Chapter 1
In the Genre Jungle

In our current discourse on artistic practices, we commonly use generic distinctions to characterize a particular work: for example, when we say that Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" is a portrait, and that Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" is a "still life"; when we describe the novels dealing with the investigations of Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret, or of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, as "Whodunits," and the romances in the Harlequin series as "format romances"; or when we call Shakespeare's *Macbeth* a tragedy, and Molière's *The Miser* a comedy. We thus invoke the idea of genres (pictorial, literary, theatrical, etc.) to identify, classify, and differentiate particular works. The same is true with cinema. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a film viewer will readily use the terms "musical" to describe *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen/Kelly, 1952), "comedy" to refer to *There's Something About Mary* (Farrelly Brothers, 1998), or "vampire film" to characterize *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922). Similarly, critics often make use of generic categories in both popular and scholarly publications – whether at the beginning of an article, or in the body of the text – to introduce a new film and situate it in the landscape of cinema. Like other cultural productions, films, both in our discourse and our consciousness, are arranged in a geography organized by genres.

Cinematic Genre: An Empirical Category

As a way of approaching this topic, one can begin with the common use of the concept of genre – defined as an empirical category that serves to name, differentiate, and classify works on the basis of the recurring configurations of formal and thematic elements they share. This is to say that any viewer (along with any critic, cinema historian, or theoretician) who assigns a film to a generic category will be familiar with, and recognize, the generic category concerned. To regard *Gunfight at the OK Corral* as a western is to conclude that this American film directed by John Sturges in 1957 embodies many of the elements that are associated with "the western" genre. In assigning a film to a genre, we give it an identity that is greater than the sum of its specific components. We attribute to the film a *generic identity*. In addition, if we admit that the generic category is a recognized category (at least by those who use it) and that it conveys an understanding of the world of cinema that is culturally pertinent to a given community, it is possible to assign a film to a genre without having to make reference to other films in that genre. For example, the "western" usually involves an action that takes place in the American West in the second half of the nineteenth century; emblematic locations such as the small Western town, the saloon, or the desert; stereotypical characters such as the sheriff, or the gambler; gunfights; and plots that are designed either to establish or transgress the law. The viewer who shares this common cultural knowledge probably does not need to appeal to his or her memories of other westerns to determine that *Gunfight at the OK Corral* belongs to this genre, given that it tells the story of the bloody, vengeful fight of the Marshall Wyatt Earp, his brothers, and the professional gambler, Doc Holliday, against the Clanton brothers in Tombstone, a small town in the West.

It is important to recognize that in current usage the notion of genre always designates an abstract category that serves to group films together, as well as referring to the particular body of films

that are grouped together in the category concerned. Cinematic genres, as is the case with literary, theatrical, pictorial, or musical genres, thus comprise both a *class of works* and a *group of works* (the contents of the class). In giving a generic identity to a film, therefore, it is not enough for us simply to place it in a category; we must also link it to a series of other films that present similar thematic, narrative, and formal traits. The nexus of common elements that constitute a genre results from the identification of these elements in many films, with the number and recurrence of the elements permitting recognition of the similarity across them. For example, the genre of "the musical" could only become established once the Hollywood studios had produced numerous films at the beginning of the 1930s in which love stories were told through a mixture of spoken dialogue, song, and dance. A significant number of films embodying analogous characteristics are thus a necessary precondition for the establishment, recognition, and consciousness of a genre, even though the number required cannot be precisely quantified.

Conversely, a generic category that has become established and recognized, once it has entered film reading-habits as part of a collective "knowledge," can short-circuit the need for comparison with other films of the same genre because of its summative descriptiveness. Spectators can thus classify a new film in a genre through two different approaches: either they can refer directly to the features that characterize a genre without reference to other films that constitute it, or they can compare this new film with other films in the genre, discuss the resemblances, and then either reinforce the generic category, perhaps adding a new element, or else question its adequacy in the light of the new case. This linked critical rereading of films and genres, as we shall see in the course of this book, is the foundation of the work of historians and theoreticians of genre, even though there is no reason to think that it is their exclusive prerogative.

The case of films recounting the story of the colonists in the Eastern parts of what was not yet the United States of America, before Independence, shows why the existence of a minimum number of films with comparable features is a necessary (if

insufficient) condition for creating a generic category. Even though *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (Ford, 1939), *Unconquered* (DeMille, 1947), the different versions of *The Last of the Mohicans* (Tourneur and Brown, 1920; Seitz, 1936; Sherman's 1947 film *Last of the Redmen*; Mann, 1991), or Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Pocahontas II: Journey to the New World* (1998) all manifestly deal with settlers becoming established in New England – in the context of the pioneers' clash with the Indians, and the war between the French and the English – the small number of such films has not allowed for the establishment of an "eastern" genre. Because these films do not take place either west of the Mississippi, or during the second half of the nineteenth century, they have become a controversial subject among those who specialize in the western. Those who see a similarity to the western in the plots of these movies (the settling of, and battles along, a frontier) and in their characters (Indians, guides, families of colonists) often include them in the "western" genre under the label of "Pennsylvania western." Such critics even include in this sub-genre of the western a film like *High, Wide and Handsome* (Mamoulian, 1937), which takes place in Pennsylvania, but well after Independence, in 1859.

All attempts at classification involve not only selection and grouping, but also exclusion. That is why, by assigning a film to a genre, we distinguish it from other films. The ideal aim of this classifying activity is to create a typology of films, which will itself be linked to a typology of cinematic genres. To use generic criteria to characterize a film, then, is to incorporate it into a larger category of works, in accordance with a logic of differentiation. There are, nevertheless, other ways of grouping films, and other typologies besides genre typologies for ordering the world of films that do not depend upon global similarities in structure, form, or content. Films can be grouped around a director, an actor, a country, a period, a producer, a school, and so on. Thus, *Gunfight at the OK Corral* can belong to the group of films directed by John Sturges, to the group of films featuring Burt Lancaster (or Kirk Douglas, or Lee Van Cleef, or Rhonda Fleming, etc.),

to the group of American films from the 1950s, to the group of films produced by Paramount, or to the group of films that constitute the cinematic saga of the Earp brothers. It is not a question of discussing here the relevance of these classifications, but of acknowledging that genre is just one possible mode of cinematic classification. We should note, however, that categorization of films by genre always depends upon the mediating definition of an *abstract* generic label, whereas the criteria that determine other possible groupings of films are immediately apparent and readily identified because they derive from *concrete* attributes that are either intrinsic to the films themselves, or pertain to the making of the films (Aumont and Marie 1988, p. 190).[1] Only classification by schools requires an abstract construction of categories, especially if one is not going to limit the definition of "school" to those that are named after a theorist, a manifesto, or an aesthetic program, and if one is going to take into account, for example, the notion of national cinematic schools. Moreover, identification by genre is a cultural habit of long-standing, not only in the occidental tradition, but also in the Japanese tradition. Genres perpetuate in cinema the practice of genericity, which distinguishes works of art through their shared traits (incidentally, a topic in the field of literature that has been an inexhaustible subject of debate and redefinition from the time of Aristotle's *Poetics*).

Finally, although I have deliberately retained only the current meaning of genre in this initial approach to the concept, it is appropriate to recall that the construction, awareness, and manipulation of generic categories is, in the movies as in all cultural productions of an industrial nature, a phenomenon that cuts across both the production and reception of films, given that producers, distributors, and exhibitors on the one hand, and popular audiences, critics, and film theorists and historians on the other, make use of descriptors drawn from genre theory. In all probability, this last point is responsible for the power of the notion of genre in cinema, while at the same time it helps to explain the extreme variability of typologies.

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Every Use Has Its Own Typology

A summary (but by no means exhaustive) examination of the different generic classifications in cinema is sufficient to indicate the diversity of generic categories, the various ways in which they are used, and their contents. We will dwell on some of these typologies not in order to mock the naïveté or impressionism of this or that taxonomy, but for the sake of examining what each one deals with, how it functions, and whether it functions.

Viewers' guides

The existence of two guides to entertainments being presented in Paris (*L'Officiel des spectacles* and *Pariscope*) provides an opportunity for comparison. The way in which these two brochures classify films by genre and attribute a genre to each film shows them making the same use of generic categories. However, while these two guides have the same function and address an identical readership, an attentive reading of them brings to light real divergences between their respective classifications.

In contrast to a guide like *Time Out*, *L'Officiel des spectacles* and *Pariscope* are published as small-format booklets designed to be held in the hand or put in a handbag, and have almost no editorial content. These two guides (that appear weekly) restrict themselves to listing pieces currently being performed in the theater, films currently being screened in cinemas, exhibitions, museums, and guided tours. Practical information is given for each show or cultural event (dates, hours, venue, price) and a very brief description that allows the Parisian reader/spectator to place them among the very large number of cultural and artistic events presented in Paris and its suburbs ("the Paris region"). The practical purpose reflected in these guides and their modest price (35 centimes for *L'Officiel des spectacles* and 40 centimes for *Pariscope*) make them an indispensable *vade mecum* for the Parisian viewer.

Because of the great number of cinema halls located in Paris and its suburbs, from multiplexes to art-house cinemas, cinema occupies an important part of these guides (around one third of their approximately 200 pages), which, moreover, are presented for sale in kiosks each Wednesday, the same day that new films are released in France. Both of the guides offer a classification of films according to genre. In *L'Officiel des spectacles*, the titles of films currently being screened are divided under two headings: *Exclusivités* (new releases) and *Reprises* (repeats). They are then presented in alphabetical order, preceded by a letter or an abbreviation that indicates the film's genre. It is the same in *Pariscope*, which until 2004 also offered a second list of films presented by genres.[2] The function of these generic ascriptions is identical in both brochures. The distinctive features of films are quickly identified by their title, their country of origin, their date, their distribution, their director, and a short description – but the mention of a genre, through relating each film to a larger category, gives it a more precise definition capable of steering the choice of viewers through the several hundred films being shown in Parisian cinemas. That is why all films, without exception, are given a generic identity, enabling the guides to divide up the larger group of films through this means. Generic designations in these guides have the function of locating and constructing a horizon of expectation for the reader and prospective viewer. For example, in seeing the abbreviation "Adventure" before *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Levin, 1959), he or she can expect to follow the breathtaking story of the exploits of a hero in an exotic, dangerous, and hostile world, and not to see a scientific documentary on geological magma. Generic determinations used in these guides are assigned by the editors, but, given that the weekly has to serve the needs of all those who go to the cinema, these attributions rely on an implicit consensus with those that are used by the "ordinary viewer."[3]

Now, despite an identical use of genre in the two guides and a comparable readership, the systems of classification are not the same. *L'Officiel des spectacles* divides films between 16 genres: Adventure; Biography; Comedy; Drama; Terror, Horror; Fantastic,

Science-Fiction; War; Historical; Cartoon, Wildlife; Karate; Musical Film; Dramatic Comedy; Police, Spy; Erotic; Western; Miscellaneous. Up until 2004, *Pariscope* proposed 22 categories: Animated Film; Adventure; Dramatic Comedy; Comedy; Short Film; Cartoon; Documentary; Psychological Drama; Drama; Erotic; Fantastic; Dance Film; Musical Film; *Film noir*; Political Film; War; Horror; Karate; Police; Science-Fiction; Thriller; Western.

I shall leave a more detailed comparison to the reader, in order simply to highlight five main points here:

1   The difference between the generic categories employed concerns their number as much as their name.
2   The genres that are common to both lists are those that serve to classify a large number of films (such as "Comedy" or "Dramatic Comedy"), but certain ones, currently not well represented, reflect a past heyday, like the label "Western," which is almost entirely reserved for repeats, or "Karate," which is really a relic of the vogue for martial arts films popularized by Bruce Lee.
3   The categories used are extremely diverse: their contours are sometimes fluid ("Dramatic Comedy," "Drama") or, to the contrary, very precise ("Karate," "Western"); they indicate as much a commonality of subjects, themes or contents, as they do production techniques ("Cartoon") and differences of format ("Short Film").
4   The films are not given the same generic identity. Thus, in 2002, *Microcosmos* (Nuridsany/Perennou, 1996), a film dealing with the life of insects and other tiny animals in an ordinary French field,[4] is assigned to the "Cartoon-Wildlife" genre in *L'Officiel des spectacles*, marked with a "J" (*jeunesse*) to indicate a film suitable for children. In *Pariscope*, however, it is identified as a "Documentary." But this divergence does not derive merely from whether or not a category exists in the two guides; *Dancer in the Dark* (von Trier, 1999) was an example of a musical film for *L'Officiel des spectacles*, and of a drama for *Pariscope*.

5 The difficulty of dividing films accurately into a comprehens-
ive map of genres is evident even in the text of the booklets.
The "Miscellaneous" category of *L'Officiel des spectacles* is a catch-
all for all films that have not been able to be assigned to the
15 other genres, attesting to the irreducible residue that
remains after all attempts to classify objects – a phenomenon
well known to all those who have sought, at least once, to
organize their library or their collection of videos into a
system. Moreover, the generic identity of films, doubtless
because it does not completely fulfill its navigational function,
is sometimes completed in the text accompanying the pre-
sentation of works by a supplementary denomination – the
equivalent of a sub-genre, without, however, being lexical-
ized as a sub-genre (that is, defined as sub-category that can
be reused in a systematic way) by the guide. Comedies can
thus be listed variously as "for children," "of manners,"
"romantic," and so on.

Reference volumes: dictionaries and encyclopedias

Dictionaries and encyclopedias about cinema, cinematic genres,
and filmmaking movements that are designed to compile an inven-
tory of works in particular cinematic genres also propose their
own categories. Generally, for each entry about a genre they give
a name, a list of characteristics, a historical overview, and a list
of the main films in the genre. Having done this, they tend to
reduce the number of films in a particular genre – probably for
practical, editorial, and pedagogical reasons – to a handful of titles,
mostly of films that have received acclaim. Inevitably, as the alert
reader might anticipate, there is no perfect agreement in this type
of work concerning the name, the number, the size, and the defini-
tion of the genre![5] Moreover, as is the custom with all diction-
aries, cinema dictionaries make frequent use of cross-references
between genres. Thus, Vincent Pinel in his *Écoles, genres et mouve-
ments au cinéma* explicitly invites his readers to refer to four other
genres in the definition that he gives for the historical film:

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> As time recedes, all films become "historical" – that is, historical objects. However, these are not historical films in the sense that I am proposing here: fictive films in which the action takes place in a reconstructed past. The historical film, thus defined, does not constitute a genre in the narrow sense of the term but a vast domain that encompasses, entirely or partially, most of the great screen genres, particularly the "western" and the war film.
>
> In addition, the historical film does not include only fiction (see Documentary, and Montage). (Pinel 2000, p. 120)

Even if the implicit reference to *all* other genres raises a doubt about the soundness of the "historical film" as a category, this system of cross-referencing has the virtue of underlining an important fact that previous classifications have not taken into account – the mixing of cinematic genres.

There are also many more genres catalogued in these reference books than the standard ones. Indeed, they itemize all the cinematic genres to which reference has been made at one time or another throughout the history of cinema, as well as the history of scholarship on cinema. Furthermore, they do not restrict themselves to describing the state of contemporary film production, the nomenclature in use today, or even the categories that have been established by critics.

Lack of agreement over cinematic categories

The classifications that we have just seen propound generic categories that differ in number, name, and content, as well as in their definitions (even if we have until now provisionally overlooked that last point in order to grasp the rationale of the various types of divisions). An examination of the film lists and names used by the film industry confirms the variability of the categories that are used. It is the same with the names of genres produced, used, or studied by film critics and historians, for whom constituting, organizing, and discussing the classifications and

groupings of films in an informed and rigorous manner is a major preoccupation. Thus Steve Neale, in order to propose a panorama of Hollywood genres, retains 16 principal genres from among the various possibilities, chosen because they fit the two following criteria: they have been the subject of a detailed examination by film scholars, and their theoretical definitions coincide with the designations of the film industry (2000, p. 51). However, these genres, which he accepts as uncontested, are far from being incontestable. In fact, Neale admits in the introduction to his study that scholars are in general agreement about a dozen genres, while he himself begins with ten genres that are identified by Richard Maltby: four undisputed categories (the western, the comedy, the musical, the war film) and four supplementary categories (the thriller, the gangster film, the horror film, and the science-fiction film), and two categories that stand apart from the others because they have been the subject of numerous and significant studies and discussions (*film noir*, and melodrama) (Maltby 1995, p. 116). To this list of categories, which clearly do not all have the same status, Neale adds six other genres: the detective film, the epic, the social problem film, the teenpic (in which the principal characters are generally adolescents, and which is aimed at a teenage audience), the biopic, and the action-adventure film. In addition, these 16 genres are constantly subject to reworking by producers, as well as being the subject of debates and redefinitions, as Neale proceeds to demonstrate in his detailed examination of the scholarly literature dedicated to each genre. Even if the field is restricted to Hollywood cinema – that is, to a cinema which is often considered to be constructed and organized around genre – this variation in naming is inescapable.

Generic categories are not the same for everyone, everywhere, in all periods, because they depend upon different contextual relations with cinema. This means that they cannot have the same meaning or the same function in all these different contexts. Classifying films by genre is to practice a kind of labeling game, comparable to that which Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (inspired by Wittgenstein's account of "language-games") has detected in

the use of genres in television programming (1997, p. 105).[6] Practiced by a community (of spectators, producers, critics, etc.), this labeling game presupposes shared systems of reference that are often implicit, and is, above all else, the result of habits of production and reception. Even though these labels are used almost automatically by those who share the same understanding of the world of cinema, they nevertheless produce useful generic distinctions.

In fact, several possible labeling games exist in parallel. Each devolves from a vision and a practice of the cinema that is specific, but shared. All impart meaning and have classificatory value because they depend upon a prior agreement between those who employ them. Adopting the metaphor of a card game, one might say that the different communities who concur with a classificatory system agree about the cards (the corpus of films considered) and the rules of the game (the criteria that serve to determine the distinguishing similarities and differences between films). The recurrence of certain generic labels in the different typologies that I noted previously (such as the western, the comedy, the war film, the musical, or the science-fiction film) do not derive solely from the purity of the filmic forms that they designate; they also illustrate a broader cultural consensus (one that is perhaps less rigorous on account of its inclusiveness) that transcends and traverses the specific communities of producers, directors, critics, and viewers.

An Impossible Typology?

There is no known universal typology of genres capable of dividing up the cinematic landscape definitively into groups of films, given that such a typology would need to be built on distinctions accepted by all, and to be organized in terms of stable categories. It is necessary, therefore, to examine catalogues of film genres to ascertain the principles according to which the various conventional genres are organized.

Different levels of characterization

A comedy, by its very nature, provokes laughter or smiles (assuming that it is successful). A western deals with life on a frontier – that of the American West at the time of its conquest (1840–90). As brief as these definitions might be, they suffice to demonstrate that the criteria enabling these two genres to be defined cannot be put on the same level. Comedy is recognized by the response it attempts to arouse in its viewers, the western through its thematic content. Beyond these two examples, we can observe that the properties that serve to characterize and identify genres are not always of the same nature. With cinema, the justifications for different generic categories are as varied as those used to distinguish literary genres. Jean-Marie Schaeffer remarks:

> When we run through the list of names of common genres, it very quickly becomes apparent that the heterogeneity of the phenomena they identify derives very simply from the fact that these names do not all operate at the same discursive level, but refer sometimes to one, sometimes to another and the most often, the several of them at the same time. (1989, p. 81)

This literary theorist identifies five distinct levels of differentiation that can all be used to construct generic categories, even though they do not pertain to the same phenomena. Three of these levels (the level of *enunciation*, the level of *destination*, and the level of *function*) derive from the fact that a work is not only a text, but also performs an act of communication: "a message transmitted with a specific aim by a given individual in particular circumstances, received by another individual in particular circumstances, with a purpose that is no less specific" (Schaeffer 1989, p. 80). Thus, the level of enunciation corresponds to the question "Who speaks?," that of destination to the question "To whom?," and that of function to the question "With what effect?" The other two levels (the *semantic* level and the *syntactic* level) are about the materialized message – that is, the text, or,

for our purposes, the film. The semantic level corresponds to the question "What is said?" and the syntactic level to the question "How is it said?" These five levels of differentiation that have been established in the discourse about genres will be very useful to an understanding of where and how the distinctions between film genres are played out, in terms of one or more of the five different levels (Schaeffer 1989, pp. 82–115).

The level of function
This level may be used, for example, to distinguish documentary genres (assuming, hypothetically, that we accept the documentary as a genre, and not merely a form). The enunciation of a documentary occurs through an informative mode that "established its scientific method on the strict recitation of facts in the order of their occurrence, in the conviction that truth would emerge from this 'faithful' representation of phenomenal reality," while other genres present themselves generally as fictive representations, being the outcome of an invented enunciation (Guynn 1990, p. 13).

The level of destination
Some of the film genres that we have already met, such as the children's film, are defined through specific destinations – that is, the audience(s) to which they are directed – while other generic categories do not assume *a priori* the existence of a particular spectator. In the same way, a home movie in Super 8 or on video by the member of a family for the most part addresses the family that made it, and which forms its subject. Not surprisingly, such films are rarely exhibited at public screenings! The impact that intended destinations can have is illustrated by the suppression and subsequent release of Raymond Depardon's film *1974, une partie de campagne* (*A Summer Outing*), which is a documentary tracing the election campaign of Giscard d'Estaing, a candidate for the presidency of France who was elected and served as president from 1974 to 1981. Given that the former president, the central character in the documentary, had largely financed Depardon's film, he was able to exercise a control and censorship

over its distribution. In fact, apart from several special showings in which Depardon personally presented his work as a documentary filmmaker, *1974, une partie de campagne* was not shown in the commercial cinema before 2002. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing explains that up until this date the film, in his eyes, had been equivalent to a set of holiday snapshots, having been made for sentimental reasons without any commercial motive, as a personal memento of his campaign.[7] In 2002, to lend support to a new presidential campaign in which he was not personally involved, he reversed his decision because, according to him, the destination of the film appeared to have changed. A private film – a sort of home movie (albeit made by a professional filmmaker, in a format that was not customary for the genre!) – had become with time an object of general interest for public consumption, a documentary with historical value attesting to a dimension of political life (an election campaign).

The level of function
The names of genres can be defined by the function that they seek to perform, by their "project," as it were. Certain genres have an *illocutionary* function – that is, they express the communicative aim that the films and their creators wish to achieve. Thus, a documentary is often employed to inform viewers of how things are. Other genres have a *perlocutionary* function – that is, they aim to change the behavior of viewers, to induce a particular response in them.[8] Thus, a comedy solicits laughter, an erotic or pornographic movie solicits sexual excitement, and a horror film the emotion of fear or dread.

The semantic level
Many genres are distinguished by semantic elements: their themes, their motifs, or their topic. The western is characterized by spaces (mountains ranges, deserts, canyons, etc.), locations (saloons, banks), characters (cowboy, horse, communities of farmers, saloon singer, sheriff, etc.), objects (wagons, coaches, colts and shotguns), situations (confrontation between hero and villain, river crossings, Indian attacks on the wagons, gunfights, etc.),

all of which belong to the American West at the end of the nine-teenth century.[9] Similarly, other genres are defined by their distinctive semantic elements; for example, the martial arts film is characterized by samurais, monks and their students, aerial combat, unarmed combat, and sword fights that resolve conflicts between good and evil, and an ethos of detachment and bodily and spiritual self-mastery. Fantasy and horror films contain supernatural beings or inhuman creatures (devils, spirits, living-dead, giant monkeys, hybrid creatures of all sorts) that behave in an unnatural manner (sorcerers, mad scientists), and populate disturbing spaces (crypts, cemeteries, castles in ruin, haunted homes, isolated houses, ancient buildings, etc.). Contemporary wars are the topic of the war film, which recreates military events (battles, ambushes, front lines, etc.), magnifies heroic actions, or raises doubts and questions about the usefulness of armed combat, retracing the story of simple soldiers or officers, who are variously admirable, or dangerous.

The syntactic level

Jean-Marie Schaeffer aggregates formal elements at this level. In this regard, because "film" as a form is not the same as "text" as a form, and because the term "syntactic" may have different meanings, what should be grouped together at this level may be subject to debate. The technical aspects of filmmaking provide criteria that operate at this level, giving rise, for example, to the cartoon (which we have already encountered) as a generic category. One can also view the alternation between realistic scenes with dialogue and scenes with singing and dance numbers as being a formal element that distinguishes the musical. One might, if need be, enlarge the syntactic level to include narratological features that partially characterize certain genres, such as the flashback – a favored narrative technique in *film noir* – or the use of focalization from the perspective of the viewer, which often generates the effects in comedies, or in suspense genres such as the thriller.

One must acknowledge the plurality and composite nature of generic references. Commentators do not always invoke the

same level when making distinctions between genres. It is obvious, for example, that even though most genres are largely based on a convergence of semantic and thematic features, this level is completely absent from what we refer to as the "documentary," the name of which does not imply any particular subject. It is hypothetically possible to describe a generic category by mechanically referring to the five levels. For example, one might say that melodrama uses a fictive mode of expression (enunciation); that it addresses, particularly in the United States, women spectators (destination); that it makes audiences cry (function); that it emphasizes conflicts between generations, between the sexes, or between desire and the law (semantic); and that it is often told through a flashback, or through a story told by the voice of a narrator who is also one of the characters in the story (syntactic). To do this, however, would be to address historically determined categories through a scheme that takes no account of context – such as the sexual branding of the genre, or the use of the flashback, which is not a universal feature of melodrama.

Different frames of reference

The degree of precision with which common generic categories are conceptualized is extremely variable, as can be seen both in the understanding of a genre (its defining criteria) and in its application (the number of films that are deemed to be included in it). The more general the definition of a genre, the more indistinct its boundaries become, meaning that more and more films are able to be included in the category – as with comedy or drama, for example. Moreover, each of these genres is named after a dramatic type. Cinema thus inherits a long theatrical tradition in which certain genres were defined, developed, and transformed. Indeed, the term "drama," which originated in the eighteenth century as an intermediate genre between comedy and tragedy, after two centuries of changes and reformulations ended up by referring loosely to all plays in the theater at the end of the nineteenth century having a serious tone, and in which the action

consisted of violent and pathetic confrontations between characters placed in a specific historical or social framework. The term then migrated to the cinema, where it was used in the early years of filmmaking to classify films that were neither documentaries nor comedies. Subsequently, it was extended to cover a field so vast that it became necessary to specify the nature of the drama (romantic, historic, psychological, social).

In contrast to these broad, inclusive frames of reference – which are often transnational, trans-artistic, and transhistorical, and so large that they tend to lose their operational value – we find very precise categories, such as the "gore" or "splatter" film, born in 1963 with *Blood Feast* (Lewis), in which horror combines with repulsion, with the specific aim of explicitly showing violence, rather than merely suggesting it: mutilated and cut up corpses, horribly wounded and lacerated bodies, blood spattered in streams. Similarly, certain Asian cinematic genres, particularly those found in Hong Kong cinema, may appear singularly idiosyncratic, especially to a Western spectator. One thinks, for example, of *Wu Xia Pian* with its sword fights, as illustrated in the 1960s Hong Kong movies by King Hu (*Come Drink with me*, 1965; *A Touch of Zen*, 1972), and Chang Cheh (*Tiger Boy*, 1960), or *kung fu* films and aerial battles, as in *Fist of Fury* (Luo Wei, 1972) in which the Chinese Chen-Chen, played by Bruce Lee, a student of the school of *kung fu*, confronts the Japanese directors of a karate school in Shanghai during the 1940s who had killed his master. Even without entering into the Chinese distinction between the two genres of *Wu Xia Pian* and *kung fu* (based on the type of martial art used), the larger genre that unites the martial arts film still often strikes the French viewer, from an occidental perspective, as a very narrow category.

These differences between broad general categories and narrow precise categories do indeed result from different conceptual framings, insofar as they derive in part from the broader global artistic and cultural system in which the genres are conceived and received. Cinematic genres embody traces of other literary or visual genres, and share any degree of indeterminacy or precision that may inhere in them. In addition, the perception of

this degree is inevitably influenced by the culture of the specta-tor. Hong Kong spectators do not consider the notion of martial arts film too narrow and limited, and the aficionados of the horror film would find the simple distinction between horror movies and gore films inadequate, preferring to subdivide the horror film into thriller, gore, psycho-killer, slasher, splatter,[10] stalker,[11] and so on. The traces that remain from this earlier fram-ing also explain the recurrent uncertainty about the boundaries between genres and sub-genres from which certain differences between common and scholarly typologies derive. Some make gangster films, *film noir*, detective films, and the thriller into auto-nomous genres, while others incorporate them into one large, complex genre – the crime film.

The mixing of genres

One of the perverse effects of a typology designed to divide and construct categories is to give the illusion that genres are pure and impermeable. In actuality, we know that genres are often hybrid, as is evident in the alliance of the silent western first with the burlesque comedy, and later with melodrama in the 1920s. Furthermore, certain of the distinctions between genres appear to be purely conventional. The western, in its classical form, could be included in the genre of the historical film because it recounts episodes, inspired by real or fictitious events, that take place in a reconstructed past located in the far West. This would not be the case, however, for a large number of westerns made during the 1920s that did not delve back very far in history – one needs to acknowledge that in the 1920s the settlement of the West was still a relatively recent event – and could even be set in a time that was contemporaneous with their filming. The formation and permanence of the western as a genre distinct from the historical film, therefore, derive from the desire to adopt a narrower frame of reference to define films about the American West that is designed to encompass them all. Apart from being based on a large number of films on this topic, this frame

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of reference also derives from ideological motivations, making the formation of the American nation a separate category in the cinematic production dominated by Hollywood from 1910 onwards.

The number of films that draw upon several genres are legion. Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) is both a historical film and a biopic; *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Donen, 1954) relies on the musical and the western; *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959) is a comedy, but also borrows from the gangster film; *Dance of the Vampires* (Polanski, 1967) is both a fantasy film and a comedy; and so on. Undoubtedly, the lack of awareness of genre-mixing displayed in typologies is attributable to the fact that, in an effort to be rationally ordered, they tend to compile their classification according to a scientific biological model. However, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer has observed, "Biological classification relies upon a set of inclusive relationships, in which the indivisible unit resides in its organic constitution, belonging to a specific class" (1989, p. 71). The same does not apply in the classification of objects made by human art or craft, such as films, which do not inherently belong to a genre, but can be conveniently grouped in a genre owing to the common traits they present. Thus, the film *Napoleon* can be viewed as a biopic because, in common with other films, it recounts the life of a man; it can also be considered a historical film because its actions, relying on the reconstruction of a historical period, ally it with other films that depict the past, without necessarily choosing the biographical route. By way of contrast, Napoleon as a person, considered from a biological point of view, belongs entirely to the human species and to none other. It is Napoleon himself, and not a select number of his attributes, who belongs to the human species, or "genre."

The hierarchy of genres

In highlighting the various frames of reference that determine the constitution of different generic categories, we have shown that they are based on variable cultural referents. But typologies,

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by placing genres side by side, also overlook the existence of a hierarchy of genres in culture. Jean-Loup Bourget emphasizes that in classical Hollywood cinema all genres are not equal in terms of value. "Literary adaptations, dramas, films with grand spectacles, enjoy a striking prestige that is not accorded to comedies, horror films, or low-budget adventure films" (1998, pp. 12–13). Economic factors, such as whether a movie has an A or B classification, explains, of course, this hierarchy of productions, but it would be naïve to suppose that economic logic does not reflect a symbolic and cultural logic according to which works and genres are placed in a hierarchy. As Bourget observes, the making of a historical film today imparts a respectability not conferred on science-fiction films. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that Steven Spielberg received seven Oscars for *Schindler's List* (1994), the first in his career, whereas he received none for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) or *Jurassic Park* (1993) (Bourget 1998, p. 13). As far as *E.T.* (1982) was concerned, he had to content himself with Oscars for technical aspects of the film (Sound Effects Editing, Visual Effects, Best Music, Best Sound).

The hierarchical status of film genres thus derives from more general cultural legitimacies or illegitimacies. This is well illustrated in France by the fate of comedy – a genre that has not traditionally been valued in French cinema. Even when they acknowledge that a film is successful, critics and reviewers temper their enthusiasm when dealing with French comic films. They condescendingly pen faintly laudatory or clichéd comments like "our pleasure is not spoilt," "the laugh-machine is working," or "an amusing film that allows one to have a good time." The genre, which is less disparaged if the film comes from outside France, is only accorded high status if it departs from the strict parameters of the comic, so that "the comedy generates a real feeling of malaise," or that "beneath the laughter is hidden emotion and despair."[12] More typically, French comedies are viewed as being either vulgar, mechanical, or bourgeois. This condescension and contempt for the genre, leaving aside the quality of the films, is a legacy of the illegitimacy of comedy in France over three

centuries. Comic theater of the eighteenth century is marked by two contradictory influences. The first is that of farce and the *commedia dell'arte*, which elevate and value laughter. The second is the traditional view inherited from Aristotle, whose few lines on comedy in the surviving version of *The Poetics* characterize this genre as a low one:

> Comedy is, as we said, a representation of people who are rather inferior – not, however, with respect to every [kind of] vice, but the laughable is [only] a part of what is ugly. For the laughable is a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive, just as, evidently, a laughable mask is something ugly and distorted without pain. (Aristotle 1987, p. 6)

From the seventeenth century, then, playwrights were divided between a desire to produce plays based on laughter inspired by farce, and a wish to rid themselves of violent laughter in order to make comedy into a noble genre that does not merely provoke laughter, but also instructs. To take a notable example, the first tendency is manifest in Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (*Scapin's Deceits*), and the second in *Le Misanthrope* (*The Misanthrope*). That is why the eighteenth century, which favored comedy that was mixed with morality (as in the plays of Beaumarchais and Diderot), and afterwards the nineteenth century, consistently preferred *Le Misanthrope* to *Les Fourberies de Scapin*. So much so, that a superficial reading of the classic works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could lead one to think that their writers had all wished to empty comedy of farcical laughter, crude or popular – an assumption that is far from the case, if one rereads these works carefully. It appears that classical authors and their successors wished to rid comedy of crude laughter (the laughter of the people) in the way that modernity would later stigmatize the "bourgeois laughter" of a Feydeau or a Labiche. Comedy in France is only an acceptable genre on the condition that it is not merely a comedy.

Finally, one should note that the preference given to one name for a generic category over another, when several terms

are available, can reflect a hierarchal logic of differentiation. Thus, the "*kung fu* film" connotes a popular audience from the 1970s, and the "martial arts film" is a more general term. The journal *Cahiers du cinema*, however, prefers to use the term *film de sabre* (sword film), which has scholarly overtones because of its rarity.

The question of history

Typologies record the existence of genres, but by flattening their categories they do not provide a historical perspective. The history of genres also remains outside their classification. They juxtapose transhistorical categories (comedy or drama) and categories whose production is limited in the case of film to a particular moment in the history of cinema. One example is the burlesque, which survives on the screen after the 1930s only as a "tone," and not as a genre. Directors (some of whom were also actors, such as Blake Edwards, Jerry Lewis, or Woody Allen), actors (such as the Marx Brothers), and genres (such as the screwball comedy) make use of burlesque comedy, adopting the device of the gag, and imitating some of the mannerisms of the jumping-jack stooge favored by actors in this genre (Nacache 1995, p. 32). Moreover, generic classifications place genres belonging to different periods in the history of cinema alongside one another. The western, which has languished since the 1970s, sits next to the gore film, which developed in the 1970s and 1980s, in these typologies. "Living" genres are juxtaposed in the typologies with "dead" genres. This does not mean that the latter no longer represent anything, or that they lack meaning. Even though these categories have ceased to exert an active influence on the making of new films, they remain productive in the memory of cinephiles, and in film analysis. Finally, just as generic categories carry along with them the totality of the culture in which they are inscribed, they also bear a history. To be convinced of this, one need only look at the classification generated by Antoine Vallet in 1963 in *Les Genres du cinéma* (*The Genres of Cinema*):

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1 Nature and man: the documentary
2 The life of the world: pages of history
3 History and legend: the epic
4 Reality and fiction: the adventure film
5 The world of souls: the psychological film
6 The human comedy: the comic film
7 Dreams and reality: the poetic film
8 Films about art
9 The animated film

As noted by François de la Bretèque, this is a transcendental vision of cinema, inspired by Henri Agel, who presides over this classification. It ascends from nature to the soul and dream, to end up with poetry and art (Bretèque 1993).

If we consider film genres as categories of classification, one can only note the vitality of generic activity at an empirical level, and the impossibility of organizing cinema dogmatically into a definitive and universal typology of genres at a theoretical level. Categories exist, but they are not impermeable. They may coincide at certain points, contradict one another, and are the product of different levels of differentiation or different frames of reference. They take no account of either the internal interactions between film genres, or the external interactions between film genres and other artistic and cultural productions. Finally, maps of genres ignore the geographic and cultural dimensions of films, even though these are generated by a relationship with a specific period, place, or given activity that is expressed in the cinema. This lack of attention to cultural and geographic specificity explains, in particular, the ethnocentric nature of many common European typologies that leave off their lists genres that are found only in exotic filmographies; for example, those of Japanese cinema, which is strongly structured in terms of types and genres. The illusion of a rigorous and comprehensive generic classification dissipates, leaving in its place a veritable jungle of genres in which categories and films, like the trees of a tropical forest, grow branches, roots, and vines that meet and intertwine.

Notes

1 Even though historians may disagree over how to attain an adequate definition of a period, the films made in the 1930s, or in 1990, or in any other determinate period are, from the outset, a concrete grouping.

2 This listing by genres, which still existed when the original French edition of this work was published, disappeared from *Pariscope* in 2004. However, *Pariscope* makes use of the same batch of generic categories to define films.

3 Although this discussion will be restricted to these two examples of guides, the present analysis could be extended to almost all generic classifications that aim to provide guidance to viewers – in newspapers, magazines that list television programs, and video clubs. However, an examination of categories offered in newspapers and magazines would need to take account of the specific sociological circumstances of their readership.

4 *Microcosmos* is a rather poetic documentary without any scientific commentary that films the inhabitants of a field in a scale of centimeters. The ecosystem is examined in its entirety and all its interactions, with its list of imponderables, efforts, setbacks, and successes. The film, which won the *Grand Prix* of the higher technical commission at the Cannes Festival in 1996, although less anthropomorphic, is not unrelated to *La Marche de l'Empereur* (*March of the Penguins*) (Jacquet, 2005).

5 For a comparison, see the entries included in *Dictionnaire du cinéma mondial. Mouvements, écoles, courants, tendances et genres* (1994), edited by Alain and Odette Virmaux, Paris, Éditions du Rocher, and in Vincent Pinel's *Écoles, genres et mouvements au cinema* (2000), Paris, Larousse-Bordas/HER, Comprendre/Reconnaître, which, moreover, incorporate categories with a different status in the same list. The criteria that determine movements and genres are not the same, and do not translate into a comparable basis of comparison for understanding the cinema.

6 For the concept of language-game, see Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell.

7 Written note, dated January 17, 2002, distributed during a press screening of the film. In all the interviews given about the release of *1974, une partie de campagne*, Giscard d'Estaing develops the same argument.

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8 For a definition of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, see John R. Searle (1969) Expressions, meaning and speech acts, in *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 22–50.

9 For a detailed catalogue of the semantic elements of the western, see Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzane Liandrat-Guigues (1990) *Les Cartes de l'Ouest. Un genre cinématographique: le western*, Paris, A. Colin, pp. 11–73.

10 The notion of splatter move underlines the joyous dimension that does not appear in the gore film. See John McCarty (1984) *Splatter Movies: Breaking the Last Taboo of the Screen*, New York, St. Martin's Press.

11 The verb "to stalk" evokes, at the same time, the idea of a regular progress forward which nothing can stop and that of tracking. These two actions define the murderers in the stalker movie, like the Friday killer of *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), or like Freddy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984). See Philippe Rouyer (1997) *Le Cinéma Gore: une esthétique du sang*, Paris, Cerf, 1997, pp. 87–90.

12 The veil of opprobrium thrown over purely comic cinema in France seems to exclude aggressive and burlesque foreign comedies. It is likely that if Italian comedies or the films of Jerry Lewis were well received in France, it is in part because of their exoticism and, in the case of Italian comedies, because their reliance on stereotypical Italianness protects them.