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CRITICAL MASS: MASS LITERATURE AND GENERIC CRITICISM

In my Essay I discuss some aspects of the division of the literary field into the critically canonized high (-brow), and the popularly read low (-brow) literature (*Trivialliteratur*). I begin with a brief outline of the qualitatively new cultural environment brought in by the introduction of means for mass reproduction of works of art. I examine some of the methodological inadequacies in the traditional approach to fiction, and relate the issue to the recent trend in the academic circles which has resulted in a partial redrawing of the literary canon. Contesting some of the distinctions between high and mass literature, I analyze several particular ways in which both have traditionally interpenetrated and inspired each other. Consonant with arguments for a more inclusive approach to literature, the critical consideration of works from the mass or generic end of the literary spectrum warrants a development of a viable theory of genres. Adopting a pragmatic approach to literature, I thus conclude with an outline of some of the possibilities for development in genre studies.

ART AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY

In the face of modern technology which has created fast and inexpensive means of almost infinite reproduction and dissemination of cultural artifacts, art finds itself in a qualitatively novel situation. The presence of communication channels, which pour forth gigabytes of information for the benefit of anyone who cares to take heed, affects not only the various forms of reproduction of art, but its production as well. Today anyone who introduces his work on a wider cultural forum must be prepared to pay the price of popular success, and witness his unique personal achievement being endlessly copied and multiplied for the sake of mass recipients of modern culture. As a matter of fact, the very idea of personal crea-

tion and expression is almost paradoxically checked by the apparently unstoppable development of contemporary information technologies. The very techniques which have so dramatically increased the individual artist's forum of appeal, have also worked to erode the very concept of individuality which they disseminate. Mass market writing and publishing strategies, most conspicuous in the proliferation of artless imitations of generic matrices, conspire to obliterate the impact of trend-setting originality. If uniqueness and singularity of aesthetic experience still elevate works to the status of art, the avalanche of information enabled by technologies of mass reproduction has gradually exposed (some would say: precipitated) the increasing anachronism in the functioning of their cultural (notably critical) environment.

Embedded in the macrocosm of modern art, and typifying to a large extent its global characteristics, there is the enclave of the literary realm. The literary culture, considered here as the entire hierarchical system of literary actions and their corresponding meta-levels (i.e. production, mediation, criticism, metatheory), offers in a number of respects a particularly vivid illustration of trends and developments raging in the art world today. Until relatively recently, the explosion of mass readership and the coincidental explosion of print failed to affect significantly the literary culture and the time-honoured way in which it approached literature. Today, however, no serious examination of the literary culture can ignore the apparently unstoppable flow of printed matter.

More than ever before in human history, the production and consumption of literature seems now to have reached inflationary proportions. Before the growth of modern mass culture, when the quantity of print in circulation did not yet cross the critical threshold, the "natural" diachronic process of aesthetic diversification could be generally regarded as a trustworthy mechanism for diversifying ambitious literature from ephemeral entertainment. Sooner or later, it was believed, the works that deserved recognition would enter the critics' field of vision and, under their guidance, eventually find their appropriate niche in the big cultural storehouse. Not so, however, in a system grown so large that is on the verge of collapsing under its own weight. As that tirelessly mordant commentator on modern culture, Stanislaw Lem, observes, not one, not even a hundred, but thousands of Shakespeares could be writing today without ever emerging from the cloud of obscurity conferred upon them by the sheer quantity of books in print. The critical selective filters which have long been performing close to their peak capability, today

choke on the volume of raw material available to them. With the number of writers and publications growing at an unstoppable rate, the literary culture loses its ability to function critically, buried under pyramids of books that no one will ever have time to read.

If we look at some selected post-war publishing figures, the quantitative growth of the volume of print assumes almost inflationary proportions. *The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information* reports that in 1945 the number of new titles introduced annually on the American market was marginally under 5.400. In 1979 the corresponding figure was well over 36.000, an almost sevenfold increase in thirty four years. In other words, every five years America added more its total output of new books from 1945 to the total number of new titles available annually on the market. It is apparent that neither the literary market, nor the critical superstructure could sustain such a dramatic explosion. which perhaps explains the noticeable collapse of this trend (the corresponding figures for 1990 are only marginally higher than those from even a decade earlier, at above 38.000). Of course these numbers acquire their full resonance only when understood in their proper *cumulative* context.

At the same time, even though the American market is certainly the major player in the world of publishing, in itself it constitutes just a fraction of the global publishing phenomenon. In order to encompass the totality of the sea of print, one must consider book publishing figures from the rest of the world, as well as the literary output from the myriad journals, magazines, underground presses, etc. Only then can we slowly begin to realize the amount of words deposited year in, year out, on library bookshelves, already filled to the point of bursting. A good indicator to the state of affairs might be the analogous situation in the microworld of academic and scientific publishing. At the turn of the 1980's it became necessary to publish indices to indices of publication titles as a measure of coping with this deluge of information. One can only wonder how much time such metaindices can buy, and how many years away we are from having to resort to publishing indices of indices of indices. (Large computer databases, by facilitating search and access to the primary sources, do not of course attack the problem of information glut, but merely alleviate its symptoms).

CRITICISM AND (NON-) CANONICAL LITERATURE

The critical community has traditionally followed a rather simple strategy - inherited from the days when books were scarce enough

to command individual attention and attract universal response – in dealing with the constantly expanding realm over which it presides. Out of what has started out as a genteel trickle, then becoming a middle-class river, and finally a modern deluge of print, a number of (both synchronic and diachronic) critical methods and approaches filter out a manageable fraction. This select group, its quality and status bolstered by the virtue of having been separated from a field increasingly large, is subsequently awarded the luxury of in-depth analysis and appreciation. The literary detritus which never makes it to the tip of the critical Ararat is, more or less consistently, neglected in the conviction that its average quality is markedly inferior to the anointed sample.

The highly selective nature of critical attention to literature is aptly satirized by the folkish aphorism which tells that, while popular (mass) literature is read, canonical literature is only studied. The pithy phrase also hints at the sometimes surprising results of the aesthetic differentiation between works selected or rejected by the critical process of canon selection. The same works that have often been regarded as equally prominent by contemporary audiences (including sometimes respected critical voices) are slowly left behind those that have been deemed worthy of representing the era. One can think, for example, of the popular and critical acclaim for the "pulp" novels of Ring Lardner, whose work has been even openly admired by one of his contemporaries, Ernest Hemingway. Today the author of *The Sun Also Rises* is a well established and canonized classic, whereas Lardner has been relegated to the circle of popular writers of "tough guy" fiction.

What the adage about high and mass literature fails thus to illuminate is precisely the point implicit in the Hemingway-Lardner case: high (-brow) literature is for the most part approached in a symptomatically a-generic fashion. It would be highly iconoclastic, and certainly contrary to the well established praxis, to approach works from the top of the big literary pile as examples of generic offerings. Whatever one's particular critical orientation, no one is inclined to regard Mailer's *An American Dream* as a generic murder mystery, to read *The Old Man and the Sea* through the schema of a fishing narrative, or to place Mann's *Doctor Faustus* alongside fantasies or satanic cult books. (In this sense cinematic criticism has been traditionally more progressive; the *auteur* studies, for example, have evolved primarily in order to reconcile artistic individuality with generic structuring). In contrast, little of such generic pussyfooting takes place on the *Trivialliteratur* end of the literary spectrum, the one apparently summed up by the term "mass literature" (Bowker's text refers to

"mass market output"). It seems that the prevalent critical attitude to popular literature is summarized up by two tacit equations: "mass literature equals bad literature" (if it was good it would not be mass literature in the first place), and "mass literature equals generic literature" (it appeals to so many because it uses schematic well-trying formulae guaranteed to succeed). In this way it has traditionally found itself outside critics and scholars' event horizon by "virtue" of being assumed to be simplistic, schematic and repetitive - in one word, by amply manifesting its heritage.

I would like to emphasize at this point that the recent developments in the critical circles which see scholars fish out a few names from the literary "bottom" and elevate them to the rank of "study-worthy", are not as trend-setting as one might expect. To begin with, these studies of "low" literature are often motivated by the same assumption of the essence and necessity of drawing the same kind of boundary between canonical "literary" works and mass "entertainment" productions. The examples from popular literature are used simply as case studies to exemplify and buttress the same hierarchical system of division inherited from the classics-oriented curriculum. My point here is not that generic literature is inherently or necessarily good literature, but that tendentious selective attitudes interfere with our picture of it at precisely the point where objectivity and impartiality should hold sway. Also, in many cases an adoption of a new work to the literary canon is motivated by something other than an interest in exploring the boundaries between high-brow and low-brow fiction. Rank ideological persuasions frequently motivate critics to rescue works from obscurity for reasons that have little to do with aesthetic criteria¹.

In one sense, at least, this attitude reflects the same old form of elitist snobbery which can readily accept the literature of "entertainment" from the past, but only the literature of "enlightenment" from the present. My point is, again, not that all popular fiction is worthy of study and analysis, but that amongst its productions, almost *a priori* consigned to the cultural wastebin, there are works equally weighty (minus several hundred critical books and essays) as many works from the canon. The apparent arbitrariness which frequently separates works at their publishing "birth" (often for generic reasons) should attune us to the presence of these neglected "twins" in that part of literature which is covered only by a much broader definition

¹ For a useful discussion of some aesthetic properties and their relevance to a pragmatic study of fiction see P. Livingston's *Texts, Works and Literature*, "Spiel" 1992 (II) as well as G. Hermeren, *The Nature of Aesthetic Qualities*, Lund 1988.

than the one favoured at present. One could quote here the words of Raymond Chandler, ostensibly a professional purveyor of pulp crime fictions, who has nonetheless emerged posthumously as one of the more imaginative, complex, and entertaining authors of his era. As Chandler puts it "[b]etween the one-syllable humors of the comic strip and the anemic subtleties of the litterateurs there is a wide stretch of country". It would be worth our while to try trekking across the less charted regions of that country - even if only to find out whether we do not lose much by sticking to our well-trod literary highways.

HIGH AND LOW ART

The metaphor of a countryside criss-crossed by roads is misleading in a very important way. It is very easy to rise above ground and, surveying the country, determine where the highway is and where pristine country begins. Not so in the world of modern culture, full of mutually interpenetrating influences, fashions, and trends, full of mutual borrowings and allusions, of new and established traditions, appropriations, imitations, joint authorships, and other ways of obliterating the precise extent of one's artistic territory. Instant means of communication make dissemination of information so easy that it sometimes is quite impossible to determine authorship of the original idea (witness the ridiculous law suits plaguing the modern art world, especially the movie industry; the recent Murphy-Buchwald contest over the rights to the story line of *Coming to America* is a good example). This situation, although it has become aggravated in the recent years, is nevertheless *nihil novi sub sole*; mutual interpenetration between high and low art has always taken place with or without the consent of the curators of the (particular version) of the canon.

Consider the following:

1. All popular entertainment forms are enjoyed by the masses and shunned by the elites until new forms replace them, at which point the past "mass entertainment" forms become art. That case could be made for poetry in Plato's day, for the theatre, vaudeville, even classical music and opera; in this century the same trend is responsible for the astounding cultural nobilitation of the cinema and its productions.

2. Since ninety percent of cultural productions is worthless and perishable, that is usually taken to legitimate the forsaking of any serious effort to examine that ninety percent for traces of any virtue. Although statistically that might indeed be the case, such statistics do not at all rule out the appearance of a Shakespeare in the

popular "dregs" of our culture. Any *a priori* decision about aesthetic quality, without a study of quantitatively viable samples, must be thus methodologically suspect.

3. Following his multi-million dollar contracts and staggering publishing figures, Stephen King's novels began to attract attention on campuses, to the point where these days it is relatively common to encounter his name on course syllabi. Such singular examples of writers who, by tapping on to a certain marketable type of story, can become viable subjects of study and analysis, have an adverse affect on the rest of the field. By drawing exorbitant amounts of attention to the specific instantiation of a certain genre or formula (one speaks these days of a "King-type story"), such policy overlooks other writers who might be writing in less identifiable genres or styles (or even more interestingly, in their hybrids), and thus pass outside our field of vision simply for lack of accompaniment by the media hype surrounding best-sellers.

4. Although Marshall McLuhan was undoubtedly right about the global village, he was wrong about the medium being the message. Far from remaining restricted to their "own" techniques and influence, ideas flow uninhibited from one level of artistic productions to another. Witness how the modern and contemporary literature picked up many of the marketing ideas from its "lesser" cousins: today works of the Pulitzer-Prize winner Norman Mailer are published in colourful jackets, displaying catchy and often clichéd blurbs and advertisements; inside one can frequently discover elements of the "trashy" writing technique (generating suspense and mini-climaxes for chapter endings), style (colloquial dialogue), themes (murder), genre (murder-story, semifiction). At the same time mass literature often lifts its ideas for characters and narrative techniques from the more "literary" works. The results of such "cross-pollination" are becoming more common: George Simenon, a writer of crime fiction, is granted the highest artistic honours by the French critics; Stanisław Lem, a science fiction practitioner, enters the select circle of national nominees for the Nobel Prize; Margaret Atwood, from the top of the Canadian literary canon, stoops to writing a dystopia; and Thomas Disch, one of the aesthetically most conscious writers of his generation, regularly turns to the maligned genre of fantasy as a literary vehicle.

5. Last of all, one could argue that mass literature's very shortcomings - its obsession with well-tried formulas and penchant for recycling - saves literature from the ravages of the past by preserving it for the following generations (who will eventually see in it a product of high art). Thus, contrary to the common dogma, one

could argue that it is the popular literature that is a true medium of tradition and continuity, perpetuating the outstanding literary achievements of the past not in suspended animation as the canon of great dead works, but circulating them with a popular vitality for the mass enjoyment of mass readership.

FOR A THEORY OF GENRES

For the time being the situation remains unchanged: critics invest an inordinate amount of effort to study a minuscule "high" portion of the literary output; meanwhile the chronic publishing cornucopia refuses to rectify itself, and every day the ratio of literature circulating in the society to the literature remarked by the critics gets more and more lopsided. In the face of the deluge of writing, whose vastness and formlessness are probably emphasized by the isolated perspective from the top of the ivory tower, some voices have proclaimed as early as 1955 "that literary forms, that genres, no longer have any genuine significance" (Blanchot). That such sweeping statements have actually rallied some scholars around them is probably more indicative of the critically sanctioned "death of the novel" (which, as we know, enjoys a healthy life, thank you), and the critical attention that deconstructionist discourses commanded over the past decades, rather than the real argumentative power of Blanchot's thesis.

We would be well justified to pursue the study of genres and their theory, and through them the study of literature which they are used to describe, even if for no other reason than that Blanchot's anti-generic (or a-generic) stance can be easily shown to be untenable (not the least because even while denouncing generic categories, Blanchot uses the very concepts he is trying to cast away). Although the reasons for renewing efforts at developing a theory of genres may begin with Todorov's illustration that there has "never been a literature without genres" (*Genres* 15), they certainly do not stop there². The issue of generic presence and identity raises its Hydra-head every instance we grant individual status to any text without recourse to the immense, unread majority of literature from which it is (implicitly) assumed to stand out in some significant way. The very act of inclusion of a literary work in the critical pantheon presumes consigning a host of others to obscurity. Such important decisions

² T. Todorov, *Genres in Discours*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge N. Y. 1990. See the second chapter, "The Origin of Genres", especially pp. 13-16 where Todorov engages and refutes Broch and Blanchot's positions.

ought to be made through a process of less chaotic interactions between works and critics, who, obviously unable to pursue all that is published, increasingly often rely on publisher-advertised generic membership to guide their professional attention. The shortcomings of the traditional critical praxis are at their most spectacular during confrontations with new, unknown works. They are amplified even further in the face of works that display true literary novelty (it seems that despite the inflated claims from the critical and meta-critical circles, the diachronic career of literary works is still the most relied upon indicator of their cultural - and thus presumably literary - merit). A successful articulation of a rigorous theory of genres should be an important tool in the study of individual narratives, no matter if originating in the canonical foothills, or in the summit of the literary kingdom.

This is far from saying that a generic approach to works of literature could ever exhaust their semantic potential, even if only for the simple reason that no "single instance of genre ... [is] contained by its supposed generic root"³. The practical assignation of generic identity to a work of fiction must, however, be an important element of its semantic interpretation since an identification of aesthetic qualities can be determined at least partly by purely pragmatic considerations (e.g. about the [non-] fictional status of a given work). At the same time, a genre theory should enable a study and systematization of common generic features while permitting a description and analysis of the unique aspects of the works, narrative make-up⁴. Another reason, eloquently argued by Wiesław Krajka, is that a reliable theory of literary forms ought to provide a "rewarding and fascinating approach to literary history". Krajka's conception of a literary genre has also the merit of recognizing that the approach to literary history through a theory of literary genology could also help "introduce some sort of classification and systematization into the *great mass of literary texts*" (emphasis mine). It appears, then, that in contradiction of Blanchot's precipitous dismissal of genres and their study, the theory of literary forms is a pressing necessity, rather than a luxury to be pursued by a club of hermit-scholars.

³ T. Ryall, *Teaching Through Genre*, "Screen Education" (17) 1975, pp. 27-33.

⁴ For a similar argument see A. Zgorzelski, *Towards a Theory of Systematic Featuring of a Literary Text: Theses*, "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" 1980, t. 22, pp. 75-83.

FOR REGIONAL THEORIES OF GENRES

As a part of the fundamental problem of developing a viable pragmatic theory of reading literature, we need thus a reliable method of classificatory and comparative analysis of literature (admittedly, these tasks are some of the most difficult on the research agenda). In an essay *On Three Types of Deductive Models in Genre Theory* Uri Margolin outlines three avenues for research into the theory of genres, arguing for their analytic potential as well as broadly investigating their feasibility. The most comprehensive of the proposed deductive models is a general, culture-informed theory linking "particular types of discourse causally with cultural situations" ⁵. Since this model hinges a priori on the formulation of a comprehensive predictive theory of cultural evolution, it is epistemologically unfeasible and can be articulated only as a theoretical possibility.

The second model is a general theory which should deduce not only all existing, but all possible generic formations by a combinatorial analysis of a limited number of "kernel configurations" of some basic (though unspecified) narrative elements. The second model suffers from the same epistemological flaw as the first, adding to it the problem of rigorously defining concepts such as "basic" and "narrative elements" (both separately and in conjunction). Moreover, no study to date has succeeded in demonstrating any mathematically admissible kernel configuration to be either necessary or impossible.

In contrast to the "totalism" of the first two approaches, the last model is the most moderate in scope but, for the same reason, offers the most promise for eventual success. It depends on the construction of "regional grammars" for genres belonging to smaller and more manageable classes of literary forms (whether limited by a time period, literary school, or any other factor). The grammar of formations and transformations within a system of neighbouring generic forms should be much easier to pursue, especially given that most genres are defined "in relation to the genres adjacent to it" (Todorov, *Fantastic* 23) ⁶. Eventually, successful research projects of this kind, hinging on one another, might evolve from one or more systemic nuclei into a grid of interlocking genre clusters which could even surpass the mere sum of their constituents ⁷.

⁵ U. Margolin, *On Three Types of Deductive Models in Genre Theory*, "Zagadnienia Rozdajów Literackich" 1974, t. 17, pp. 5-19.

⁶ The same opinion is expressed by J. Hvišč.

⁷ For an illuminating outline of the issue related to the meaning of the term "theory" see P. Livingston's *Literary Knowledge*, pp. 13-31.

The criteria employed in generic analyses should avoid an easy attention to superficiality: as Stephen Neale points out in *Genre*⁸, generic specificity depends not on the presence of any particular narrative elements (or even their sets) but on their global "combinations and articulations". A good generic definition ought thus to capture the essential "deep structure" of a genre prior to its manifold "surface" manifestations. Tied to the formulation of a pragmatic theory of literature, the development of systematic theory of genres looms as a pressing task which, apart from other goals, should offer us some means of critical orientation in the universe of paper which expands almost as fast as the one which it tries to describe.

MASA KRYTYCZNA: LITERATURA MASOWA A KRYTYKA GATUNKÓW

STRESZCZENIE

Zasadniczym tematem eseju jest istniejący w krytycznej świadomości podział obszaru literatury na tę "niską" (masową, rozrywkową, *Trivialliteratur*) i "wysoką" (artystyczną, proponującą wzorce i wartości). Autor podważa zasadność tego tradycyjnego podejścia do literatury, wskazując jego nieprzystawalność do sytuacji w kulturze końca XX wieku. Charakterystyczna dla tej kultury obfitość technologii produkcji, reprodukcji i komunikowania, doprowadziła do potopu informacyjnego, w którym nie sposób dostrzec czy kreować wartości artystycznych (czy innych) wedle wykształconych w epokach nie-masowych kryteriów estetycznych i aksjologicznych.

Szansę ocalenia aksjologii, a zarazem zdobycia narzędzia orientującego krytykę w chaotycznym świecie współczesnej literatury, widzi autor eseju w skonstruowaniu "lokalnych gramatyk gatunkowych" (tj. "gramatyk" małych klas utworów, np. form literackich w obrębie jakiegoś okresu czasu czy szkoły literackiej). Postulując powyższe, ostrzega jednak zarazem przed niebezpieczeństwami powierzchowności i łatwych, ale pustych totalizacji, na które krytyka gatunkowa wydaje się szczególnie podatna.

⁸ S. Neale, *Genre*, London 1980.