

John Rieder

On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History

In his groundbreaking 1984 essay, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” Rick Altman could accurately state that “genre theory has up to now aimed almost exclusively at the elaboration of a synchronic model approximating the syntactic operation of a specific genre” (12). Only a few years later, in 1991, Ralph Cohen announced that there had been a paradigm shift in genre theory, in the course of which its dominant project had changed from identifying and classifying fixed, ahistorical entities to studying genres as historical processes (85-87). Yet the impact of that paradigm shift on sf studies, while no doubt contributing to the predominantly historical rather than formalist orientation of most scholarly projects these days, has been neither so immediate nor so overpowering as to render entirely clear its implications for conceptualizing the genre and understanding its history. In this essay I aim to help clarify and strengthen the impact of an historical genre theory on sf studies.

I start from the problem of definition because, although constructing generic definitions is a scholarly necessity, an historical approach to genre seems to undermine any fixed definition. The fact that so many books on sf begin with a more or less extended discussion of the problem of definition testifies to its importance in establishing a framework for constructing the history of the genre, specifying its range and extent, locating its principal sites of production and reception, selecting its canon of masterpieces, and so on.¹ Perhaps the scholarly task that best highlights the importance of genre definition is bibliography, where the choice of what titles to include necessarily has to be guided by clearly articulated criteria that often include such definitions.

Yet it seems that the act of definition cannot ever be adequate to the notion of genre as historical process. Altman’s 1999 *Film/Genre*, one of the best and fullest elaborations of this approach to genre, argues that “genres are not inert categories shared by all ... but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations” (101, qtd. Bould and Vint 50). Thus Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue in a recent piece, drawing on Altman’s work, that “There Is No Such Thing as Science Fiction,” by which they mean that “genres are never, as frequently perceived, objects which already exist in the world and which are subsequently studied by genre critics, but fluid and tenuous constructions made by the interaction of various claims and practices by writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics and other discursive agents” (48). The critical and scholarly act of definition seems reduced, in this conception of the “claims and practices” that constitute the history of the genre, to no more than one among many other “fluid and tenuous constructions.” In fact, the only generic definition—if one can call it that—adequate to the historical paradigm would be a kind of tautology, an assertion that the genre is whatever the various discursive agents involved in its production, distribution, and reception say it is. And indeed

statements of that kind consistently come up in discussions of the problem of defining sf, the best-known example being Damon Knight's gesture of dismissal toward the very attempt at definition—"Science fiction is what we point to when we say it" (122, qtd. Clute and Nicholls 314).

In his 2003 essay "On the Origin of Genre," Paul Kincaid manages to turn the tautological affirmation of genre identity into a thoughtful position. Basing his argument on the notion of "family resemblance" in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Kincaid proposes that we can neither "extract a unique, common thread" that binds together all science fiction texts, nor identify a "unique, common origin" for the genre (415). He concludes that

science fiction is not one thing. Rather, it is any number of things—a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist in time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective, a particular approach to the matter of story, whatever we are looking for when we look for science fiction, here more overt, here more subtle—which are braided together in an endless variety of combinations. (416-17)

The usefulness of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance for genre theory bears further discussion, and I will return to it a bit later. For now, the important theoretical point with regard to Kincaid's argument is not only to agree that, according to an historical theory of genre, sf is "any number of things," but also to note and emphasize that this account of genre definition, like Altman's and Bould and Vint's, involves subjects as well as objects. It is not just a question of the properties of the textual objects referred to as "science fiction," then, but also of the subjects positing the category, and therefore of the motives, the contexts, and the effects of those subjects' more or less consciously and successfully executed projects. To put it another way, the assertion that sf is "whatever we are looking for when we are looking for science fiction" does not mean anything much unless "we" know who "we" are and why "we" are looking for science fiction.

In what follows I propose to offer an account of the current state of genre theory as it applies to the attempt to say what sf is. The first section of the essay will concentrate on conceptualizing what sort of thing a genre is, or is not. The final section will then return to the question of how to understand the collective subjects of genre construction. I am asking, throughout, what does the tautological assertion that sf is what "we" say it is mean if taken as a serious proposition about the nature, not just of sf, but of genre itself? And if the notorious diversity of definitions of the genre is not a sign of confusion, nor the result of a multiplicity of genres being mistaken for a single one, but rather, on the contrary, the identity of sf is constituted by this very web of sometimes inconsistent and competing assertions, what impact should this understanding of genre formation have on the project of writing the history of sf?

Genre as a Historical Process. I am going to make five propositions about sf, each of which could also be reformulated as a thesis about genre per se, constituting what I take to be a fairly non-controversial but, I hope, useful summary of the current paradigm of genre theory. The sequence leads from the

basic position that genres are historical processes to the point where one can effectively address the questions about the uses and users of sf that occupy the final section of this essay. The five propositions are:

- 1) sf is historical and mutable;
- 2) sf has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin;
- 3) sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them;
- 4) sf's identity is a differentially articulated position in an historical and mutable field of genres;
- 5) attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception.

Let me explain and defend these propositions one at a time.

Sf is historical and mutable. Nearly all twentieth-century genre theorists before 1980 would have agreed that "Theory of genres is a principle of order: it classifies literature and literary history not by time or place (period or national language) but by specifically literary types of organization or structure" (Wellek and Warren 226). The newer paradigm, in contrast, considers generic organizations and structures to be just as messily bound to time and place as other literary-historical phenomena, albeit with patterns of distribution and temporalities of continuity and discontinuity that may differ quite strongly from those of national traditions or "periods" in Wellek and Warren's sense. A newer paradigm is not necessarily a better one, however, and the choice between these two alternatives remains a matter of first principles, where the evidence seems susceptible of logically consistent explanation from either point of view. That is, if one considers sf to designate a formal organization—Darko Suvin's "literature of cognitive estrangement" has of course been by far the most influential formal definition—then it makes just as much sense to find it in classical Greek narratives as in contemporary American ones; and, in addition, it makes sense to say, as Suvin did, that much of what is conventionally called sf is actually something else. But the newer paradigm holds that the labeling itself is crucial to constructing the genre, and would therefore consider "the literature of cognitive estrangement" a specific, late-twentieth-century, academic genre category that has to be understood partly in the context of its opposition to the commercial genre practices Suvin deplored. Suvin's definition becomes part of the history of sf, not the key to unraveling sf's confusion with other forms.

Strong arguments for the logical superiority of the historical over the formal approach to genre theory have been advanced from the perspective of linguistics and on the grounds provided by the vicissitudes of translation.² Beyond that, I would argue, the historical paradigm is to be preferred because it challenges its students to understand genre in a richer and more complex way, within parameters that are social rather than just literary.³ Confronted, for example, with the controversy over whether such acclaimed pieces as Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967) or Karen Joy Fowler's "What I Didn't See" (2002) are sf or not, a formal approach can only ask whether the story is or is not a legitimate member of the genre. Does it accomplish "the presence and

interaction of estrangement and cognition ... [in] an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin, "On the Poetics" 375)? Is it a "realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method" (Heinlein 9)? Is it "modified by an awareness of the universe as a system of systems, a structure of structures" (Scholes 41)?⁴ Does it explore the impact of technology or scientific discovery on lived experience? And so on. An historical approach to genre would ask instead how and why the field is being stretched to include these texts or defended against their inclusion; how the identification of them as sf challenges and perhaps modifies the accepted meaning of the term (so that questions about form also continue to be part of the conversation, but not on the same terms); what tensions and strategies in the writing and publication and reading of sf prepare for this sort of radical intervention; and what interests are put at stake by it.

Sf has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin. That sf has no point of origin or single unifying characteristic is the Wittgensteinian position Kincaid proposes in "On the Origin of Genre." The application of Wittgenstein's thought to the notion of genre that is crucial to Kincaid was first proposed in 1982 in Alistair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* (41-44), an impressively erudite book whose central thesis is that genres are historical and mutable. As Fowler saw, Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance" is enormously suggestive for genre theory because it conceptualizes a grouping not based upon a single shared defining element. In the language game that constructs the category of games, for example, Wittgenstein says, "these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but ... they are *related* to one another in many different ways.... We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail." We extend the concept "as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres" (31-32, sections 65-66; emphasis in original).

Another conceptual model for the shape of a genre that has no single unifying characteristic is provided by the notion of the fuzzy set (see Attebery, *Strategies* 12-13). A fuzzy set, in mathematics, is one that, rather than being determined by a single binary principle of inclusion or exclusion, is constituted by a plurality of such operations. The fuzzy set therefore includes elements with any of a range of characteristics, and membership in the set can bear very different levels of intensity, since some elements will have most or all of the required characteristics while others may have only one. In addition, one member of the set may be included by virtue of properties a, b, and c, another by properties d, e, and f, so that any two sufficiently peripheral members of the set need not have any properties in common. It thus results in a very similar conception of the shape of sf as one based on Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. Either model allows sf the kind of scope and variety found in John Clute and Peter Nicholls's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

It seems worth remembering, however, that something like such a fuzzy set was precisely the target of Suvin's influential intervention into the history of definitions of sf. What Suvin opposed to the wide range of texts included in the category of sf was a precise concept of the genre ruled by what Roman Jakobson called a "dominant": "the focusing component of a work of art ... [that] rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (Jakobson 82). The categorical entity constituted by a fuzzy set or family resemblance, from this point of view, simply allows any number of incompatible versions of the textual dominant to operate silently, side by side, producing in the guise of a narrative genre a motley array of texts with no actual formal integrity. That, according to Suvin, was the state of sf studies when he entered into it his own rigorous formal definition, which directed itself powerfully against the illusion of integrity in a generic field that had allowed itself to be delineated in such a loose manner.

I think that the conceptualization of sf as a fuzzy set generated by a range of definitions remains susceptible to this formalist critique—that it indiscriminately lumps together disparate subgenres under a nominal umbrella—because it is still ruled by the logic of textual determination, albeit in a far more diffuse way than that demanded by Jakobson's notion of the textual dominant. A thoroughgoing theorist of the fuzzy set, rather than being pressed to identify the dominant that commands the operation of inclusion or exclusion from the generic set, would face the daunting task of enumerating the range of characteristics that merit inclusion, including not only textual properties but also intertextual relationships and paratextual functions such as "labeling." Such a task would indeed be encyclopedic in scope, but I want to suggest that it would also be futile, because the quasi-mathematical model of the fuzzy set can never be adequate itself to the open-ended processes of history where genre formation and re-formation is constantly taking place. In this respect, Wittgenstein's thinking is more attuned to the historical approach to genre than is the notion of the fuzzy set, because "the term 'language-game' is meant to call into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein 11, section 23; emphases in original). Categorization, in this view, is not a passive registering of qualities intrinsic to what is being categorized, but an active intervention in their disposition, and this insistence on agency is what most decisively distinguishes an historical approach to sf from a formalist one.

The term "family resemblance" has its shortcomings, however, when it comes to thinking about the problem of generic origins. Historians of sf are all too fond of proclaiming its moment of birth, whether it be in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (1926), or elsewhere according to one's geographical and historical emphasis; and the term "family resemblance" encourages the construction of the history of sf as some version of a family tree of descendants from one or more such progenitors.⁵ It is not quite enough to argue, as Kincaid does, that there is no "unique, common origin" for the genre (415); the collective and accretive social process by which sf has been constructed does not have the kind of coherent form or causality that allows one to talk about origins at all. Even without reference to Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism, the historical approach to genre proposed in

Hans-Robert Jauss's reception theory exposes the logical problem with identifying the moment of origin for a genre insofar as, for Jauss, the notion of genre is based on repetition and is strictly opposed to his notion of originality. In Jauss's reception theory, there cannot be a first example of a genre, because the generic character of a text is precisely what is repeated and conventional in it. A text can violate established generic expectations, but it can only be said to have established new expectations when other texts, in imitating its strategies, solidify them into the features of a genre. In order for a text to be recognized as having generic features, it must allude to a set of strategies, images, or themes that has already emerged into the visibility of a conventional or at least repeatable gesture. Genre, therefore, is always found in the middle of things, never at the beginning of them.⁶

A model that helps to better conceptualize the absence of origins in an historical approach to genre is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizomatic assemblage.⁷ What Deleuze and Guattari call a "collective assemblage of enunciation" (22) is constituted by "lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (3). It has no center, no "hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, [but rather] the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system ... without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states" (21). The most important feature of the rhizomatic assemblage in relation to genre theory is that it is an "antigenealogy" that "operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots.... [I]t has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills" (21). The movement of texts and motifs into and through sf does not confer a pedigree on them, then, but instead merely connects one itinerary to another. The paths that connect those itineraries are not given in the "acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying" structure of the genre, but rather have been and must be constructed by writers, publishers, and readers out of the conjunctures they occupy and the materials at hand.

The notion that sf's history is one of "variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" rather than a lineage of ancestors and descendants is nowhere more important than in the study of what, following the hint in the title of Everett Bleiler's indispensable bibliography, *Science-Fiction: The Early Years*, I would call early science fiction. Studying the beginnings of the genre is not at all a matter of finding its points of origin but rather of observing an accretion of repetitions, echoes, imitations, allusions, identifications, and distinctions that testifies to an emerging sense of a conventional web of resemblances. It is this gradual articulation of generic recognition, not the appearance of a formal type, that constitutes the history of early sf. Thus, rather than sorting out true sf from the genres in its proximity or trying to find its primal ancestors, it is far more useful to take stock of the way that sf gradually comes into visibility in the *milieu* of late nineteenth-century fantasy, imperial adventure fiction, the romance revival of the 1880s and 1890s in England, the boy-scientists of the American dime novel, utopian writing, the future-war motif, and so on.⁸ One is not looking for the appearance of a positive entity but rather for a practice of drawing similarities and

differences among texts, which is the point further elaborated by the third proposition.

Sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them. All those involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of sf—writers, editors, marketing specialists, casual readers, fans, scholars, students—construct the genre not only by acts of definition, categorization, inclusion, and exclusion (all of which are important), but also by their uses of the protocols and the rhetorical strategies that distinguish the genre from other forms of writing and reading. John Frow, at the beginning of his excellent and concise recent summary of the current state of genre theory, writes: “I understand genre as a form of symbolic action: the generic organization of language, images, gestures, and sound makes things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world.... Texts—even the simplest and most formulaic—do not ‘belong’ to genres but are, rather, uses of them” (*Genre 2*). Genre requires “symbolic action” rather than being inherent in the form or content of a text, illustrated by the way generic difference can reside within verbal identity. Consider the example offered by Samuel R. Delany, who juxtaposes realist and sf readings of the sentence, “He turned on his left side”; the realist reading understands that someone has changed the position of his body, but the sf reading might mean that he has activated the left side of his body by turning on a switch (Delany 103). The point of this example is not so much that the sf reading exploits the grammatical and semantic possibilities of the language in a different and richer way, as Delany argued, as that the second reading depends upon the reader’s familiarity with and use of sf conventions—in particular, here, the expectation that the distinction between organism and machine is going to be blurred or violated. Both the writer and the reader of the sentence in its sf sense are using the genre to actively shape their understanding of the world—that is, the world depicted in the text in question, and its relation to both an empirical environment and to other generically constructed worlds (the world of fantasy, the world of comedy, and so on).⁹

The distinction between a text’s using a genre and its belonging to it also changes the relationship between the individual text and the genre, so that it is no longer one of simple exemplification, where the text stands as a metonym or synecdoche of the genre. The character of genre as “symbolic action” implies that genre is one of the many kinds of codes that, as Roland Barthes pointed out so relentlessly in *S/Z*, a text activates. Generic hybridity is not a special case, then; any narrative longer than a headline or a joke almost inevitably uses multiple generic conventions and strategies. Distinctions between sf and fantasy typically, if tacitly, acknowledge this fact, since they so often turn upon the status afforded to realist conventions in relation to the rest of the narrative. Because of the way that multiple genres play upon and against one another in individual texts, pigeonholing a text as a member of this or that genre is much less useful than understanding the way it positions itself within a field of generic possibilities.¹⁰

Sf’s identity is a differentially articulated position in an historical and mutable field of genres. Frow, after postulating the thesis that texts use genres rather than belong to them, goes on to say that the uses of genre in a text “refer not to ‘a’

genre but to a field or economy of genres, and [the text's] complexity derives from the complexity of that relation" (*Genre 2*). To speak of an "economy of genres," as Frow does here, is to think of the generic codes activated in a text or by a reader as a matter of making choices with values attached to them by virtue of their difference from other possible choices. Such an economy depends crucially on the system of genres in play at a given time and place. Genres—like phonemes and words in Saussure's lectures on linguistics—are here considered values that signify by virtue of their difference from the other values in their field, and may change or lose their meaning if transposed into a different system. Thus, as Tony Bennett puts it, generic analysis must always take into account "the system of generic differences—conceived as a differentiated field of social uses—prevailing at [a given] time in terms of its influence on both textual strategies and contexts of reception" (108), because every generic choice constitutes what Pierre Bourdieu calls a position-taking with respect to the positions and values that structure the contemporary field of choices. Understanding the dynamics of genre in a given text depends upon being able to understand the field that offers the writer or reader its range of generic possibilities and determines the values attached to them.

Problems of generic economy are absolutely crucial to sf studies in two ways, the first having to do with questions of prestige and the second with writing the genre's history. Roger Luckhurst has written very entertainingly about sf's "death wish," which is to say its desire to stop being sf and become "literature." The source of that desire is the way positions and values line up in the contemporary economy of genres to produce the negative connotations often attached to "genre fiction:"

The paradigmatic topography of ghetto/mainstream marks a border on which are transposed the evaluations popular/serious, low/high, entertainment/Literature.... The only way, it is proposed, to legitimate SF is to smuggle it across the border into the "high." And for the genre as a whole to become legitimate paradoxically involves the very destruction of the genre. (Luckhurst, "Many Deaths" 37-38)

The conceit of the death wish actually refers to something rather different than an instinctual drive, of course—the fact that, although one can make choices (in this case, about genre), one can only choose from the options that history makes available. Many scholars (and editors, writers, and readers) of sf would like to have their sf and their literature too, but that is an option that the distinction between high and low culture has tended to foreclose.

The obsession with definite boundaries that once abounded in discussions of genre rested, not on a widespread desire for precision in making genre distinctions, but rather on the effects of prestige attached to positions in the contemporary genre system; and this is the source of the recurrent drawing and redrawing of sf's borders that Luckhurst writes about. The fact that genre boundaries are so frequently described as prescriptive and constricting derives, similarly, not from their really being that way, but rather from the fact that in modern Western artistic practices more prestige accrues to violating these boundaries than to conforming to them. Hence the concept of "literature" as such

has repeatedly been formulated as the category where every work constructs its own unique genre (e.g., by Friedrich Schlegel, Benedetto Croce, and Maurice Blanchot; see Frow, *Genre* 26-27, and Altman, *Film/Genre* 4-7). What this understanding of “literature” puts at stake is much less the prescriptive force of generic boundaries than the play of expectation and surprise in a text’s handling of them, as in the stark opposition in Jauss’s reception theory between innovative strategies and the understanding of genre itself as a set of predictable and eventually worn-out conventions. Yet, although distinctions between high and low modes of narrative can be expected to exist wherever class differences attach themselves to the production and distribution of narratives—which is to say throughout history—the particular way that high and low are connected in contemporary genre practices with innovation versus imitation is a more recent and specific development. The peculiar sense of “literature” as the category whose members defy categorization is an integral part of the history of the sense of “genre” that is one of sf’s conditions of existence. Thus writing the history of sf has to involve, at a minimum, attending to the historical change in generic systems that produced that distinction.

The history of sf, then, involves the history of a signal change in the system of genres: that is, the emergence of a genre system associated with mass publication that came to include science fiction alongside the detective story, the modern romance, the Western, horror, fantasy, and other similar genres, and which collectively comprised a practice of genre categorization distinct from and in tension with the pre-existing classical and academic genre system that includes the epic, tragedy, comedy, satire, romance, the lyric, and so on. In this sense, the influence of the great innovators like Shelley, Verne, and Wells takes place within the context of “cultural and historical fluctuations in the composition of generic systems,” and close attention to the reception of any of the three authors will show that “the same texts may be subject to different generic classifications in different social and historical contexts” (Bennett 101). But the classical-academic and mass-cultural genre systems also each have a history that has entered into the production, distribution, and reception of texts, and that often forms substantial connections between the systems themselves and the history and significance of a given text. Thus, while it is certainly possible to read the *Oedipus* of Sophocles as a piece of detective fiction, its historical relationship to the genre of tragedy, and to the system of genres and literary values elaborated in relation to classical tragedy, is a good deal more consequential. By the same token, texts that are usually considered science fiction could be read simply as examples of satire, romance, comedy, tragedy, and so on, but doing so, rather than elevating them to the status of “serious” literature, strips them of an important aspect of their historicity.

The way generic terms and choices signify in relation to other terms and choices is constantly in flux. Thus, as Fowler says, “It is neither possible nor even desirable to arrive at a very high degree of precision in using generic terms. The overlapping and mutability of genres means that an ‘imprecise’ terminology is more efficient” (130). Such overlapping and mutability also makes necessary the practice of retro-labeling in order to trace the lineaments of emerging genre

categories (hence, “early science fiction”). Nonetheless, attention to the history of genre systems ought to foreclose the option of transposing the category of sf wholesale onto early modern or classical texts. If Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was not sf when it was written (see Rieder, *Colonialism* 19), neither, *a fortiori*, were Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) or Lucian’s *True History*. The important point is that the emergence of sf has to do, not with the first appearance of a certain formal type, nor with when the term “science fiction” was first used or by whom, but rather with the appearance of a system of generic identities that articulates the various terms that cluster around sf (scientific fiction, scientific romance, scientifiction; but also horror fiction, detective fiction, the Western). Clearly Gernsback did not initiate this system of generic identities when he published the first issue of *Amazing Stories* in 1926. But just as clearly, the milieu of mass-marketed periodical publications is one of the historical conditions for sf’s emergence as a distinctive genre, and that milieu carries with it its hierarchical opposition to a specific version of the realm of “high” culture.

I propose that understanding the positions and values of sf within past and present economies of genre, or how the history of this shifting and slippery subject fits into the larger context of changes within the system of genres, is the frame in which to put the question, what difference does it make when “we” point to a text and say that it is sf?

The answer to that question from the perspective of genre theory is that *attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception*. Here we should speak of labeling itself as a rhetorical act. One of the most bustling areas of genre theory in recent years has been that explored by rhetoricians focused on the pedagogy of composition, rather than critics and scholars of literature (Frow, “Reproducibles” 1626-27). In an important early contribution to the new rhetorical approach to genre, Carolyn Miller wrote in 1984 that “A theoretically sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (24). Miller is primarily concerned with “the ‘*de facto*’ genres, the types we have names for in everyday language” because it is these genres that formalize “the knowledge that practice creates” (27). Although her analysis is therefore more concerned with analyzing genres such as the letter of recommendation or the inaugural speech than with drawing distinctions between different types of storytelling, Miller’s approach to genre might well lead one to ask why distinctions between types of story are drawn and insisted upon at all. How can one explain this “mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need” (30)? What action does it accomplish to attribute the label, sf, to a narrative?

Whatever protocols of interpretation or formal and thematic conventions the label refers to, the labeling itself often serves to position the text within the field of choices offered by the contemporary genre system in quite material ways: how it will be printed, where it will be sold, by whom it is most likely to be read. Generic attribution therefore affects the distribution and reception of texts: that is, the ways that they are put to use. It is a way of telling someone how to read a

text, and even more a kind of promise that the text can be usefully, pleasurably, read that way. The attribution does not just classify the text, it promotes its use by a certain group of readers and in certain kinds of ways (e.g., with a high level of seriousness, or a lack of it). When “we” point to a story and say it is sf, therefore, that means not only that it ought to be read using the protocols associated with sf but also that it can and should be read in conversation with other sf texts and readers.

Such acts of labeling, by assigning texts a position and a value within a system of genres, entangle them within both a synchronic web of resemblances and a diachronic history of generic “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (Deleuze and Guattari 21). A history of genre systems attentive to the power that generic attribution exercises upon distribution and reception would not be one structured primarily by the appearance of literary masterpieces, but rather one also punctuated by watersheds in the technology of publication, the distribution of reading materials, and the social production and distribution of literacy itself. Some sense of the contours of such a history might be gleaned from John Guillory’s brilliant summary of the forms of the canon from classical times to the present in *Cultural Capital* (55-82); for sf in particular, the list of the conditions for its emergence that Roger Luckhurst gives in his recent history are very much to the point (*Science Fiction* 16-17).¹¹

It would be well beyond the scope of the present essay to attempt a comprehensive or even partial account of the history and dynamics of the attribution of sf’s various labels to texts, much less an account of the economic and cultural transformation of the production and distribution of literature and literacy that I have been arguing should be its frame. I will turn back, rather, to the questions I raised earlier about the collective subject of sf genre formation. Those questions can now take an expanded form that should make their ramifications clearer. If sf is “whatever [in all its historical mutability and rhizomatic irregularity] we are looking for when we are looking for science fiction,” what kind of a collectivity is formed by those who recognize the genre? On what terrain—that is, what system of genres, what regime of the production and distribution of literature and literacy—does the collective endeavor of “looking for science fiction” take place? What in the economy of genres or the dynamics of distribution and reception drives that collectivity to look for sf? And what kind of intervention in that economy is their saying they have found it?

Categorization and Communities of Practice. Sf history and criticism afford two drastically different versions of the collective subject of genre formation. The list of “writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics and other discursive agents” in Bould and Vint’s “fluid and tenuous” construction of sf indicates an anonymous, disparate, and disunified set of people. The use of the pronominal “we” here would constitute a kind of grammatical mirage imputing collective intentionality to a process without a subject—or, to be more precise, a process involving so many and such disconnected subjects that they share only the nominal common ground of their participation in the production, distribution, and reception of sf. This anonymous and scattered sense of a defining collectivity

stands in sharp contrast to the practice of referring the construction and definition of sf to a rather tightly knit community, a folk group who gets to say what sf is by virtue of its shared participation in the project of publishing, reading, conversing, and otherwise interacting with one another about it:

“Modern” science fiction, generally dated as having begun in late 1937 with the ascent of [John W.] Campbell, was a literature centered around a compact group of people.... There could have been no more than fifty core figures who did 90 percent of the writing and editing. All of them knew one another, most knew one another well, lived together, married one another, collaborated, bought each others’ material, married each others’ wives, and so on. (Malzberg 240)

This sort of usage has the considerable merit of making a concrete history and set of motives underlying sf refreshingly clear. Yet an excessive emphasis on the community of writers, editors, and fans in the early pulp milieu encourages an illusion of voluntary control over genre formation that is certainly exaggerated. Even during the so-called Golden Age of Campbell’s editorial influence, sf resided within a larger economy of genres whose shifting values and fluid boundaries no group, much less a single editor or publication, could control. Genre construction is intentional only in fits and starts, only as localized as the circulation of the narratives in question, and even then subject to the pressures of the entire system of publication and circulation in which it takes place.

Even worse, the peculiar situation of the pulps can be taken as normative for genres as such, as Gary Westfahl does in *The Mechanics of Wonder*:

if we define a genre as consisting of a body of texts related by a shared understanding of that genre as recorded in contemporary commentary, then a true history of science fiction as a genre must begin in 1926, at the time when Gernsback defined science fiction, offered a critical theory concerning its nature, purposes, and origins, and persuaded many others to accept and extend his ideas.... Literary genres appear in history for one reason: someone declares that a genre exists and persuades writers, publishers, readers and critics that she is correct. (8-12)

If this conception of genre were correct, it could be so only with respect to modern genre practices. Certainly there is no body of contemporary commentary that illustrates a shared generic understanding of the proverb, the riddle, the ballad, or the epic. But even if one stays within the field of genres occupied by Gernsback, one cannot locate a master theorist or “announcer” for the Western, spy fiction, detective fiction, and so on. The more usual case with genres is surely the one described by Michael McKeon in *The Origins of the English Novel*, where he argues that the novel as a generic designation is an abstraction that only came to be formulated when the process of its emergence was complete: “‘The novel’ must be understood as what Marx calls a ‘simple abstraction,’ a deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process” (20).

I suggest that it is possible to articulate the anonymous collectivity of the “complex historical process” of sf’s emergence and ongoing construction, maintenance, and revision with the rich particularity of an account like Malzberg’s by means of the theorization of categorization and its uses offered by

Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Starr in *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (1999). Bowker and Starr are concerned with the way classifications are constructed within communities of practice, emphasizing the ad hoc supplementation and renegotiation of official or institutional categories by those who make them work: “We need a richer vocabulary than that of standardization or formalization with which to characterize the heterogeneity and the processual nature of information ecologies” (293). They emphasize, too, the “collective forgetting” about “the contingent, messy work” of classification that unites members of a community of practice (299). Full-fledged membership in such a community involves the naturalization of its objects of practice, which “means stripping away the contingencies of an object’s creation and its situated nature. A naturalized object has lost its anthropological strangeness” (299). As a result of its naturalization, it can be pointed to as an example of X with an obviousness that derives, not from the qualities of the object itself, but rather from membership in the relevant community.

Objects and communities of practice do not line up simply and neatly, however, because people come in and out of such communities, operate within them at various levels of familiarity with their categories, and may at the same time be members of different communities with conflicting classification practices. Bowker and Starr therefore emphasize the importance of “boundary objects” as ways of mediating the practices and motives of overlapping communities of practice:

Boundary objects are those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them.... The creation and management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting communities.... Boundary objects are the canonical forms of all objects in our built and natural environments. (297-307)

To speak about the common ground that comprises a sense of sf shared by writers, editors, publishers, marketers, fans, general readers, critics, and scholars might mean to identify the boundary objects that these various communities of practice share. The advantage of this conceptualization of classification is that the communities of practice do not disappear into anonymity, nor do the differences and tensions between their practices fall out of view, nor does whatever consensus settles among them embody the essence of the object. Boundary objects—for example, the texts that make up the sf canon—are not by necessity the most important or definitive objects for any given community, but simply the ones that satisfy the requirements of several communities at once.

Using the concepts of communities of practice and boundary objects to sort out the complex agencies constructing sf implies at least three distinct ways of understanding the assertion that sf is “whatever we are looking for when we are looking for science fiction.” First, the “we” who are looking for science fiction could refer to the members of the speaker’s own community of practice; this is the sense it had when Damon Knight wrote that “Science fiction is what we point to when we say it.” Second, however, “we” could be taken to refer to all the different communities of practice who use the category, and “science fiction” to

all of the objects all of them collectively point to. Any expectation of coherence here is obviously doomed to disappointment, but nonetheless this encyclopedic sense of the genre has the virtue of pointing toward the broad horizon of social practices where the history of genre systems can come into view. Third, science fiction could be taken as the set of objects the relevant communities of practice point to in common—that is, the boundary objects “we” communities share.

This third reading refers to a shared territory that is not a matter of giving up on arriving at a definition of the genre, but rather is precisely the product of the interaction among different communities of practice using different definitions of sf. The multiplicity of definitions of sf does not reflect widespread confusion about what sf is, but rather results from the variety of motives the definitions express and the many ways of intervening in the genre’s production, distribution, and reception that they pursue. A wealth of biographical and paratextual material can be brought to bear here, as in Justine Larbalestier’s decision that “letters, reviews, fanzines, and marketing blurbs are as important as the stories themselves” in piecing together her detailed history of a riven and complex sf community in *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (1). Brian Attebery’s description of the shape of sf in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* also attributes it to the interaction of disparate communities:

Some outgrowths of the genre have so little in common that they hardly seem to constitute a single category. Yet if they share few features, all the myriad manifestations of SF may still be analyzed as products of a single process. All result from negotiated exchanges between different segments of culture. (170)

Understanding the relations among its various communities of practice, whether of negotiation or conflict or deliberate non-interaction, is among the most important problems that genre theory poses for sf critics and scholars.

Most genre theory has focused on the choices writers make when composing texts or that readers make, or ought to make, in interpreting them. But the practice of generic attribution also clusters heavily in two institutional locations, commercial publishing and the academy, and this pair of institutions bears no accidental resemblance to the oppositions between high and low culture referred to earlier. The practice of generic attribution in both places is concerned with constructing and regulating a text’s or a genre’s public value and significance, and comparing the different forms that publicity takes in these two locations would seem to be a good way to explore large-scale regularities in the contemporary genre system. The relation between these two institutional locations, however, is a feature of contemporary genre systems upon which much academic theory in the twentieth century simply turned its back, failing to even notice it, much less ask about its significance or implications.¹² Yet in any construction of the history and fortunes of sf, the prominence of commercial sites and motives, from the pulp milieu of Gernsback to the mass market franchises of *Star Wars*, is hard—I would even say, foolish—to ignore.

The contours of an analysis of genre practices in the realm of commercial publishing is suggested by Marxist cultural theory, insofar as much of its best work distinguishes itself precisely by its concern with the pressure of

commodification on literary and artistic production, as in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's arguments in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) concerning the "culture industry" (94-136); Fredric Jameson's thesis that the commodity form structures modern artistic production in general, no less in the anti-commodities of high art than in the commercial products of mass culture ("Reification and Utopia" 130-38); or Pierre Bourdieu's thesis that the field of cultural production is structured by an inverse relationship between economic and cultural capital, such that restricted circulation—producing for other producers—enjoys a high level of prestige that is antithetical to, and compensatory for, the high economic rewards of general or mass circulation (312-26). As Horkheimer and Adorno first pointed out, the generic label attached to a narrative by "the culture industry" concerns strategies for identifying and targeting audiences, weighing risks, allocating resources, and capturing profits. Commercial practices, in this line of argument, tend to reify generic classifications, promoting them as instigations to engage in repetitive and predictable habits of consumption. As Bourdieu argues, however, the motives of artistic producers in general cannot be reduced to a simple drive to maximize economic profit. Instead there is a constant struggle for writers and editors to achieve autonomy from the economic imperative. They are doubly, and contradictorily, driven both by the profit motive and by what Bourdieu calls the goal of achieving "consecration" by their peers, the "recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize" (320). The different motives and trajectories that appear in the editorial careers of, for example, Hugo Gernsback, John W. Campbell, and Michael Moorcock would richly illustrate these double motives, with the added advantage of distancing the dynamics of "consecration" from an exclusive identification with the avant-garde, high-art practices that Bourdieu tends to emphasize, placing it instead within the communities of practice of sf professionals and fans.

Genre attribution intersects with publicity in a different but perhaps complementary way in academic practices. Genre attribution in the academy has a double articulation that resembles the double motives of economic profit and consecration described by Bourdieu.¹³ Thus there is an outward-looking motive by which genres serve as boundary objects that help rationalize curricular regularities in relation to the bureaucratic structure of the educational apparatus. A course on the novel, drama, poetry, creative writing, or science fiction, entered upon a student's transcript, promises his or her exposure to some standardized regime of study that can be measured in credit hours, billed for tuition, used by administrators to determine the allocation of institutional resources, and so on. But there is also an inward-looking side to genre discourse, a dialogue among scholars and critics in which generic labels merely serve as points of departure for exploration and argument. One encounters here a form of publicity that is one of the best contemporary approximations to the public sphere of "rational-critical debate" whose emergence Jürgen Habermas described in eighteenth-century England (57-67, 89-117), in spite of the fact that the demands of bureaucratization continue to exert considerable pressures on academic publishing, the organization

of conferences, grant writing and grant giving, and so on. I would venture the hypothesis that the Janus face of genre practice in the academy bears a non-coincidental, structural resemblance to the split in the modern system of genres between practices aimed at aesthetic distinction and crass moneymaking that has been one of its gross features from the time of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1743) to the present. If it seems at all plausible that the tensions between bureaucratic heteronymy and intellectual autonomy within the academy have a structural affinity with the contradictory drives for economic profit and cultural prestige in commercial production, the history of sf is well positioned to contribute importantly to a broader cultural history because, as I argued earlier, it has to involve that second structural transformation of publicity, the emergence of mass culture, that Habermas decried as the dissolution of the promise of social rationality contained in the first (159-74, 181-210).

Thinking of genres as categories wielded by communities of practice has one final advantage that can serve as the conclusion to this discussion. Bowker and Starr's analysis makes all definitions of sf appear in the light of working definitions, provisional conceptualizations suited to the purposes of a particular community of practice and, within that community, to the needs and goals of a specific project. In this way, definitions may be necessary, even indispensable, and yet constructing and adhering to a definition of the genre, far from being the goal of a history of sf, is more likely to be a way to short-circuit it. Definition and classification may be useful points of departure for critical and rhetorical analysis, but, if the version of genre theory offered in this essay is valid, the project of comprehending what sf has meant and currently means is one to be accomplished through historical and comparative narrative rather than formal description. I hope to have given some sense of the capaciousness and complexity that a narrative of the formation and maintenance of sf would entail, as well as of the stakes involved in its elaboration.

NOTES

1. Examples of this kind of discussion are Freedman (13-23); Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (6-10); Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (15-21); and Roberts (1-20).

2. One of the most notable linguistic arguments is that of Tzvetan Todorov, who, in the opening section of his 1978 *Genres in Discourse*, broke with the emphasis he had earlier placed on the category and properties of "literature" (e.g., in *The Fantastic* 6-7) by arguing that there is no clear distinction between literary and non-literary language. The analysis of literary genres does not have to do with sentences and grammar, he now argued, but rather with discourses composed of "utterances in a given sociocultural context" (9), and therefore genre is a local phenomenon determined by social and cultural practice, not a quasi-grammatical one embedded in the deep structures of language. For a strong argument that begins by considering the problems of cultural difference that beset translation, see Owens.

3. Luckhurst makes the same point in a different way in *Science Fiction* (6-10).

4. Suvin and Scholes are quoted in Clute and Nicholls's entry on definitions (310-14).

5. For identification of Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the grand original of sf, see Aldiss and Wingrove (25-52); on the "miraculous birth" of sf in Shelley's *Frankenstein* or

Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898), see Jameson, *Archaeologies* (1, 57); for Gernsback's role as originator, see Westfahl (8).

6. Cf. Altman on "genrification" (*Film/Genre* 49-68).

7. For another discussion of the usefulness of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of rhizomes to genre theory, see Dimock (74).

8. Perhaps the most drastic attempt to sort true sf out from its neighbors is Suvin's (nonetheless very informative) bibliography in *Victorian SF in the UK*, which lists several hundred texts that fail to qualify as sf (most famously, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1886]). As Luckhurst comments, Suvin ignores any "sense that the categories of popular literature and notions of what scientific cognition might be were both undergoing transformation in the nineteenth century, and that SF is itself the very product of this change" (*Science Fiction* 8). I would say that the more inclusive and broadly-based bibliographies of Bleiler and Clareson are to be preferred. Examples of the kind of delineation of the emergence of the genre advocated here include Rieder's treatment of the lost-race motif in chapter 2 of *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, and chapters 2 and 3 of Luckhurst's *Science Fiction*.

9. On the way that genres construct worlds, see Frow (*Genre* 86-87).

10. What is usually meant by generic hybridity is perhaps simply that the genres being mixed in a text have not conventionally been considered neighbors (like the combination of philosophical speculation and sword-and-sorcery fantasy in Delany's NEVERYON stories [1979-87]), or perhaps that their neighborliness is being foregrounded and exploited in the text rather than allowed a conventionally silent co-presence (as in the explicit use of folkloric material in China Miéville's *King Rat* [1998]). That is, the designation of hybridity has more to do with the way a text positions itself within a system of generic values than with the simple and more or less inevitable fact that it uses a multiplicity of generic strategies.

11. Luckhurst's conditions include:

1) The extension of literacy and primary education to the majority of the population of England and America, including the working classes; 2) the displacement of the older forms of mass literature, the "penny dreadful" and the "dime novel," with new cheap magazine formats that force formal innovation, and drive the invention of modern genre categories like detective or spy fiction as well as SF; 3) the arrival of scientific and technical institutions that provide a training for a lower-middle-class generation as scientific workers, teachers, and engineers, and that comes to confront traditional loci of cultural authority; and, in a clearly related way, 4) the context of a culture being visibly transformed by technological and scientific innovations.... (16)

12. The exception that proves the rule is Altman, *Film/Genre* (90-96, 123-43).

13. I am drawing here on the analysis of the double articulation of academic concepts in Rieder, "Institutional Overdetermination."

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to clarify and strengthen the impact of an historical genre theory on sf studies. It advances and defends five propositions about sf, each of which could be recast as a thesis about genre per se: 1) sf is historical and mutable; 2) sf has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin; 3) sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them; 4) sf's identity is a differentially articulated position in a historical and mutable field of genres; 5) attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception. The essay concludes by proposing an approach to the multiple and competing agencies of sf genre formation, using the concepts of communities of practice and boundary objects.