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Are genres stable?

Genre can be defined as a structural pattern which embodies a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language. . . . Genre is universal, basic to human perceptions of life.

John Cawelti, *The Six-gun Mystique* (1975, p. 30)

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, discussions of genre almost always invoked historical precedents. The late Renaissance rise of generic consciousness was specifically predicated on a revival of the genres of classical Greece and Rome: comedy, tragedy, satire, ode and epic. Even the anti-genre romantics could not escape the tyranny of genre history as they sought to destroy generic specificity and with it the weight of the past. When science provided a model of apparently stable biological species permanently separated by reproductive incompatibility, the concept of biological evolution – immediately adapted to social and literary categories – quickly re-established the traditional link between generic thinking and historical observation. In a turn-of-the-century world dominated by Ferdinand Brunetière's *Evolution of Genres*, there could be no question of genres existing outside of history.

Half a century later, however, under the influence of Jungian psychology and structural anthropology, genres found themselves in new company. Instead of being read in the context of Horace and Boileau, they found themselves surrounded by pagan rituals, native ceremonies, undated traditional texts and descriptions of human nature. No longer was attention concentrated on the appearance, transformation, combination and disappearance of genres, and thus on new, modified, or vanishing genres, but on generic continuity and in particular on genres that might justify claims of generic permanence. With Northrop Frye identifying genres as embodiments of myth and Sheldon Sachs connecting genres to stable characteristics of the human mind, it is hardly surprising that a generation of film critics should have considered film genres as nothing more than the latest incarnation of broader, older, more permanent generic structures. Although, following John Cawelti and his culture-specific notion of formula fiction, critics have seen Hollywood genres as specifically American, they nevertheless happily attribute to film genres a distinguished ancestry including Greek comedies, Western novels, stage melodramas and Viennese operettas.

Not surprisingly, the myth-oriented rediscovery of genre criticism during the third quarter of this century seriously jeopardized our ability to think of genres as anything other than the stable manifestations of more or less fundamental and permanent human concerns. In one sense, this is only reasonable, because the prestige associated with the term *genre* over the past few decades derives from a belief that the notion of genre, like Alice's rabbit hole, provides a magic connection between this fallen world and the more satisfying, more permanent realm of

archetype and myth. Once filled by prayer, the role of mediating between man and the eternal has now fallen to genre. In short, we must see genres as stable if they are to do the work we require of them.

In placing so much emphasis on generic fixity – necessary for access to the benefits of archetypal criticism – two generations of genre critics have done violence to the historical dimensions of genre. Stressing the apparently representative straight stretches of the mighty genre river rather than its tortuous tributaries, its riverbed-defying floods, or its tidewater-dominated estuary, recent genre theory has devoted too little attention to the logic and mechanisms whereby genres become recognizable as such. This chapter offers a corrective to that tendency.

In the recent past, all genre study has begun with questions of permanence and coherence: What do these texts have in common? What shared structures permit them to make more meaning as a genre than the sum of their meanings as individual texts? What forces explain, and what patterns reveal, generic longevity? Here, however, I look instead at problems of transience and dissemination. How is it that some structures fail to achieve generic recognition? What changes are required for others to be constituted as genres? If genres are the temporal reflection of transhistorical values, what explains the regular conflicts regarding their definition, extent and function? Traditionally, by stressing coincident structures and concerns, genre criticism has laboured mightily to conceal or conquer difference and disagreement; the principle observed in this chapter instead underscores discrepancies in order to explain what makes difference possible. Only when we know how difference is spawned in the apparently universal generic context will we be in a position to arbitrate the many border disputes growing out of genre's role as a representative of permanence in a world of change.

Adjectives and nouns

Stressing discrepancy rather than coincidence, we cannot help but notice that generic terminology sometimes involves nouns, sometimes adjectives, a distinction also noted by Leutrat and Liandrat-Guigues (1990, pp. 95, 105–7). Indeed, the very same word sometimes appears as both parts of speech: *musical comedies* or just plain *musicals*, *Western romances* or simply *Westerns*, *documentary films* or film *documentaries*. Interestingly, there would seem to be some kind of historical consistency in these generic doublets. Earlier uses of the term are invariably adjectival in nature, describing and delimiting a broader established category. Not just *poetry*, but *lyric poetry* or *epic poetry*. Later uses involve stand-alone substantival treatment, with a corresponding change in the status of the new category. Lyric poetry is a type of poetry; the more types of poetry we name, the more we reinforce the existence of poetry as an independent category, with each type corresponding to a different potential aspect of poetry. When we drop the noun and promote the adjective to substantival status – *a lyric* – we have done quite a bit more than simply pass from a general type – *poetry* – to a specific case – *a lyric poem*. By giving the adjective the status of a noun we imply that *lyric* exists as a category independent of *poetry*, the noun that it originally modified.

When a descriptive adjective becomes a categorical noun, it is thus loosened from the tyranny of that noun. *Epic poetry* calls to mind Homer, Virgil or Milton,

poets all. But what mental images does the stand-alone substantive *an epic* call forth? *The Song of Roland*? *War and Peace*? *Alexander Nevsky*? *Lonesome Dove*? No longer is our imagination bound to poetic form; instead it seeks out similar texts across media. Before, epic was one of the possible qualities of the primary category *poetry*; now film is one of the possible manifestations of the primary category *epic*.

The number of generic terms that have gone through this substantifying process is surprising. *Narrative poetry*: the nature of *narrative*. *Scenic photography*: a *scenic* (one of the staples of silent film exhibition). *Serial publication*: a *serial*. *Commercial message*: a *commercial*. *Roman noir*, *film noir*: just plain *noir*. In some cases a neologism is required in order to incorporate the adjective into a noun. A *biographical picture* becomes a *biopic*. *Musical drama* turns into *melodrama*. On the same model, *documentary drama* can be termed *docudrama*. *Science fiction* stories are *sci-fi*. Often, the exigencies of journalism even generate clones of these substantified terms: musicals are *singies*, Westerns are *oaters*, melodramas are *mellers*, *tearjerkers* or *weepies*.

In each case the development of the stand-alone noun signals the liberation of the former adjective from its noun and the formation of a new category with its own independent status. Consider the history of comedy. Over the centuries comedy has been characterized in a variety of ways, according to its source, tone, costuming, exhibition, and the like. Now we have a series of categories that have become more or less loosened from the parent genre: burlesque, farce, masque, screwball, slapstick, and so on. In fact, this progression recalls the fact that *comedy* itself did not start as a noun, but as one of a set of adjectives designating the possible types of theatre or song: the word *comedy* comes from the kind of singing associated with revelling (Greek *komoidos* < *komos* = revel + *aiodos* = song), whereas *tragedy* comes from the type associated with goats, i.e., satyrs (Greek *tragoidia* < *tragos* = goat + *oide* = song).

In other words, even such apparently basic terms as *comedy* and *tragedy*, like *epic* and *lyric*, had to earn substantival status. What initially were simply descriptive adjectives had to commandeer entire texts and demonstrate a clear ability to pilot them independently. Alistair Fowler is right to recognize that types expressed in noun form (which he calls kinds or genres) can eventually give rise to types expressed as adjectives (which he calls modes), but since he takes for granted both the existence of genres and the 'structurally dependent status of mode vis-à-vis kind' (1982, p. 108) he fails to note the importance of adjective-to-noun progression in the creation of genres.

Burlesque comedy was once simply a form of the comedy genre belonging to the mode of burlesque, characterized by travesty, caricature, and nonsense jokes (the original meaning of the adjective 'burlesque'). But history doesn't stop there. What initially appeared as (*burlesque*) *comedy*, a known genre dressed in modal garb, with the noun outweighing the adjective, took on a new identity when accompanied by burlesques of other genres, thus becoming *burlesque (comedy)*, with the adjective now outweighing the noun. Soon the single substantive 'burlesque' was introduced, with the slight discomfort accompanying neologisms. Eventually, the only thing left was just plain *burlesque*, standing alone on the generic stage, stripped of any necessary connection with comedy.

Kalem Films
THE NEW LINE

THE TENDERFOOT



A Merry Western Comedy
Full of Laughs and Ginger
LENGTH, 850 FEET READY JULY 31

THE TENDERFOOT is a callow Eastern youth who goes West with an ambition to become a cow puncher. Of course he is an easy mark from the moment he strikes the ranch, and the cowboys have no end of fun with him until one fine day they inveigle him into a game of poker. Then the deal suddenly changes, and the tenderfoot wins the game and the girl.




6 Great Scenes With Cartoon Titles

1. HEAP BAD INJUN.
2. He Would Be a Cowboy.
3. Love a la Carte.
4. The Bear Hunt.
5. Captured by Redskins.
6. Slung.

RECENT KALEM SUCCESSSES
THE HUBO HERO, 760 ft. Bowser's Housecleaning, 675 ft.
Pony Express, 880 " Dog Snatcher, 595 "
New Hired Man, 575 " Gentleman Farmer, 720 "
Runaway Sleighbelle, 535 Feet

KALEM COMPANY, Inc.
131 W. 24th STREET (Telephone 4619 Madison) NEW YORK CITY
Selling Agent, Kieino Optical Co. 62 State St., Chicago

KALEM FILMS
(THE NEW LINE)

THE LOST MINE



Western Romance
and Adventure at its Best
Length 455 Feet

The story of the Lost Mine is a pretty one—telling how a poor prospector was grub-staked by a tender-hearted girl, and after perilous adventures found a mine and won a bride. The film is a most perfect specimen of high art photography in motion pictures. Demand it of your rental bureau. Make them give you the best.

Woman, Cruel Woman
Length 315 Feet

An amusing story about a cook who tried to cop a flirtatious pa-tior maid.

A DRAMATIC RHEARSAL, Length 105 feet

Showing how a sketch team nearly raised a riot at Coyotesville. A real laugh producer.

All ready November 16th. Making an 875 ft. Reel of exceptionally attractive stuff.

KALEM FILMS HAVE CARTOON TITLES
Recent Kalem Successes

RED MAN'S WAY - 750 Feet	NATHAN HALE - 680 Feet
His Affinity - 340 ft.	Woolg of Miles Standish 720 ft.
Troubles of a Tramp - 255 "	Reguy's Camping Party 705 "
The Royal Motorists - 535 "	Dot Leticia German Band 535 "
The Gold Brick - 705 "	B I! Built-In & the Burglar 160 "
It Was Mother-in-Law - 160 "	Chinese Slave Smuggling 650 "

KALEM COMPANY, Inc.
131 W. 24th STREET (Telephone 4619 Madison) NEW YORK CITY
Selling Agent, Kieino Optical Co., 62 State St., Chicago
London Agents: Urban Trading Co., 42 Rupert Street

Typical of early studio discourse about the Western, Moving Picture World ads for Kalem's *The Tenderfoot* (27 July 1907) and *The Lost Mine* (16 November 1907) attach the adjective 'western' to already existing generic nouns: 'comedy' and 'romance'.

The constant sliding of generic terms from adjective to noun offers important insight into film genres and their development. Before the Western became a separate genre and a household word, there were such things as Western chase films, Western scenics, Western melodramas, Western romances, Western adventure films, and even Western comedies, Western dramas and Western epics. That is, each of these already existing genres could be and was produced with settings, plots, characters and props corresponding to current notions of the West. In 1907 the West was a drawing card, so even familiar melodramas could be given new life if they could be staged with Western trappings (just as the popularity of high-tech sports shoes has given rise to such unexpected phenomena as commercials employing sports shoes to advertise everything from batteries to rental cars). In a

similar manner, the musical was preceded by musical comedy, musical drama, musical romance, musical farce, and even the doubly redundant *all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing musical melodrama*. Just as turn-of-the-century America was fascinated by anything Western, the sliced bread of the late 20s was sound film; in 1929, a film seemed incomplete unless music was added to its existing generic framework.

As long as Western trappings, music, or a dark style were just add-ons, neither the Western, the musical, nor film noir could exist as a genre. Three changes had to occur before full genrification could take place:

- a) Abandoning the add-on approach ('Let's just add music to this comedy'), studios had to shift attention away from pre-existing substantive genres toward transgeneric adjectival material. Musical *melodrama* and musical *comedy* have little in common, but *musical melodrama* and *musical comedy* reveal proto-generic relationships. The primary vehicle of this change is standardization and automatization of the reading formation through which previous successes are evaluated and imitated.
- b) Films had to display shared attributes stretching beyond the genre's eponymous material (music, the Wild West, dark atmosphere), but nevertheless sufficiently connected to that material to justify using the name for that material as a generic label. In the Western, this began when Western material was combined with melodramatic plots and characters (villain, endangered woman, law-abiding young man). In the musical, it had to await the use of music as both catalyst and expression of heterosexual romance.
- c) The public, whether self-consciously or not, had to become so aware of the structures binding disparate films into a single generic category that the process of viewing would always be filtered through the type concept. That is, the expectations that come with generic identification (character types and relations, plot outcome, production style, and the like) must become part and parcel of the process whereby meaning is attributed to films.

Conceptually aiding these three parallel processes, and like them taking place not all at once but over a period of time, the substantification of the generic label signals the beginning of a privileged period for film genre that we appropriately celebrate by use of the expression *genre film*. All too often in the past, *genre film* has been used interchangeably with the more general designator *film genre* or simply to designate a film with obvious connections to a widely recognized genre. A more precise use is in order:

1. Genre films are films produced after general identification and consecration of a genre through substantification, during the limited period when shared textual material and structures lead audiences to interpret films not as separate entities but according to generic expectations and against generic norms.

If one of the attractions of the very notion of genre is its ability to celebrate connections among the various players in the film game, then any short span of genre film production and reception is the ideal object of genre theory, because it is there that the various forces are most clearly aligned, and the overall power of generic terms apparently at its height. Indeed, so seductive is this alignment that many genre studies never stray outside its bounds.

Genre as process

Attention to coincidence having been banned from this chapter, another discrepancy now offers itself for analysis. Too often, attempts to understand origins have led to careful description of situations favouring change, evaluation of factors motivating change, and enumeration of devices revealing change, only to limit deployment of the resultant model to a single moment, that of origin. But what if the model thus constructed were applicable to other moments as well? What if genre were not the permanent *product* of a singular origin, but the temporary *by-product* of an ongoing *process*?

We begin with two discrepancies. The first we have already noted. The genres formed when adjectives become nouns in the process of genrification (for example, comedy, melodrama and epic) are themselves subject to replacement when they are in turn modified by other terms that then may graduate from adjective to substantive (for example, burlesque, musical and Western). Yet even the latter terms never achieve security, because they too can be displaced according to the same process that brought them to the fore. Thus at any given time we find an unselfconscious mixture of terminology. With no way to distinguish among the terms, we regularly intermingle current and former genres, either in an adjectival or a substantival state. Lumped in the same sentence are films made under a genre-film regime and films subsequently assimilated to that genre; genres that once existed, that now exist, and that have not yet fully begun to exist; genres recently substantified and others still adjectival in nature; genres currently boasting genre-film audiences and others that long ago lost those audiences. The usual response to such a dilemma is to walk quietly away.

A second discrepancy is more surprising in nature, because it contradicts virtually everything that has ever been said about the value of genre terms to the production process. Received wisdom suggests that genres provide models for development of studio projects, simplify communication among studio personnel and ensure long-term economic benefits. So far, so good. All of these functions are surely fulfilled by genres. The role played by generic concepts in production, it is claimed, is then reflected in studio film publicity, where generic concepts are prominently displayed. With few exceptions (for example, see Barrios, 1995, p. 66 on *The Broadway Melody*; Buscombe, 1992, p. 76 on *Stagecoach*; Jenkins, 1992, p. 125 on the television series *Beauty and the Beast*), this is the generally shared critical attitude towards the role of genre in Hollywood publicity. Never having looked closely at film publicity campaigns with this problem in mind, I too for a long time believed that Hollywood regularly overtly exploited the generic identities of its genre films. Surprisingly, when I took a genre-sensitive look at advertisements and press books, I found something quite different.

Whereas film reviews almost always include generic vocabulary as a convenient and widely understood shorthand, film publicity seldom employs generic terms as such. Indirect references to genre are of course regularly used, but they almost always evoke multiple genres. A widely distributed poster for *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) is typical in this regard. The topmost prose promises 'Everything the Screen can give you . . . all in one MAGNIFICENT picture . . .!' A box on the lower left adds specificity to this general statement:



Everything the
Screen can give
you...all in one
MAGNIFICENT
picture..!

CARY GRANT
JEAN ARTHUR

TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST
TIME... IN AN EXCITING
ROMANTIC ADVENTURE!...

Only Angels Have Wings

THOMAS MITCHELL • RITA HAYWORTH
RICHARD BARTHELMESS
A HOWARD HAWKS
PRODUCTION
A Columbia Picture

EACH DAY
a Rendezvous
with Peril!
EACH NIGHT
a Meeting
with Romance!
Set against the
mighty tapestry
of the
**FOG-SHROUDED
ANDES!**

Like most Hollywood publicity, this poster for the 1939 Columbia picture *Only Angels Have Wings* downplays direct generic references in favour of coded appeals to multiple categories of viewers.

EACH DAY
 a Rendezvous
 with Peril!
 EACH NIGHT
 a Meeting
 with Romance!
 Set against the
 mighty tapestry
 of the
 FOG-SHROUDED
 ANDES!

The design of the poster reinforces this tripartite guarantee, with photographic close-ups of three different couples separated by sketches of a crashing plane and of a tropical port dominated by an enormous peak. The only specifically generic

STARTS
TOMORROW ★ **CLASHING BLADES AND LOVABLE MAIDS!**
RINGING TUNES AND BALMY BUFFOONS!

D'ARTAGNAN RIDES AND FIGHTS AND LOVES AGAIN!
 A song on his lips
 romance in his heart
 and the Ritzes in his hair!

DON AMECHE
and
THE RITZ BROTHERS
in
 A Musical Comedy Version of
ALEXANDRE DUMAS'
THE THREE MUSKETEERS

with
BINNIE BARNES • LIONEL ATWILL
GLORIA STUART • PAULINE MOORE
JOSEPH SCHILDKRAUT
JOHN CARRADINE • MILES MANDER
DOUGLAS DUMBRILLE • JOHN KING

Directed by Allan Dwan
 Associate Producer Raymond Griffith • Screen Play by
 M. M. Musselman, William A. Drake and Sam Hellman
 Special material by Sid Kuller and Roy Golden
 A 20th Century-Fox Picture
 Darryl F. Zanuck in Charge of Production

Swordplay! Horseplay!
 With the Ritzes as
 phoney Musketeers
 more at home with a
 carving knife than a
 sword!

Hear:
 "Song of the Musketeers"
 "My Lady"
 "Voila"
 by Samuel Pokrass
 and Walter Bullock

EXTRA!
 LATEST ISSUE
"MARCH OF TIME"
 featuring the story behind the
BOY SCOUT MOVEMENT

This poster for the 20th Century-Fox musical version of The Three Musketeers (1939) clearly works hard to complement the Dumas' novel's well-known adventure orientation with implications of additional genres: comedy, romance and the musical.

vocabulary is located front and centre, but in small type overwhelmed by the names of the stars, Cary Grant and Jean Arthur, 'TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME ... IN AN EXCITING ROMANTIC ADVENTURE!'

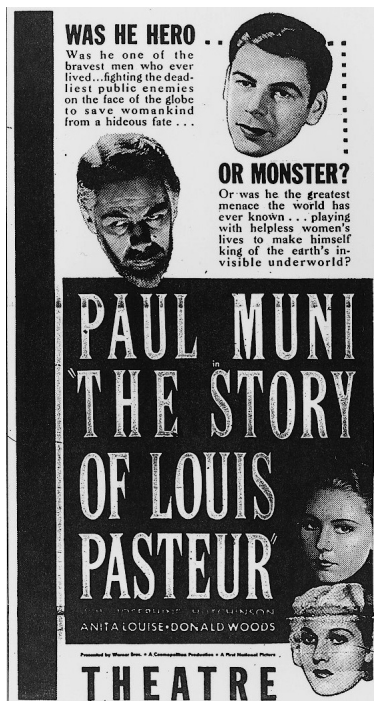
Hollywood has no interest, as this poster clearly suggests, in explicitly identifying a film with a single genre. On the contrary, the industry's publicity purposes are much better served by implying that a film offers 'Everything the Screen can give you'. During Hollywood's golden years, this usually meant offering something for the men ('EACH DAY a Rendezvous with Peril!'), something for the women ('EACH NIGHT a Meeting with Romance!'), and an added something for that *tertium quid* audience that prefers travel to adventure or romance ('the mighty tapestry of the FOG-SHROUDED ANDES').

Again and again in Hollywood publicity materials we find the same combination. DeMille's *Northwest Mounted Police* (1940) is 'the Mightiest Adventure Romance of All Time!!! ... two surging love stories woven into an unforgettable drama of human emotions ... told against the blazing beauty of the northern forests'. Starring Gable and Harlow, *Saratoga* (1937) is 'as exciting as the Sport of Kings it dramatizes ... and is the romance of a daring gambler and a girl who thought she wanted to ruin him'. *A Damsel in Distress* (1937) has Fred Astaire and 'Mad adventure! Daring deeds! White hot love with music!'

Publicity for Warners' *The Singing Marine* (1937) reduces the formula to just a few words, promising 'the crowning martial musical'. At every turn, we find that Hollywood labours to identify its pictures with multiple genres, in order to benefit from the increased interest that this strategy inspires in diverse demographic groups.

When specific genre terms are used, they are invariably offered in adjective/noun pairs, thus guaranteeing an appeal to both sexes: Western romance, romantic adventure, epic drama, and so on. Whenever possible, still other generic affiliations are implied, especially when comedy is part of the mix. The key words in ads for the Ritz Brothers' version of *The Three Musketeers* (1939), for example, are 'CLASHING BLADES AND LOVABLE MAIDS! RINGING TUNES AND BALMY BUFFOONS!' Thus guaranteed adventure, romance, music and comedy, how can we possibly resist?

We now regularly identify *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) and *The Story of Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940) as biopics. Although Warners almost certainly did not think of the former as a continuation of the politically oriented tradition initiated by



The Jekyll and Hyde characterization of Paul Muni in this poster for Warners' The Story of Louis Pasteur (1936) seeks to double the film's interest and its generic affinities.

A CHILD'S
Laughter..

A WOMAN'S
Love..

1000 MEN'S
Hope..

THESE AND A HUNDRED OTHER UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS MAKE THIS THE SCREEN'S MOST THRILLING TRIUMPH!

EDW. G. ROBINSON

Only 'genius' can describe his amazing new role... only when you see it can you believe it!

"THE STORY OF DR. EHRlich's MAGIC BULLET"

Another 'Zola'!

with **RUTH GORDON · OTTO KRUGER · DONALD CRISP**
Directed by **WILLIAM DIETERLE** · A WARNER BROS. First National Picture
Original Screen Play by John Huston, Hans Nezel and Norman Krasna
From an idea by Norman Krasna · Music by Max Steiner

As touted by this 1940 Warners poster, Hollywood films constitute a magic bullet for children, women and men alike.

Disraeli, they just as clearly considered the latter film as furthering the sequence begun by films depicting the life stories of Pasteur and Zola. Whereas Pasteur's story comes at the beginning of a cycle, Ehrlich's comes near the end. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the publicity for the two films are handled in similar fashion. *Pasteur's* posters feature two radically different vignettes of Paul Muni; seen from eye level, he is a good-looking, well-shaven ladies' man, but in high angle he is a bearded, backlit, heavily shaded, horror-film star. The caption reads: 'WAS HE HERO ... OR MONSTER?' Posters for *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* of course never revealed what the magic bullet really was (a cure for syphilis). Instead, they reinforce the title's com-

posite offer (a doctor for the ladies, a bullet for the men, magic for the *tertium quid*) with three scenes illustrating 'A CHILD'S LAUGHTER ... A WOMAN'S LOVE ... 1000 MEN'S HOPE'. Rarely has there been a better example of Hollywood's strategy: tell them *nothing* about the film, but make sure that everyone can imagine something that will bring them to the theatre.

Whether through sparsely used specific generic terms or the more common strategy of broad generic implication, Hollywood's stock-in-trade is the romantic combination of genres, not the classical practice of generic purity. In one sense, this is hardly surprising; by definition, genres are broad *public* categories shared across the entire industry, and Hollywood studios have little interest in anything that must be shared with their competitors. On the contrary, they are primarily concerned to create cycles of films that will be identified with only a single studio. After his 1929 success in *Disraeli*, for example, Warners moved George Arliss through a series of films, each time retaining one or more apparent money-making features from a previous success, but never falling into a fully imitable pattern. Searching for something only Warners could sell, the studio stressed a Warners contract actor, Warners' hard-hitting style and Warners' recognizable cycles. When the time came to advertise *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, therefore, reference was made to Pasteur and Zola not because all three are biopics, but in order to tie *Ehrlich* to an ongoing cycle of Warners hits.

Once the biopic bandwagon got moving, of course, any studio could hop on and take advantage of its momentum. Having no cycle of its own to sell, 20th Century-Fox thus advertised *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939) in the context of the larger biographical genre, a strategy typically employed only after a genre has been recognized by industry-wide adherence.

Once fully formed, as these examples suggest, genres may continue to play an exhibition or reception role as convenient labels or reading formations, but they actually work *against* the economic interests of the studio that spawned the genre. This unexpected observation helps us to bring together the two discrepancies mentioned earlier. Both adjectives and nouns, we first noted, can be used to designate genres. Although heavily used by critics, such terminology is generally avoided by studio publicity, which prefers to imply generic affiliation indirectly, with at least two generic connections invariably implied. Putting these two observations together with the recognition that studios prefer to establish cycles (which are proprietary) rather than genres (which are sharable), we may make a number



Secure in its own biopic success, Warners downplayed other studios' biographical films, whereas 20th Century-Fox here seeks to attach its star to Warners' success by associating The Story of Alexander Graham Bell (1939) with its competitors' best-known biopics.

of unexpected hypotheses that can serve as a preliminary foundation for a new model of generic process.

2. By assaying and imitating the money-making qualities of their most lucrative films, studios seek to initiate film cycles that will provide successful, easily exploitable models associated with a single studio.

Stressing studio-specific resources (contract actors, proprietary characters, recognizable styles), these cycles always also include common features that can be imitated by other studios (subject matter, character types, plot patterns).

3. New cycles are usually produced by associating a new type of material or approach with already existing genres.

Noir as adjective and noun

Thanks to the research of Charles O'Brien (1996) and Jim Naremore (1996; 1998), we now realize that film noir also began as a loose, adjectival, add-on mode that took decades to mature into the substantival genre that we know today. Following Raymond Borde's and Eugène Chaumeton's 1955 *Panorama du film noir américain*, critics have long assumed that the articles written in 1946 by Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier offered the initial formulations of the new genre. As Charles O'Brien shows, however, these articles simply extend to American films a pre-war



Before it became one of film noir's founding films, Double Indemnity (1944) was regularly called a 'murder melodrama'.

The Great Train Robbery (1903) and its immediate successors associated crime films, railway films and scenics with the Wild West. *The Singing Fool* (1928) and its imitators were musical melodramas, musical comedies or musical romances. Early biopics applied the biographical model to historical romances, adventure films and melodramas.

4. When conditions are favourable, single-studio cycles can be built into industry-wide genres.

Conditions are more likely to be favourable for generification when the cycle is defined by elements easily shared by other studios (common plots and settings rather than proprietary characters or contract players) and easily perceived by audiences.

5. When cycles become genres, adjectival genre labels are substantified.

tradition identifying certain French films with the narratives of Gallimard's proprietary 'Série noire', a cycle of particularly bleak tales in the popular French *roman policier* (detective novel) genre. At first, the term 'noir' is directly borrowed from the French expression *roman noir* and used simply as a descriptive adjective defining films with a gloomy atmosphere. In January 1939, Ernest Vuillermoz says that the subject of Jean Renoir's film *La Bête humaine* is noir, adding that black seems to be the 'in' colour in French studios these days. By July of the same year, sensing that the descriptive adjective was beginning to take on a classificatory meaning, critics and editorialists for *L'Intransigeant*, *Le Petit-journal* and *Pour vous*, describing such films as *Quai des brumes*, *Hôtel du Nord*, *Le dernier tournant* and *Le Jour se lève*, begin to confine the word noir or even the full expression film noir in quotation marks (O'Brien, 1996, p. 10), as do Frank and Chartier in the post-war era.

As with the Western and the musical, the first American films regularly described as noir already had their own generic identity. Frank and Chartier concur in identifying most of the films they discuss with the *policier* or detective genre; *Double Indemnity* is regularly called a murder melodrama; *Murder, My Sweet* is dubbed a thriller on both sides of the Atlantic; *Woman in the Window* is labelled a bourgeois tragedy by the French (Naremore, 1996, pp. 15–17). First used only as an adjective to describe a particular style of treatment adapted to several different types of film, noir settled into the noun phrase film noir only well after the war, achieving full substantival status only when, after crossing the Atlantic during the 50s, it was adopted by an American culture adept at making dark films but entirely unaware that noir had ever been an adjective.

I recall in the 70s constantly correcting the term 'noir', used as a noun, in the drafts of Thomas Schatz's dissertation. Oblivious to the winds of change, I wanted him to use the full noun-plus-adjective expression. By 1981, the Random House copy editors for *Hollywood Genres* were already willing to indulge the neologistic use of 'noir' as a stand-alone term. History has proved Schatz right, as noir has over the last twenty years become as much a part of film journalism as biopic, sci-fi and docudrama, thus completing the full adjective-to-noun trajectory.

Just as Kleenex tissues were soon referred to simply as *Kleenex*, and eventually reduced to the 'generic' term *kleenex*, so *musical comedy* became *the musical*. The difference lies in the fact that product names may be registered and protected, whereas genre terminology is shared by all. Knowing that their competitors may not use them, manufacturers strive for generalized application of their trademarks (Kleenex, Linoleum, Kodak, Hoover, and so on), whereas a film studio has little to gain from genrification.

6. Once a genre is recognized and practised throughout the industry, individual studios have no further economic interest in practising it as such (especially in their prestige productions); instead, they seek to create new cycles by associating a new type of material or approach with an existing genre, thus initiating a new round of genrification.

Without the ability to ensure a significant measure of product differentiation, studios cannot expect a substantial economic return on their investment. When a genre reaches the saturation point, studios must either abandon it, restrict it to 'B' productions, or handle it in a new way. Though this does not necessarily guarantee the creation of a new genre, it always recreates the circumstances out of which new genres are generated. At this point, then, the entire process has the potential to begin again.

The progression described here is by no means specific to *film* genre. As compared to literature and its approach to genre, however, cinema accentuates and accelerates the product differentiation aspects of the process.

Genrification as process

Over the past few millennia, every extant general term has been subjected to a version of the process described above. Discourse as a whole has been divided into poetry, painting and history. Poetry, in turn, has been characterized as epic, lyric or dramatic. Moving down yet another step, dramatic poetry – or theatre, as it came to be called – was considered as comic or tragic (and eventually even tragicomic). Note that the category-producing substantification process in these classic cases looks extremely measured and sensible. New types appear to be produced not one by one, but by an apparently scientific subdivision process. In other words, the terminology involved seems to represent the permanent and stable result of synchronic categorization. We commonly image such relationships through a branching diagram such as those that are used to locate a given species in a Linnaean configuration. Thus tigers are configured (in simplified form) as shown in figure 4.1. In order to establish such a chart, the charted animals must be imagined as existing in a timeless, unchanging museum (like the natural history museums erected around the world during the nineteenth century). In addition, we must imagine ourselves, as authors or users of the chart, as objective observers, radically separated from the animals that the chart classifies.

Generic terminology is commonly based on a classificatory model of this type – the classical origins, extended life and seeming permanence of the terms and the overall structure that contains them apparently justifying neglect of history and of

Hollywood Does A Mirthful Martial Musical Up 'Brown'



JOE E. BROWN

joins the army and 'slays' the world as the head man of a riotous regiment of singing

SONS O' GUNS

Including Joan **BLONDELL**
 Beverly Roberts, Eric Blore,
 Winifred Shaw, Craig Reynolds,
 Joseph King, Robert Barrat




TAKE A BOW, LLOYD BACON, FOR YOUR DIRECTION

And the Same To You, Warren & Dubin, for These Great Songs "A Buck And A Quarter A Day", "Put On A Uniform", "In The Arms Of An Army Man"

THE PICTURE OF THE MONTH

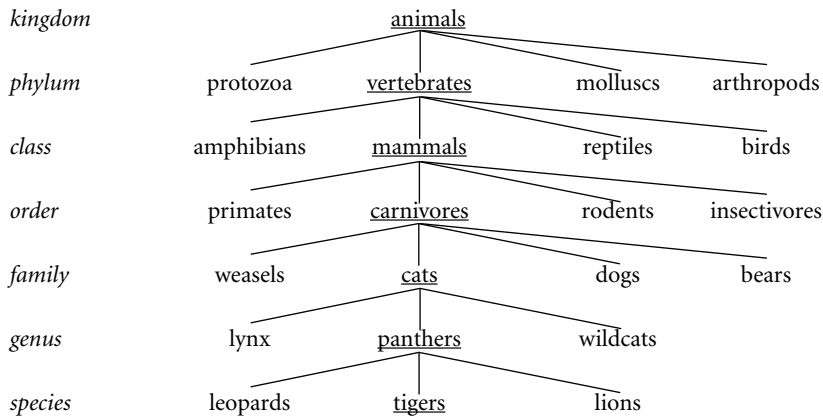


Those thousands of "Bright Lights" audiences who demanded another song-and-dance show for Joe have had their way! Warner Bros. went right out and bought that famous stage musical 'Sons O' Guns,' equipped it with an uproarious cast and all modern conveniences including new Warren and Dubin songs, and a passionate apache dance number by Joe that stops the show. The riotous results emerge as the month's top entertainment.

Through phrases like 'mirthful martial musical' and 'riotous regiment of singing', this 1936 Warners poster does it best to identify *Sons O' Guns* with three separate genres.

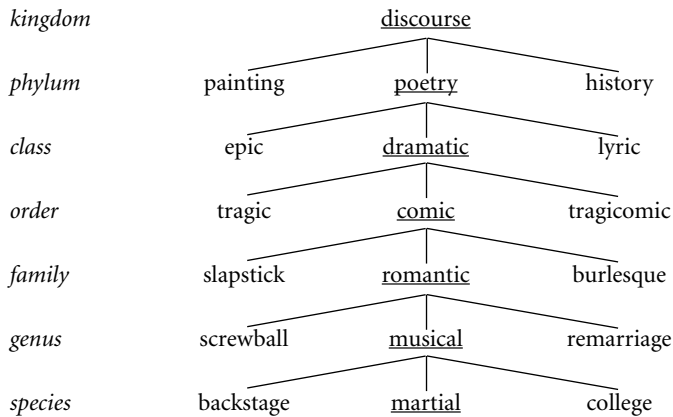
our own place within it. Consider the not-so-famous case of *mirthful martial musical romantic comic dramatic poetic discourse*. When we try to make sense of Warners' mid-30s series of annual musicals built around the service academies and related military motifs – including *Flirtation Walk* (1934), *Shipmates Forever* (1935), *Sons O' Guns* (1936) and *The Singing Marine* (1937) – we understand the contemporary label *martial musical* as part of the overall classification simplified

Figure 4.1



in figure 4.2. The more recent categories are treated with the classificatory neatness of their classical predecessors, even when their status, title, characteristics and durability remain uncertain. Yet the accelerated genrification process characteristic of this century's fully commodified genres follows not a librarian's deliberate

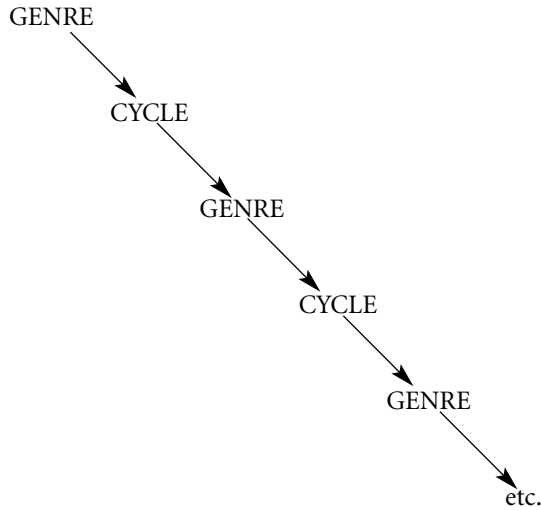
Figure 4.2



Dewey-decimal desires, but the entrepreneurial spirit and its heightened adrenaline levels.

This is not the place to decide whether or not genrification was ever a fully scientific categorizing process, free from commercial or political interests. What we can affirm at this point, however, is that the constitution of *film* cycles and genres is a never-ceasing process, closely tied to the capitalist need for product differentiation. The 'martial' musical is at first neither a genre nor a species in the permanent sense that we borrow from Linnaeus. Instead, it is a Warners cycle, a well-differentiated product sure to return a good profit to the studio's backers. As such, it has the wherewithal to become (depending on the actual level of studio investment and audience reaction) what I have termed an 'adjectival' genre. But as an adjecti-

Figure 4.3



val genre, the martial musical gains the opportunity eventually to become a broadly practised substantival genre. Just as musical comedy spawned the musical, so martial musicals might (but will not necessarily) give rise to the ‘martial’ genre.

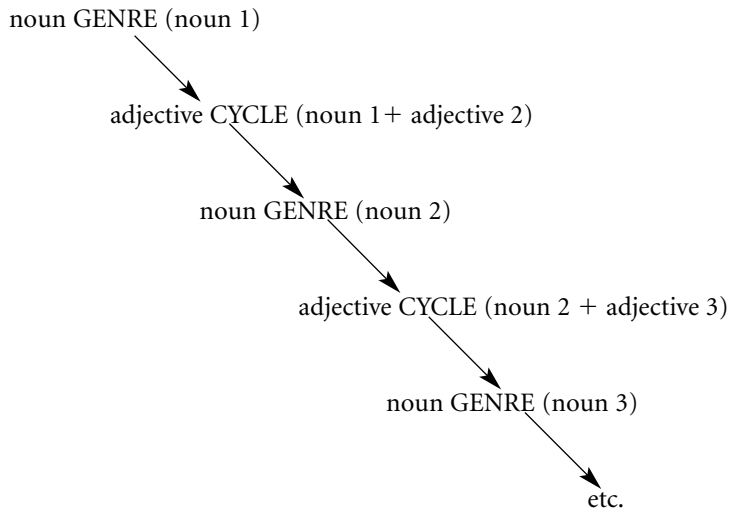
But why stop there? Posters for *Sons O’ Guns* identified it as a ‘*mirthful* martial musical’ (my emphasis). If romantic comedy can become the spawning ground for a new genre, eventually losing territory through squatters’ rights to music and the values, situations and relations it vehicles, then why can’t the process continue from the musical to the *martial or even eventually the *mirthful? (Used here according to the conventions of linguistics, the asterisk designates hypothetical categories never actually observed in the field.) Through this process-oriented logic we discover to our surprise that the number of levels is in no way fixed. Just as geology places us only on the latest level, not on the fundamental or final level, so a process-oriented understanding of genrification keeps us from thinking of the kingdom-phylum-order-class-family-genus-species sequence as complete or closed.

Genres are not just *post facto* categories, then, but part of the constant category-splitting/category-creating dialectic that constitutes the history of types and terminology. Instead of imaging this process in terms of static classification, we might want to see it, in terms of a regular alternation between an expansive principle – the creation of a new cycle – and a principle of contraction – the consolidation of a genre (see figure 4.3).

But this formulation fails to take account of the special relationship studied in the preceding section, namely the connection between adjective and noun genres. The proposed model must therefore be revised as suggested in figure 4.4 (over-leaf). That is, a fresh cycle may be initiated by attaching a new adjective to an existing noun genre, with the adjective standing for some recognizable location, plot type, or other differentiation factor.

Under certain conditions, so much attention may be attracted to the tacked-on adjective that it changes parts of speech and inaugurates its own noun genre, only

Figure 4.4



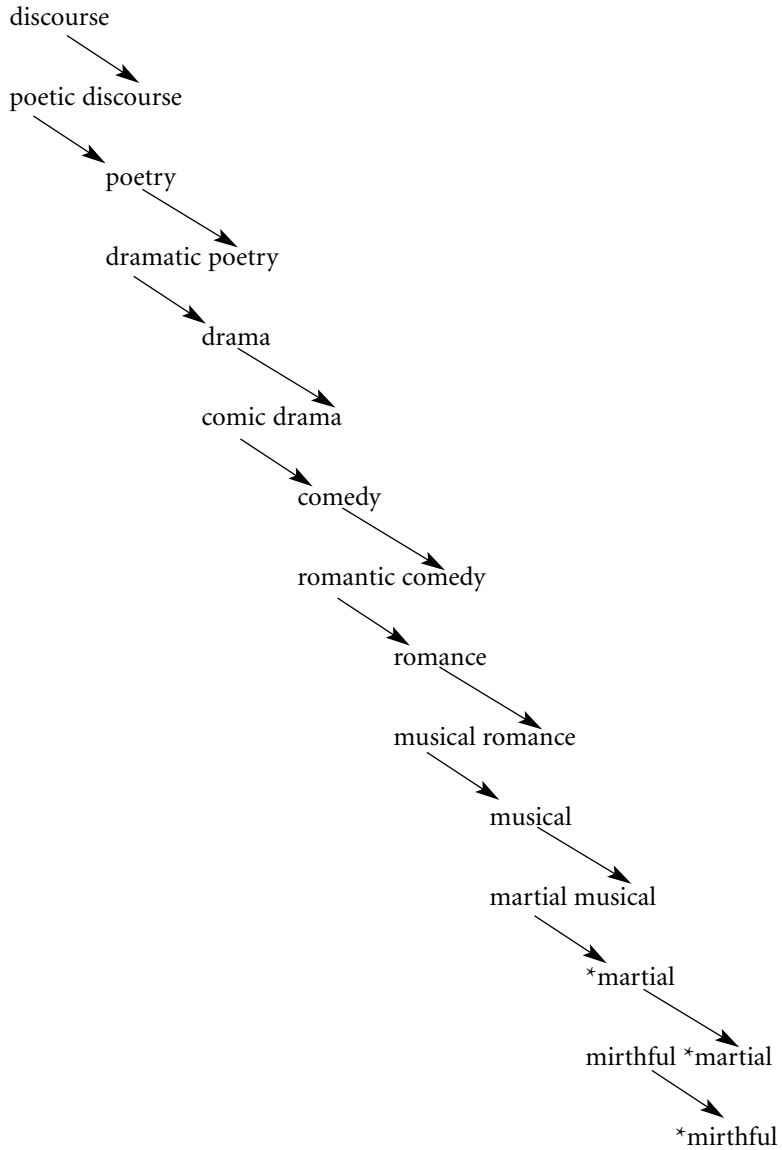
to remain constantly subject to eventual regenrification through the constitution of yet another adjectival cycle. And so forth.

A process-oriented representation of our not-so-famous *mirthful martial musical romantic comic dramatic poetic discourse* would thus look something like figure 4.5. Yet even this model is too rigid, too linear, in its attempt to avoid stability at all costs.

The musical, for example, achieves cycle status not just by modifying the silent romance genre with the new musical technology; on the contrary, early musical forays involve modification of every genre in sight, drawn from every level of the historical genrification process. Indeed, promotion from adjective to noun genre is strongly favoured by the ability of adjectival material to be applied to multiple noun genres. Thus the ability of music to be attached to drama and comedy as well as to romance enhances the likelihood that a noun genre will be created out of a number of musical adjective genres.

As the asterisks in figure 4.5 suggest, not every cycle spawns a genre. In the 1929–30 period, for example, adjectival ‘backstage’ and ‘musical’ genres competed for promotion to noun genre status. According to *Photoplay*, *Close Harmony* (1929) is a ‘vaudeville backstage hit’, *Broadway Hooper* (1930) is a ‘backstage comedy’ and *Puttin’ on the Ritz* (1930) is a ‘backstage story’, while *Variety* styles *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929) as a ‘backstage formula’, *Behind the Make-Up* (1929) as a ‘backstage picture’, and *It’s a Great Life* (1930) as a ‘backstage yarn’. In 1930, the time was certainly right for someone to coin the term *backstager, on the model of ‘soaper’ and ‘meller’, yet no such term was forthcoming. Just as the *martial never gets beyond the adjectival level, so the backstage cycle never graduates to noun genre status. This is not, as might be assumed, because the backstage cycle is simply a subgenre of the musical. *Behind the Make-Up* and many other backstage formula films are either devoid of music or shunt the music to a single location and a few short passages, as film noir does with its sultry night-

Figure 4.5



club singers; other backstage films offer scenes from legitimate rather than musical theatre. If some adjectival cycles are promoted to generic status while others are not, it is because some are more easily applicable in theory to a broad spectrum of film types, and actually adopted in practice by the industry as a whole. Ironically, it was the general demise of musical films that caused them, rather than backstage films, to be perceived and named as an independent genre. As the *martial and *backstager cases demonstrate, there is nothing automatic about the

genrification process. For every dozen cycles, only a few genres ever emerge, and even fewer endure.

The cycle-creation process may at any point in time be initiated at any level of the generic past. Like the earth around us, genre history is marked by folds that bring previous generic levels to the surface, where they can once again serve as the basis for regenrification. Think of how many times the epic has been thrust back to the surface by the energy of enterprising producers. Western epics, historical epics, biblical epics, wartime epics, science fiction epics, and many others testify to the epic's permanent youth. Certainly, the ability of classical nouns to serve as host for modern adjectives lies at the heart of genre theory's many difficulties. The geological metaphor helps to explain the simultaneous presence of phenomena formed in radically different periods. The term *epic* dates from the first ice age, and *romance* from the second, whereas *Western* and *musical* are creations of the current era, yet all are simultaneously visible on the surface of the current generic lexicon. That the nonlinearity of this situation should create confusion is hardly surprising, especially since producers have tended to stress adjectives and cycle creation, whereas critics have paid attention instead to nouns and genre formation. When we understand the process whereby cycles and genres are created, we at least understand the source of our confusion and thus take the all-important first step towards dissipating it.