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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Not form, not genre, but style: on literary categories

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ABSTRACT

This metacritical essay compares three concepts in literary criticism – form, genre, and style – each of which lumps together disparate objects in a common category. Lumping is an essential component of what we as humanists ought to be in the business of doing, and this essay defends the taxonomic impulse. But I argue that different categories produce different kinds of knowledge; and that for contemporary literary criticism, we need stylistic knowledge more than formal or generic. I theorise genres as affective institutions, which provides more leverage than formalism does in tracking the ongoing modulation of social structure in the historical present. And yet genre can still only get us so far, which is why we need a rejuvenated theory of style. Drawing but departing from recent critical accounts of style including Mark McGurl and D. A. Miller, I theorise style as action, not an expression of affect, and as a coordination of form and content. If form attends more to structure, and genre attends more to affect, then style attends to their entanglement, highlighting strategies developed to adapt to the affective pressures of social structure.

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Categories beyond algorithms

Each in their own way, amidst declining prospects for the longevity of literary criticism, Timothy Aubry, Michael Clune, and Joseph North have recently called for a revival of one of our profession’s ‘core proficiencies’: judgment.¹ In an overpopulated aesthetic field, we ought to be at least somewhat in the business of telling people what’s good and what’s bad, they argue, what’s worth your time and what isn’t: because otherwise we’ve ceded the aesthetic to the deadening and flattening capitalist market (Clune), whereas what we need is an aesthetic education than can make us alive to ‘the deepest and richest forms of human life’ (North), which means a text’s political import lies not in opposition to, but precisely within, its formalist affordance of life-giving aesthetic pleasure (Aubry). A sometimes target of this line of criticism is a turn to cultural studies that, for the otherwise

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good intention of not wanting to create Bourdieuan class hierarchies of cultural capital, made first the mistake of equating people with their choice of aesthetic objects and then was forced to make a further mistake of saying all aesthetic objects are equal (so as not to make people unequal), whereas something like social equality is actually an effect of a discriminating aesthetic education (so we don't end up complete dupes at the whim of the 'free market').²

In this essay, I aim to reconcile the appeal to the judgment and the intuitions of cultural study by defending the normative claim that one of the 'core proficiencies' of literary study is and should be the provision of cultural categories. We should be in the business of cutting up and taxonomising the aesthetic field, but I argue by means other than the coarse and sometimes moralistic binaries good/bad, worthy/unworthy, or even radical/conservative: a bigger, roomier chart of possibilities. The judgment we should practice is not the evaluative one of determining what is best and what is worst, but the nomenclatural one of simply deciding what is what. To do so is to provide a map through a dense aesthetic field; it is to point attention to *x* and to *y* as social kinds and categories, but in a way more oblique than, say, the Amazon algorithms that recommend what you should buy next based on your consumption history. At a time in which something like Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping of the individual's position in relation to a social totality has, as Zahid Chaudhary argues, 'been subverted by companies like Palantir and Facebook for decisively instrumental and unaesthetic purposes', the critic's task is one of counter-mapping, of laying out a field of categories that is not already commonsense (because commonsense means hegemonic) in order to make counterintuitive archives that recommend unexpected affiliation – a queer method that Eve Sedgwick called putting objects 'beside' one another and that Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez have more recently called the 'combination of seemingly disparate objects'.³

In pursuing this line of inquiry, I explore three traditional means by which literary critics have created categories of cultural production: sorting by form, by genre, or by style. Each provides important resources, particularly for the study of the historical present, but I will argue it is style – which has, relative to genre and certainly to form, been neglected in the past generation – that especially deserves more attention. Part of my argument is a strategic one, in my belief that form and genre risk, to riff on Bruno Latour, 'running out of steam', whereas style provides fresh leverage on questions important in particular for our historical present. I will argue that we should theorise style as action, which shows us how people continue to adapt to a contemporary world defined by crisis; and that as a concept, style is logically superordinate to form. At least since Nelson Goodman, stylistics has moved beyond the untenable distinction between content as *what* is said and style

as *how* it is said by seeing style instead as a particular way of *coordinating* form and content: ‘what is expressed, and how it is expressed are all intimately interrelated and involved in style’.⁴ In fiction, for instance, style coordinates different forms of words, sentences, and chapters with different themes and subjects. But if style always coordinates, I claim we should identify styles according to the action of coordination itself. I thus shift the terrain: content is what is *said* and style is what is *done*.

Genre, not form: on institutions of affect

In the past decade, literary historians have turned to genre in order to disrupt lines of specialisation and open up arbitrary borders of study: genres, which cut across geography and history, oversee what Wai Chee Dimock, in her introduction to a 2007 special issue of *PMLA* devoted to genre, calls literary ‘kinships’ that are ‘[n]ot segregated by periods or by nations’.⁵ The instability of generic categories becomes a resource, loosening genealogies to allow comparisons across time and place. Although in Dimock’s account there can be no such thing as a super-category of genres – that is, something like a genre *system* – as a delimited field, it is clear she thinks of genres themselves as fields: open-air spaces in which objects meander, jostle, and conspire. She calls genres ‘fields of knowledge’, because their objects present not only themselves, but also the historical periods and cultural contexts from which they migrate. Genres sponge up and relate the residues of the places and times their objects carry, and the knowledge genres harbour is therefore of an ancestral and cross-cultural variety. Genre, as a way of categorising texts that de-prioritises geography and history, makes available new configurations of each.

Nonetheless, academic discussions of genre have tended to be muddled by the fact that we have two principal conceptions of what genre is. The first is primarily formal, dealing with what Northrop Frye called the ‘radical of presentation’ or the form in which a particular work is presented.⁶ Here, we talk about the genre of the novel or, say, the genre of drama. The second is primarily affective, like when we talk about horror or comedy or thrillers. A horror can present itself in many forms, whether a short story by Edgar Allan Poe or a film by Jordan Peele. And a novel can offer different affects; some make you laugh and some make you cry. So the formal and affective enfold one another. And what they have in common is what Hans Robert Jauss called a ‘horizon of expectation’, which means you kind of know what you’re going to get from something before you even read it or watch or it hear it.⁷ If I tell you we’re going to see a horror, you know what we’ve signed up for and what that should feel like, even before we know the particular ways in which *this* horror will produce its frights (or if it will even succeed in doing so). And ditto the novel: we more or less know

what reading experience a novel entails despite the obvious heterogeneity of the form. Both definitions of the genre therefore also invite an evaluative question of success, a question not often available for other forms. For, as Frances Ferguson has written in one of the most insightful essays on form in the past generation, something either is or is not in free indirect discourse or is or is not a Spenserian sonnet, whereas when it comes to genre we ask, not if something is or is not a horror or a novel, but whether it's a good one.⁸

Although these two understandings of genre – its form of presentation; its contract of affective expectation – enfold one another, it is the latter that has special importance for theorising culture, and at key moments, it is also the latter that really seems to be the object of most theorists of genre, including Dimock and Frye. When Dimock 'weakly' traffics among genres, she takes as a case study how the genres of drama, the novel, and poetry infect and ingest each other through the kinship among Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats, as well as a few minor characters collected from their orbit along the way. Her story begins with Tóibín's 2004 novel *The Master*, which narrates the life of James as the earlier novelist rebounds from the failure of his brief theatrical career in the much-loudly-boomed *Guy Domville* (1895), and during the writing of which Tóibín was inspired to write his own play, *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004), about the 1920s world of the Abbey Theatre in which Yeats trafficked and through which Yeats developed a dramatic vocabulary for his poetry, for instance, famously, calling the Easter Rising a 'casual comedy'. There is something more than citation going on in this network, Dimock shows: as genres are recycled in others, they bring out latent aspects and contexts of their production.

But this is not just a hermeneutic exchange, in which genres train us to interpret other genres in fresh ways. The exchange is firstly and lastly affective. In the first section in which Dimock introduces *The Master* as 'a host environment for Henry James', she uses the word 'host' only one other time; James had described, in his letters, how the failure of *Guy Domville* had produced in him 'a bitterness of every hour', and, in Dimock's description, '*The Master* plays host to that bitterness'.⁹ It is a bitterness Tóibín knows how to host because he has experienced it himself, in his short-listing for but ultimate loss of the Booker Prize in 1999.¹⁰ Affective resonance first brings these two authors together: a bitterness shared and then condensed; a bitterness that indexes, too, an aspiration shared by the two novelists, for the theatre – eventually realised for Tóibín, never for James. Indeed, it is these feelings – longing, bitterness – that facilitate the generic inbreeding Dimock describes. *Guy Domville* itself was about its title character's final positioning outside two heterosexual couples, returning him to his pursuit of the priesthood; *The Master* is about James's positioning in exile in Sussex, outside not only coupling but also his family and the public; what connects them is not just that the novelist of the first is a character in the

second, but also that each, discretely, harbours the affects of isolation and separation: longing, bitterness.

But in *Beauty in a Broken Place*, Tóibín's play about a famously unpopular play championed by Yeats, distance from the consent of the public produces different, lighter affects. The grotesqueness of a phrase like 'casual comedy' is its turning into farce what could have been tragedy; it is a variant of bitterness, perhaps, but one that finds, through irony, the absurd humour lurking in the dark shadows. And so, too, does the tragedy of James become, in Dimock's final account – James by way of Tóibín by way of Yeats; novel by way of drama by way of poetry; and each in a loop – something else: 'Guy Domville would always remain a tragedy in [James's] mind. It is only through the long network of Colm Tóibín, W. B. Yeats, and several others that it would become half comic'.¹¹ Dimock's previous names for the genres she was studying have dropped out in this final formulation; instead of the genres of the novel, drama, and poetry, we have, finally, the genres of 'tragedy' and the 'comic', genres that are, in their definition, tied not to a given form but to an affective experience: from a bitter end to a happy ending. But this only brings into relief how the story Dimock has been telling has always been about affect, first the hosting of bitterness to now its conversion, so that, from a zoomed-out perspective, it seems as much that the novel, drama, and poetry mediate a higher-level generic infection of comedy and tragedy.

What if Dimock had begun with comedy and tragedy as her lead genres instead of the novel, drama, and poetry? The division of genre into these last three forms, pervasive in genre theory of the mid-twentieth century, is often attributed to Aristotle, although, as Gerard Genette has shown, it is nowhere to be found in the *Poetics* and seems in fact to have been a Renaissance invention.¹² Northrop Frye's canonical *Anatomy of Criticism* also ends with a formal taxonomy of 'ordinary literary genres', which he says is 'derived from the Greeks', but before he gets to those – drama, novel, lyric, and epic – he first of all establishes the 'pregeneric elements' of what he calls mythoi: 'categories of literature broader than, or logically prior to, the ordinary literary genres' (p. 162). These four 'broader' mythoi are tragedy, comedy, romance, and irony. Elsewhere in the *Anatomy*, Frye uses 'broader' to mean structural; thus the historian is distinguished from the chronicler by having a 'broader' framework in which to implant the events a chronicler merely records (p. 15). The *mythoi* are, in this sense, structures in which the 'ordinary literary genres' are implanted; tragedy, for instance, is an environment in which both the novel and the drama move around. At the same time, tragedy as 'logically prior' to the novel or the drama – a logical antecedence reaffirmed by the rebranding of *mythoi* as 'pregeneric' (and not, say, extrageneric or supergeneric) – recommends that novels and dramas are produced by, or derived from, tragedy,

comedy, irony, and romance. This is the sense of 'prior to' Frye employs throughout the *Anatomy*: 'what entertains is prior to what instructs, or, as we may say, the reality-principle is subordinate to the pleasure-principle' (p. 75); '[w]e can see from the revisions poets make that the rhythm is usually prior, either in inspiration or in importance or both, to the selection of words to fill it up' (p. 275). To say something like tragedy is 'prior to' something like drama is to say: 'what is tragic is prior to what is dramatic or, as we may say, the dramatic is subordinate to the tragic'; 'tragedy is usually prior, either in inspiration or in importance or both, to the selection of characters' to fill up the drama it oversees.

The implication, from Frye's theory of *mythoi*, is that genres are primarily organised by affect, or a 'mood' organises the generic objects that follow it: 'If we are told that what we are about to read is tragic or comic, we expect a certain kind of structure and mood, but not necessarily a certain genre. The same is true of the word romance, and also of the words irony and satire' (p. 162). No mood can monopolise a genre, according to Frye, but in the sense that these moods are prior to a genre, they organise the formal elements within it, or what we called a genre is 'subordinated to' the mood prior to it. Frye gives an example, later, in his discussion of characters in a drama: 'characterisation depends on function; what a character is follows from what he has to do in the play. Dramatic function in its turn depends on the structure of the play; the character has certain things to do because the play has such and such a shape. The structure of the play in its turn depends on the category of the play; if it is a comedy, its structure will require a comic resolution and a prevailing comic mood' (pp. 171–2). Mood determines structure determines function determines characterisation. Dealing with and programming mood, it would perhaps be better to call Frye's 'pregeneric' comedy, tragedy, romance, and irony as *genres of affect* and Frye's 'ordinary literary genres', dealing with radicals of presentation, as *genres of mediation*. What Frye is in turn saying is that affect comes before, or organises, mediation.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle ended up saying something remarkably similar. Although he begins by defining comedy and poetry according to characters, Aristotle soon restricts what this means: 'As for Comedy, it is ... an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others'. Here, the definition of comedy ultimately depends on a definition of the experience of pain, which picks out in retrospect the kinds of fault comedy will narrate. So, too, will Aristotle talk about tragedy in terms, not of characters, but of a 'tragic effect', understood affectively: 'arousing pity and fear' is 'the distinctive function of this kind of imitation'. From this view, 'kinds of imitation' – genres – can be

distinguished by their emotional function, or the particular moods and affects they 'aim at' arousing. The first book of the *Poetics* deals primarily with tragedy, but we know Aristotle intended and perhaps wrote a second book, later lost, dealing primarily with comedy; the *Tractatus coislinianus*, a later manuscript sometimes considered to be a summary of or notes for this lost second book, defines comedy in similar manner, as arousing, not pity and fear, but 'laughter and pleasure'. In both cases, comedy and tragedy achieve definition independent of the matrix of character and mood Aristotle first supplies. As soon as affect appears, all the elements of tragedy are swallowed up, or subordinated to, its production: from misfortune, violence, and suspense in the plot, to the particular kinds of 'spectacle' on stage. All the features associated with tragedy cannot be attributed to a type of character, but they can be attributed to a type of affect. Indeed, Aristotle will end up talking about tragic heroes who are 'neither entirely good, nor entirely evil', completely abandoning the earlier definition tying tragedy only to the former.

Elizabeth Belfiore's still indispensable *Tragic Pleasures* follows through on this insight in the *Poetics*.¹³ For Belfiore, Aristotle's various descriptions of the content of tragedy – its ideal plots – are diagnoses of what best produces the particular 'pleasure' of human understanding through pity and fear. For instance, the best way to produce fear and pity is through unexpected suffering, which is why the tragic plot concerns *philos* harming *philos* – as this is less expected than an enemy harming an enemy – but doing so, not through moral delinquency, but tragic ignorance, so that Oedipus can say he did not know it was his mother he killed. But these plots do not by themselves identify tragedy; rather, it is tragedy's proper pleasure – of human understanding afforded by the universal emotions of fear and pity of social disgrace – that administer and organise the plot.

That Aristotle supplies two definitions of (for instance) tragedy, the first but only briefly explored related to characterisation and the second and more wholly employed based on affect, has two further implications for a theory of genre. The first is that tragedy becomes, as in Frye, 'pregeneric' in the sense of superordinate to mediation. Tragedy, which is a species of drama in the first definition, is liberated to cross over and oversee other, additional 'radicals of presentation' in the second definition. Genette points to a passage in which Aristotle allows an action to arouse fear or pity 'regardless of whether it is shown on stage or merely narrated', moving tragedy to an extra-dramatic space because emotions have no a priori fidelity to any one genre of mediation.¹⁴ Indeed, if, for Dimock, one of the utilities of a genre like the novel is the kinds of comparisons it makes available across time and place, then one of the utilities of a genre like tragedy is the additional comparison it makes among media. Both Aristotle and Frye, who take literature as their primary object, betray, at key

moments, a desire to talk about other media, too. Thus the first chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics* begins not with poetry but by analogy to painting and song: 'Just as colour and form are used as means by some who ... imitate and portray many things by their aid, and the voice is used by others; so also in [poetry], the means with them as a whole are rhythm, language, and harmony'. Similarly, the third chapter of Frye's *Anatomy* – the chapter in which he turns to tragedy, comedy, romance, and irony – begins by discussing the 'art of painting', drawing analogies to form and content in literature (pp. 131); and then draws further (and many) analogies from music.¹⁵ If Frye had followed through on genres of affect as 'broader than' genres of mediation, he might have moved from analogy to comparison: seeing a genre like comedy as a broad environment in which novels, dramas, music, and other forms participate and influence each other.

The second implication of a theory of genre founded on affect rather than derived from combinations of arbitrary attributes like characterisation is that a taxonomy of genres is opened up to become extendable, rather than closed down and confined by some table. This is the logical conclusion of others of Aristotle's aesthetic taxonomies as well. In his *Rhetoric*, for instance, Aristotle divides 'speech-making' into the three genres of the political, the forensic, and the ceremonial, a division originally presented as motivated by classes of 'hearers'; it is the audience that 'determines the speech's end and object', and therefore a taxonomy of genres is derived from a taxonomy of scenes of reception: parliamentary assemblies, law-courts, and ceremonies. These scenes direct speech toward different 'ends', and so the genres administered by them collect other attributes as well: the political speech of parliament is directed toward the 'expediency' of actions into the future; the forensic speech of courts is directed toward justice, attacking or defending somebody for actions of the past; and the speech of ceremony is directed toward 'honour or the reverse', praising men or events of the present. Of the different dimensions along which Aristotle classifies his rhetorical genres – audience, purpose, and 'kinds of time' – it is only temporality that would seem to have an intuitive tripartite division into past, present, and future, and it would seem that if Aristotle wanted to insist on three and only three rhetorical genres, he might have begun with time instead of subordinating it, rhetorically, to audience. One could imagine other purposes toward which speech could be directed, just as one could imagine other scenes in which audiences congregate to hear speeches. A sermon, for instance, would seem to cut across each of the purposes and each temporal regime – attacking sins of the past; celebrating devotion of the present; prophesying the future – and cannot be claimed by any single audience in Aristotle's scheme. That the scenes he does provide may not exhaust the entire social or political sphere of speech recommends reading Aristotle historically: as societies develop

more or different scenes of reception, perhaps different categories of rhetoric would also emerge.

To suggest this is also to isolate the distinctive historicising work that genre does, especially in comparison to formalism more broadly. We are in a formalism heyday, and let me clear: I think this has been a good thing. In particular, it has reinvigorated attention to how the shapes or patterns of texts might do more than reveal, whether as mirrors or as symptoms, the conditions of their creation. Departing from a previous generation of Marxist formalist critics such as Fredric Jameson, for whom ‘the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction’, the New Formalism has examined moments of misfit between aesthetic and social form.¹⁶ Caroline Levine’s work has been a leader in this direction, attending to ‘patterns of sociopolitical experience’ and finding a similar logic at play in the structuration of both social and aesthetic order.¹⁷ For Levine, tracking the correspondences between the two orders requires not only a more capacious field for formal analysis, but also a more generative concept of form itself, and she turns to the theory of ‘affordances’ in design studies to define form as a capacity inherent in the arrangement of aesthetic or social materials: forms are to be picked out according to the potential behaviours they afford.¹⁸ But attention to affordance also requires an object be rendered not as the guarantor of a form, but as a site in which a plurality of forms converge and compete without the determination of any script that could provide in advance which forms will ascend to hegemonise the others.¹⁹ Thus, it will not do to view aesthetic form as determined by social, economic, or political forms, but rather as homologous to them. Such a relative liberation of form from historical referent – which is not to say its complete independence, but the provision of room for misalignment or deviation from an ideological script – has been explored by a number of monographs in the past half decade by critics including Anna Kornbluh, Anahid Nersessian, Aarthi Vadde, Nathan Hensley, and Claire Jarvis.²⁰ In these accounts, form retains the left-leaning politics of a Jameson and in turn many of the same objects of critique, whether capitalism or neoliberalism, but here, form does not merely resolve a contradiction within the social or political world, but instead is straddling the world as it is and the world as it could be.

Genre, if understood as primarily affective, has a different relation to historical structure. It is not that genre runs parallel to it; nor that it reverts to being a symptom or crystallization of structural contradiction. Genres are instead condensations of affective atmospheres. Instead of metaphors of base and superstructure, essence and epiphenomena – typically metaphors of spatial depth – we might develop metaphors of spatial containers, of absorption and dilation and condensation. Think of the cloud as a concentration of moisture in the air; think of horror as a condensation of dreads

circulating in the social environment. Genres are like affective containers: bounded spaces that concentrate affective experiences from their cultural atmospheres, simultaneously compartmentalising and intensifying social and political feelings.

If genres activate and deliver affect, then they are analogous to – or, in some sense, actually *are* – institutions. Sociologists talk about institutions such as the family, the university, the church, and the hospital as programming roles that people inhabit. I go to the university and am a professor; the family, a spouse; the hospital, a patient. I can anticipate what is expected of me in each institution, and when inside it, I perform those behaviours. Genres operate in a similar way, although they programme not so much roles but affect and affective reaction. I go to a comedy and laugh; to a melodrama and cry; to a horror and gasp. I may, of course, do none of these things, if I have an ironic relation to the genre in the same way that people can subvert or desert the social roles assigned to them. The point, however, is that I am likely to recognise when a film is *trying* to make me laugh. Genres, like institutions, are normative; they come into being through recognition by a collective.

Literary theorists have long analogised genres to social institutions: classically, here's René Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature*: 'The literary kind is an 'institution' – as Church, University, or State is an institution'; and here's Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*: 'Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public'.²¹ In some accounts, institutions not only analogise genres but are also their origin. Carolyn Miller, the leading theorist in this line of thinking, argues genres are based on 'typical joint rhetorical actions' in a given culture at a given period of time, provisioned by the collective spaces within that culture; hers is then an account similar to, but properly historicised and elaborated from, Aristotle's connection between genres of rhetoric and the spaces in which they are employed.²² In these accounts, studying genre might help us study institutions – not any particular institution, but the fate of institutionalism itself, or the relative extent to which a society can be cut up into discrete spaces that administer discrete roles and 'joint actions'. For Jameson, for instance, the point was that genres, like institutions, could also become subordinated to late capitalist logics;²³ it would then seem possible to make a study of how economic modes modulate institutions according to the modulations evidenced in genres. For Miller, generic instability could be explained by social instability: today, in a fragmented and diffuse society, we have fewer shared intentions and fewer scenes of collective action, and '[t]his may be why the whole matter of genre has become problematic'.²⁴ In a related vein, Lauren Berlant defines the contemporary not through Jameson's 'waning of affect' but through a 'waning of genre': not a loss of feeling, but a lost

sense of when and where to find feelings, an erosion of prior forms of recognition.²⁵

For that is one major takeaway from critical theorists of the present: institutions don't stabilise roles, don't hold together a common world, like they used to. '[E]veryone knows', Gilles Deleuze famously said in his essay on the 'control society' that he thought had replaced Foucault's 'disciplinary society', 'that these institutions [the prison, hospital, factory, school, family] are finished'.²⁶ Today, people do not go from one discrete institution to another but instead are subjected to an ongoing modulation of behaviour, an endless and roaming self-affectation that has left behind any script that could predict or direct its trajectory. Genres, as institutions, reflect this structural disarray. Consider the simultaneous proliferation and algorithmic personalisation of generic consumption with online streaming platforms like Netflix, which mark a novel departure from a 'broadcasted' television era, with its programming blocks that section off the workweek into discrete, shareable units, such as, in the 1990s, the TGIF block that ABC aimed at families on Friday nights, with sitcoms like *Full House* or *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. This organisation of affective experience – a scheduling when during the week to encounter drama, when comedy – has been further dissolved by Netflix's proliferation of hyper-specified genres that can help viewers navigate through and locate a particular affective experience they are in the mood for at a given time. Netflix has said it categorises its content into thousands of subgenres, each of which gets a 4- or 5-digit code at the end of the URL netflix.com/browse/genre/, for instance: 'Violent East Asian Ghost Story' (87751) or 'Mind-Bending Thrillers with a Strong Female Lead' (23782). The decade of Netflix may mark a new 'period' of television: after the network monopolies of the 1950s and 1960s and then the rise of cable in the 1980s and 1990s and of digital platforms in the new millennium, this fourth period entrenches the simultaneous individualisation and fragmentation of its imagined audience.²⁷

Genres as affective containers answer to questions about the relation and interpenetration of media; the synchronic distribution of feeling; the diachronic historicity of feeling; the social ascent or decay of regimes of shared or consensual recognition; and the political management of affect. These are questions that formalism has not ignored, but a more deliberate attention to genre rather than form per se, and therefore to affective atmospheres more than economic or social structures, may advance our historicisation and politicisation of media, affect, and institutionalism.

Style, not genre: on patternings of action

Genres are affective institutions. In perhaps the two most influential accounts of literary style in the new millennium, style is a management of

authorial ambivalence in relation to institutions: a means of surviving attachment to institutions hostile to your flourishing. For the Mark McGurl of *The Program Era*, styles like minimalism and maximalism are about lower-middle class writers' incorporation into the postwar and formerly elite American University. His argument goes like this: pride inflates the self; maximalist writers, prideful of leaving their background of poverty and flourishing in an academic setting, inflate their writing. Or, alternatively, the style of the minimalist writer, bearing the residual 'wounds of low-status employment', incarnates the vulnerability of shame, stripping language as a strategy of retracting the self.²⁸ Whereas the 'verbal pride' of someone like Joyce Carol Oates aims for creativity and maximal expression, the minimalism of someone like Raymond Carver disciplines the writer through submission to their craft. The brilliance of McGurl's account is how it can leave behind an even older, highly individualistic understanding of style as the signature of a particular artist ('Austen style', 'Dickens style'). Rather than a single artist, the key features in McGurl's account are a single institution, the University, and a single affective experience, pride. Similarly, for D. A. Miller, *The Secret of Style* is its handling of an author's humiliation by a different social institution, the heterosexual family. The domain of style is the gay reader or, like Austen, the unmarried woman who could never really appear as a character in any of her novels because not emplotted in the will toward reproductive futurity. For Miller's Austen, style is paradigmatically free indirect style, which simultaneously mimes and distances the narrator's 'way of saying ... from ... the character's way of seeing'; style brings the narrator and a socially typical character into 'ostentatiously close quarters', testing the thin boundary between the two and allowing the narrator to get as intimate as possible with a social type while still performing a decided detachment from it, that is, a disavowal of wanting to actually inhabit it.²⁹ Like McGurl, style is the drama of humiliation translated into craft, with masterful sentences (or definitively mastering free indirect discourse) substituting for the feeling of having first been mastered by a social apparatus out of authorial control.

And yet, the transformation of institutional structure I outlined in the previous section puts pressure on these accounts. What does it mean to manage attachment to an institution that has fallen into disrepair? Moreover, the essentially affective relation of style in these two definitions risks missing the specificity of styles. In particular, as McGurl acknowledges, an affect like shame tends to bleed into its opposite, pride, and vice versa.³⁰ Moreover, many authors might experience shame, but may not be minimalists, just as many authors may be unmarried women or queer, but do not master free indirect discourse. But what remains amidst contradictory affective situations is not the coherency of what writers *feel*, but what writers *do*. At a basic level, we are all contradictory, ambivalent subjects organised simultaneously

by competing affects like shame and pride: we do not always know what we want, we sabotage our official desires, we both love and hate the same object. What is interesting is the style of what we *just do*, a particular mode of persistence and acting in the world, regardless of how we feel about the world.

In the philosophy of action, what we ‘just do’ is usually called a ‘basic action’; and as it turns out, a basic action is how Arthur Danto defined style in his classic, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. A basic action is the kind of action that happens as if instinctively and automatically, but still in a way we can attribute to an actor (unlike, say, the way I might twitch in my sleep or blink rapidly when my allergies act up).³¹ What matters is you don’t sit down and plan the action in advance of performing; you just do it. For Danto, style is, like a basic action, ‘what is done without the mediation of art or knowledge’.³² But the absence of mediation also means, for Danto, that style, which is so intimately the expression of an artist, cannot itself be known by its artist. Even though ‘the structure of a style is like the structure of a personality’, this style is only ‘for others to see’, because the ‘presence of knowledge or art presupposes that externalisation which is inconsistent with them being [their] style’.³³ Elsewhere, Danto elaborates that style cannot be known by the artist in part because style develops over the course of a career that exceeds any given artwork: those features which, in retrospect, appear as stylistic must first have been spontaneous.³⁴ This provides another reason why, in Danto’s understanding, style is to be understood as a basic action: if style cannot be known, it cannot be pre-intended, and therefore it cannot be a nonbasic action.

For Danto, style is essentially a signature, and on this point McGurl and Miller provide an advance, attending more so to social categories of people than individuals. But if, as Danto says, style is a basic action unplanned by the artist, another interpretation is possible: our instincts in acting may be unknown to us precisely because they are part of a larger social pattern in which we play a part. We pick up manners of action from others. What style names is this action itself. Danto’s mistake was that, having discovered style as action, he still went looking for a single actor to attach it to.

If genres index the crumbling of institutions in the present, styles index the strategies of moving on within this crisis, how we continue to move around in the world even if, or especially if, we cannot cut up its map into discrete institutional spaces. And while our own affects may be hard to place, not only because of the speed with which they mutate from one moment to the next in a world of institutional overlap and chaos but also because of the fundamentally contradictory nature of our mixed and ambivalent (really, multi-valent) feelings, what remains observable is what we do. We cannot not act; we are always doing something. In this light, to return to one of McGurl’s examples, we might think of minimalism less as the expression of an affect like shame and more as what it is as an action: a

kind of 'tidying up' or 'decluttering' of linguistic space, to use terms from the title of the today's leading text of minimalism as a lifestyle, Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*.

A number of consequences follow from thinking of style as action; let me highlight two. First, style becomes available for a cultural criticism without content, because it shows what people are doing regardless of what they may say they are feeling or thinking. To read style is to read how people adapt to their changing worlds, even when they may not be able to slow down the world long enough to represent it. Such a theory is particularly important when the period under study is the historical present; whereas narrative representations of what life is like in transitional periods often lag behind the transitions themselves, style is synchronous with the present it acts within. Second, to read style as a mode of adaptation means liberating it from the particularly individualising or universally periodising terms in which it is usually discussed. Rather, styles refer to new social groups that emerge in a contemporary situation through sharing actions. Because they come into being only through action, these style groups do not have to be primarily organised by demographic categories like class or institutions like the family. To enumerate the multiple styles at play in our world is to map budding relations when previous norms tying action to identities or institutions weaken. A minimalist 'tidying up' is not the property of one institution, like the university as an institution in McGurl's account, but a practice that happens across and beyond institutions; and its practitioners are hard to locate within just one demographic group or geographic place.

Styles theorised as actions, like genres theorised as institutions, facilitate comparative analysis across place (as habits responding to the present become harder to stabilise in a globalised and virtualised world) and medium (as an action is incarnated both in film and fiction, for instance). At the same time, styles respond to at least one shortcoming observable in the new formalism. One difficulty of formalist analysis has been how to scale structure: why we should think that the character network of a novel, for instance, is a good model for the social networks of the real world; why the shifting intensities of attention in a film can teach us modes of community life blown up from the case study of the dyad to the experience of the collective; why the containment of an aesthetic form is analogous to the containment of a nation-state and therefore a lesson in sovereignty and its disruptions. Writing in a different context responding to the urgency of thinking the big scale of human agency in the age of manmade climate change, Derek Woods has called this the 'smooth zoom' of scaling up from the small to the large and assuming a shape and the forces that convene upon it are identical throughout the transformation. As one example of why this scaling up can be wrong-headed, drawing upon the

work of biologists J. B. S. Haldane and Stephen Jay Gould: an insect can walk on the ceiling because it is small enough that surface forces trump gravity, but blow up the insect to the size of a horror movie monster, and gravity will win; a 6-foot insect could not walk the same paths of its 6 mm model.³⁵ Forms do not always scale smoothly; a different scale brings in different variables and environments. But by comparing not forms per se, but an action in which form is coordinated – and therefore seeing a relation not between political and aesthetic shapes, but in a common habituated practice that underlies and produces objects in separate political and aesthetic domains – stylistics could focus on processes that mediate among scales of analysis and domains of experience. Candace Vogler has remarked that one of the ‘excellent’ things about definitions of action is that they are ‘applicable to people, to firms, and so on’: ‘[n]ation-states, corporations, and other such bodies also act’.³⁶ Comparing actions allows us to compare what agents on different scales are doing, even if the agents themselves are not of the same make-up or structure. To return a final time to minimalism: it is something that nations *do* in foreign policy, corporations *do* in plans for expansion and trimming, and people *do* in their living room designs.

If form attends more to structure, and genre attends more to affect, then style attends to their entanglement. And if form has tended to emphasise the object itself, and genre the object’s reception (the affective ‘contract’ between author and reader in their shared ‘horizon of expectation’), then style returns to the scene of object production itself, and to the instinctive strategies authors have developed to adapt to the affective pressures of social structure, particularly decaying structure in our contemporary world of institutional decline. With style, we approach a method of literary categorisation that is on neither the ‘personalised’ level of Amazon’s algorithms nor the hyper-generalized level of moral evaluation (‘good’ or ‘bad’), and that instead finds an atlas of ‘basic actions’ in the present.³⁷

Notes

1. I borrow this phrase from Anna Kornbluh, who argues that another inalienable practice of our profession is, and should be, formalism. Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 5. See Michael W. Clune, ‘Judgment and Equality’, *Critical Inquiry*, 45.4 (2019), pp. 910–34; Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 76; Timothy Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
2. Clune, ‘Judgment and Equality’, 933.
3. Zahid Chaudhary, ‘The Politics of Exposure: Truth after Post-Facts’, *ELH*, 87.2 (2020), p. 302; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affectivity, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 3; Kadji

- Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, 'Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social', *ASAP/Journal*, 2.2 (2017), p. 230.
4. Nelson Goodman, 'The Status of Style', *Critical Inquiry*, 1.4 (1975), p. 803.
 5. Wai Chee Dimock, 'Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge', *PMLA*, 122.5 (2007), p. 1382.
 6. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
 7. Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', trans. Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 2.1 (1970), pp. 7–37.
 8. Frances Ferguson, 'Jane Austen, Emma, and the Impact of Form', *MLQ*, 61.1 (2000), p. 159.
 9. Wai Chee Dimock, 'Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats', *Critical Inquiry*, 39.4 (2013), p. 739.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 739–40.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 753.
 12. Gérard Genette, *The Architext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
 13. Elizabeth Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
 15. A sampling of just a few quotations: 'Suppose, for example, that the present book were an introduction to musical theory instead of poetics' (p. 132). 'The five structures of meaning we have given are, to use another musical analogy, the *keys* in which they are written and finally resolve' (p. 158). 'The total *mythos* of comedy, only a small part of which is ordinarily presented, has regularly what in music is called a ternary form' (p. 171). 'The analogy of the keyboard in music may illustrate the difference between fiction and other genres which for practical purposes exist in books' (p. 248).
 16. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 77.
 17. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 2.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 20. Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Nathan K. Hensley, *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Claire Jarvis, *Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex, and the Novel Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Timothy C. Campbell, *The Techne of Giving: Cinema and the Generous Form of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
 21. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 226; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 106. For a meta-theoretical review of the 'genre as institution' analogy, see David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 85–118.

22. Carolyn Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70.2 (1984), p. 158.
23. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 107.
24. Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', p. 158.
25. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 6. See also Lauren Berlant, 'Genre Flail', *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Theory*, 1.2 (2018), pp. 156–62.
26. Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (1992), p. 4.
27. For extended discussion, see Mareike Jenner, 'Is This TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and Binge-Watching', *New Media & Society*, 18.2 (2016): 257–73.
28. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 296, p. 301.
29. D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or: The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 27.
30. McGurl, *The Program Era*, p. 319.
31. Danto elaborates: 'an individual does not cause his basic actions to happen. When an individual *M* performs a basic action *a*, there is no event distinct from *a* that both stands to *a* as cause to effect *and* is an action performed by *M*'. Arthur Danto, 'Basic Actions', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2.2 (1965), p. 142.
32. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 201.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
34. Danto, 'Narrative and Style', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49.3 (1991), p. 208.
35. Derek Woods, 'Scale Critique for the Anthropocene', *The Minnesota Review*, no. 83 (2014), p. 136.
36. Candace Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 259.
37. I develop this argument further in my *Crisis Style: The Aesthetics of Repair* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

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