

Comics and Genre

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Introduction

As comics develop as a medium and as an art form, more and more comics genres emerge. My aim in this paper is to explain what comics genres are and what it is for a comic to belong to a particular genre. An adequate account of comics genres should illuminate the nature of genres more generally. Nevertheless, it will be fruitful to focus on the particular case of comics genres. Both film and literary practice and the philosophy and criticism of film and literature have advanced to a point at which it is reasonably clear what the main genres of movies and literary works are, and what features distinguish them. By contrast, comics are a relatively young art form, and the philosophy and criticism of comics are in their infancy.

Past discussion of comics has even confused the art form of comics with particularly popular and influential genres, with the result that comics have been dismissed as artistically unimportant, because they have been equated with superhero escapism for adolescents (McCloud 1993). Comics fall into a broad array of categories, including funny animal comics, romance comics, superhero comics, Tijuana bibles, alternative comics, autobiographical comics, mini-comics, graphic novels, comix, adult comics and fumetti (also known as photo-comics). While some of these categories seem clearly to be genres, it is not obvious that all are. Funny animal comics, romance comics, and superhero comics are comics genres, but it is not obvious whether or not graphic novels or fumetti comprise genres. Comics categories therefore provide a good test case for an account of genre.

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An adequate account of genre should provide a plausible way of distinguishing between comics categories that are genres and those that are not, and should provide principled reasons for this distinction. In doing so, it will help inform our understanding of comics, by elucidating the significance of the various categories of comics.

I begin, in the next section, by outlining some desiderata for an adequate account of genre. In the following section, I assess existing accounts of genre, and argue that none can adequately distinguish those comics categories that are genres from those that are not. In the final section, I provide an alternative account of genre and of the conditions for genre membership. I then use this account to distinguish those categories of comics that are genres from those that are not, by identifying features in virtue of which they either fall within the scope of the account, or fail to do so.

Desiderata for an Account of Genre

An adequate philosophical account of genre should provide solutions to the various philosophical problems that genres pose. To clarify what this requires, I will now outline some of these problems.

First, it is not clear what makes a certain feature of a work relevant to determining its genre. There is no single type of feature that determines the genre to which a work belongs. Rather, a variety of different types of features of comics may be relevant to determining their genre. Their genre may be determined, not just by their content – their setting, characters, themes and subjects – but also by their structure, and the effects they have on an audience. Whether or not a comic is a science-fiction comic depends, amongst other things, on its setting; whether or not it is a romance comic depends both on its subject and on its structure (a comic about a boy's love for a girl, in which the boy has already got the girl, and does not lose her, may not qualify as a romance comic despite its subject); and whether or not it is a horror comic is determined partly by its capacity to induce fear in an audience. If fumetti comprise a comics genre, a comic's genre membership may also depend on its format (if a comic does not include photographs, it is unlikely to be a fumetti). Some types of features seem to be relevant to determining a work's genre in some cases, but not in others. While a comic's emotional effects on an audience are clearly relevant to determining whether or not it is a horror comic, they are not obviously relevant to determining whether or not it is a science-fiction comic. An adequate account of genre should explain both which features of a work are potentially relevant to determining its genre membership, and under what conditions they do so.

A second problem concerns, not what features determine a work's genre membership, but the manner in which they do so. It does not seem possible to specify individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for membership of a specific genre. Rather, certain features are *standard* for works in a specific genre, such that a work's possessing one of those features counts towards its belonging to the genre at issue, and other features are *contra-standard* for works in a specific genre, such that a work's possessing one of those features counts against its belonging to the genre at issue (see Walton 1970). A work may belong to some genre despite its lacking features standard for that genre (for example, a comic about a boy's love for a girl that fails to meet the boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl structural format may nonetheless qualify as a romance). It may also belong to some genre despite possessing features contra-standard for that genre (for example, a comic may qualify as a horror comic despite not being capable of frightening an audience). A work's possessing a feature standard for some genre is a *pro tanto* reason for classifying it as belonging to that genre, and its possessing a feature contra-standard for that genre is a *pro tanto* reason for not classifying it as belonging to that genre. An adequate account of genre should provide an account of the manner in which those of a work's features that are relevant to determining its genre help to determine the genre to which a work belongs, and this account should accommodate the fact that such features provide only *pro tanto* reasons for genre classifications.

An adequate explanation of what determines genre membership and how it does so should also accommodate the fact that a single work may belong to more than one genre. For example, one can imagine a comic that is a funny animal romance comic, belonging both to the genre of funny animal comics and to that of romance comics. Such an explanation should also accommodate the fact that some genres incorporate works in a variety of different media. For example, superhero comics and romance comics comprise sub-genres of the broader superhero and romance genres, which include not only comics, but also works in other narrative media, such as novels and films.

Furthermore, as I suggested in the Introduction, an adequate account of genre needs to distinguish genre categories from the various other categories into which works can be classified. These other categories include categories based solely on history of production, such as Canadian comics produced between 1950 and 1965, or comics produced by Charles Schulz, as well as arbitrarily specified categories, such as comics produced using more than five colors of ink. More importantly, an adequate account of genre should distinguish genre categories from style categories. The notion of genre is closely related to that of style: so closely related that it is often unclear whether a category is a genre or a style category. For example, is realism a genre or a style? What about pop art? This lack of clarity is due not just to

philosophical uncertainty about the nature of genre, but also about the nature of style. In the absence of an adequate philosophical account of style, one should not expect an account of genre to provide a definitive explanation of the distinction between a genre and a style. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect an account of genre to identify some features of genres that, *prima facie*, distinguish them from styles, and also to identify features that, *prima facie*, genres share with styles, and that account for the close relationship between genres and styles.

A final philosophical problem posed by genres – and one of the most interesting – concerns the relationship between a work's genre and its content. A work's genre membership appears to affect its content. We can see this by focusing on *narrative content*: the content that works of fiction have, considered as such. The narrative content of a work of fiction incorporates everything that is true *according to the story that the work recounts*. A work's narrative content generally incorporates a lot more than the work explicitly represents. For example, it is part of the narrative content of the *Peanuts* comics that Charlie Brown is insecure, although they do not explicitly represent him as insecure. A work's narrative content must therefore have additional determinants, besides its explicit representational content. It seems pretty clear that a work's genre is one such determinant. For example, it would not be true according to a funny animal comic that explicitly represented an animal as talking that anything unusual had taken place. By contrast, it would be true according to a war comic that explicitly represented an animal as talking that something extremely unusual had taken place. In war comics it is unusual for animals to talk, but in funny animal comics it is not.

An adequate account of genre should help us to understand the relation between a work's genre and its narrative content. The nature of this relation depends, not just on the nature of genre, but also on that of narrative content. One influential thought is that a work's narrative content incorporates what would be the case, were things as the work explicitly represents them as being (Lewis 1978).

On this understanding, what makes it part of the *Peanuts* comics that Charlie Brown is insecure is the fact that any child who did and said the things that *Peanuts* explicitly represents Charlie Brown as doing and saying would be insecure. However, such considerations will not always yield a satisfactory explanation of a work's narrative content. Consider, for example, a superhero comic that represents a masked and caped man but does not explicitly represent him as employing any special powers or abilities.¹ It seems plausible that it is nonetheless part of the comic's narrative content that the man has special powers or abilities, but this cannot be because anyone who was attired as that man is represented as being attired would have

special powers or abilities. This seems patently false. David Lewis considers the analogous case of a story that represents a dragon, Sculch, a princess and a knight, but does not explicitly represent Sculch either as breathing fire or as not breathing fire. It nevertheless seems plausible that it is part of the story's narrative content that Sculch breathes fire. However, this cannot be because any creature with the features Sculch is explicitly represented as possessing would breathe fire. He argues that it is part of the story's narrative content that the dragon breathes fire "because dragons in that sort of story do breathe fire" (Lewis 1978: 45). He writes, "If Sculch does breathe fire in my story, it is by inter-fictional carry-over from what is true of dragons in other stories" (45). Lewis can thus be interpreted as claiming that it is in virtue of the story's genre membership that the dragon breathes fire in the story he considers.

Similarly, one might think that it is part of the narrative content of the superhero comic that the masked and caped man possesses special powers or abilities because in superhero comics masked and caped men possess such powers or abilities. On Lewis's view, therefore, a work's genre can affect its narrative content by making it include things in addition to those that would be the case were things really as the work explicitly represents them as being. Let us call such effects *positive* effects of genre on narrative content.

Andrea Bonomi and Sandro Zucchi claim that a work's genre membership can also have *negative* effects on its narrative content. That is, it can affect its narrative content by preventing it from incorporating certain of those things that would be the case were things as it explicitly represents them as being. They consider *Othello*, in which Shakespeare represents the character Othello as uttering lines that would ordinarily indicate eloquence of an order of which only a great poet is capable. Nonetheless, as Kendall Walton points out, Othello is supposed to be a rough military man whose first language is not English. It is not part of the narrative content of the play that Othello is especially eloquent (Walton 1990: 175). Bonomi and Zucchi claim that Othello is not to be credited with astonishing eloquence since *Othello* belongs to the genre of Elizabethan plays and "by the conventions of Elizabethan plays a man who expresses himself like Othello need not be a first rank poet" (Bonomi and Zucchi 2003: 114).² If this explanation is correct, it is not true in funny animal cartoons that talking animals are unusual because, although it would be extremely unusual were an animal to talk, it is a convention of the funny animal genre that talking animals are not unusual.

Neither Lewis nor Bonomi and Zucchi offer any explanation of how genres affect narrative content in the ways they describe. An adequate account of genre should explain why genre membership can have these effects. With this, and the other desiderata just outlined in mind, let us now examine how existing philosophical accounts of genre fare in relation to them.

Existing Accounts of Genre

There is little discussion of the nature of genre in the philosophical literature. Two discussions, by Gregory Currie and by Brian Laetz and Dominic Lopes, are the only recent exceptions. To begin with, let us consider the account of movie genres proposed by Laetz and Lopes. On their view:

Category K is a movie genre if and only if K [is a type of movie which] has multiple members, which are made by more than one artist (for any given artist role), from any background, and K has features in virtue of which K figures into the appreciations or interpretations of K's audience. (2008: 156)³

This account suffers from several problems. First, it is unable to distinguish genre categories from the various other types of categories into which works can be classified. The stipulation that, for a type of movie to comprise a genre, it must be made by more than one artist, from any background is supposed to distinguish genre categories from categories based solely on works' histories of production. Laetz and Lopes claim that genres are distinct from traditions, such that a work's genre does not depend on social facts about its maker (Laetz and Lopes 2008: 156). They may also have insisted on the irrelevancy of history of production to genre membership because they want to distinguish genres from styles. Because the work of an individual artist may be distinguished from the work of others by its distinctive style, as with the case of Seaurat's pointillism, for example, it is not always the case that more than one artist can produce works in any given style.

However, a work's genre does seem sometimes to depend on its history of production. Like the genres of Dutch realist painting, Texas country music, and Asian extreme, the comics genre Manga seems to be partly geographic in nature.⁴ Arguably, a comic must have been produced in Japan in order to belong to the Manga genre, just as a painting must have been produced in the Netherlands in order to belong to the genre of Dutch realist painting, and a musical work must have been produced in Texas to be an instance of the genre of Texas country music. Thus, one might think that Amerimanga or, more generally, original English-language manga (like Chinese manhua and Korean manhwa) are distinct genres from Manga proper. Certainly, someone who produces something that looks like an instance of Manga, but is unaware of and unconnected to the Manga tradition has not made an instance of Manga. Bonomi and Zucchi clearly think that Elizabethan plays comprise a genre, but Elizabethan plays can only be produced by playwrights living in England in the Elizabethan era. Laetz's and Lopes's overt denial that history of production has any role to play in determining genre membership seems too strong.

Genres are therefore not distinguished from styles by the irrelevance of works' histories of production to genre membership. Furthermore, the requirement that a genre have features that figure in appreciation or interpretation also fails to distinguish genre categories from styles. Laetz's and Lopes's comments suggest that, by the requirement that genres have features that enter into appreciations or evaluations they intend to impose a fairly narrow condition. In particular, they seem to mean that genres must have features that generate interpretative and evaluative *expectations* (Laetz and Lopes 2008: 156). The fact that a comic belongs to the superhero genre will generate in someone who likes that genre the expectation that they will enjoy the comic at issue. Similarly, the fact that a comic belongs to the funny animal genre will generate the expectation that it will represent talking animals. However, like genres, styles have features which generate interpretative and evaluative expectations. The fact that a comic is in Dan Clowes's distinctive style may generate such expectations in an audience, but his style is not a genre. The fact that their account fails to distinguish genres from the various other categories into which works may fall prevents Laetz and Lopes from resolving the issue of whether or not fumetti and graphic novels are genres.

Their account is also unable to explain how genre membership affects narrative content. Laetz and Lopes are aware of the role of genre in determining narrative content, and propose to accommodate it by the following *genre principle*:

A story belonging to genre K represents that q [i.e. incorporates q in its narrative content] if it explicitly represents that $p_1 \dots p_n$ and it is a feature of K that it would be the case that q , were it the case that $p_1 \dots p_n$. (2008: 153)⁵

However, this principle seems inadequate as a description of how genre affects narrative content. While it accommodates the positive effects that Lewis notes, it does not accommodate the negative effects noted by Bonomi and Zucchi. Moreover, it raises the question of which features of a genre determine that, if it were the case that $p_1 \dots p_n$, it would be the case that q . What sorts of things are genres that they have these features? Perhaps Laetz and Lopes would claim that genres have these features because of the interpretative expectations to which they give rise. To see how such an explanation might proceed, let us now turn to Currie's account, which purports to explain the role that expectations play in producing the effects that genre has on narrative content.

Currie claims that genres are simply sets of features or properties that works can have (2004: 47). He holds that any set of features a work can have constitutes a genre. Consequently, on his view, there is an infinite number of genres. However, on his account, genre membership is not simply a matter of possessing the features constitutive of a given genre. If this were the case,

every work would belong to some genre because every work has some set of features. Rather, Currie argues, a work belongs to a genre to the extent that it possesses the relevant features *and* this creates an expectation among the members of the community in which it was produced that it will possess the others (2004: 49). Thus, while there is an indefinite number of genres, the number of genres to which works actually belong is much more limited, because not every genre is such that a work's possessing some of its constitutive features will create the expectation among community members that it will possess the others. Currie claims that these expectations are created by prior experience of certain features being co-instantiated, and perhaps also by such other factors as innate expectations about narrative form (2004: 54).

On Currie's account, a work's causal and temporal relations to other works can help to determine its genre (2004: 43). This is so because these causal and temporal relations help to create the expectations that determine genre membership. It is because a work is causally and/or temporally related to other works with which it shares some features that we expect it to share further features with them. Unlike Laetz's and Lopes's account, therefore, Currie's can accommodate genres, membership of which depends partly on a work's history of production.

Nevertheless, there are problems with Currie's account. First, it fails to distinguish genre categories from other types of categories. Like Laetz's and Lopes's account, it fails to distinguish genres from styles. Like genres, styles are associated with sets of features works can have and, like genres, the fact that a work possesses some of the features constitutive of a style leads interpreters to expect that it will possess the others. For example, when we watch a film with features of Robert Altman's distinctive style, such as that of representing a series of apparently unrelated episodes, we expect that it will exhibit other features of his style, such as revealing unexpected relations between those episodes.

It also fails to distinguish genres from media, such as photography or watercolor. Different media are associated with different sets of features. Moreover, the fact that a work possesses some of the features associated with a given medium leads interpreters to expect that it will possess the others. For example, the fact that a work possesses some of the features of photography, such as a high degree of realism and a glossy surface will lead interpreters to expect that it will possess the other features we associate with photographs, such as representing actual objects and states of affairs. Currie's account therefore cannot help to solve the problem of which comics categories are genres and which are not. Graphic novels and fumetti are conceivably media rather than genres. It is the task of an adequate account of genre to determine whether or not this is the case. However, because Currie's account fails to distinguish genres from media, it cannot illuminate the nature of these comics categories.

Second, Currie's account does not provide a satisfactory explanation of the effects of genre membership on narrative content. He claims that these effects are a consequence of the expectations that help to determine a work's genre membership. These expectations, he claims, affect narrative content by enabling *genre-based implicatures* (2004: 45–46).

Implicatures are pragmatically – as opposed to semantically – determined aspects of content. The paradigmatic form of implicature is a *conversational implicature*. According to Grice's influential theory, what a speaker conversationally implicates by producing an utterance is determined by her intentions (Grice 1975). Conversational implicatures arise when what speakers intend to communicate by an utterance differs from the semantic content of that utterance. Although interpreters do not generally have any access to a speaker's intentions independently of the utterances she produces, Grice argues that they are nonetheless able to identify her intentions because, in communicating with interpreters, speakers conform to the *cooperative principle*: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice: 45–46). When the semantic content of a speaker's utterance does not conform to the cooperative principle, interpreters work out what the speaker intended to communicate by ascribing an alternative content to the utterance that does conform to the principle.

Interpreters' expectations play an important role in their ability to identify conversational implicatures, because those expectations determine what they take to be required in order for an utterance to conform to the cooperative principle. However, Currie denies that genre-based implicatures are conversational implicatures, on the basis that they do not exploit apparent violations of the cooperative principle (Currie 2004: 46). On his account, therefore, expectations cannot play the same role in enabling genre-based implicatures as they do in enabling interpreters to identify conversational implicatures.

Conventional implicatures depend, not on speakers' intentions, but on conventions associating certain types of utterances with certain implicatures. For example, utterances of “but” between coordinate clauses conventionally implicate a contrast between the relevant clauses. When I say “Tom is rich but unattractive,” I cannot help but indicate a contrast between being rich and being unattractive, whether or not I intend to indicate such a contrast. Conventional implicatures cannot be canceled. By contrast, Currie argues, genre-based implicatures are cancellable and thus cannot be Gricean conventional implicatures (Currie 2004: 46).

Currie is right to claim that the effects of genre on narrative content are cancellable. For example, when we read a comic strip in the funny animal genre, we will assume that there is nothing abnormal about an animal talking in the context of the cartoon. However, this expectation can be undermined – for example,

because the comic explicitly represents a human character as reacting with incredulity to a talking animal. Kaz undermines this very expectation to humorous effect in his cartoon *Lumberger* (Brunetti 2006: 18). If the expectation is canceled in such a way, we *will* take it to be part of the narrative content of that work that the talking animal it represents has unusual capacities.

However, Currie's account of genre does not explain how genre affects narrative content in ways that are cancelable. First, because he characterizes genre-based implicatures predominantly negatively (they are neither conventional implicatures nor conversational implicatures), it remains unclear exactly what genre-based implicatures are. Second, his account fails to explain exactly how audience expectations generate genre-based implicatures and what distinguishes those expectations that do so from those that do not. Not all the expectations that accompany genre membership affect our ascriptions of narrative content. For example, when we read romance comics, we expect the romances they represent to end happily. This expectation may be met, or may be explicitly violated. Alternatively, it may be neither met nor violated, as when a comic ends before it is evident whether or not the romance it represents will end happily. In the latter case, although our expectation has not been violated or canceled, we do not take it to be part of the comic's narrative content that the romance ends happily. Rather, we take it to be unclear whether or not it does so. Similarly, our expectation, on encountering a funny animal cartoon, that it will contain animals that can talk need not be either met or undermined. For example, a funny animal cartoon may represent a group of animals going silently about their lives, without making it clear whether they are simply refraining from speaking, or whether they are not speaking because they cannot do so. In this case, although our expectation is not undermined, it does not lead us to ascribe the ability to talk to the animals it represents. Expectations such as these do not generate genre-based implicatures.

Despite these problems, I think there's something right about Currie's claim that genre membership affects narrative content by enabling implicatures. In the next section, I propose an account of genre that explains the sense in which the effects of genre on narrative content are implicatures, and explains the role that interpreters' expectations play in enabling them to identify these implicatures.

An Account of Genre

I propose that genres are sets of conventions that have developed as means of addressing particular interpretative and/or evaluative problems, and have a history of co-instantiation within a community, such that a work's belonging to some genre generates interpretative and evaluative expectations among the

members of that community. To belong to some genre, a work must be produced in a community in which its constitutive conventions have a history of co-instantiation and must be produced in accordance with some subset of those conventions that is sufficient to distinguish the set of conventions at issue from all other sets of conventions that have developed as means of addressing interpretative and/or evaluative concerns and have a history of co-instantiation within the community in which the work was produced. A work is produced in accordance with a convention if and only if it both has features of the type picked out by the convention at issue and its maker gave the work those features so that the convention would apply to it.

On this account, a work's history of production is relevant to determining its genre membership. One cannot produce a work in a given genre unless one belongs to a community in which its constitutive conventions have a history of co-instantiation. Nevertheless, the notion of a community at issue is not narrowly geographic. A community is a group of people who interact through the production, interpretation, and evaluation of works. On this account, therefore, manga comics are not necessarily Japanese, but one must be familiar with comics conventions that originated in Japan in order to produce a manga comic. Someone who produced a comic perceptually indistinguishable from a manga comic in total ignorance of those conventions would not thereby produce a manga comic. Genres that are partly geographically identified, such as Dutch realist painting, arise when the community in which their constitutive conventions have a history of co-instantiation happens to be relatively geographically isolated.

New interpretative and/or evaluative concerns, not addressed by the conventions of existing genres, may lead to the emergence of new genres, comprising new conventions that have arisen in response to those concerns. Alternatively, they may lead to the emergence of hybrid genres, which are created when the conventions of different existing genres are combined to address new combinations of interpretative and/or evaluative concerns. Finally, new concerns may lead to the emergence of subgenres, which are created when a set of conventions distinctive of an existing genre is supplemented with new conventions, which modify the existing genre to enable it to meet those concerns. Artists can help to create new genres, hybrid genres or subgenres that do not have a history within a given community by producing works that solve new interpretative and/or evaluative problems or address old problems in novel ways. If the works they create lead others to adopt those solutions, such that new sets of conventions emerge and develop a history of co-instantiation within a community, those works may be responsible for initiating new genres. Nevertheless, the works themselves do not belong to the genres they may help to create, because the conventions constitutive of those genres, hybrid genres or subgenres do not exist at the time of their creation.

This account explains why a variety of different types of features is relevant to determining a work's genre. Different types of conventions may develop as means of addressing interpretative and evaluative concerns, including conventions of content, structure, format, narrative content and effects, since a work's content, structure, format, narrative content and effects are all of potential interpretative and/or evaluative significance. Moreover, it explains why these features are not generally individually necessary for genre membership, but instead provide *pro tanto* reasons for classifying a work as belonging to a certain genre. To belong to some genre, a work need only be produced in accordance with a distinctive subset of the conventions of that genre. It is possible that a specific member of the set of conventions comprising a certain genre will be essential to distinguishing that genre from all other genres with a history of co-instantiation in the community in which it was produced, and thus that there is some feature, or set of features possession of which is necessary for membership of some genres. Nevertheless, this will not generally be the case. Often, there will be no single convention in accordance with which a work must have been produced in order to belong to a given genre. Moreover, most of the constitutive conventions comprising any given genre will not be individually necessary to genre membership. Consequently, the features that determine genre membership are generally only *pro tanto* determinants of genre membership.

A work may have features with conventional significance according to a set of conventions that are jointly distinctive of one genre, and also have features with conventional significance according to a set of conventions that are jointly distinctive of another genre. This account of genre membership is therefore consistent with a work belonging to more than one genre. It is also consistent with the existence of genres that incorporate works in a variety of different media, such as the fantasy genre, which incorporates not just fantasy comics, but also fantasy novels and films. The fantasy genre incorporates works in a variety of different media because works in different media may each be produced in accordance with a distinctive subset of its constitutive conventions.

The fact that genres are sets of *conventions* distinguishes them from categories based solely on works' histories of production, such as the category of comics produced by Charles Schulz. It also distinguishes genres from styles. Genre categories are distinct from style categories because style categories are not comprised of conventions. As I noted earlier, a style can be unique to the work of an individual artist. However, it is a necessary condition for something's being conventional that it be widely adopted among the members of a community (Lewis 1969). Nevertheless, style categories are like genre categories in being responses to evaluative and/or interpretative concerns. My account of genre thus explains how genres differ from styles, and also why the notions of genre and of style are nonetheless closely related.

Genres are distinct from media such as watercolor and photography because, although media are often developed as means of addressing interpretative and/or evaluative concerns, a medium consists in a set of tools and techniques, rather than of conventions. Although certain of the techniques constitutive of a medium may become conventionalized, such conventions are not constitutive of media themselves. For this reason, a work's being a watercolor or a photograph does not generate interpretative and/or evaluative expectations among the members of the community in which it was produced. People do not generally like photographs or watercolors in general, or have general expectations about the sorts of things they will represent. The account's appeal to conventions and to interpretative and evaluative expectations therefore distinguishes genres from media.

We are now in a position to understand why it is so difficult to decide whether graphic novels and fumetti comprise genres or media. On the one hand, the category of graphic novels has a claim to be considered a medium, since graphic novels may be used to address a very wide range of interpretative and/or evaluative problems and consequently the fact that a work is a graphic novel need not generate interpretative and/or evaluative expectations in an audience. On the other hand, graphic novels also have some claim to being considered a genre. As a matter of historical fact, graphic novels have been used to address a fairly restricted range of interpretative and evaluative problems, such that the fact that a comic is a graphic novel may in fact generate interpretative and/or evaluative expectations in an audience. Nevertheless, the interpretative and/or evaluative expectations that a comic's being a graphic novel generates are an accident of the way in which graphic novels have evolved, and are not essential to the category. Consequently, graphic novels comprise a medium, rather than a genre. Likewise, the comics category of fumetti identifies a medium, not a genre. Although fumetti happen to have been used to address a limited range of interpretative and evaluative concerns, such that fumetti are associated with a set of conventions that generate interpretative and evaluative expectations, it is not essential to a comic's being a fumetti that it instantiate a distinctive subset of those conventions.

Genre membership can affect narrative content because the conventions constitutive of a genre may include *generalized conversational implicatures* (Grice 1975: 56). Such implicatures are the result of conventions associating specific features of sentences (or of works, in the present case) with specific kinds of conversational implicatures. Consequently, unlike ordinary conversational implicatures, they depend on conventions rather than on makers' intentions, and hence are carried by *sentences* (works), rather than by *speakers* (work makers) (Davis 2008). Nevertheless, unlike conventional implicatures, they are cancelable. For example, "some frogs are green" carries the generalized conversational implicature that not all frogs are green.

However, it is intelligible to say “some frogs are green, indeed all are” in which case the sentence one utters does not implicate that not all frogs are green. If one produces a work that carries a generalized conversational implicature, one’s work will have that implicature, so long as it is not canceled, irrespective of whether or not one intends the implicature in question. My utterance of “some frogs are green” carries the generalized conversational implicature that not all frogs are green, even if I do not mean by my utterance that not all frogs are green.

Currie is wrong to claim that genre implicatures cannot be conversational implicatures because they do not depend on our perceiving an apparent violation of the cooperative principle (Currie 2004: 46). First, Grice is clear that not all conversational implicatures need involve the violation of maxims (Grice 1975: 51). More importantly, however, because generalized conversational implicatures are determined by conventions rather than by intentions, our ability to identify what generalized conversational implicatures a work carries depends on knowledge of conventions, rather than on an appeal to the cooperative principle.

Both the positive and negative effects of genre membership on narrative content can be construed as generalized conversational implicatures. It may be part of the narrative content of a superhero comic that represents a masked and caped character but does not explicitly represent her as employing special powers or abilities that she possesses extraordinary powers or abilities because the constitutive conventions of superhero comics include the generalized conversational implicature that masked and caped characters possess extraordinary powers or abilities. This implicature may be canceled, for example by explicitly representing the character as lacking any such powers or abilities, but unless it is canceled, it will be part of the comic’s narrative content that the character has special powers or abilities. Likewise, it may be part of the narrative content of a funny animal comic that represents an animal as talking that there is nothing unusual about the animal’s talking because the constitutive conventions of funny animal comics include the generalized conversational implicature that talking animals are not unusual. This implicature may be canceled, as Kaz cancels it in the *Lumberger* strip referred to earlier, but unless it is canceled, it will be part of the comic’s narrative content that the animal’s talking is not unusual.

A work’s genre membership depends on its maker’s intentions because, in order for a work to have been produced in accordance with a distinctive subset of a genre’s constitutive conventions and thus to belong to that genre, its maker must have deliberately given the work features picked out by a distinctive subset of those conventions so that they would apply to it. By contrast, the effects of a work’s genre on its narrative content are independent of its maker’s intentions. Given that a work belongs to a certain genre, if it

has features that carry generalized conversational implicatures according to the conventions comprising that genre, it will carry those implicatures irrespective of its maker's intentions, unless they are canceled. Makers may sometimes inadvertently produce works with a certain narrative content, by producing works that belong to a genre according to which certain of their features carry generalized conversational implicatures.

We are now in a position to explain the role that interpreters' expectations play both in generating the generalized conversational implicatures by which genre affects narrative content, and in enabling them to identify those implicatures. Interpreters' expectations help to generate these generalized conversational implicatures because conventions associating certain features of works with certain conversational implicatures arise partly as a consequence of interpreters' expectations that works with certain features will carry certain conversational implicatures. To understand the role of interpreters' expectations in enabling them to identify the generalized conversational implicatures a work carries, we need to distinguish between two kinds of expectations that genre membership brings with it. First, interpreters expect a work that employs a distinctive subset of the conventions of some genre to employ the rest of the conventions of that genre. We therefore expect works that have certain features, in virtue of which they belong to certain genres, to have certain further features characteristic of works in that genre. For example, we expect the romance in a romance comic to end happily. However, the expectation that a work which employs conventions distinctive of a genre will possess all the conventions of that genre plays no role in interpreters' ability to identify genre-based implicatures. It is an inductively-based expectation that works' makers may deliberately exploit for purposes such as humor and suspense, but it does not affect the identification of narrative content. Such expectations contrast with the expectation that a work which belongs to some genre and has features to which the generalized conversational implicatures partly constitutive of that genre assign a certain narrative significance will have the narrative significance they assign to it. Interpreters rely on the latter expectation in order to identify a work's narrative content.

Conclusion

An adequate account of the nature of genre and of the criteria for genre membership is essential to understanding the nature of the various categories into which comics can be classified. Because they fail adequately to distinguish genre categories from other ways of categorizing works, including categorizations according to medium or according to style, previous accounts of genre fail to illuminate the nature of comics categories. I have argued that

genres are sets of conventions that have developed as means of addressing particular interpretative and/or evaluative concerns, and have a history of co-instantiation within a community, such that a work's belonging to some genre generates interpretative and evaluative expectations among the members of that community. Genres are distinct from styles in consisting of conventions, and are distinct from media both in consisting of conventions and in generating interpretative and evaluative expectations.

This account helps us to understand the interpretative and evaluative significance of the various comics categories. Comics genres, such as manga and funny animal comics are associated with specific interpretative and evaluative expectations. These expectations result from the conventions constitutive of the manga and funny animal genres, which address particular interpretative and evaluative concerns in specific ways. By producing comics according to these conventions, makers can help to ensure that interpreters' expectations are met. New interpretative and/or evaluative concerns, not addressed by the conventions of existing genres, require new solutions, which may in turn lead to the emergence of new genres, comprising new sets of conventions that address those concerns. Existing genres do not themselves incorporate the means of responding to new interpretative or evaluative concerns. By contrast, media such as graphic novels and fumetti consist in tools and techniques that can be applied to a range of different interpretative and evaluative problems. A medium's constitutive tools and techniques impose limitations on which solutions to such problems the resources of the medium can provide. Nevertheless, unlike genres, media incorporate the flexibility to respond to interpretative and evaluative concerns in a variety of different ways. Certain ways of responding to certain such concerns within the confines of a medium may lead to the development of different genres within that medium. As the artistic exploration of the interpretative and evaluative scope of the graphic novel continues, we can expect an array of graphic novel genres to emerge.⁶

Notes

- 1 Not all superheros have extraordinary powers. Batman, for example, is merely extremely skilled and well-equipped.
- 2 Gregory Currie proposes something similar (2004: 45, note 5).
- 3 The text in square brackets is mine.
- 4 Thanks to Aaron Meskin for the example of Texas country music.
- 5 The text in square brackets is mine.
- 6 Thanks to both Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook for helpful comments on this paper.

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