

by Christine Evans

ON 'GENRE' AND SEMANTIC QUIBBLING: OR, THERE'S NO PLEASING A GENRE CRITIC

In my own paper for the Genre and Irish Cinema conference, I made the conscious and ultimately rather problematic decision to avoid using the term 'genre' at any cost. While writing, I encountered a difficult impasse: 'apocalypse films' are not a genre-proper, especially considering the mutability of 'apocalypse' from event to term, and from adjective to noun and back again. I imagined being interrogated about my decision to fallaciously 'create' a genre (at worst), or to assume the existence or pertinence of a genre where none existed (at best); somewhat terrified, I opted to employ a strategy which was later critiqued as "avoidant and apologist" but which I nonetheless don't regret. Reading a number of exemplary 'apocalyptic' texts or 'apocalypse films' within the confines of genre and nationhood suddenly became secondary to the process of reading itself, and my earlier criticisms of Rick Altman's apparently essentialist approach(es) in *Film/Genre* turned to grudging empathy. How do we think about genre? Indeed, if the so-called borders or boundaries of genres are constantly shifting, then it is essential to clearly define existing boundaries while simultaneously admitting to the inadequacy of every attempted (re)definition. With a 20-minute limit at the podium, the solution to my dilemma of approaching genre seemed to be the polite implication that one's discussion could be re-imagined within a generic framework, or that 'genre' always existed as a classifiable given and could therefore be avoided. Instead, I spent fifteen very long minutes setting the parameters of my discussion by considering reading strategies – and five rather inadequate (or apologist) minutes attempting to prove that the strategies were critically useful.

To return to Altman, it seems that the very term 'genre' is subject to the same noun/adjective/noun slippage experienced by genres themselves; to improperly invoke the term 'genre' (even implicitly) is problematic but also rather pleasantly inevitable, and yet 'genre' itself exists as a (theoretical) imperative absolute. While preparing my paper on genre and apocalypticism, I was reminded of my own stubbornness concerning the improper absolute-to-adjective transference of terms such as 'traumatic' or 'Sadism', and thus opted to avoid the term 'genre' entirely. Treating the word as gingerly as I treat my preferred host of 'unrepresentable Thing' terms (sadism, trauma, evil, and so on), I attempted to sidestep the issue by citing 'genre' as a verb – 'genre-fying' or 'genre-fication.' These terms – which are partly popular neologisms but mostly just ridiculous – nonetheless imply a kind of process to the conceptualization of genre. That is, unlike 'genre' alone, 'genre-fication' connotes the root-term's problematic potential; it describes the means by which the genre is created, or the process by which certain characteristics or clichés are accepted as canonical. To speak the word 'genre' may be risky and even totalizing business, but to speak around it is to suggest its perpetual transition between unmaking and remaking. As such, 'genre-fying' or 'genre-fication'

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function precisely to communicate the ironically simultaneous necessity and futility of clearly-defined generic boundaries.

'AGAIN, FOR THE FIRST TIME': FORGET INTERTEXTUALITY!

Although Martin McLoone's most explicit connection to genre in his paper, "Cinema, City, and Imaginative Space: Hip Hedonism in Recent Irish Cinema" came by way of Celtic Tiger Cinema (a subgenre, if anything), his was the first paper which inspired – in me – a somewhat more developed or complex reconsideration of the process of genrefication. Within a national context, one must always interrogate the efficacy of haphazardly interchanging 'genre' with 'cultural stereotypes'; in order to procure an original approach to genrefication itself, it seems necessary to question the value of insisting that generic relevance comes about through a titular emphasis on form (documentary, biopic, etc). McLoone addressed these issues through his application of Benjaminian (and earlier Baudelairian) frameworks of flanerie to a discussion of the city and its social/national significance throughout Elizabeth Gill's *Goldfish Memory* (2003). In adopting this approach, McLoone ultimately contextualized both Dublin and Gill's film as sites wherein 'everything old became new again', since McLoone's reimagining was primarily dependent on the city's/the film's status as 'fringe national.' In approaching modernist conceptions of urban spaces via the route of oft-neglected Dublin, McLoone afforded the topic a quintessentially postmodern credence; or, to put it differently, the (over)emphasis on the postmodern space as a specifically national site served to sanction an infinite number of readings presented 'again, for the first time.'

Up to this point in the conference (McLoone's paper), I had been dutifully 'framing' my conception of genre(fication) within intertextuality - that is, through a kind of generic relatedness between texts which evolved but still depended on its/their past 'successes' for survival. Altman addresses such intertextuality through critical re-reception and industry reclassification in his chapter, "Are genres subject to redefinition?" Discussing Mary Ann Doane's text *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* and its role in defining the woman's film as an independent genre, Altman pinpoints a moment of contradiction in Doane's final chapter. He states that Doane "first stress[es] and then contest[s] the generic nature of the woman's film" (75). Yet Altman is willing to forgive this contradiction not merely as a simple oversight, but as a crucial moment of critical recall – of embedding the past function/status of genre into its present projections as a necessary constituent of being "in the process of changing that status" (Ibid). This practice of obliquely referencing the (critical or generic) past in order to impel its transformation/evolution into a newly-defined or understood construct suggests an intertextual approach to genre. To put it simply, the reader or critic can ask how relatedness induces a unique reading or new meaning.

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It was, however, during McLoone's paper that I began to wonder if intertextuality was too rigid a structure to impose upon genre. Granted, the signifying chain in intertextuality is by no means restrictive, but McLoone's revivification and translation of hedonism and urban spaces suggested less a counterpart to the past (as in Doane) and more of a reference open to endless historically-haphazard reduplication. In the spirit of trendiness and 'hip hedonism', I began to consider genrefication as a function of *déjà disparu*. *Déjà disparu* can generally be defined as the displacement or loss of the culturally-significant subject, where "the feeling that what is new and unique about [a] situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés" (Williams 140). The use of the term 'always-already' here implies a pre-mediated starting point which is constantly threatening to disappear or self-destruct before it 'carries out' its dialectical duties. Due to the ever-present intimation of disappearance, the implied challenge of engaging with *déjà disparu* involves the constant revivification of redundant cultural signifiers; these clichés simultaneously 'keep pace' with the disappearing subject, and transform the modality of 'always-already' from a threat into an expectation, or from "in-itself into for-itself" (Žižek 1996 211). Consequently, when the recognizable clichés resurface in genrefication 'again, for the first time', they are always-already outdated and must regenerate in an endless cycle of "dis-appearance", depicting a form of critical engagement that "is not so much hidden as purloined" (Williams 140).

This issue of disappearance – or, more precisely, of critical constructs/approaches overlapping and occasionally subsuming one another – was a central concern in the papers of Dervila Layden and Barry Monahan. In "Discovering and Uncovering Genre in Irish Cinema", Layden explicitly addressed the problem of genre and nationhood, stating that a given film's 'Irishness' often repels the possibility of alternate, culturally-indifferent readings. What happens when a genre's identity is threatened by an overwhelming emphasis on the national? How can we successfully engage with 'film theory' when we are mired in the predicament (and, alternately, the enjoyment) of 'Irishness'? I found myself nodding very vigorously during this segment of Layden's presentation, if only because she articulated the generic-allegorical 'snag' of nationhood – the tendency to exchange one ungainly framework ('theory') for another ('nation') under the erroneous assumption that the cultural and social potency/relevance of the national imaginary can effectively sustain its isolated exploration. As such, it was refreshing to witness both Layden and Monahan contextualizing their analyses of Irish signification in two rather traditional generic frameworks (the screwball comedy and the cops and robbers/crime film, respectively).

Monahan's movement from genre theory to genre parody was essential to my reconsideration of genrefication, the problem of allegory in genre, and *déjà disparu*. Specifically, the careful attention paid to arguably restrictive (and, as previously mentioned, arguably useless) genre boundaries in both Layden and Monahan's papers

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demanded an emphasis beyond the national and cultural threat of disappearance. Through an introduction of the empty, parodic generic citation in his paper "Playing Cops and Robbers: Recent Irish Cinema and Generic Parody", Monahan invited me to contemplate genrefication as a practice of 'xerox' or counterfeit referentiality, aiming precisely to oppose the constantly resurrected cliché of *déjà disparu*. Although the *déjà disparu* representational solution of "construct[ing] images¹ out of clichés" (Abbas 26) is always fleeting and connotes alienation, it is also ironically redemptive. Conversely, the xerox reference is an example of the genre as a self-conscious, historically situated semblance – a reference that, it seems, is wholly aware of its textual origins but not of how this referential status enriches or complicates the 'quoting' text. In itself, xerox or counterfeit referentiality is

totally indifferent and, by structural necessity,
absent; its signification is purely auto-reflexive,
it consists [only] in the fact that it has some
signification for others... (Žižek 1992 6).

In short, what occurs is not citation or homage 'proper' but a kind of gleeful, haphazard aping where any text becomes a viable source of allusion (or point of contingent generic identification).

GENRE(FICATION) AS HYPERTEXT

By the coffeebreak on the final day of the conference, I had abandoned the term 'xerox referentiality' and had become rather crabby. My Inner Semantic Quibbler – while thrilled that none of the conference participants had attempted to exploit genre as a 'solution' to anything – was disappointed that no new means of 'reading the process of genrefication'² had been presented to me in the form of a clever neologism or analogy. It was during Lance Pettitt's presentation, "Guerin, Gangsters, and Genre in Irish Contemporary Cinema" that the question of media technologies and genrefication crossed my mind. 'Xerox' (the endless reduplication of an original copy), it seemed, was not enough; I found the concept of original or primal genres to be very problematic, given that "genre offers neither a unique object of study nor the stability of an exactly duplicated text. There exists no generic original of which particular events might be represented as performances" (Altman 83). If we accept Altman's assertion that genre is "present in no specific place at any particular time" (Ibid), then referentiality itself is called into question and must be reimagined. Evidently something is the subject of

¹ Entire genres or systems of genrefication, in this case!

² Here the phrase denotes a duplicated reading, since 'genrefication' is the process by which generic meaning is (re)constructed.

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reference (whether haphazard, parodic, empty, or reverent), but the circuit exchange which facilitates such aping has undergone a specifically genrefied revision.

Admittedly, it was Pettitt's exploration of the mediation of genre identity which caused me to consider the genre(fied) hypertext as a more accurate (and timely!) variation on xerox referentiality. Pettitt's analysis of gangster and media hubris (i.e., the moment that the genrefied figure/personality begins to speak 'of him/her/itself' as such) reminded me that the transgressive self-conscious 'asides' in genrefication simultaneously create structure while disavowing traditional conceptions of 'meaning.' Hypertextuality, which is arguably rooted in self-referential conceptions of symbolization, takes the disavowal of conventional meaning-making as its motive force. As George P. Landow points out, the notion of hypertextuality developed concurrent with poststructuralism, since both "grew out of dissatisfaction with the related phenomena of the printed book and hierarchical thought" (1). Simply defined, hypertext is "an information technology consisting of individual blocks of text, or lexias, and the electronic links that join them" (Ibid); when the reader engages with hypertext, he 'navigates' across a surface of circuitry, often 'getting lost' in the random connections between blocks of texts. Unlike intertextuality, which references a critical 'past' as a means of informing a new significance, hypertextuality dissolves the fixity of causal critical connections in favour of permitting readers "to choose their own paths through a set of possibilities" (Ibid 33). Consequently, each independent 'block' of text is not bound to any particular successor or antecedent, but only to the meaningless digital circuit which connects it (arbitrarily) to "whatever happens to follow... [and] whatever happened to come before" (Ibid 37). With no specific origin and no particular destination, the hypertext exists in a "perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed" (Barthes 5).

We have, at this point, arrived at what I have tentatively classified as the 'absent centre' of genrefication. In this respect, Natalie Harrower's work, "Wishing the Future into Existence: Goldfish Memory and the New Ireland" was particularly helpful. While I disagree with an overly-politicized engagement with the film, Harrower's reading of the text as one which problematizes second-order articulations is relevant in relation to hypertextuality. If Goldfish Memory is, in a sense, 'about what is missing' or about its empty spaces, how do we read a text when it presents all of its positive entities (sexualized bodies, public and private spheres) as essentially meaningless? This is, I believe,³ a central tenet of hypertextual genrefication; that is, the reversal of meaning from a positive entity (past critical reference or industry identity, for example) to a 'text block' in a digital circuit which successfully abandons its prescriptive 'path' to signification without negating the signification itself.

³ ... at this early stage in my belief...

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