6.2 Generic Classification and Habitual Subject Matter

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One of the operations included in philological inquiries is the restoration of etymologies, built up of linguistic units enduring through ages, languages, meanings, usages and contexts. The following essay attempts a possible deployment of an etymology of the lingual unit ‘genre’. Our trail will be guided by two stations in the long and extended history of this etymon: First, the Aristotelian origins of the etymon ‘genre’ are reconsidered; second, attention is given to the presence of the same etymon in the vocabulary of modern art criticism. Working within a comparative framework, this essay tries to create a trail between literary artistic and philosophical discourses. In all three domains, ‘genre’ appears as a classificatory instrument, and it is as a classificatory instrument that genre is addressed here. In the second anthology of ‘The Making of the Humanities’, Mats Malm portrayed the chart of relations between literary genre theory, rhetorical motives and emotional figures, as well as demonstrated the affinities between literary genre theory and theory of painting. The present essay joins this trail and tries to ponder about the methodic tenor and relevancy of generic classification to the humanities.

Genre: Critics and defenders

Henri Bergson blamed generic classification for causing situations of imprecision: ‘Imprecision is, usually, the inclusion of a thing in a genre too wide.’ This articulation takes part in the general critical attitude toward generic classification, a criticism launched throughout the twentieth century across the humanities. Numerous authors, many of them motivated by vitalist tendencies, such as Walter Benjamin, Erich Auerbach, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida interrogated the complexities of generic classifications. Their interrogations entail several problems regarding the concept of genre: the generic
method of classification is considered as too wide, too rigid, too hierarchic or too essentialist. In his Ursprung des Deutsches Trauerspiel, Benjamin, drawing his argument from Benedetto Croce’s criticism of the schematic deduction of literary genres, preferred to promote the importance of the ‘idea’ of a work rather than sticking to generic systems of classifications, as

It is [...] precisely the more significant works, in as much as they are not the original, and so to speak, ideal embodiments of the genre, which fall outside the limits of genre. A major work will either establish the genre or abolish it, and the perfect work will do both.10

More recently, Derrida questioned the validity of the classical rigid dictum: ‘genres are not to be mixed’, a dictum demanding a strict separation between the genres. Derrida described the disciplinary rigidity forced by the generic regime thus:

As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind. ‘Do’, ‘Do not’ says ‘genre’, the word ‘genre’, the figure, the voice or the law of genre.

Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm. One must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity.11

This deconstructive criticism expresses unease with the rigid differentiations that are enforced by generic classifications. Indeed, the organization of the humanist disciplines embodies generic rationality and its effective method of classification according to subject matters and themes, a classification according to ‘what is at stake’, i.e., the subject matter of the inquiry. Twentieth-century critics of genre promoted mixing between genres, making the genres interpenetrate both within the disciplinary discourses and between them. Within the twentieth-century landscape of genre criticism, the moderate, favorable position of Gérard Genette stands as an exception.12 Both in his ‘Introduction de l’architexte’ and more so in his ‘Des Genres et des Œuvres’, Genette conceived of generic rationality as a challenge, and his poetics, in fact, involves elaborations of the conceptual and terminological potential of generic rationality. Genette notes: ‘To the question, “Can one love a genre?” the proper answer may be this other question: “Can one really love anything else?”’13

The experiment in this present essay is to follow Genette’s approach to generic rationality, and to defend the place of the concept of genre as a methodic in-
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Instrument in the humanities. This does not mean that the concept of ‘genre’ must retain all its traditional coordinates, yet it does mean that the broader concept of genre as it was furnished by Aristotle could still be used as an Archimedean point for enquiries within the humanities. The compact review of the trails of usage of the concept of genre that is suggested here supports the conclusion that something did change in the modern period in the application of the concept of genre, something which has to do with its original Aristotelian roots. That is to say: In modern times, i.e., from the eighteenth century onwards, a change occurred within the hierarchic structure of genres, leading to the situation in which the ‘lower’ genres have been gradually regarded as a primary reality from which subject matter is to be drawn. Therefore, in modern times genre has been not so much a system as a problem, a task, perhaps yet to be accomplished.

Literary genres and their Aristotelian origins

Though the origin of literary ‘genre theory’ is to be found in Aristotle’s Poetics what was later to be known as ‘generic differentiation’ has its origins in the Aristotelian differentiation between poetic forms (eide), not genres. It is rather in his logical, metaphysical and biological writings that the concept of genre (genos) plays a central role. In the Poetics Aristotle differentiated between the central forms of poietic mimesis: epic, tragedy and comedy, and only the last two were considered by him as dramatic, as they imitate an action in a direct manner, told from the point of view of the characters themselves.

This basic differentiation established the long and canonic tradition of literary ‘genre theory’, consisting of a system of classification of kinds of literature; the generic distinction between tragedy and comedy is based on the subject matter that the work imitates. And though, as Genette demonstrated, the long history of genre theory largely deviated from the Aristotelian designations, yet, the basic Aristotelian alleged ‘generic’ differentiation of the Poetics was retained: it is the one drawing a distinction between tragedy, which is a mimesis of a ‘serious’, good praxis, performed by good or noble, that is to say ‘better’ characters, and comedy, which imitates ridiculous, laughable deeds, performed by ‘lesser’ characters. This distinction entails a hierarchy, distinguishing between that which is imbued with importance and tenor, and that which is considered as minor, insignificant and habitual. The generic literary distinction between tragic and comic subject matter was still being maintained in literary seventeenth-century neoclassical discourse. During the second half of the seventeenth century, the vocabulary of generic classification was transferred to the discourse of the plastic arts. This passage was carried out by the development of artistic theory.
in the academies. In his preface to the *Conférences de l’académie royale de peinture et de sculpture,* André Félibien used the literary hierarchy of genres in order to discuss painting and sculpture, constructing a hierarchy of subject matter, which begins from still-life and landscape (the lowest genres), continues to portraiture, and culminates in history and theological painting, which were taken to be as the higher, respectable genres. Yet artistic discourse in the eighteenth century entailed a notable deviation in the etymon’s trail, to which our trail now turns.

**Peintres de genre and habitual subject matter**

Artistic vocabulary in the eighteenth century had to follow contemporary changes in the conditions of production of artistic works. As early as in the seventeenth century, mostly in the Netherlands, a notable school of painting developed, having its sources in earlier Dutch painting and ‘Caravaggism’. This class of paintings is characterized by subject matter which are admittedly nonheroic and nonhistorical, but rather belong to everyday life, describing human habitudes, many times accentuating moral frailty. In France, one should note the paintings of the Le Nain brothers, who worked in the same thematic framework and were known and influential in their own times. The paintings of this ‘kind’ were referred to initially by the Italian-driven derogatory term *Bambochades,* meaning laughable, fake, or even deformed. The word ‘genre’ was not used in the seventeenth-century Netherlands to describe what was later to be referred to by this word. Only in the eighteenth century does one start to find in French art criticism the use of the term *peinture de genre* to refer to the above class of painting. Therefore, the term ‘peinture de genre’ was a retroactive term, serving French authors of the eighteenth century to refer and to define seventeenth-century (mostly Dutch) paintings and to affiliate these with their own present-day painterly production. This new encompassing category of ‘genre painting’, as Wolfgang Stechow specified, ‘embraced the minor categories [les genres] of painting, such as landscape, still life and everyday scenes’.

Localizing precisely the original eighteenth-century textual usage of the term *peinture de genre* (genre painting), or *peintre de genre* (genre painter) is a complicated task. The term is clearly to be found in Diderot’s art criticism, though he referred to it as an already commonly used term. Notwithstanding, the expression ‘peinture de genre’ does not make an explicit category in earlier eighteenth-century French art criticism, such as those by Roger de Piles, l’Abbé Dubos or La Font de Saint-Yenne. One could find in these texts the usage of the word ‘genre’ referring to ‘kinds’ in general, for example, as in the expressions: ‘le genre de Peinture la plus considerable’; ‘différents genres de la poésie’; or ‘en aucun genre’. In all these expressions, ‘genre’ does not explicitly refer to the specific class of painting mentioned above.
The use of the term ‘peinture de genre’ is a peculiar one, in which the word ‘genre’ refers to subject matter located at the very bottom of generic hierarchy, or falling outside it altogether. Slightly prior to Diderot’s art criticism, one could find the term ‘peinture de genre’ in the seventh volume of the *Encyclopédie*, edited by Diderot and by d’Alembert in 1757, in the article ‘Genre (Peinture)’, written by Claude-Henri Watelet. Hence, one may narrow the localization of the formation of the specific classification ‘Genre painting’ to around 1750. The formation of this term is synchronous with the beginning of the Salon exhibitions (from 1746 onwards) and the development of public discourse surrounding them. This cultural process included the development of the practices of the *amateurs*, collecting affordable paintings, an occupation demanding new categories of classification and reference to paintings that were unclassifiable according to pregiven iconographical, canonical systems of subject matter.

Thereafter, one finds in the writings of Diderot the term ‘peintres de genre’ as an independent expression. Here is Diderot’s definition:

> One calls genre painters [peintres de genre], without distinction [indistinctement], those who busy themselves with flowers, fruits, animals, woods, forests, mountains, as well as those who borrow their scenes from common and domestic life [de la vie commune et domestique]; Teniers, Wouwermans, Greuze, Chardin, Loutherbourg and even Vernet are genre painters.

For Diderot, the term *peinture de genre* refers to those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painters depicting all subject matter which is not historical or theological. In fact, the above definition appears in the place were Diderot discusses a terminological dyad which is relevant to our trail of inquiry: it is the dyad of *genre painting versus history painting*. In the framework of this discussion Diderot explicitly recalls the classical literary generic model when noting that ‘[i]t is the quarrel between prose and poetry, between history and epic poem, between heroic tragedy and bourgeois tragedy, between bourgeois tragedy and gay comedy’. Thus Diderot implicitly suggests the following scheme, which amounts to a philological trail of sorts:

- Prose → history → heroic tragedy → bourgeois tragedy
  vs
- Poetry → epic poem → bourgeois tragedy → gay comedy

Genre painters are occupied with habitual themes, those considered as comic in the Aristotelian sense, and therefore are classified according to the specific sort of ‘things’ depicted in their painting, rather than by the ‘history’ they recount.
Diderot protected the status of genre paintings, and even affiliated these with the work of philosophy. According to Diderot, both practices, genre painting and philosophical investigations, seek to represent the ‘true’.32

It was the proliferation of the unclassified subject matter of mundane, habitual reality, correlative to the widening of the art public, that lead to the eighteenth-century usage of the concept of genre, and which, according to Diderot, coincided with the task of philosophical thinking. Diderot used the term ‘peinture de genre’ in a framework of a critical polemic against historical painting which adheres to the classical, Aristotelian academic hierarchy of genres which was still retained, as noted above, by the French academy of the seventeenth century.

The term *peinture de genre* continued to be effective also in the following century, when artistic theory and discourse proliferated, with the writing and teaching of the history of art.33 In Germany, the term became accepted during the nineteenth century; around 1830 one can find the term *Die Genre-malerei* in the art-historical surveys of Karl Schnasse and Franz Kugler.34 Moreover, genre painting served as a model for the ‘Realist’ nineteenth-century critics and authors.35

Though seeming to entail a deviation from classical hierarchies of genres, the modern concept of *peinture de genre* continued to lean on the Aristotelian differentiation between the tragic and the comic, the serious and the habitual. The change particular to the modern period since the eighteenth century is that habitual subject matter has been gradually given a central role to be equaled and sometimes surpassing in importance historical and theological subject matter.

Still, the use of the concept of ‘genre painting’ in artistic vocabulary stands as a philological riddle: Must one, as Jakob Burckhardt did 1874, refer to this term of ‘genre painting’ as merely ‘accidental’ or arbitrary?36 In my opinion the history of the etymon ‘genre’, and its affiliation with habitual subject matter is not accidental but rather informative. Moreover, it points to the capacity of the concept of genre to continue to serve as a methodical tool in the humanities. This suggestion could be enhanced by a return to the Aristotelian meaning of the term *genos*. Indeed a long tradition of transmission exists between Aristotle’s thought regarding the *genos* and the various definitions of genre theory in modernity. Regarding the twentieth century’s criticisms of ‘genre’, which I mentioned at the outset, one may ask: is genre classification, as its twentieth-century prosecutors argued, indeed a stiff grill of separations, that is inadequate to account for the complexity and singularity of historical reality? Perhaps genre could rather be viewed as a methodic mechanism enabling a localization, or definition of a work, be it provisory or transitory? All generic classification places a work within a preexisting diachronic line of types, corresponding primarily to the work’s subject matter. Now let us take a brief look at the Aristotelian beginning of generic classification.
Generic classification and genre as the ‘matter’ of forms

The insistence of the methodic centrality of the concept of ‘genre’ could be viewed as one of the central suggestions of the Aristotelian orientation throughout the centuries. The genos was placed by Aristotle as a complementary and supplementary concept to the Platonic eidos. Instead of forms, Aristotle posed the genera as the primary means of classification. For Aristotle, the form (eidos) is a subdivision within the genos, a subdivision which is the outcome of a specific difference (diaphora) found within the genre. Hence: a genre + a specific difference supply, within a certain inquiry, what Aristotle refers to as the eidos, or the form of a thing in question. Genres include all actualized differences as a potentiality; and one achieves the definition, or the form, of a thing when recognizing both the latter’s genre and the specific difference. Thus one cannot achieve an understanding of a thing’s form without passing through an understanding of its genre.

The concept of genos, translated also as ‘kind’ or as ‘race’, comes up throughout Aristotle’s works: In the Categories, the two Analytics, in the Topics, in the biological writings, in the Metaphysics, the Poetics and in the Rhetoric.

Here is the definition Aristotle gives to the genos in his Metaphysics Delta:

The term genus, then, is used in all these senses: (a) in respect of continuous generation of the same type (εἴδους); (b) in respect of the first mover of the same type as the thing which it moves; (c) in the sense of material. For that which the differentia or quality belongs to is the substrate, which we call material (ὕλην).

This Aristotelian definition is applicable to the literary classification of genres. Indeed, Richard McKirahan has recently demonstrated a continuity and coherence between Aristotle’s logical and metaphysical definitions of the genos, and his definitions of various forms of literature in the Poetics. Genres are, in Aristotle’s definition as well as in literary genre theory, recognized to exist in several exemplars during a certain period. And the generic series exhibits repetitions, articulations and variations of the genos. Indeed, a relation of hierarchy exists between genre and forms. Genos is to Form, what matter (hyle) is to shape (morphe): Genos is a ‘matter’ from which specific forms are generated, released or distinguished; Genos is the hyle of definitions, a reservoir of potential forms. Due to this basic layering, a generic system of classification must be, to some extent, a hierarchical one. In literary generic classical classifications, it is the subject matter of the work that determines its stylistic form, and the generic type supports and sustains, and in that sense entails the various realizations as potentials; and the same is also true of the genos in the original Aristotelian definition,
which is denoted as a kind of matter regarding forms; it is a yet to be determined potentiality, as a matter from which forms and their differences are to be realized. The genera are epistemological instruments enabling saying something about something else, an operation which is one of the most basic impulses of humanist inquiries. Naturally, generic rationality demands a certain amount of discipline: According to Aristotle, locating an inquiry within a certain genre is necessary for any proof process, and one should abstain from moving from genre to genre in the same demonstration. The two following sections examine what continuity can be demonstrated between the eighteenth-century transfiguration of the concept of ‘genre’ regarding painting and a modern epistemological understanding of ‘genre’.

**Genre painting and the subject matter of modern art**

Genre painting, as was demonstrated above, is essentially related to the comic ‘genre’ of artworks, imitating subject matters belonging to habitual reality, not exactly still-life, not landscape either, but rather minor human scenes located on the background of history, devoid of ideal nobleness. The rise of the comic through the new classification of ‘genre’ could be comprehended as the decisive change modern art, at least in literary and artistic discourse, has brought to the history of our etymon.

In the nineteenth century, ‘genre painting’ became prominent. From Gustave Courbet’s Realism, through Édouard Manet’s Impressionism, up to Édouard Vuillard’s Post-Symbolism, a large part of nineteenth-century avant-garde painting could not be thematically and stylistically understood without a recourse to the classification of ‘genre painting’ [Fig. 5]. Therefore, the concept of ‘genre’ should be considered as a key player in establishing the paradigm of modern art. Hence modern art and its associated discourse could be understood as a development within the long tradition of transfiguration of the Aristotelian literary ‘genre’ theory. And in the twentieth century it was physical, material reality itself that became primary and central, so that abstract art, dedicated to the articulation of physical characters of space, color, materiality, and corporeal gestures, could be included in the story that is deployed here, driven as it is by the movement toward the ‘comic’ through the concept of ‘genre’ in the arts. To the claim that one cannot use thematic generic classification regarding nonfigurative, ‘abstract’ art, one could reply that an artwork does not have to be figurative in order to be considered within a certain genre; the type of subject matter of the work can still, in most cases, be deciphered. On the other hand, clearly classical canonic iconographies, ancient as well as Christian, have been found in modern
times as too narrow and anachronistic to supply the exhaustive subject matter from which possible forms could be drawn. It is therefore physical reality as such, from its materials to habitual life in the city or the home, that make the modern, encompassing ‘genre’ of art. This was anticipated by the formation of ‘genre painting’ in the eighteenth century, and exemplified by philological rationality in the twentieth century, to which we now turn.

**Genre and philological habitude**

We arrive now at the last station of our trail, gathering the various threads together, and considering their relevance to humanist inquiries at large. The modern use of the concept of genre in artistic discourse, epitomized by the concept of ‘genre painting’, is not by sheer coincidence related to habitual subjects. Indeed, Diderot’s use of the term clarifies an aspect of the Aristotelian *genos* and its application, which hasn’t been clear in previous usages of the term in traditional liter-
ary genre theory. It highlights the fact that generic examination is essentially and consistently occupied (1) with definitions and (2) with a hierarchical distinction between the comic and the tragic, or between the habitual and the heroic. Generic investigation considers human work as a result of serial repetition of types, and therefore as a constant process of distinction between the habitual, repeating ‘comic’ details, and the tragic deviations from the generic web. A generic problem always involves the demand for a definition. It comes up when one seeks to define ‘what’s that’ in a situation where some figure is not automatically classifiable under accepted iconographies. In the twentieth century, in the history of art, Erwin Panofsky practiced such a generic, thematic history; occasionally he referred to this kind of inquiry as iconology. Iconology, as it was practiced by Panofsky and before him by Warburg, breaks the matter of history into themes and distinguishes genres of classification inside those which already exist; it locates a work, through the definition of its theme, within the already existing schemes of generic categories. In that sense, it is less interested in history as such.

A late-modern kind of generic inquiry, taking both Aristotle and Diderot into account, would understand historical reality as a result of habitual repetition and variation, not as tragic historicity. History would then be considered to be woven out of repetition and rehearsal of generic themes and types. The task of a genre-oriented study of art would then consist in locating a work, or some detail of a work, within a classificatory thematic category, which should be demonstrated to exist in a continuous trail of repetition across a certain segment of history. Generic classification locates a work within a genre, yet a one which would not be too wide (see Bergson’s complaint mentioned at the outset) but rather as wide and as weighty as the work in question can carry. Leo Spitzer attested to the tragic-comic nature of philological inquiry, in his 1948 introduction to Linguistics and Literary History:

[T]he philological, the inductive way, seeks to show significance in the apparently futile. [...] Philology, which deals with the all-too-human, [...] the attempt to discover significance in the detail, the habit of taking a detail of language as seriously as the meaning of a work of art – or, in other words, the attitude which sees all manifestations of man as equally serious – this is an outgrowth of the pre-established firm conviction, the ‘axiom’, of the philologian, that details are not an inchoate chance aggregation of dispersed material through which no light shines.

A generic investigation demands from the researcher to rethink and rehabilitate his own habituated system of classifications, thus carrying a potential for new forms to be generated on the charts of history.
Notes

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10 Benjamin, *Origin*, 44.


20 Lavezzi, *Scène de genre*, 43.

21 Ibid., 35.
23 Ibid., 89.
24 Roger de Piles, Cours de peinture par principes (1708) (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 31 (A searchable version is to be found in Gallica database).
27 Lavezzi, Œuvre de genre, 31, 121 n. 42.
29 I quote the English translation from Stechow and Comer, ‘History of Genre’, 89-90. The French text is to be found in Denis Diderot, Essais sur la peinture (Paris: Fr. Buisson, 1795), 90-91. A searchable version of this edition could be found on the Gallica database.
30 Diderot, Essais sur la peinture, 84-91.
31 My translation from Diderot, Essais sur la peinture, 90: ‘C'est la querelle de la prose et de la poésie, de l'histoire et du poème épique, de la tragédie héroïque et de la tragédie bourgeoise, de la tragédie bourgeoise et de la comédie gaie.’
32 Ibid., 176.
36 Stechow and Comer, ‘History of Genre’, 89 n. 2 (‘[...] zu diesem zufälligen Namen [...]’).
40 See Andrei Cornea, ‘Umberto Eco’s Encyclopedia vs. Porphyry’s Tree’, Laval théologique et philosophique 65.2 (2009), 301-320.

46 For a similar attitude, see Ralph Cohen, ‘History and Genre’, New Literary History 71.2 (Winter 1986), 203-218.

