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COMMENTARY

Genre and Discourse (and Zombies), an Introduction in Pictures

Nicolas Labarre*

This five-page comic, contextualised with a research note, provides an introduction to discursive approaches to genre, inspired by Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999). It seeks to demonstrate the necessity to go beyond textual or prescriptive approaches, using the example of zombie films. The comic is arguing that some films that contain zombies are not usually seen as being part of the zombie film genre. The work proposes that our perception of genre in those cases relies on various discourses that frame our reading of the texts themselves. This framing operation is at once the function and the nature of genre.

Keywords: genre; theory; film; zombie; comics

Some films which contain zombies are not usually seen as being part of the zombie genre (because of conflicting generic affiliations) while several films without zombies are linked to the genre (such as George Romero's *The Crazies*, 1973, known in France as *La nuit des fous vivants*, "Night of the living crazies") or even part of its modern canon (Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*, 2002). Here I argue that our perception of genre in those cases relies on various discourses that frame our reading of the texts themselves, and that this framing operation is at once the function and the nature of genre.

Reading Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999) a few years ago provided me with the theoretical apparatus I needed to approach genres in a suitably nuanced way. At that point, I had become increasingly frustrated with prescriptive approaches to genres, in which authors set out to delineate what was part of the genre and what was not. I am of course not going to enumerate examples these approaches, but I have in mind Pete Coogan's attempt to remove Nick Fury from the super-hero genre in his otherwise valuable approach to super-heroes (2009: 86–87).

It seemed to me that at the very least, these text-based approaches missed the role of the various cultural institutions that frame our consumption of these texts. To come back to Nick Fury, surely the fact that it was published as a

super-hero comic in the late 60s and 70s had to play a role in our description of the character's generic alignment?¹

I was also wary of anyone presuming to "rule in" or "rule out" anything from such a collective notion as the super-hero genre. While it is perfectly acceptable to cast aside these considerations for a while and focus on a text – all the more so since reception studies are notoriously rare and difficult to conduct – doing so has to be a deliberate choice as opposed to an unacknowledged blind spot.

Rick Altman's approach not only includes the various institutions and interpretative communities that shape genres, but it describes their various interactions, based on specific historically located examples. It still constitutes the core of my conception to genre and I have seen it put to great use by other scholars, such as Grégoire Halbout (2013) in his study of Hollywood screwball comedies. Though it focuses on cinema, Altman's approach can be applied fairly directly to comics and probably other forms as well.

This comic was an attempt not to reiterate Rick Altman's nuanced demonstrations, but to point to the aporias of a prescriptive approach to genre for readers unfamiliar with the underlying theory. It was thus conceived as a teaching tool, an introduction rather than as a truly scholarly exploration. As such, it skims over some difficulties and may oversimplify some points.² I do hope it is useful and convincing, though.

This piece echoes a scholarly article in comics form about genre(s) in the movie *Shaun of the Dead* (E. Wright 2004) co-written with Jean-François Baillon, which puts to use some of these theoretical considerations. It is to appear soon in *Angles*³.

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GENRE, DISCOURSE (and zombies)

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION, IN PICTURES



SORRY KIDS, BUT GENRES
SIMPLY DO NOT LIVE
IN TEXTS

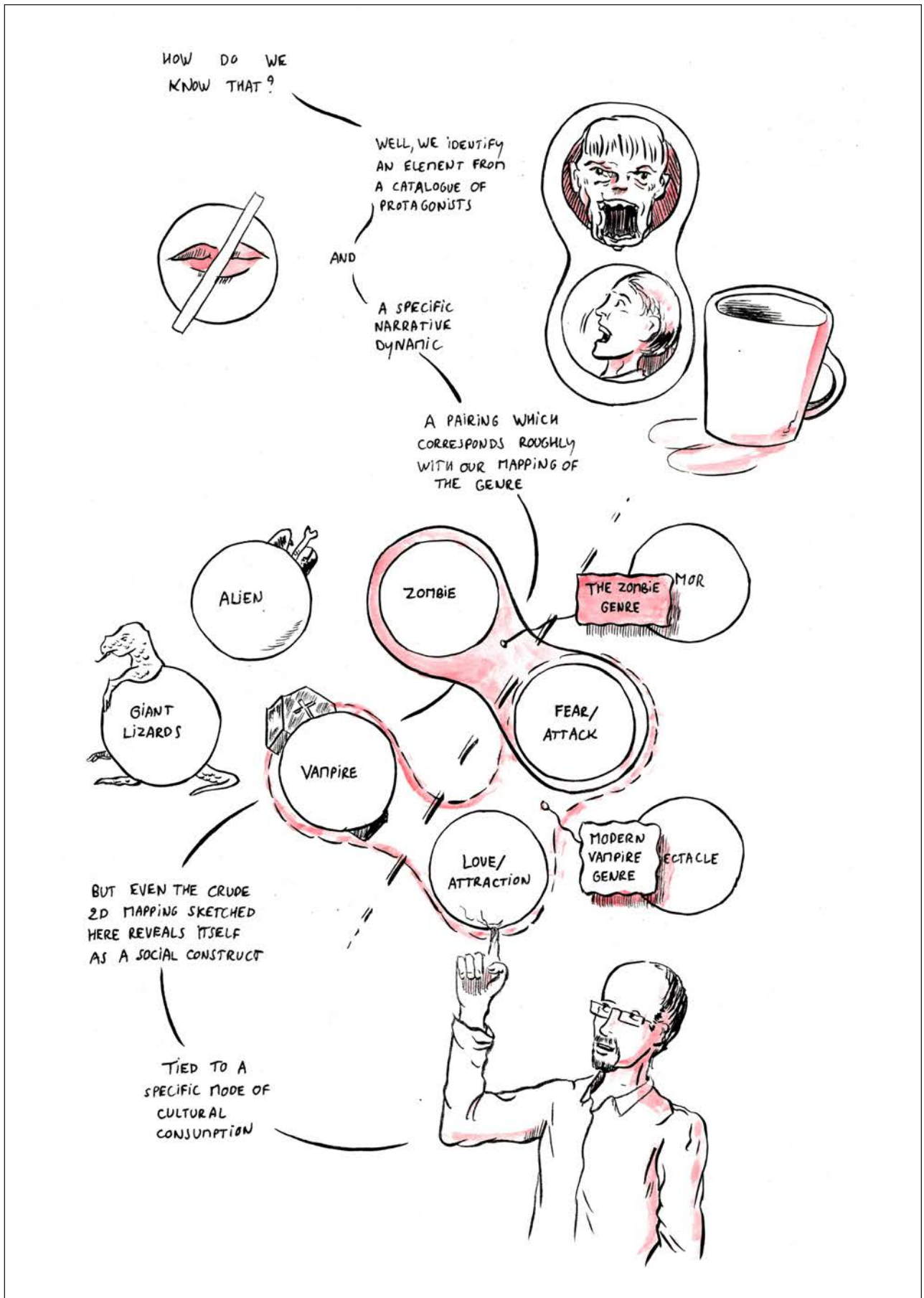
WE PRETEND THEY DO
BECAUSE THAT MAKES
THEM EASIER TO USE

AND THAT'S FINE!



IF WE WERE TO SEE
THIS SCENE IN A FILM

WE WOULD PROBABLY
AGREE THAT THIS IS
A ZOMBIE MOVIE



FOR STARTERS, THIS MAP
INCLUDES DISTINCTIONS THAT
ARE PROBABLY IRRELEVANT
TO MANY SPECTATORS...

ZOMBIES, GHOULS, DEMONS,
SERIAL KILLERS AND EVEN
GIANT LIZARDS ARE
COMMONLY LUMPED
TOGETHER: "MONSTERS"
IN A BROAD "HORROR"
GENRE.

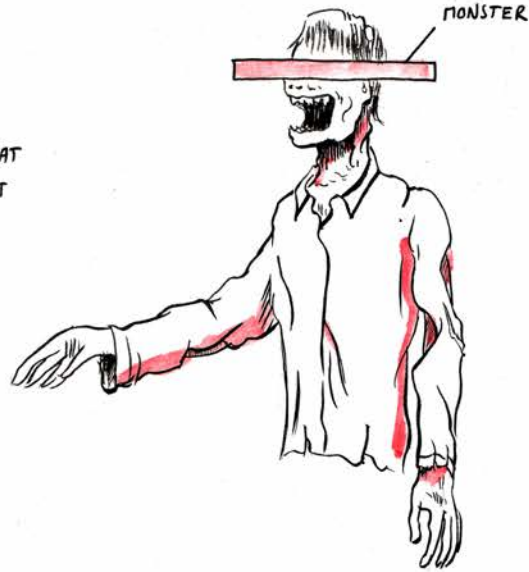


FIG. 1



FIG. 2

AT THE OTHER END OF THE
SPECTRUM, THE ZOMBIE GENRE
CAN ALSO BE SUBDIVIDED INTO
SMALLER UNITS. FAST (28 DAYS
LATER) VS. SLOW ZOMBIES, FOR
INSTANCE.

NONE OF THESE CATEGORIZATIONS
CAN BE DESCRIBED AS "WRONG"

THEY ARE ALL USEFUL IN
DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

THEY ARE, IN FACT, THE PRODUCTS
OF THESE CULTURAL CONTEXTS.

FOR INSTANCE, I USE VARIOUS
TAXONOMIES AND OCCASIONALLY
CREATE NEW ONES ("EARLY
ROMERO" VS. "LATE ROMERO")
DEPENDING ON WHOM I'M
TALKING TO...



MORE STRIKINGLY, PERHAPS
FILMS WITHOUT ZOMBIES ARE
SOMETIMES INCLUDED IN THE
ZOMBIE GENRE



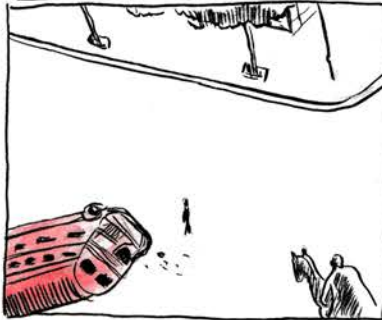
THE CRAZIES
(1973)

WHILE A FEW FILMS THAT
DO FEATURE ZOMBIES ARE
COMMONLY EXCLUDED.



SANTO AND BLUE DEMON AGAINST
THE MONSTERS (1971)

28 DAYS LATER IS A ZOMBIE FILM WITHOUT ZOMBIES. GENRE IDENTIFICATION IS TRIGGERED BY



IMAGES



SITUATIONS

MURDEROUS FLEET-FOOTED
ZOMBIES VOMITING BLOOD
ALL OVER YOU - WHY ON
EARTH DID YOU WANT
TO DO THU FILM ?

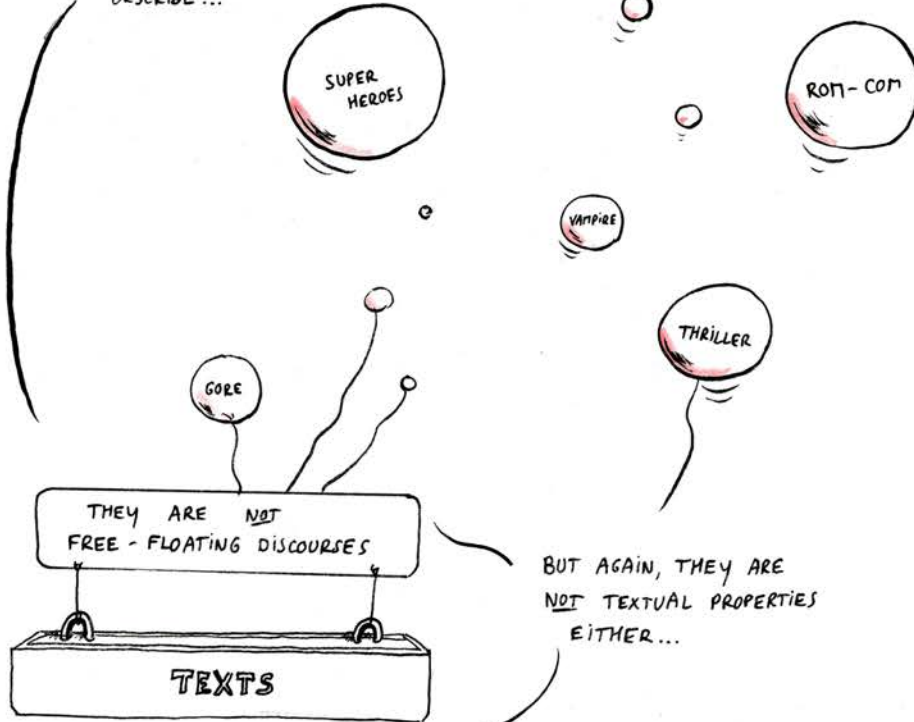
JAMES DYER, DANNY
BOYLE INTERVIEW IN
EMPIRE

AND DISCOURSES, THAT
PROVIDE AN APPROPRIATE
CONTEXT TO "READ" THESE
ELEMENTS



WITHOUT A CONSENSUAL MAP
OF FILM GENRES, THAT CRITICAL
DISCOURSES AFFIRM OR REFINE,
WE COULD BE TEMPTED TO
READ THE FILM AS A
PANDEMY MOVIE (CONTAGION)
OR AS A BRITISH POST-APOLYPTIC
FILM (DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS).
BOTH ARE PERFECTLY VALID
CATEGORIES.

THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT
GENRES EXIST OUTSIDE THE
TEXTS THEY PURPORT TO
DESCRIBE...



BUT AGAIN, THEY ARE
NOT TEXTUAL PROPERTIES
EITHER...

THEY STAND BETWEEN THE
TEXTS AND THEIR AUDIENCE,
SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTIONS WHICH
MAKE IT EASIER TO SHARE
DISCOURSES. THEY HELP FOSTER
CREATIVE OR INTERPRETATIVE
COMMUNITIES (WITH OBVIOUS
COMMERCIAL POSSIBILITIES)

ZOMBIES DO MAKE
ZOMBIE FILMS, MOST
OF THE TIME...

BUT NOT WITHOUT
YOUR HELP.



N. LABARRE
JULY 2015

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ There are other issues with attempting to pinpoint genre for a character rather than for specific stories/comics, but that's beside the point here.
- ² Such as Altman's distinction between syntactic and paradigmatic textual elements, which I use but do not explain.
- ³ *Angles: French Perspectives on the Anglophone World* is an international online peer-reviewed journal published bi-annually by the SAES (Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur). Available online at <http://angles.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/>.

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