

## NOT DEFINING GENRE

I understand genre to be a historically specific pattern of organisation of semiotic material along a number of dimensions in a specific medium and in relation to particular types of situational constraints which help shape this pattern. Genre in turn acts as a constraint upon—that is, a structuring and shaping of—meaning and value at the level of text for certain strategic ends; it produces effects of truth and authority that are specific to it, and projects a “world” that is generically specific.

John Frow, *Genre* (London: Routledge, 2005), 73.

A fundamental problem of genre studies stems from the ever-present desire for a stable and easily identifiable object of analysis. Ever simplifying, genre critics have simply borrowed an ontology, a methodology and an epistemology developed by critics of art and literature for other objects and other purposes, thereby reducing the notion of genre to a *corpus* of texts or to textual *structure*. We do better, I suggest, to treat genre as a complex *situation*, a concatenated series of events regularly repeated according to a recognizable pattern. For a genre to exist, a large number of texts must be produced, broadly distributed, exhibited to an extensive audience and received in a rather homogeneous manner. Traditional genre criticism has tended to treat a single aspect of this process as representative of the whole situation. Yet no isolated part of this process actually *is* the genre; instead, the genre lies somewhere in the overall circulation of meaning constitutive of the process.

Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 84.

In the genre world, however, every day is Jurassic Park day. Not only are all genres interfertile, they may at any time be crossed with any genre that ever existed. The “evolution” of genres is thus far broader in scope than the evolution of species.

*Ibid.*, 70.

It is only relatively late in the nineteenth century, then, that the conditions converge to produce the space for what will become SF. These conditions are: (1) the extension of literacy and primary education to the majority of the population of England and America, including the working classes; (2) the displacement of the older forms of mass literature, the “penny dreadful” and the “dime novel,” with new cheap magazine formats that force formal innovation, and drive the invention of modern genre categories like detective or spy fiction as well as SF; (3) the arrival of scientific and technical institutions that provide a training for a lower-middle-class generation as scientific workers, teachers and engineers, and that comes to confront traditional loci of cultural authority; and, in a clearly related way, (4) the context of a culture being visibly transformed by technological and scientific innovations that, really for the first time, being to saturate the everyday life experience of nearly all with Mechanism.

Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 16–17.