In the past decades, the question of genre has come to play an ever smaller roll in critical discourse. Whereas literary critics of historical leaning continue to regard it as a matter of mere taxonomy and classification, even those who are more theoretically astute have little time for a rigorous inquiry into the laws that, more specific than general principles of aesthetics or media and yet more general than the law of the individual work, grant an internal texture to the field of art and literature as a whole, allowing it to appear not simply as a monolithic and homogenous mass of texts, but as a system of different disciplines all of which implicate, yet none of which is adequate to, the whole. For indeed, precisely the most theoretically innovative critical disciplines of the last fifty years—New Criticism, reader response and reception theory, deconstruction, and cultural
and post-colonial studies—each focus their gaze somewhere else, casting it either too widely or too narrowly to recognize principles of genre, in their interaction with the text, as an autonomous theoretical concern. What is lost as a result, above all, is a sense for what Lessing, Friedrich Schlegel, Lukács, and Benjamin each recognized, though each in their own way, with the greatest clarity, and which one might regard as the most important, if also most subtle, legacy of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: namely that just as the individuality of the individual person can only be understood as the individual realization of his or her “species being,” so too the work asserts its own vital individuality and originality as the exemplification of a genre.

It is in the study of popular culture and in particular film and television, where such seemingly antiquated theoretical concerns might appear least relevant, that this neglect is most troubling. If one had originally hoped that these new media would give rise to a radically new, non-auratic and non-Aristotelian poetics and aesthetics, it is now clear that, with very few exceptions, the genres of the past continue to assert their rights in the new domains, haunting an element that it seems should have no room for them. Precisely this afterlife of genre, however, becomes incomprehensible when we abandon
genre as a theoretical problematic. Indeed, even if the very notion of genre, with its implicit metaphysics of “essence” and “organicity,” is itself no longer defensible, we can eliminate it from our critical apparatus only at risk of becoming blind to precisely what is most uncanny in our own age and, above all, its popular cultural forms: its saturation with past forms of life that, without ever exactly achieving clarity into their own nature, accumulate ceaselessly and without regard for the principle of contradiction. Only an understanding of the life of genre, in other words, can grant insight into its afterlife. The question of the life of genre, moreover, has everything to do with the problem of the genre—the form—of life. To conceive of literature in terms of mere textuality, to refuse to grant genre the status of an autonomous, structuring principle, is to reduce it to the analog of bare life. Literary theory, in turn, could only appear either as a law imposed by violent fiat—as when we demand that every text must have one ultimate meaning—or as a mere repetition of the logic of textuality. Genre is the law and form that has not forced itself on the work from the outside, but inhabits it from within: that is nothing else than the expression of its singularity. The alienation of law from life begins with the afterlife of genre.
Such an inquiry is complicated from the outset by the fact that the philosophical concept of literary genre, articulated in Aristotle’s poetics, seems to be already rooted in a generic understanding of human nature. In this sense, its life seems to have been, from the outset, an afterlife: the haunting of human beings in their singularity by the afterimage of a generic humanity. Yet to return to a pre-Socratic moment, in the hope of finding there the authentic law of genre, is untenable, not only because it depends on a highly problematic notion of originality, but also because it cannot really cast any light on the afterlife of genre that touches us most intimately in the present. We must abandon the idea that the afterlife which we seek is the afterlife of an authentic, fully realized life. Thus, it is best to begin, in a seemingly paradoxical fashion, with a genre that was always more dead than living, lacking a fleshy musculature of technical efficiency and aesthetic finish, with its own proper life skeletal rather than organic.

Perhaps the most striking example of such an un-dead genre is the mourning play (Trauerspiel) of the German Baroque. For in the case of these strange and almost completely forgotten works, Benjamin argues in his Habilitationsschrift, the law of the genre reveals itself
with the greatest clarity in the most skeletal, dramatically impoverished, exemplars—works which were barely able to survive in their own time, let alone into another age (I.1:238). Just as the affinity of the German Baroque to Expressionism gave impetus to Benjamin’s study, the revivification of aspects of the mourning play in the popular media of our time also opens up a promising path of investigation. Here, of course, it cannot be a question of the merely superficial appropriation of certain morbid elements such as ghosts, tombstones, skulls—all of which are familiar from the far more living Baroque drama of Shakespeare—nor of the familiar resources of the Gothic horror film, whose immediate power over the affects in fact places them at a far remove from the contemplative attitude of the mourning play. The affinity between the genre’s life and its afterlife, if it is to mean anything, must involve the inner organization and not just the outer trappings. In just this respect, however, the popular TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* makes a special claim on our attention. With a gentle and understated campiness suspending extremes of pathos, forbidding an excessive identification either with Buffy or the endless victims yet without depriving the characters (living and dead) of a sympathetic and human fullness, the mood of
Buffy the Vampire Slayer is more restful than urgent. And within this almost contemplative element many of the most peculiar and characteristic aspects of the Baroque genre, as it was conceived in Walter Benjamin’s Origin of the German Mourning Play, rise from their three hundred year oblivion and, only slightly transformed by their new birth, join together in a macabre procession.

Not only do the “demonic” forces unleash, with every turn, new intrigues against the world, but these crises, threatening the very continuity of earthly existence, are paired with the more mundane (if not less intense) catastrophes of high school and college life, thus revealing a dramatic universe in which catastrophe, no longer measured by the value of what is threatened with loss, appears simply as the gesture of time itself. For like the time of the mourning play, the time in which the action of Buffy the Vampire Slayer unfolds is neither progressive nor eschatological. Rather, what the demonic makes manifest is nothing else than the hold of the past over the present. Indeed, as Giles explains in the second episode of the first season, in what is perhaps the most substantive elaboration of Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s demonology, the demons and vampires that inhabit the world are merely the remnant of the
immortals who dwelled on the earth prior to the advent of human beings. Likewise, through the consequent inversion of all theological categories—the original paradise is a hell, and the end of time the return of the earth to its original demonic possessors—prophesy and messianism are divested of all reference to revelation. In both these ways, time, in its properly historical dimension, is dissolved into space. The future (as openness for the truly new) has been eradicated, and what remains is an essentially static opposition between a sub-terrestrial past and a terrestrial, purely earthly present—an architectonic structure visualized through the spiritual topography of Sunnydale, with its lairs and grottos and the hellmouth counterpoised to the high school and its central library;\(^2\) with the home standing off from the action as the always-threatened refuge of the paradisal condition of childhood; and with the graveyard finally marking the point of transition between the living and the dead, the present and the past. And indeed, not only does the cyclic take precedence over the linear (the passage between light and day and the lunar cycle play a particularly crucial role) but even the seasons—the cycles of time which, interwoven with the agricultural and organic, pass over into eschatological time—have been banished from an ever sunny
The television series also demonstrates more subtle affinities to Baroque drama. The royal court or Hof, the primary showplace of the mourning play, finds an almost perfect analogue in the high school, organized as it is around fawning and flattery, rituals of pomp (cheerleaders, the prom, the homecoming dance) and spectacle, and dictatorial control bent on maintaining order in a constant state of exception. And one even discovers that element of the mourning play which might seem least palatable to a modern sensibility and to the demands of the new media—the peculiarly Baroque use of language. If allegory in the strict sense remains mostly absent, nevertheless a lush if sometimes excruciating verbal wit, the apocalyptic speech of demons and vampires, and the learned language of magic and demonology combine to create an effect not unlike the bombast (Schwulst) of the mourning play. Meaning, in the traditional sense, is hardly the only, or even the most prominent, function of a language that oscillates between prophesy, Latin incantations, tortured word-play, and the clichéd sentiments of adolescence, and in which even emblems and iconography assert their rights. It not infrequently happens that a conversation held under the menace of a new catastrophe, and even in the moment of
uttermost danger, derails into a play of words, producing an effect like that which Benjamin attributes to the Baroque author Hallmann (I.1:375). Stupid puns interrupt and disorient even the most serious conversations. Nowhere though is the implicit rejection of an organic theory of language, in which sound and meaning are united, so evident as in the episode titled “Hush” (14 December 1999). Sinister old men come alive from a fairy tale and steal the voices from the residents of Sunnydale, forcing Buffy and her friends to figure out what has happened while communicating only through written marks and emblems. In a chill and haunting silence, written marks must unravel their own mystery.

2: A MOURNING PLAY WITHOUT MOURNING

Yet one thing above all is lacking for the analogy with the mourning play to be complete. There is no, or almost no, mourning. Despite the occasional brooding of the vampires and the human moodiness and all the travails that Buffy must endure as slayer, mourning, especially during the first three seasons, never becomes the dominant mood. It is never allowed to develop according to its own logic, but instead is always transformed into something else, directed into another, essentially different af-