The Ontology and Aesthetics of Genre

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Abstract. Genres inform our appreciative practices. What it takes for a work to be a good work of comedy is different than what it takes for a work to be a good work of horror, and a failure to recognize this will lead to a failure to appreciate comedies or works of horror particularly well. Likewise, it is not uncommon to hear people say that a film or novel is a good work, but not a good work of x (where x is the genre of that work). A work can be good all things considered, but genre membership provides us with an additional set of evaluative criteria over and above those of the medium, which colors how we interpret and appreciate the work. Given this importance, it is not surprising that philosophers of art have been interested in providing an account of what, exactly, a genre is. Despite this interest, there is not widespread agreement about what it takes for something to be a genre, nor what kinds of considerations are relevant in determining whether a work is a member of that genre. Beyond this, we might also want to know to what degree we ought to consider genre in evaluating a work of art and why it should matter at all. Here, I explore the variety of recent theories that philosophers have taken up on the topic of genre and why we should ultimately think of genres as artistic practices rather than the alternatives.

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1. Introduction:

Genres inform our appreciative practices. What it takes for a work to be a good work of comedy is different than what it takes for a work to be a good work of horror, and a failure to recognize this will lead to a failure to appreciate comedies or works of horror particularly well. Likewise, it is not uncommon to hear people say that a film or novel is a good work, but not a good work of *x* (where *x* is the genre of that work). A work can be good all things considered, but genre membership provides us with an additional set of evaluative criteria over and above those of the medium, which colors how we interpret and appreciate the work. Given this importance, it is not surprising that philosophers of art have been interested in providing an account of what, exactly, a

genre is. Despite this interest, there is not widespread agreement about what it takes for something to be a genre, nor what kinds of considerations are relevant in determining whether a work is a member of that genre. Beyond this, we might also want to know to what degree we ought to consider genre in evaluating a work of art and why it should matter at all. Here, I explore the variety of recent theories that philosophers have taken up on the topic of genre and why we should ultimately think of genres as artistic practices rather than the alternatives.

2. **Genres-as-features:**

While there are a number of theories of genre, and differences between them can be subtle, accounts in the literature tend to fall into one of four kinds: genres-as-features, genres-as-functional-kinds, genres-as-traditions, and genres-as-practices.[1] The first of these, genres-as-features, regards a genre as a set of works picked out by a particular combination of features (Todorov 1973; Currie 2004; Friend 2012).[2] These features are typically thought of as internal to the work, such that we (as audience members) could diagnose the genre of the work directly through engagement with the work and without needing much (if any) background knowledge. In some cases, genres-as-features accounts think that the characteristic set of features provides us with a definition (such that the features and jointly necessary and sufficient) (Todorov 1973). In other cases, these features might form the basis of a cluster concept, where works only need some combination of the characteristic features in order to count as works of that kind (Currie 2004; Friend 2012). For instance, we might think that film noir is the genre characterized by depictions of hard-boiled private investigators, beautiful double-crossing women, and dramatic use of lighting. A definitional version of genres-as-features tells us that satisfying all of these features is both necessary and sufficient for a work to be a member of the class 'film noir'. Meanwhile, a cluster model might tell us that a film is a work of film

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[1] This classification scheme comes from (Malone 2023) which, in turn, develops upon Terrone's distinction between genres-as-concepts and genres-as-traditions (Terrone 2021). Malone's taxonomy further distinguishes between 'genres-as-features' and 'genres-as-functional-kinds', which both count as 'genres-as-concepts' views on Terrone's account. This difference will matter for our discussion. In addition, this paper introduces the 'genres-as-practices' account.

[2] Enrico Terrone and Franco Fabbri both articulate genres-as-features accounts which differ slightly than those presented here. Terrone builds off of Currie's model by adding that audience expectations ultimately decide which features are characteristic of a genre (Terrone 2021). By contrast, Fabbri defends a prototype theory, in which the features constitutive of a genre are set in reference to a prototypical work (Fabbri & Chambers 1982; Fabbri 2012). These variations are meant to explain why and how the constitutive set of features of a genre can change over time (in the former case) and why they emerge around that set of features in the first place (in the latter case). Despite these modifications, since both views still maintain that genres are sets of works picked out by common features, most of what is said of the simpler version of the view also applies to these.

noir insofar as it satisfies at least some of these conditions and, further, that the more of these conditions the film satisfies, the more film noir it is. Yet, despite these differences, definitional and cluster accounts of this kind have in common that they take it that providing an account of a particular genre is a matter of determining the characteristic features and that diagnosing a work as a work of that genre is a matter of determining whether (and to what degree) the work has those features.

Importantly, the features which pick out a genre need not be internal to works of that kind in order for an account to be a genres-as-features account. Take, for example, the musical genre 'bounce'. Bounce is characterized by internal features (e.g., the 'triggerman beat', call-and-response shouting, and whistling), but also by the external fact that the artists who produce bounce tracks are from New Orleans. This is, then, a mixed account, because it draws on both internal and external features. Mixed accounts may be attractive because they allow us to capture genres which we take to be spatially localized (as is the case for bounce music) or temporally localized (as might be the case for post-impressionist paintings) (Abell 2012). We could also have a genres-as-features account that is entirely based in external features, though most genres do not lend themselves to this kind of analysis.[3]

There are several challenges which arise for genres-as-features accounts. For one thing, there is the open question which all hangs over all theories of genre: can we actually provide satisfactory accounts of every individual genre in terms of the theory. As we will see, different theories seem especially well-suited to capture a particular set of genres. Beyond this, however, there is also the *problem of genre drift*. The features we associate with a given genre often change over time. We can imagine this happening to such a degree that the earliest and latest works in a particular genre share no common features at all, yet are both considered members of the same genre Enrico Terrone offers the most promising answer to this question, with his homeostatic property cluster account of genres (Terrone 2021). Here, the features which pick out a given genre are those that audiences expect from works of that kind. Since audience expectations evolve over time, so do the features which count towards membership in that genre. However, there it does not get us closer to

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[3] The genres-as-functional-kinds accounts, which have not yet been discussed, are actually externalist genres-as-features accounts which are only concerned with a single external feature (that is, the intentions of the artist to produce a work with a particular function). While genres-as-functional-kinds accounts are a kind of genres-as-features account, I have set them apart here because it is a popular formulation and because the problems which arise for functionalist accounts differ from those focused on satisfying particular internal features.

addressing another worry: the *problem of genre explosion* (Malone 2023). In this case, our concern is with ensuring that our view of what a genre is doesn't lead to an explosion of previously undiscovered genres. Put another way, we need an account of genre which preserves the ability to distinguish between genres and mere categories of art. It may be that a set of common features is a necessary component for a genre, but it is certainly not sufficient. There is a set of paintings which share in common that they use the colors dark sienna and Van Dyke brown, but this set doesn't constitute a genre any more than the set of songs featuring a glass harmonica and a tempo below 200bpm, or the set of architectural works exactly 84' in height. Indeed, the buildings which make up the last category do all satisfy the expectations that audiences would have for works of that kind, but they don't seem to compose a genre. Accordingly, the genres-as-features accounts need to ensure that they have fully spelled out the conditions which distinguish categories of art from genres. Finally, there is the *problem of genre appreciation*, or that of why genre classification should be relevant at all in appreciating a work. If genres are just works organized according to common features, then why should we care that, for instance, *Scream* (1996) is a horror film. A work having some features in common with another work doesn't seem to provide us with aesthetic reason to like it more or to evaluate it different; it is merely a passing fact about the work. If these features are important or relevant because the audience expects them, then why is it sometimes good and sometimes bad to satisfy the audience's expectations? Further work must be done, on the genres-as-features account, to explain the normative force that genres have over how we appreciate works.

3. Genres-as-functional-kinds:

Genres-as-functional-kinds argues that genre identity is determined by a particular functional role which works of that kind are supposed to play in our aesthetic practices (Abell 2014). For instance, we might think that horror is the set of works which function to induce the feeling of 'art horror' in audiences (Carroll 1987). In the same way, suspense films should function to cause the feeling of suspense. These examples are helpful because they fit the general pattern of thinking about function in terms of a work's ability to bring about a particular phenomenological state. Genres named after emotions like this tend to lend themselves to functional accounts especially well and, as such, are most common. Yet, if the genres-as-functional-kinds theory is true, we can give accounts like this for every genre. For instance, Noel Carroll has argued that documentary, as a film

genre, is picked out by its assertoric function, not by a particular phenomenological state (Carroll 1997).

Most functionalist accounts of genre are also intentionalist in an important way (Abell 2014; Carroll 1987; Carroll 1997). If function was directly used to diagnose genre membership (rather than intention), then fulfilling the function of that genre would be a necessary condition of being a work of that kind. This has two significant implications. First, it means that a work could be a work of a given genre on accident. It doesn't matter whether the artist was trying to get a particular reaction from the audience; if they did, then they have fulfilled the function (and, as such, produced a work of that kind). The second implication is that regardless of the artist's intentions, if they failed to make a work which fulfills the characteristic function, then they failed to make a work of that kind. By contrast, if genre membership is, instead, a matter of the artist intending the work to have that function, then we have a built-in appreciative plan for works of that kind. For example, a work of horror is one intended by the artist to induce art-horror, and a work that is good qua horror is one that succeeds in inducing art-horror to some significant degree. This is part of the appeal of genres-as-functional-kinds accounts. Not only does the theory tell us how works get counted as works of that kind, but it also tells us what success conditions are for works of that kind. Thus, the view goes a long way in addressing the problem of genre appreciation. Notice, however, that this means that works can't be works of a given genre on accident. Membership is fixed by intention, so a scary film is not a horror film unless the filmmaker intended it to be a scary work.

Despite its attractions, the genres-as-functional-kinds view also runs into a number of problems. First, there are the issues with the account's intentionalism. Some works are unintentionally funny or unintentionally scary, and the degree to which we might want to count these as instances of comedy or horror will matter to whether the theory's intentionalism is a problem. However, the intention to produce a work with the characteristic function is rather minimal in terms of the relevant intentions. We can call this view 'soft intentionalism' (Malone 2022). By contrast, we could hold a stronger view as well. For instance, inclusion in the genre might involve intending the work to fulfill the characteristic function, but also intending that the work is counted as a work of that kind. To be clear, this second condition can be added to a genres-as-features account as well, but it fits quite naturally into the already intentionalist genres-as-functional-

kinds account.[4] The problems which arise for hard intentionalists are more numerous than those facing soft intentionalists. For instance, a Robinson Crusoe like character who spends their time on a desert island writing stories intended to induce fear would not count as a horror author if they did so without the awareness that works which fulfill this function constitute the kind 'horror'. This is, despite the fact that they endeavored to produce a work which fulfilled that characteristic function and succeeded in doing so. Likewise, it is unclear, in practice, whether the first work of a given genre would count as a member of that kind. While artists sometimes produce works with the intention to create a new genre, they often don't realize that similar works will later be brought together in order to constitute a kind. When Margaret Cavendish wrote *The Blazing World*, it is very unlikely that she intended the work to count as science fiction, even if she intended it to perform the function we now ascribe to works of science fiction. Accordingly, hard intentionalist theories of genre face the *problem of genre invention* (that is, the question of how such a theory can capture the emergence of new genres).

Beyond concerns about intentionalism, the genres-as-functional-kinds view also faces the problem of genre explosion. Willie Nelson released the album *The IRS Tapes: Who'll Buy My Memories?* (1991) with the intention that the work would raise enough money for him to pay off his back taxes. Meanwhile, since Lady Gaga has produced an album with the intention that the album function to give her an opportunity to work with Tony Bennett, there is a genre of works which serve the functional role of giving the artist the opportunity to work with another artist (and, perhaps, a subgenre of works focused on Tony Bennett in particular). Do works of this kind constitute a genre? Likewise, how do we make sense of dance music? This is a functional kind of music, but it crosscuts a variety of genres (zydeco, EDM, disco, etc.). Country artists often write songs with the intention that they be used for waltzing, line dancing, or two-stepping. Other songs are not intended to be danced to at all. Yet, while these works are all made with different functional intentions, they are all works of country music. This is all to say that we need a story about which functional intentions represent genres (because not all do) and why only those have a corresponding genre.

4. Genres-as-traditions:

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[4] Hard intentionalism has been defended in (Laetz & Lopes 2008) and criticized in (Collingwood 1938).

According to the genres-as-traditions view, genres are traditions of artistic production where artists reference previous works in that tradition and thereby link them together (Evnine 2015). For example, a filmmaker may include a theremin in the score or feature a malevolent robot character as an homage to previous works of science fiction, and later sci-fi films will reference this film in other ways. This scheme of reference ties all of these films together in the sci-fi tradition. These references are then taken up by audiences who, in turn, appreciate this new work in the context and tradition established by the previous entries into the genre. On first pass, we might think that whatever these references are, they are just internal features characteristic of the genre and, as such, this is just a form of a genres-as-feature account. However, one work might reference another in one way, which is referenced by two others in two other ways. All of the works which make up the tradition need not reference the same features. This allows different threads to emerge, in which subgenres continuously reference from a particular set of features which are distinct from the set that pick out another subgenre. Despite this, these two traditions can trace themselves back to a common ancestor and are, ultimately, parts of a common tradition.

The differences between Evnine's genres-as-traditions account and Terrone's HPC genres-as-features account are subtle, and mostly concern the question of whether genres are a history (Evnine's view) or simply have one (Terrone's view) (Terrone 2021). However, one issue which arises in an especially strong way for the genre-as-traditions account, but which is likely present for all of the theories we have so far discussed, is the privilege it gives artists in shaping genres. Consider the case of the music genre 'chillwave' (Malone 2022). Chillwave is widely regarded as having been invented by the music critic Carles on his blog *Hipster Runoff* in 2009 (Carles 2009; Hood 2011). The genre is said not to have existed at the time that Carles coined the term (Pirnia 2010; Cheshire 2011; Hood 2011; Schilling 2015). However, in describing the genre and initially using the term, Carles described bands, songs, and albums that already existed. If people are right to think that Carles invented the genre, then many of the theories we have already discussed fail to capture that. For instance, the set of works containing those features was already occupied by those same works Carles noticed, he merely discovered the genre (rather than inventing it).

Yet, the problem is different as it arises for genres-as-traditions. Early chillwave artists were not aware of one another when they were making the works that Carles described, and those works don't reference one another. As Alan Palomo of the chillwave band Neon Indian points out, "being called chillwave is akin to waking up one day to read in the papers that you are related to the

Baldwins. You begin to be asked several questions like, 'Do you have any interesting stories from when Stephen was shooting Biodome?' only to respond, 'I've never met him.'" (McDermott & Friedlander 2015) Whatever is the case about Neon Indian and chillwave, the artists of the genre do not see themselves as in a common tradition of artistic production. Instead, it was fans (likes Carles) who brought the disparate works together and made a genre out of them. Yet, by placing genre membership in the hands of artists (who intentionally fix the target of their references), there is no room for fans or critics to do this. By contrast, a good theory of genre will allow for artists *and* fans to elevate mere categories of art to the status of genres.

This discussion leaves us with a few conclusions which can shape future theorizing. Beyond at least roughly capturing all and only those things we think are genre, a good account will also avoid the problem of genre explosion and the problem of genre invention. In the case of the problem of genre explosion, this means being able to distinguish genres from mere categories of art. The difference between these two is genres are social in an important way (Malone 2023). The reason that we are disinclined to count the mere categories of art that I described above as genres is that, when we look around at the world, we find no evidence of them shaping or affecting anyone's aesthetic practices. Indeed, the test we would use to tell whether something that is a genre on one account actually is a genre, is that we would look for signs of life (venues, fan communities, festivals, awards, attributions, debates, etc.) Genres have these features; they matter to communities and communities identify with them. No one identifies as a fan of films depicting snails, or as a member of the community of John Donne reference enthusiasts. However, people do identify as 'metal-heads', 'punks', 'sci-fi fans', or 'goths'. This is to say that avoiding the problem of genre explosion means having a theory of genre that is social in an important way (though, what that means is open to interpretation). With regards to the problem of genre invention, we know that a good theory will capture the variety of ways in which genres are invented. Of course, artists sometimes do set out to make works of a radically new kind, but genres also emerge when critics or fans bring together works and begin to curate them as a kind. As such, we now know that a good theory of genre will capture the role of fans and critics. My contention is that all of these conditions can be satisfied by thinking of *genres-as-practices*.

5. Genres as Practices:

Rather than thinking about genres as sets of works, we should, instead, think of them as communities of art-centered practice.[5] Following Rawls' model of social practices, the genres-as-practices account view genres as "forms of activity specified by a system of rules which defines officers, roles, moves, penalties, defenses, and so on, which give the activity its structure." (Rawls 1955, 3) If these activities are aesthetic in nature, then we are characterizing an aesthetic practice (Kubala 2020). Rawls mentions baseball and criminal justice as examples of practices. Both of these practices feature a number of different kinds of officers who are licensed to perform a variety of moves; these officers and moves are defined and constrained by a system of rules. In baseball, there can be only batter at a time, who that batter is defined by the rules, and what they are allowed to do in their capacity as a batter is constrained by rules. The same is true of pitchers, baserunners, fielders, and umpires. Further, the valence that certain moves take on emerges from the rules of that practice. For instance, hitting a homerun is valuable in that practice in a way that it is not outside of that practice. Its value is defined in reference to it. Likewise, in criminal justice, holding a particular office (e.g.: judge, lawyer, plaintiff, etc.) licenses you to contribute to the practice in certain prescribed ways (e.g., issuing and granting appeals, handing down sentences, filing suits, etc.) and, assuming you act within the procedures of that practice, all parties recognize those moves as having a kind of normative force that they wouldn't if they were undertaken by other officers or by those outside of the practice.

In much the same way, genres are like games that fans and artists play with works of art (taking on Rawls' use of games as a paradigmatic practice). In this case, genres are art-centered aesthetic practices, participation in which picks out the community of that genre. Looking at genre membership, a work is a work of a genre if regarding it as a work of that genre constitutes a legitimate move according to that practice. Fans and artists represent different offices, and these offices (along with others) are empowered to impact the practice in different ways. Beyond this, producers, critics, and venues also count as offices which enable the officeholder with the ability to perform a variety of particular moves. What officers exist, what is necessary in order to be counted as an officer of that kind, and what moves are available to those officers will be defined by the practices of that genre in particular (in the same way that sports, paradigmatic practices, may differ

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[5] These communities are defined by their uses of art. This differs from a tradition of production (according to which only those involved in the production of art are counted, and only insofar as they are producing art). By contrast, 'use' here includes the use of a work by its artist along with its use by critics and audiences. Thus, genres are narrower than aesthetic practices broadly (including culinary practices, etc.), but broader than (Evnine's) traditions of production.

wildly in structure). It might be that venues or artists are more empowered in certain genres than in others. Likewise, what moves are valuable and/or legitimate will depend on the particularities of that genre. It might be valuable to frighten the audience in horror but not in comedy. It might be valuable to scream in hardcore punk and not in ambient music. The project of providing an account of a particular genre is, then, one of understanding what moves are legitimate and valuable, why they are valuable in the context of that practice, what offices exist and how they are defined, what norms govern evaluations and determinations within that community, and what function those norms play for that practice.

With this account in hand, we can now address the problems we have raised so far. What distinguishes genres from mere categories of art? The mere categories that the other theories call genres have no officeholders. The social requirement which came out of the discussion of genre explosion is met when people occupy offices articulated by the rules of that genre. Who makes up the community of officeholder for the category of 'novels beginning with the letter Q and ending with the letter P'? While we could imagine a variety of potential ways that a legal system *could be* arranged, it is a legal practice when people are actually involved in realizing those laws. This same distinction is true for categories of art and genres. A mere category of art does not become a genre until there is a community (no matter how small) that is invested in negotiating its rules, curating or creating works seen as legitimate moves in it, using it to structure their aesthetic practices, or identifying as officeholders within it.

How are genres invented on this view? When Carles invented chillwave, he articulated rules for regarding a work as a work of that genre ("'chill wave' is dominated by 'thick/chill synths' while [the] conceptual core is still trying to 'use real instruments/sound like it was recorded in nature'… chillwave is supposed to sound like something that was playing in the background of 'an old VHS cassette that u [sic] found in ur [sic] attic from the late 80s/early 90s.'") With his article, Carles made himself, Neon Indian, and Washed Out officeholders in that practice (Carles 2009). Once there are rules which determine the legitimacy of regarding a work as a work of that genre, then we can begin making moves in that practice. Importantly, it could be that these rules are articulated by artists and that the practice is primarily perpetuated by those artists insofar as they produce works of that kind, but the rules could also be developed by fan communities or critics and the practice can be instantiated when they begin regarding works as moves in that practice. Likewise, whether fans regard your work as a work of that genre does not depend on your intentions as an

artist or whether you conceive of yourself as producing works as part of an artistic tradition. It may be that specific genres think these considerations matter (as is their right), but there is no reason why the genres-as-practices account is pre-committed to privileging the intentions of artists when it comes to inventing new genres or in populating those genres with works. In this way, genres are historical individuals (such that they are historically contingent), but Robinson Crusoe-like artists can still make works of a genre (so long as the rules of that practice regard doing so as a legitimate move). Artists with awareness of a genre can also still make works of that genre on accident according to this model as well. New genres can be invented by artists (like they are in the genres-as-traditions account and under hard intentionalism), but they can also be invented by fans without the awareness of artists. This allows the genres-as-practices account to avoid the problem of genre invention.

Likewise, we can form practices of curation according to clusters of features (internal, external, or both), function, or a tradition of reference. For instance, a community might come together around their common interest in curating a playlist of films which function to make them feel dread, of songs that prominently feature a tuba, or of paintings that occur within a tradition of artistic production. This is to say that practices can be functional, featural, or traditional. The rules for regarding a work as a work of that genre might consider external features (like an artist's ethos, their intentions in producing works, or biographical facts about where and when the work was produced). It is up to the community to determine the project of their practice. So long as including a work in the genre is seen as a legitimate move by that practice, then it is a work of that genre. This means that insofar as we are moved to accept the other theories in virtue of their describing a particular genre well, we can have all of those accounts on a practice-based view. This kind of pluralism also gives us the ability to capture the range of practices we find in microgenres like chillwave.

This has at least two other consequence of import. First, the rules of a genre can change over time. Just as the rules of baseball have changed over time but the identity of the game persists, what is demanded of a work in order to count it as a member of a genre might change over time. For instance, it might be that country music started out as a functional practice according to which works functioned to reconnect an increasingly urban American population to their rural roots (Malone 1968). Yet, this does not fix the genre so permanently that being a work of country music isn't now simply a matter of satisfying a set of musical features. Likewise, a features-driven curation

practice can change over time by requiring more, less, or different features. In this way, the genres-as-practices account accommodates genre drift. Second, just as the rules of baseball can't be changed by presidential fiat, what a genre is and what rules count towards genre membership is a matter of negotiation between members of that community. The genres-as-practices view does not privilege artists as such, but it does privilege the community that makes up that genre (including members who hold offices as artists in it). The nature of genres and the genre membership of works aren't decided by metaphysical facts about features or about the private intentions of artists, they are decisions made by communities engaged in that practice. Insofar as theories ignore this social nature of genres, they run the risk of engaging in a kind of philosophical busy bodying. If genres are fixed merely by being sets of features or functional kinds, then we could have a situation in which philosophers insist to the community of, say, metal fans who are happily regarding a work as a work of metal that that work is actually not metal on account of some metaphysical facts about it. It is not philosophers or metaphysical facts that ultimately decide what metal is, the metal community decides. Community members decide whether a work or artist is of a particular genre (through the practices they establish for counting offices, players and moves), they don't discover whether they are.[6]

This is not to say that the community can't be wrong. For instance, we might think that the country music community was wrong in saying that Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" isn't country. However, whether they are wrong or not will depend on reasons that that community has picked out as relevant. On a practice-based model, telling the community that they are wrong about whether an artist or work is of that genre either 1) requires a strong argument rooted in that communities practices, or 2) appears equivalent to breaking up a perfectly content baseball game in order to argue that a particular homerun is (in fact) not a homerun on account of some facts independent of the game, the players, and the rules (that is, it amounts to busybodying). The community decides what is required for a work to be a work of that genre, but they do so according to rules that they must ultimately change or be answerable to.

6. Conclusion:

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[6] This distinction, between deciding and discovering, comes from (Thomasson 2005).

Beyond better handling the problems associated with genre invention and categories of art than the existing accounts, the genres-as-practices model has other advantages. For one, it connects questions of genre to the existing literature on both practices and aesthetic practices, thereby providing us with a more unified picture (Kubala 2020; Lopes 2018; Riggle 2022a; Riggle 2022b). More importantly, however, it orients our thinking toward tractable problems, and provides a framework for arriving at answers. For example, we might wonder why punk and metal assign positive value to screaming in a way that other genres don't. After all, we don't typically enjoy listening to screaming in our everyday lives. Accordingly, a standard answer might be investigate the aesthetic value of screaming as such. However, this project seems doomed to fail because it is not properly sensitive to the role that screaming plays in the various subgenres of punk and metal. For instance, 'gang vocal' yelling common to hardcore serves as a form of community building where artists and audiences unite in an accessible form of group singing. Meanwhile, metal screaming is accessible for the audience to participate in but allows artists to demonstrate virtuosity in controlling vocal timbre and dynamics the way that metal guitar playing often involves demonstrations of virtuosity (at least in contrast to punk). Finally, screaming in screamo music might involve the expression of primal emotions like pain and anger such that the audience identifies with the screaming front man and experiences their catharsis as their own. Without understanding that genres are practices, in which screaming performs different functions, any simple answer is equivalent to an attempt to explain the value of touchdowns at a higher level of explanation than the rules of football.

The moral of this story is that providing an account of what makes a given phenomenon aesthetically valuable might require being sensitive to the role that that feature plays within a genre community's aesthetic practice. By the same token, thinking of genres in terms of communities of aesthetic practice can also help us understand why the Grand Ole Opry plays an outsized role in determining what is or isn't country music (because it inhabits a particularly empowered office in that practice), or why some genres seem to aim at eliciting a particular emotional or phenomenal response in their audience and others simply coalesce around a cluster of internal features. The answer is that these differences reflect differences in the practices of those communities.

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