

Genres

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1. Introduction

The heroic manifests through media.[\[1\]](#) In arts and popular culture, the affiliation to a genre or the invocation of generic conventions co-determines the form of (re)presentation. The concept of *genericity* recognises that genre traits and conventions significantly impact these (re)presentations.[\[2\]](#) For the representation and impact of the heroic (or certain aspects of it), genericity can be of fundamental importance. Some genres are more conducive to the (re)presentation of the heroic, or even require it be (re)presented in a certain way, while other genres limit the options of (re)presenting the heroic. As a result, there is a natural affinity between the heroic and particular genres or subgenres. These genres offer a specific “affordance”, i.e. conditions that enable the heroic to be manifested in a particular way.[\[3\]](#)

2. Concepts of genre

Within disciplines focused on artistic and popular culture representations, the concept of genre has been extensively debated and, at times, contested due to its synchronic and diachronic flexibility.[\[4\]](#) Obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the vast body of scholarship on genre theory and history can be challenging. As the literary scholar Peter Wenzel has aptly summarised, the definition

and classification of literary genres is complex. However, he does see a “broad consensus” in the direction “that genres are open systems of formal and functional characteristics in which individual works participate to varying degrees [...] and that the genres of an era form a genre landscape that must in turn be described as a system”.^[5] Accordingly, genres are describable only as groupings “of different formal, structural and thematic criteria”.^[6] Moreover, genres are interdependent with the media and media systems in which they are realised.

As a classification term, genre is used in literary studies, visual studies, film studies, etc. to describe types of (re)presentation that are characterised by shared elements and patterns and differ from other types in the way they are composed. By this understanding, genre functions as an organizing concept that facilitates differentiation among types and subtypes of literature, film, painting, and other forms based on their conventional elements, enabling description and analysis of their unique aesthetics, functions, and aesthetic and social impact. Classifying genre terms have different ranges, and they must acknowledge that genres are dynamic and are realised in historical and culturally specific manifestations.

In European poetics, the discussion of genres dates back to classical Antiquity. Initially, modern literary studies identified generic patterns and variations through historical analysis and systematic comparisons. However, since the 1970s, the emphasis has shifted toward examining the ideological and pragmatic facets of genres, as well as their corresponding social and historical contexts. For Tzvetan Todorov, genres codify the properties of a society’s discourse and relate to its dominant ideologies; they are part of a society’s meaning-generating structures.^[7] Carolyn Miller defines genre as “social action”^[8], and Paul Cobley emphasises that genres arouse “expectations” and thereby create horizons of experience for the discourses possible within a society.^[9] Alastair Fowler understands genres as systems of communication that organise text production and reception because of their conventions^[10] – a view that is also emphasised in cognitive literary and media studies.^[11] The organisational and regulatory role of genre is recognised not least as central to the mechanisms of popular culture. Ken Gelder for instance observes with respect to popular literature: “The entire field of popular fiction is written for, marketed and consumed generically: it provides the primary logic for popular fiction’s means of production, formal and industrial identification and critical evaluation.”^[12] Popular literature advertises its genre affiliation to the point of being formulaic^[13], which can also make the productive interplay between genres and their semantic elements possible, however.

The notion that genres co-determine individual and social action in artistic and popular production and reception can be important for (re)presentations of the heroic: as Collins shows using the example of the Western film, how and with what intentions genericity is signalled and products are marked as generic and whether this happens with serious, playful, nostalgic or ironic intent can set the framework for the interpretation of the heroic.^[14]

3. Genericity and heroicity in different genre traditions

3.1. (European-Western) literature

For literature, besides the major domains of prose (epics), poetry and drama, a distinction is made between types that are characterised by either their formal features, content and thematic elements, or affective attributes. It is primarily these more specific genres and subgenres that function as affordances for the heroic:

Prose

- Epic
 - Homeric epics
 - Medieval epic
 - Renaissance epic (e.g. Luís de Camões: *The Lusiads*, Edmund Spenser: *Faerie Queene*)
 - mock-heroic poetry
- Heroic lay
 - Adventure novel
 - Chivalric romance
 - Romance of the Early Modern Period
 - *roman héroïque*
 - Gothic novel
 - Comic / graphic novel
- Biography

Drama

- Comedy
- Tragedy
- Heroic drama

Poetry

- Song of praise, poem of praise
- Ode
- German *Hymne*
- Elegy

3.2. Film

Several of the genres and subgenres listed above under 'Literature' have been translated into the cinematic tradition. As in the case of the theatre, the heroic is dramatised in film (and in television) multimodally: in word, action, image and sound. For the effect of the heroic, a visuality of the sublime is just as instrumental as certain camera settings or forms of background music. Such heroizing effects come uniquely into play in certain film genres:

- Western film
- Fantasy film
- Action adventure
- [Superhero film](#)
- Biopic

3.3. Music

Similar to the field of literature, for music, a distinction is made within genre fields between types that exhibit a strong affinity towards the heroic due to formal features, content and thematic aspects or affective characteristics.

Musical theatre

- [Opera](#)
 - *Opera seria* or *dramma per musica* (Italy, 17th/18th cent.)
 - *Tragédie en musique* or *tragédie lyrique* (France, 17th/18th cent.)
 - *Melodramma* (Italy, 19th cent.)
 - *Grand opéra* (France, 19th cent.)
 - Music drama (19th/20th cent.)
- Operetta
 - *Offenbachiade* (France, 19th cent. – satirical, critical of myths)
 - Tragic Operetta (primarily Germany, 20th cent.)
- Musical

Song

- Hymn
- Marching song
- Battle song

Choral music

- Cantatas
- Oratorios
- Choral movements

Symphonic music

- Overtures (e.g. Tchaikovsky: “1812 Overture”)
- Symphonies (e.g. Beethoven: 3rd Symphony “Eroica”)
- Symphonic poems (e.g. Strauss: “Ein Heldenleben”)

3.4. Fine arts

For the fine arts, applying a functionalistic genre term analytically is more challenging, as art history tends to place a greater emphasis on material and production aspects, which stands in contrast to the debates in literary or film studies. Defining the boundaries between individual genres (e.g. between monuments, history painting and portraiture) is often problematic and largely depends on the specific systematic criteria being applied – such as motifs and forms, the function of the works, the degree of their narrativity or their site of installation. Moreover, the heuristic value of such differentiations between genres is questionable in the eras in which a deliberate differentiation between such genres was not yet established, like in the case of Antiquity. The following classification of fine arts genres that are important for the heroic essentially follows the traditional systematics of art history:

Architecture

- Triumphal arches
- Halls of honour

Sculpture and plastic arts

- Monuments
 - Honorific statue
 - Equestrian statue
 - Funerary monument
- Votive or temple offerings

Painting

- Mythology painting
- History painting
- Portraiture
- Landscape

Print and photography

- Anthologies
- Book illustrations
- Poster and advertisement
- Journalism / press

Applied art

- Medals and badges of honour
- Coins / face designs
- Jewellery
- Ceramics / vessels
- Tableware
- Armour

4. References

- 1 Cf. von den Hoff, Ralf et al.: "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms: Transformations and Conjunctions from Antiquity to Modernity: Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948". In: Falkenhayner, Nicole / Meurer, Sebastian / Schlechtriemen, Tobias (Eds.): *Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories* (= helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu den Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5 [2019]), 9-16. DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02](https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02).
- 2 For a literary- and film-studies application of the concept of genericity, cf. for example Collins, Jim: "Genericity in the Nineties. Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity". In: John Storey (Ed.): *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. 4th edition. Harlow 2009: Longman, 454-471.
- 3 For greater detail on the affordance of aesthetic form, cf. Levine, Caroline: *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton 2015: Princeton University Press. For an application of the concept in the context of heroicity and violence, cf. Falkenhayner, Nicole / Korte, Barbara / Bensch, Matthias J. / Hardt, Maria-Xenia: "Heroik – Gewalt – Medialität: Working Paper der Verbundarbeitsgruppe 7 'Medialität'". In: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 6.1 (2018), 61-70. DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2018/01/06](https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2018/01/06).
- 4 For (transdisciplinary) overviews of the genre term, cf. for instance Dowd, Garin / Strong, Jeremy / Stevenson, Lesley (Eds.): *Genre Matters. Essays in Theory and Criticism*. Bristol 2006: Intellect Books; as well as Frow, John: *Genre. The New Critical Idiom*. London 2006: Routledge. For art history, cf. e. g. Kemp, Wolfgang: "Ganze Teile. Zum kunsthistorischen Gattungsbegriff". In: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 76 (2002), 294-299; and the articles in Mauser, Siegfried (Ed.): *Theorie der Gattungen*. Laaber 2005: Laaber.
- 5 Wenzel, Peter: "Gattungsgeschichte". In: Nünning, Ansgar (Ed.): *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft*. 5th edition. Stuttgart 2013: Metzler, 245-246. Translation by Daniel Hefflebower, in the original: "Ein weitgehender Konsens besteht heute darüber, dass Gattungen offene Systeme von Form- und Funktionsmerkmalen sind, an denen die einzelnen Werke in unterschiedlichem Maße partizipieren, und dass die Gattungen einer Epoche eine Gattungslandschaft bilden, die wiederum als System beschrieben werden muss."
- 6 Wenzel, Peter: "Gattung, literarische". In: Nünning, Ansgar (Ed.): *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft*. 5th edition. Stuttgart 2013: Metzler, 244-245. Translation by Daniel Hefflebower, in the original: "Gattungen [stellen] offene Systeme dar, deren Charakter nur durch ein Bündel von unterschiedlichen formalen, strukturellen und thematischen Kriterien beschrieben werden kann."
- 7 Todorov, Tzvetan: "The Origin of Genres". In: *New Literary History* 8 (1976), 159-170, in this respect particularly 162-163, DOI: [10.2307/468619](https://doi.org/10.2307/468619); cf. also Beebee, Thomas: *The Ideology of Genre. A Comparative Study of Generic Instability*. University Park 1994: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- 8 Miller, Carolyn: "Genre as Social Action". In: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984), 151-167; cf. also Voßkamp, Wilhelm: "Gattungen als literarisch-soziale Institutionen". In: Hinck, Werner (Ed.): *Textsortenlehre — Gattungsgeschichte*. Heidelberg 1977: Quelle & Meier, 27-44.
- 9 Cobley, Paul: "Objectivity and Immanence in Genre Theory". In: Dowd, Garin / Strong, Jeremy / Stevenson, Lesley (Eds.): *Genre Matters. Essays in Theory and Criticism*. Bristol 2006: Intellect Books, 41-54.
- 10 Fowler, Alastair: *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Oxford

- 1997 [1993]: Clarendon, particularly 256.
- 11 Cf. for example Viehoff, Reinhold: "Literarische Gattungen als kognitive Schemata". In: Laszlo, Janos / Viehoff, Reinhold (Eds.): *Sozialpsychologie und Literatur(wissenschaft)*. SPIEL, Sonderheft 2. Frankfurt a. M. 1993: Lang, 230-251.
- 12 Gelder, Ken: *Popular Fiction. The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. London 2004: Routledge, 40.
- 13 Gelder: *Popular Fiction*, 2004, 42.
- 14 Collins: "Genericity in the Nineties", 2009.

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