by Susan Bassnett on translation and the transformation of genres and by Jeremy Strong on interpreting and adapting Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) for film. The third part deals with the relevance and use of genre in television broadcasting and film publicity with Richard Kilborn’s “Mixing and Matching: The Hybridising Impulse in Today’s Factual Television Programming” and Mike Chopra-Gant’s

“So What Kind of Film Is It? Genre, Publicity and Critical Practice.” Finally, the fourth section deals with genre, gender, and fiction with an essay by Margaret Russett, “Three Faces of Ruth Rendell: Feminism, Popular Fiction, and the Question of Culture,” on the fiction of Ruth Rendell and its relationship to genres, including the gothic, psychological, and detective novel, as well as on the author’s metafictional references to these genres. In the concluding essay, “The Historical Novel? Novel, History, and the ‘End of History,’” Martin Ryle explores the contrasting views of the relationship of literature to history of Lukács and a variety of recent “postmodernist” theorists as well as on novels on the subject of war and memory, such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001).

Most of these thoughtful, but sometimes all-too-brief, essays argue for a broadening of the concept of genre, although (as at least some of their authors appear to recognize) not all earlier studies of literary “kinds” or “species” have necessarily excluded their mixing or transformation. In Aristotle, on the poetic “species” discussion in his *Poetics* parody was there represented not only by reference to the comedies of Aristophanes but also as an imitation of the verse form of the epic poem with a change to its object, through reference to writers such as Aristophanes’ near contemporary Hegemon, the author of mock-epics such as the *Gigantomachia* or *Battle of the Giants*, and of Nicochares, the author of the *Diliad* or “Poltrooniad.” In this role, parody had also clearly been part of the development of another poetic kind or species of the epic—of (as it was later called) the “mock-heroic.” Explicit discussions of transgressive, transformative (i.e., “double-coded”) forms such as parody, which can create new works and species from old, as well as metafictional comments on the latter, are, however, largely absent from the essays collected here, although authors who have dealt with parody as a transformative force such as Bakhtin and the Russian Formalists are mentioned, as are related forms such as montage, translation, satire, and metafiction. Despite this theoretical lacuna, it is above all the transgression or transformation of former genre boundaries in contemporary works of film or fiction that appears to be of most interest to the essays’ authors.

All in all, the collection will be of interest to those working on the subject of genre as well as to those who have entered the fields of film and media studies and other such recently developed realms of cultural analysis. Some of these readers, however, may also miss discussion of the interrelationship of text and image and of the relevance of such relationships to the concept of genre within some of the new media discussed. As with most such collections of essays by a variety of individual authors, the reader will also have to draw together and critically assess the disparate ideas suggested in them, be aware of the need for a some-

times broader selection of sources that might be used, and look to other works for a more fully laid-out historical background to both the theories and practices under discussion. This having been said, the collection as a whole deserves to be recommended for providing some new and generally well-thought-out ideas on the subject and theory of genre as well as on the relevance of the concept to contemporary media analysis, and an interesting (if select) variety of examples of literature, television, and film not always brought together in such discussions.

Margaret A. Rose
Clare Hall, Cambridge