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A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory

by Jason Mittell

This essay argues that genres are cultural categories that surpass the boundaries of media texts and operate within industry, audience, and cultural practices as well. Offering a television-specific approach, the article explores media genres by incorporating contemporary cultural theory and exemplifying its discursive approach with a brief case study.

Every aspect of television exhibits a reliance on genre. Most texts have some generic identity, fitting into well-entrenched generic categories or incorporating genre mixing (as in “dramedies,” such as *Ally McBeal*, or blends, such as *Make Me Laugh*, a comedy/game show). Industries rely on genres in producing programs, as well as in other central practices such as self-definition (channels such as ESPN or Cartoon Network) and scheduling (locating genres within time slots, as in daytime soap operas). Audiences use genres to organize fan practices (generically determined organizations, conferences, and Websites), personal preferences, and everyday conversations and viewing practices. Likewise, academics use generic distinctions to delineate research projects and to organize special topic courses, while journalistic critics locate programs within common frameworks. Even video stores and *TV Guide* reveal that genre is the primary way to classify television’s vast array of textual options. But despite this virtual omnipresence of genre within TV, little theoretical research has explained the role of genres specifically in the context of television.

A number of factors explain this lack of theoretical exploration. Some scholars may view the vast body of genre theory produced within literary and film studies as sufficient, able to explain genre in any medium. Much literary and film genre theory, however, does not account for some of the industry and audience practices unique to television, as well as for the mixture of fictional and nonfictional programming that constitutes the lineup on nearly every TV channel. Importing genre theories into television studies without significant revision creates many difficulties when accounting for the specifics of the medium.

The greatest obstacle to the development of television-specific genre theory stems from the assumptions of traditional approaches. Most genre theory has focused on issues that may seem outdated to some media scholars. Formal and aesthetic approaches to texts or structuralist theories of generic meanings, for example,

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may seem incompatible with contemporary methods. In particular, the central questions motivating many media scholars today—how do television programs fit into historically specific systems of cultural power and politics—appear distant from those that typify genre theory.¹ Thus, a return to genre theory might imply theoretical backtracking, either to structuralism, aesthetics, or ritual theories, all of which take a back seat to current cultural studies paradigms within television studies. Even the most comprehensive discussion of television genre theory, Jane Feuer's essay in *Channels of Discourse*, ultimately concludes that genre analysis does not work as well as a paradigm for television as it has for film or literature.² So what's a media scholar to do?

The answers so far have not been fully satisfying. Many television genre scholars seem content to take genres at face value, using the labels that are culturally commonplace without giving much consideration to the meanings or usefulness of those labels. Television scholars who do “stop to smell the theory” have been quick to employ film and literary theories, often (though not always) with brief disclaimers in which they note the flaws inherent in these paradigms, while adding the now-ubiquitous phrase “more work in this area is needed.” This essay is a first step toward undertaking “more work in this area.” It proposes an alternative approach that better accounts for the cultural operations of television genre than traditional approaches. This theoretical offering is admittedly brief and does not put this theory into detailed practice, which is the ultimate goal.³ Despite these caveats, this essay may at least put the topic of television genre theory more squarely on the academic agenda and provide some ideas for further discussion.

In examining the assumptions of genre theory and putting forward a cultural approach to television genres, two aspects of the argument require clarification. First, while a television-specific approach to genre is proffered here, many of the theoretical points are applicable to (and derive from) work in other media, especially cinema studies. The conceptual basis for this argument could be applied to any medium and is not dependent on any essential qualities of television. The focus on television examples provides both a more detailed account of genre than a transmedia approach could offer and avoids the tendency toward generalization and abstraction that typifies some genre theory. Second, although I may appear critical of other methods of analysis, I do not wish to suggest that my approach is the only “correct” way to examine genres. I embrace methodological eclecticism, acknowledging that neither my approach nor any other could possibly answer every question about every generic example. At the same time, it is important to note that traditional approaches to genre have relied on a number of assumptions that should be examined and reappraised in light of contemporary theoretical paradigms.

Traditional Genre Analysis and the Textualist Assumption. Media scholars have traditionally looked at genre as a component of the text, using a variety of guiding questions and theoretical paradigms. One tradition poses *questions of definition*, looking to identify the core elements that constitute a given genre by examining texts so as to delimit the formal mechanisms constituting the essence of that

genre.⁴ Another approach, probably the most common in media studies, raises *questions of interpretation* by exploring the textual meanings of genres and situating them within larger social contexts.⁵ Within this approach, a number of specific theoretical orientations have emerged—ritual, ideological, structuralist, psycho-analytic, and cultural studies, to list some central (and potentially overlapping) paradigms.⁶ A third (and less developed) form of genre analysis poses *questions of history* to emphasize the evolutionary dynamics of genres. Here the central issue is how changing cultural circumstances bring about generic shifts.⁷

Despite this variety of methods and paradigms, most examples of genre analysis consider genre primarily as a textual attribute. We might characterize this central notion as the “textualist assumption,” a position that takes many forms. Some scholars (more common in literary theory) make explicit claims that genre is an intrinsic property of texts.⁸ Media scholars more frequently *imply* that genre is a component of a text through a number of practices—situating a genre within larger discussions of texts (as opposed to industries, audiences, or culture),⁹ mapping an internal/external distinction onto texts versus “other factors,”¹⁰ or methodologically examining a genre primarily through textual analysis.¹¹ This textualist assumption seems to have contributed to the decline in genre analysis; as cultural media scholars have moved away from textual analysis, genre has been left behind with topics like narrative and style as perceived relics of extinct methodologies.

So what is wrong with the textualist assumption? Aren’t genres just categories of texts? Certainly genres do categorize texts. We might consider that genres categorize industrial practices (such as the self-definition of the Sci-Fi Channel) or audience members (such as sci-fi fans), but in these instances the textual category precedes the industry’s and the audiences’ use of the term—science-fiction programs are the implied unifying factor within both the industry and the audience categories. This is not to suggest that genres are not primarily categories of texts, but there is a crucial difference between conceiving of genre as a textual *category* and treating it as a *component* of a text, a distinction most genre studies elide.

The members of any given category do not create, define, or constitute the category itself. A category primarily links discrete elements together under a label for cultural convenience. Although the members of a given category may all possess some inherent trait that binds them together, there is nothing intrinsic about the category itself. Think of our contemporary understanding of racial differences—while people who are categorized under the label of “black” might have dark skin (although certainly this is not always true), there is nothing inherent about dark skin that makes it a racial category. Eye color or hair color have no categorical equivalents to skin color; although these are all defining physical characteristics of human bodies, only some are considered culturally salient categories. We can accept the distinction between a biological trait (like skin color) and the cultural category that activates it into a system of differentiation (namely race)—these are related, but not identical, physical and conceptual elements. If we shifted the same biological bodies into another cultural system of difference, other physical traits could become activated as operative categories of differentiation (such as height). The physical

elements do not change, but the category does, suggesting that the category itself emerges from the relationship between the elements it groups together and the cultural context in which it operates.

The same distinction holds for media texts. We do not generally differentiate between shows that take place in Boston and those that take place in Chicago, but we do differentiate between programs set in hospitals and those set in police stations. Texts have many different components, but only some are used to define their generic properties. As many genre scholars have noted, there are no uniform criteria for genre delimitation—some are defined by setting (westerns), some by actions (crime shows), some by audience effect (comedy), and some by narrative form (mysteries).¹² This diversity of attributes suggests that there is nothing internal mandating how texts should be generically categorized. In fact, some scholars have pointed to instances where the same text became “regenrified” as cultural contexts shifted.¹³ If the same text is open enough to be categorized under various genres, then it follows that it is problematic to look for generic definitions solely within the confines of the text.

Genres are not found within one isolated text; *Wheel of Fortune* is not a genre in and of itself but a member of the generic category “game show.” Genres emerge only from the intertextual relations between multiple texts, resulting in a common category. But how do these texts interrelate to form a genre? Texts cannot interact on their own; they come together only through cultural practices such as production and reception. Audiences link programs together all the time (“This show is just a clone of that one”), as do industrial personnel (“Imagine *Friends* meets *The X-Files*”). Texts themselves do not actively link together without this cultural activity. Even when one text explicitly references another (as in the case of allusions, parodies, spin-offs, and crossovers), these instances become activated only through processes of production or reception. If we watch *The Jeffersons* without knowing that it was spun off from *All in the Family*—as surely many audience members have—then we cannot usefully claim that intertextuality is relevant or active at that moment of reception. Thus, if genre is dependent on *intertextuality*, it cannot be an *inherently textual* component.

Most genre scholarship has analyzed texts because they are the most imminent and material objects of media. Logic authorizes this analytic mode as well; if we want to understand the biological taxonomic family of frogs, we need to look at the members of that category (frogs). Traditionally, we do the same for genres: if we want to understand music videos, we watch as many as we can.¹⁴ But, unlike frogs, music videos do not reproduce on their own. We cannot understand why *Unsolved Mysteries* followed *America’s Most Wanted* just by watching the shows; there is no causal mechanism or active process of generic continuity in the programs themselves. Processes of genre reproduction, such as creating new sitcoms and news magazine shows, occur only through the actions of industries and audiences, not through any action of the texts themselves.¹⁵ Likewise, there is no inherent genetic code that forbids cross-genre mating; whereas a biological imperative maintains a natural distinction between frogs and tulips, nothing genetic prevented the creation of the generically mixed music video/police drama *Cop Rock*. But the

creation of *Cop Rock* did not stem from texts themselves—*Hill St. Blues* and *Like a Virgin* did not create their own sordid offspring. The mixing of genres is a cultural process enacted by industry personnel, often in response to audience viewing practices. While we may want to study frogs to understand their biological category, texts themselves are insufficient to understand how genres are created, merge, evolve, or disappear. We need to look outside the texts to locate the range of sites in which genres operate, change, proliferate, and die out.

Instead of biological taxonomy, a better parallel for genre analysis might be brands of automobiles. Most people would locate the difference between Chevrolets and Toyotas in the internal mechanics of the two brands, noting their different designs, machinery, and engine systems. While these distinctions may be important, they are not necessarily the primary ways the two brands differ. Many differences in automobile brands are established through industrial practices—manufacturing styles, labels, marketing, corporate reputation, and nationality—and cultural circulation—driver preferences, press accounts, consumer ratings, and advertising. In some extreme cases, the two brands may contain identical parts, be assembled in the same plant, and utilize indistinguishable internal mechanics; for instance, car experts Tom and Ray Magliozzi of *Car Talk* fame wrote in 1993 that “Chevy and Toyota build a car together in California. At Toyota dealers, they call it a Corolla, and at Chevy dealers, it’s called the Geo Prizm.”¹⁶ In this case, the differences are completely cultural, not mechanical, but cars are always cultural products, accruing meanings and associations through their widespread production and use, links that are not guaranteed by their mechanical essence or internal design. Automobiles are also clearly historical—few would argue that the essence of a Chevy is the same today as it was in 1920. Mechanical designs, corporate structure, consumer use, and cultural associations have all shifted dramatically, yet some scholars treat genres as timeless essences defined by an inner core rather than constituted by changing cultural practices.

Thus, genres are *not* intrinsic to texts; they are constituted by the processes that some scholars have labeled “external” elements, such as industrial and audience practices. But we cannot simply replace an intrinsic textual approach to genre with an extrinsic contextual theory. The dualities between text and context, internal and external, are artificial and arbitrary.¹⁷ We need to look beyond the text as the locus for genre and instead locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts.¹⁸ The boundaries between texts and the cultural practices that constitute them (primarily production and reception) are too shifting and fluid to be reified. Texts exist only through their production and reception, so we cannot make the boundary between texts and their material cultural contexts absolute. Genres transect these boundaries, with production, distribution, promotion, and reception practices all working to categorize media texts into genres. Emphasizing the boundaries between elements “internal” and “external” to genres only obscures how genres transect these fluid borders.

To summarize, genres have traditionally been treated as textual components. Although genres are categories of texts, texts themselves do not determine, contain, or produce their own categorization. Generic categories are intertextual and

hence operate more broadly than within the bounded realm of a media text. Even though texts certainly bear marks that are typical of genres, these textual conventions are not what define the genre. Genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural contexts. Textual analysis cannot examine media genres as they operate at the categorical level—there are texts that are categorized by genres, but their textual sum does not equal the whole of the genre. Instead, we must separate the practice of analyzing generically labeled texts from analyzing genre as a cultural category. Analyses of generic texts are certainly worthwhile, but they do not explain how genres themselves operate as categories. We thus need to rethink genres in different terms and propose their analysis using different methods. But what is this new approach?¹⁹

Discursive Practices and Generic Clusters. Decentering the text within genre analysis might cause some methodological hesitation. If genres are components of texts, there is a clear site of analysis on which to focus our critical attention. But if genres are not properties of texts, where exactly might we find and analyze them? While there are certainly many theoretical approaches that we might adopt to explain how a category becomes culturally salient, it is more useful to conceive of genres as *discursive practices*. By regarding genres as a property and function of discourse, we are able to examine the ways in which various forms of communication work to constitute generic definitions and meanings.

This discursive approach emerges out of contemporary poststructuralist theories, as genre seems to fit perfectly into the account of discursive formations offered by Michel Foucault.²⁰ For Foucault, discursive formations are historically specific systems of thought, conceptual categories that work to define cultural experiences within larger systems of power. He notes that discursive formations do not emerge from a centralized structure or from a single site of power but are built bottom up from disparate micro-instances. Even though discursive formations are often marked by discontinuities and irregularities, they follow an overall regularity and fit into a specific cultural context's larger "regime of truth." Discursive formations often appear to be "natural" or internal properties of beings, such as humans or texts, but they are actually culturally constituted and mutable. Like Foucault's notion of the "author function" of discourses, we can approach genre as a function of discourse that is neither intrinsic nor essential to texts.²¹ All of these features of discursive formations hold for genres as well, as will be argued below.

To examine generic discourses, we should analyze the contextualized generic practices that circulate around and through texts. We might look at what audiences and industries say about genres, what terms and definitions circulate around any given instance of a genre, and how specific cultural concepts are linked to particular genres. These discursive practices can be broken down into three basic types by how they work to constitute genres: *definition* (for instance, "this show is a sitcom because it has a laugh track"), *interpretation* ("sitcoms reflect and reinforce the status quo"), and *evaluation* ("sitcoms are better entertainment than soap operas").²² These discursive utterances may seem to reflect on an already established genre, but they are themselves constitutive of that genre; they are the practices that define

genres, delimit their meanings, and posit their cultural value. If genres are formed through intertextual relationships between texts, then the discursive enunciations that link texts become the site and material for genre analysis.

This discursive approach offers a new framework by which to examine media texts—instead of examining texts as bounded and stable objects of analysis, texts should be viewed as sites of discursive practice. A discursive approach to genre necessitates that we decenter the text as the primary site of genre but not to the extent that we ignore texts completely; media texts still function as important locales of generic discourses and they must be examined on a par with other sites, such as audience and industrial practices. Television programs explicitly cite generic categories, and advertising, promotions, parodies, and intertextual references within shows are all vital sites of generic discursive practice. In decentering the text from genre analysis, we cannot jettison the text as a site of discursive generic operation; rather, we should simply acknowledge that an isolated text does not define a genre on its own.

Generic discourses are best examined and mapped in their surface enunciations, rather than interpreted and “read into” like media texts. We should not attempt to interpret generic discourses by suggesting what statements “really mean” or express beneath the surface. Instead, we should focus on the breadth of discursive enunciations around any given instance, mapping out as many articulations of genre as possible and situating them within larger cultural contexts and relations of power. For example, to examine the quiz show genre, we should look beyond singular sites such as texts or production practices. Instead, we should gather as many diverse enunciations of the genre from the widest possible range of sources, including corporate documents, press reviews and commentaries, trade journal accounts, parodies, regulatory policies, audience practices, production manuals, other media representations, advertisements, and the texts themselves. Linking together these numerous discourses will begin to suggest more large-scale patterns of generic definitions, meanings, and hierarchies, but we should arrive at these macro-features through an analysis of micro-instances. Although discontinuities and ruptures among definitions, meanings, and values will certainly emerge, generic discourses point toward larger regularities that provide the appearance of stability and coherence in a genre.

Our goal in analyzing generic discourses is not to arrive at the “proper” definition, interpretation, or evaluation of a genre, but to explore the material ways in which genres are culturally defined, interpreted, and evaluated. Shifting our focus away from projects that attempt to provide the ultimate definition or interpretation will enable us to look at the ways in which these definitions, interpretations, and evaluations are part of the larger cultural operations of genre. Instead of guiding questions, such as “What does a given genre mean?” or “How can we define a genre?” we might look at widespread cultural practices of genre interpretation and definition, leading to questions such as “What does a given genre mean for a specific community?” or “How is a genre’s definition strategically articulated by socially situated groups?” This approach requires much more specific and detailed research into a genre at a given historical instance, suggesting that sweeping accounts of a genre

are probably partial and incomplete. This is not to say that genres do not have large-scale diachronic and cross-media histories; larger trends are valid objects of study, but the abstract and generalized mode of media history most common to generic historiography tends to efface specific instances in the name of macro-patterns. We can begin to build a more satisfying macro-account of a genre's history from the bottom up, by collecting micro-instances of generic discourses in historically specific moments and examining the resulting large-scale patterns and trajectories. This bottom-up approach reflects how genres actually form and evolve—out of the specific cultural practices of industries and audiences, not out of macro-structures.

Since genre discourses do not stem solely from a central source—be it industrial or ideological—we need to look at genre history as a fluid and active process, not as a teleological tale of textual rise and fall. Thus, instead of typical questions of definition or interpretation, we should foreground *questions of cultural process* in our attempts to analyze media genres. A number of scholars have proposed the notion of genre as a discursive process, although it has only recently been explored as a more fully realized approach.²³ The key work in this area is Rick Altman's recent book *Film/Genre*. Although Altman provides many compelling and convincing arguments for a process-based approach to genre—points that are congruent with my approach—he finally argues for augmenting his influential textualist semantic/syntactic theory of genre with a consideration of the pragmatic aspects of genre as well. This structuralist textual tradition is not easily compatible with his poststructuralist revision of generic processes and pragmatics. Despite Altman's foregrounding of cultural processes, textual structure still remains central to his approach, making it difficult to provide an account of how genre categories operate outside the bounds of the text.

We should examine the cultural processes of generic discourses before examining the texts that have been traditionally viewed as identical to the genre itself. Specifically, genre theory should account for how generic processes operate within cultural contexts, how industry and audience practices constitute genres, and how genres can be both fluid over time yet fairly coherent at any given moment. We should also examine the specificities of the medium; Altman convincingly argues that the film industry promotes multiple genres around any single movie to maximize audience appeals. Even though we may find similar trends in television, we cannot simply import such an argument into a distinct medium with vitally different industrial imperatives and audience practices. We should carefully adapt the theoretical advances offered within film studies to the particularities of television genres, as well as develop specific insights from the detailed analysis of television genres. This approach synthesizes previous accounts of generic processes so as to offer a model specifically for the study of television genres, while presenting theoretical notions that might be useful in the study of other media as well.

Approaching genres as discursive formations enables us to balance notions of genres as both active processes and stable formations. Although genres are constantly in flux and under definitional negotiation, generic terms are still salient enough that most people would agree on a common working definition for any genre. Even if we cannot provide an essential definition of a genre's core identity,

we all still know a sitcom when we see one. Discourse theory offers a model for such stability in flux—genres work as *discursive clusters*, and certain definitions and meanings come together at any given time to suggest a coherent and clear genre. But these clusters are contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new meanings and definitions in different contexts. In addition, these clusters are hollow. They are formed from the outside. Although the gathering and linking of meanings create the appearance of a generic core, this center is as contingent and fluid as more “fringe” discourses. At any given moment, a genre might appear quite stable, static, and bounded; however that same genre might operate differently in another historical or cultural context. Using this approach to generic clusters, we can see how genres are simultaneously fluid and static, active processes and stable products. Thus, genre historiography should provide a genealogy of discursive shifts and rearticulations to account for a genre’s evolution and redefinition, not just a chronology of changing textual examples.

Another central facet to this approach is that the generic discourses within a given cluster are *not* solely media texts. The discourses that constitute a generic cluster are the enunciations and practices that *locate* a text within a genre (including textual discourses as well). In the case of quiz shows, for example, it is not the individual programs that constitute the genre but the production and reception discourses that articulate programs together and situate them within the genre. The texts themselves are certainly brought into the genre and are components of the cluster, but they cannot be seen separately from the ways industries and audiences (broadly conceived) position them within or in relation to the genre. Thus, *Win Ben Stein’s Money* should not be examined as a textual example (or a counterexample) of a quiz show but as a site of generic discourse in which competing (and harmonious) voices and practices work to position the text in relation to the genre.

Needless to say, this cultural approach to genre is of a somewhat different order than the traditional methods of genre analysis. The three typical approaches to genres outlined above—definitional, interpretive, and historical—all engage in *textual generic criticism*; they look at genre texts to uncover and identify definitions, meanings, and changes. Other approaches, such as psychological examinations of generic pleasures, also begin with the text in order to analyze the larger operations of the genre.²⁴ While we might accept all of these methodological options in the name of theoretical pluralism, we must recognize that if we conceive of genres as cultural categories, then most typical approaches do not actually analyze *genres* per se. Rather, they use generic categories to delimit their textual projects but do not engage in the level of categorical analysis that an account of genre necessitates. It is “putting the cart before the horse” to analyze the texts of a given genre in the name of analyzing the genre itself; instead, we must explore the categorical operation of a genre before looking closely at its component texts if we want to understand the genre in cultural practice.²⁵ Once we chart out how genres are culturally constituted, defined, interpreted, and evaluated, we might look to other methods to analyze common textual forms, psychological pleasures, or structuring principles, but we should first understand how genres operate culturally to utilize the assumed generic terms that delineate such a study.

Exemplifying Genre Analysis with Michael Jackson's Music Videos. As argued above, genres are categorical clusters of discursive processes that transect texts via their cultural interactions with industries, audiences, and broader contexts. We might begin a genre analysis by starting with a textual example, an industrial practice, a historical shift, or an audience controversy, but our study needs to account for how all of these realms interact in tandem. To study genres as cultural categories, we must examine discourses that run through texts but are not found solely within them. Using abstract theory is not conducive to this cultural studies model, however, because the goal is to study genres as they actually occur in specific instances.

As a case in point, how might Michael Jackson's trio of successful music videos from 1983, *Billie Jean*, *Beat It*, and *Thriller*, be understood within the context of the music video genre? Traditional methods of genre analysis might offer specific text-based approaches to the case study. A hypothetical definitional approach might try to isolate the core elements that comprise the genre, positing that the genre is defined by the musical song, with the video elements taking a secondary role. These videos would represent a spectrum from core (*Billie Jean* as prototypical dance/performance piece) to periphery (*Thriller* as a generic exception, with fourteen minutes of narrative mixed with song and dance), to *Beat It*, on the genre's fringe (with its integration of narrative and a brief nonmusical segment). An interpretive approach might relate these videos to their social situations by showing how each is symptomatic of cultural anxieties or concerns. Thus, these videos might be read as embodying rebellion as a countercultural urge (*Beat It*'s gang fight, *Thriller*'s monsters), while acknowledging that they recuperate the status quo in the end in the name of dominant ideology.²⁶ A typical historical approach might chart the shift from performance-centered videos like *Billie Jean* to the narrative model of *Beat It*, with *Thriller* representing the extreme possibilities of a narrative music video that would rarely be matched. This approach might situate the videos within the context of industrial practices and cultural contexts, but would look primarily to the videos themselves for the site of genre definition and meaning.

All of these approaches might offer valuable insights, but some questions would not be adequately addressed using these approaches: How do MTV's practices help constitute the genre? How do audiences use genre distinctions to understand these videos? How do other systems of cultural differentiation, such as race, affect this genre? How do musical genre categories operate in this case study? In presenting a brief analysis of this specific instance, the following account of these videos is intentionally narrow in scope, focused solely on the industrial practices involving these music videos, especially MTV's role in defining the genre. Since this approach looks at specific instances in action, as opposed to broader accounts of the genre as a whole, this case study will not focus on the same scope as the hypothetical analysis offered above. What will be illustrated is how the music video operated as a cultural category for MTV at the particular historical moment when this trio of videos was produced. By emphasizing the realm of industrial practice, this essay will not address how audiences, critics, artists, or texts contributed to the generic cluster at this historical moment—an entire article (at least) would be necessary to address these

topics. However, this case study does exemplify how generic categories are mobilized in specific instances and how industrial practices work to define genres, linking them to cultural hierarchies and systems of difference.

In 1983, MTV was a comparatively new entity, still establishing its industrial practices and constructing an audience.²⁷ While the channel was known for featuring the newly emergent music video genre, MTV used a particularly narrow definition of this genre to reach its target audience—the channel notoriously excluded black artists in the name of featuring only “rock” videos.²⁸ MTV’s industrial practice is not separable from an abstract notion of the definition of the genre because MTV effectively defined the music video through its choice of what to program and what to exclude. This is not to say that if MTV excluded a music video, it would be unrecognizable as such; rather, the common-sense definitions of the genre as circulating within American culture were expressly tied to (and constituted by) MTV’s industrial practices. MTV defined the dominant conception of the genre. Press accounts of the music video in the early 1980s mention white artists such as MTV staples Duran Duran, Culture Club, and the Stray Cats as typical music video stars, while few articles name any black artists before Jackson’s breakthrough in 1983. While there were other outlets for music video exhibition, they either directly followed MTV’s white-centric lead (like NBC’s *Friday Night Videos*) or offered explicit counterprogramming (like newly formed BET’s *Video Soul*), thereby allowing MTV to define the terms of the genre’s mainstream. Prior to the Jackson videos and his subsequent crossover success, MTV delimited the boundaries of the music video genre by using its narrow notions of target audience (white suburban youth) and musical style (new wave, heavy metal, classic rock, and white pop).

MTV drew upon previously held generic discourses constituted within the popular music and radio industries, using a definition of “rock” so as to exclude black artists and audiences, a move that effectively effaced the racially hybridized origins of rock as a musical style.²⁹ Through their industrial practices, MTV actively linked a number of cultural discourses within the generic cluster of the music video: commodified rock rebellion, segregated suburban culture, a “rock” performance style specifically embodying a straight white male identity, and a posture of cutting-edge newness and anticommercial style. MTV’s practices constructed a particularly narrow target audience of young white suburban straight boys, although it crossed over into female and gay tastes, as evident in such early MTV stars as Cyndi Lauper and Culture Club, far more than including racial diversity.³⁰

Although industrial practices have been discussed as important in the constitution of genres, this case study highlights some of the specifics of television that film models cannot address.³¹ Traditional accounts that examine production practices in constituting genres cannot explain MTV’s practices, because the channel did not produce any of the music videos it aired (or excluded). Yet MTV’s practices of selecting videos, highlighting particular artists and musical styles, framing videos through VJ introductions, and bringing the generic texts to cable-wired households all worked to shape the genre’s definitions, meanings, and cultural values. An analysis of the television industry’s generic practices must look beyond production to how exhibition, advertising, and textual framing all work to constitute television genres.

Into this context of MTV's "white-only" programming came the release of what would turn out to be the best-selling musical album of all time, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. MTV maintained its controversial policy by initially refusing to play the first two videos from *Thriller*, *Billie Jean* and *Beat It*. Jackson's label, CBS Records, saw the crossover commercial potential of Jackson's album and pressured MTV to program Jackson's videos in its lineup, allegedly threatening to withdraw all CBS artists from MTV if Jackson continued to be excluded. Facing this pressure (as well as Jackson's tremendous success in record sales), MTV yielded and featured *Billie Jean*, eliciting tremendous audience response. *Beat It* followed soon thereafter and, by March 1983, both videos were in heavy rotation on MTV.³² The third video from the album, the title track *Thriller*, was even more unusual for MTV—a fourteen-minute high-budget narrative film integrating the song into a larger horror story. MTV gladly accepted this video, given Jackson's overwhelming commercial success both with album sales and on MTV. The network featured *Thriller* prominently in December 1983, with significant promotion and fanfare. The success of Jackson's videos helped change MTV's racially segregated programming policies, bringing in additional black artists such as Prince and Tina Turner and adding legitimacy to the emerging music video format.

But MTV's industrial practices alone did not define the terrain of the music video in 1983; active audience voices countered MTV's policies. These voices are not easily accessible, except when they come from locations of cultural capital and access to major media. We are left with a number of press accounts and critiques of MTV's segregation policies, protests of MTV by such outspoken artists as Rick James and David Bowie, the anti-MTV practices of BET and CBS Records, and the staggering sales of Jackson's album and *Making of Thriller* video. These voices and practices criticized MTV's conception of the genre by positing different discursive links within the generic cluster—calling attention to the implicit racism in MTV's "rock-only" policy, opening up the music video to a wider range of audiences, and highlighting the crossover appeal of black artists like Jackson. MTV altered its policies in reaction to these voices, not just because the marketplace demanded change (as MTV alleged), but in response to industrial threats from CBS and such high-profile white artists as Bowie. This is not to say that the constitution of the music video genre is simply a top-down practice, with the industry mandating public tastes. Instead, more accessible industrial discourses can be used to examine this moment of generic shift; to expand this account of these videos, one would look to other sites of discourse, such as fan practices and alternative press accounts.

While MTV justified its racial ban primarily based on definitions of musical genre (rock instead of R&B or soul) and target audience, the channel also referenced the textual form of *Beat It*'s opening shot: a twenty-second prologue without musical accompaniment. MTV claimed that this was not truly a music video and it would play the video only if this nonmusical beginning were edited out.³³ Although this policy was not upheld for long, and later videos regularly incorporated nonmusical segments (although few to the degree of *Thriller*), this moment is a very specific instance of the processes of generic differentiation activated in a public cultural forum. As an invested and powerful player in the music video business, MTV made



Figure 1. Michael Jackson's *Beat It* video begins with this shot in a diner. There is no musical accompaniment until . . .



Figure 2. . . the music kicks in and these gang members begin their choreography. *Michael Jackson: HISstory* (1995). Courtesy of Columbia Home Video.

a brief claim for the genre's proper formal definition, using form as an excuse to maintain a controversial policy. Generic practices like these occur often, whether a network forces a program to "genre" itself more explicitly (such as ABC's imposition of a laugh track on *Sports Night*) or public controversies ensue over a genre's appropriate content (such as adult themes in the cartoon shows *Beavis & Butthead* and *South Park*). Previous modes of genre analysis do not account well for these cultural practices, because they occur outside the boundaries of the text. The ability to analyze the ways in which genre definitions, meanings, and evaluations intermingle with cultural power relations is the primary advantage to an approach that examines genres as discursive processes.

Thus, in this case study, we see the music video genre at the nexus of a number of crucial discourses and practices—race-based distinctions and hierarchies, industrial debates over the genre's proper target audience, assumptions of the genre's textual "essence," Jackson's growing star persona, and public protests over MTV's exclusionary policies. No single one of these elements defined the genre in full; rather, we must look at the conjuncture of these various discourses into a generic cluster. (Needless to say, other cases would necessitate considering many more cultural, industrial, and audience practices as formative of the genre's meaning, definition, and cultural value at a given moment.)

Conclusion: Five Principles of Cultural Genre Analysis. This brief example shows the need for detailed specificity, not overarching generalities, in exploring media genres. We can never know a genre's meaning in its entirety or arrive at its ultimate definition because this is not the way genres operate; the music video is a wide-ranging cluster of discourses, not a uniform transhistorical essence. Genre definitions are always partial and contingent, emerging out of specific cultural relations, rather than abstract textual ideals. We need to examine how genres operate as conceptual frameworks, situating media texts within larger contexts of understanding. The goal of studying media genres is not to make broad assertions about the genre as a whole but to understand how genres work within specific instances and how they fit into larger systems of cultural power. This new approach can better our understanding of how media are imbricated within their contexts of production and reception and how media work to constitute our vision of the world. In conclusion, five core points need to be highlighted:

Genre analyses should account for the particular attributes of the medium. We cannot simply superimpose genre definitions from film or literature onto television. Certainly, medium distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred with the rise of technologies such as home video and integrated digital media, and we cannot regard "medium" as an absolute fixed category (any more than genre). But film genre processes cannot account for many specific television practices; indeed, television's constant integration of fiction and nonfiction, narrative and nonnarrative, especially confounds the dependence on narrative structure typical of most film genre criticism. Similarly, film has few equivalents to genre-defined channels or genre-delimited scheduling practices. These are commonplace in television, especially today.³⁴

Audience practices of genre consumption and identification also seem to be different for television, featuring more active practices of fan involvement with ongoing series, especially serials.³⁵ While we should not essentialize television's medium-defining practices, we need to account for the specific ways in which it operates at a particular moment. We need to consider the medium's particular features as a component of a larger push toward specificities in genre analysis.

Genre studies should negotiate between specificity and generality. Obviously, genre is a categorical concept and therefore somewhat transcends specific instances. But traditional genre analysis has tended to avoid detailed specificities in lieu of sweeping generalizations. A more nuanced approach can account for this tension more effectively. There are two general directions from which to approach any genre analysis. One way might start with a genre and analyze one specific element of it. That would mean focusing on a historic turning point (like the quiz show scandals), isolating a core social issue (like representations of minorities on sitcoms), or tracing a genre's origins (like the prehistory of music videos). By narrowing the focus to a specific aspect of a genre's definition, meaning, history, or cultural value, we avoid the problems of overgeneralization that have been typical of more traditional genre studies, as well as acknowledge that genres are too multifaceted and broad to be understood in their totality.

Another way to approach genre analysis would be to start with a specific media case study and analyze how genre processes operate within this specific instance, as in the above case of MTV and Michael Jackson's music videos. Such projects might isolate a variety of starting points—an industrial formation (like the Cartoon Network), audience practices (like science fiction fan conventions), a textual instance (like genre parody in *The Simpsons*), a policy decision (like educational programming mandates), or a moment in social history (like the coverage of civil rights struggles in news and documentaries). Each of these topics may serve as the nexus point of analysis, but we cannot let them dictate the methodological terrain of the entire study. Just because we start with a textual case to motivate our study, we must still examine how genres transcend textual boundaries and operate within audience and industry practices. We can start with isolated instances, but our analysis must incorporate the interrelated operations of genre that weave through the multiple realms of media.

Genre histories should be written using discursive genealogies. Genre histories have traditionally chronicled generic texts, often using both definitional and interpretive approaches. To understand genres as cultural categories, we need different methods; generic discourses are not deep repositories of hidden meanings, formal structures, or subtextual insights. Rather, we should follow the model of Foucauldian genealogy, emphasizing breadth over depth and collecting as many discursive instances surrounding a given instance of generic process as we can.³⁶ By viewing the surfaces of discursive genre clusters, large-scale patterns and meanings will emerge, but we should resist plugging these findings into old systems of macro-structures or interpretive generalizations. Insights into genre best emerge

out of detailed research and specific cultural articulations of definition, interpretation, and evaluation rather than from critical analyses of form or text. To accommodate this attention to discursive process, genre analysis should gather instances of genre activity in interrelated sites of audience, industrial, and cultural practices.

Genres should be understood in cultural practice. As noted above, genres are cultural processes that are best examined in specific historical instances. But one important aspect of genre studies builds upon literary critic Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between historical genres—those that are found in cultural practice—and theoretical genres—those that form ideal categories for scholars.³⁷ Theoretical genres can be useful for positing links among texts and practices that were not previously operative, positing new categories that might later be taken up as more widespread genres (such as *film noir*).³⁸ Before trying to posit ideal categories and look beyond the historical operation of genres, however, we should study how genres are operative and constituted in everyday life. Attempts to establish theoretical models of a genre's formal mechanics or deep structures of meaning cannot tell us how genres work within a historical context, how they evolve and emerge, or how they fit into larger relations of power. If our goal is to understand genres as cultural categories, we should first examine the discourses that constitute the category before examining the texts that seem delimited by the genre. While certain instances might dictate the proposal of new categories, in general it seems that analyzing the operation of historical genres and their relation to cultural power seems a more pressing concern for media scholars.

Genres should be situated within larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations. The goal of most cultural media scholarship is not to understand the media in and of themselves, but rather to look at the workings of media as a component of social contexts and power relations. One of the reasons that genre studies have been generally absent within cultural approaches to the media is that genre has traditionally been conceived as a formal textual element and thus not conducive to the study of mediated politics. Even when scholars do approach genre by foregrounding cultural power relations, such as in the traditions of ideological and structuralist criticism, they tend to analyze genres at a level of abstraction ill suited to understanding the specifics of cultural practice. By looking at genre as a contextual discursive process, we can situate genres within larger regimes of power and better understand their cultural operation. Since genres are systems of categorization and differentiation, linking genre distinctions to other systems of difference can point to the workings of cultural power.

How these links might play out are limitless. Although there is certainly a strong tradition connecting genre analysis and gender differences, for instance, we can broaden this approach to include other axes of identity differentiation as well, such as race, age, sexuality, class, and nationality. We might also look at how genre differences are imbricated within hierarchies of cultural value, both among genres and within one specific genre. Drawing upon the influential studies of cultural distinctions by Pierre Bourdieu, we could map a genre like the

talk show onto larger distinctions such as aesthetic value, audience identity, codes of realism, and hierarchies of taste. This analysis would produce a spectrum of generic conventions and assumptions (such as “tabloid” versus “hard” news) that are explicitly tied to greater systems of cultural power and differentiation. This approach to genre distinction avoids the tradition of text-centered analysis, accounting for the ways in which cultural agents articulate genre differentiation as constitutive of genre definitions, meanings, and values. Using this mode of examination, cultural media scholars could turn to genre analysis without abandoning their larger political projects.

Not only does this approach *enable* us to deal with cultural politics, it *requires* that we situate genre within power relations. Just as Foucault asserts that discourses are always processes of power, genres are also constituted by power relations. Genres are not neutral categories but are situated within larger systems of power and thus come “fully loaded” with political implications. This is not to suggest that we limit our genre analyses to cases in which cultural politics are obviously foregrounded. Instead, we should look for the political implications and effects of genre distinctions in seemingly “nonpolitical” case studies as well. If we accept that genres are constituted by cultural discourses, we need to acknowledge that those enunciations are always situated within larger systems of power and that the political can never be effaced from these generic processes. For instance, the importation of film cartoons to television in the 1950s might seem most relevant as part of a (potentially apolitical) industrial history. But in doing such a history, we can also be attuned to the political implications of this industrial shift—the scheduling of cartoons on Saturday mornings effectively created a marginalized location for the genre that redefined films designed for mass audiences in movie houses as “kids-only” fare. This generic redefinition linked a number of hierarchies of cultural value, assumptions of “proper” content (such as controversies over violence and the excision of racial stereotypes), and limited visions of children’s entertainment into the discursive cluster of the cartoon. Even in cases in which politics might appear secondary, foregrounding how specific articulations of genres emerge out of power relations can point toward some important insights concerning both genres and larger cultural issues.

This overall approach to television genre analysis—examining genres as clusters of discursive processes running through texts, audiences, and industries via specific cultural practices—places genre analysis back onto the agenda of critical media studies. The traditional scholarly practices of analyzing generic texts will not—and should not—simply disappear. Much has been gained by all of those prior methodological and theoretical approaches, ranging from more careful formal understanding of horror narratives to critiques of the structures underlying the typical western film. Nonetheless, we need to question the “given” in these approaches—that there is an already established generic category that can serve as the foundation for genre analysis. By first examining genres as cultural categories, unpacking the processes of definition, interpretation, and evaluation that constitute these categories in our everyday experiences with media, we can arrive at a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of how genres work to shape our

media experiences, how media work to shape our social realities, and how generic categories can then be used to ground our study of media texts.

Notes

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1. This is not true for all approaches to genre. Certainly this type of political question motivated many ideological and structuralist accounts of film and television genres. Nonetheless, contemporary media studies has shifted toward more specific accounts of power and away from the broad macro-examinations that typify structuralism.
2. Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 138–60, 157. Feuer's essay is certainly the most-read overview of television genre analysis and has defined the field of genre studies for television for more than a decade.
3. I trace out the major trends in genre theory and consider some of the more subtle nuances and theoretical implications of this approach and offer a number of case studies to put my theory into practice in Jason Mittel, "Telegenres: Television Genres as Cultural Categories" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2000).
4. For one of the few definition-based analyses of television genres (in conjunction with film), see Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1990); for a paradigmatic example of this approach within film studies, see Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
5. For a range of typical interpretive accounts of television genres, see John Dennington and John Tulloch, "Cops, Consensus and Ideology," *Screen Education* 20 (1976): 37–46; E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987); David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2d ed. (London: Blackwell Press, 1997); Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974). For more influential film examples, see Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); and John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 2d ed. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984).
6. Note that some of these critical schools do not examine texts solely for meanings. This is especially true of cultural studies, the paradigm that I wish to foreground in my own approach to genre. However, some cultural studies work does pose core meanings to genres, even as they deny the intrinsic and textual basis of these meanings.
7. A paradigmatic historical genre analysis is Feuer's account of the sitcom. A more satisfying and complex historical account of a film genre is Rick Altman, *The American*

Film Musical (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), although Altman refutes a number of his positions in his more recent work in genre theory, Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

8. Literary scholar E. D. Hirsch offers a theory of one correct “intrinsic genre” corresponding to the author’s intended meaning. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
9. For one typical example, see Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 85–93. Turner places genre under the chapter of “Film Narrative,” even though he defines genre as produced by texts, industries, and audiences. Another example is Leah R. Vande Berg, Lawrence A. Wenner, and Bruce E. Gronbeck, eds., *Critical Approaches to Television* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), which places generic criticism in the chapter “Text-Centered Approaches to Television Criticism.”
10. Feuer specifically divides her analysis between media developments that are “internal to the genre”—namely textual form and content—and those that are external, such as cultural and industrial changes. While this division may seem useful, this false internal/external binary leads us away from how genres operate within cultural contexts. Under Feuer’s model of history, the genre itself is a collection of texts that all bear “internal” markings of the sitcom; “external forces” are useful in understanding the meanings and changes in these texts at any time, but they are not directly constitutive of the genre itself. Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” 151. For another example, see Mumford, *Love and Ideology*, 17–18. In arguing against a definition of the soap opera based on audience pleasures or uses, she calls for a definition “that focuses instead on the specific characteristics of the genre itself”—namely the text.
11. This mode of analysis is typical of nearly all the approaches to genre described above.
12. Altman suggests that traditionally genres have been viewed as equal to the corpus that they seem to identify and that this corpus is defined by a common structure and topic. He goes on to consider Wittgenstein’s concept of “family relations” concerning genres but argues convincingly that genre definitions are contingent and historical, arriving through “use,” not internal structures. Altman, *Film/Genre*, 22–24, 61–99.
13. See Steve Neale, “Questions of Genre,” in Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 159–83, for his discussion of *The Great Train Robbery*’s reclassification from crime film into western, drawing on Charles Musser’s research. Altman addresses similar cases in the film genres of musicals and biopics. Altman, *Film/Genre*, 30–44. I deal with a similar instance concerning animated short films from the 1930s and 1940s, which became recategorized as children’s cartoons in 1960s television. See Mittel, “Telegenres.”
14. For a detailed discussion of the role of the biological analogy in literary genre theory, see David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 2. Altman discusses the tradition of evolutionary models for film genres in Altman, *Film/Genre*, 62–68.
15. Altman offers the most compelling and detailed account of the specific processes that film industries engage in to create and modify genres, an account that is less developed in television studies. Altman, *Film/Genre*, chaps. 3–5
16. Quoted on <<http://cartalk.cars.com/Columns/CC/CC4021TXT.html>>, June 7, 1999.
17. For a provocative debate on the boundaries of the text, see John Fiske’s “Moments of Television: Neither the Text Nor the Audience,” in Ellen Seiter et al., eds., *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 56–78, and Charlotte Brunsdon’s “Text and Audience,” also in Seiter et al., *Remote Control*, 116–29.

18. This approach to media studies—examining the integrated relationships among industry, audience, text, and context—is drawn from Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of “Cagney & Lacey”* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); see also Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90–103, and Richard Johnson, “What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?” *Social Text* 16 (1987): 38–80.
19. A potential answer to this question was offered in a prescient early essay, Andrew Tudor, “Genre,” in Grant, *Film Genre Reader II*, 3–10. Although Tudor’s argument was not as influential when it first appeared in the 1970s as it deserved to be, his early critique of genre criticism highlighted what he called “the empiricist dilemma” of genres—genre critics isolate a group of texts to establish a genre’s definitional criteria, but by doing so merely reproduce the initial assumptions that led to their sample of films. Tudor proposes a rough vision of what might replace this paradoxical mode of genre criticism, namely, an account of how genres operate in the “interplay between culture, audience, films, and filmmakers.” Tudor, “Genre,” 8. Although Tudor does not offer a fully realized model for this analysis, he keenly points out that attempts to analyze genre texts are not effective ways to examine genres themselves but rather just another mode of textual analysis. I wish to extend Tudor’s critique into a mode of genre analysis that highlights the categorical aspects of genres over their textual attributes.
20. For his most central accounts of discourse, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
21. While revising this essay for publication, I read James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Naremore offers a similar link between Foucauldian theory and media genres in theorizing his “history of the idea” of *film noir*. Naremore, *More than Night*, 11.
22. There are obvious (if misleading) links among the three modes of discursive practice for genres (definition, interpretation, and evaluation) and the three models of genre theory proffered at the beginning of this essay (definition, interpretation, and history). I do not mean to equate these trios. While certainly there are more popular modes of generic historicization and scholarly modes of evaluation, historical approaches are an academic model that do not have an equal in general cultural practices; in addition, evaluative practices are much more important in everyday discourse than in scholarly research. Thus, when I discuss these discursive practices throughout the rest of this essay, I am not suggesting that they are equivalent to the scholarly traditions outlined above.
23. See Neale, “Questions of Genre”; Robert C. Allen, “Bursting Bubbles: ‘Soap Opera,’ Audiences, and the Limits of Genre,” in Seiter et al., *Remote Control*, 44–55; Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 203–18.
24. Psychological approaches primarily refer to either psychoanalytic or cognitive accounts of the pleasure derived from genres. For examples of psychoanalytic approaches, see Robin Wood, “Return of the Repressed,” in Barry K. Grant, ed., *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 164–200; Margaret Tarratt, “Monsters from the Id,” in Grant, *Film Genre Reader II*, 330–49; and Kaplan,

Rocking around the Clock. For examples of cognitive approaches to genre, see Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, esp. chap. 4; Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Noël Carroll, "Film, Emotion, and Genre," in Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, eds., *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 21–47.

25. This argument (and most appropriate cliché) is made most clearly in Tudor, "Genre," 10.
26. Altman suggests that the representation of countercultural behavior and its eventual narrative recuperation are defining features of generic entertainment, an argument I find too broad to be particularly convincing. Altman, *Film/Genre*, 144–65.
27. MTV debuted in 1981, but most commentators felt that cable did not have a significant impact until its debut on the Manhattan and Los Angeles cable systems in September 1982. See Tom McGrath, *MTV: The Making of a Revolution* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1996), 88–91.
28. Ibid., and Andrew Pollack, "Music on Cable TV Provoking a Debate," *New York Times*, November 29, 1982, D1.
29. MTV head Robert Pittman was quoted in *Variety* justifying his station's "rock-only" policy: "We hope to find more black musicians doing rock 'n' roll and new music. It's not a color barrier—it's a music barrier." Richard Gold, "Labels Limit Videos on Black Artists," *Variety*, December 15, 1982, 73+, 78.
30. See Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
31. See Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* for an influential structuralist account of how Hollywood studios produce genres. Altman heavily revises Schatz's explanation, highlighting how marketing techniques and exhibition work in film genres in addition to (and sometimes counter to) production practices. Altman, *Film/Genre*, chaps. 4–7.
32. For documentation of this chronology (with a few inconsistencies), see McGrath, *MTV*, 99–101; Steven Levy, "Ad Nauseum: How MTV Sells Out Rock & Roll," *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 1983, 30–37+, 37; J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991), 322; Christopher Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 108–9; and Dave Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 216–20.
33. This aspect of MTV's policy is difficult to research; I have found no documentation of its practices involving *Beat It* and the opening prologue. My examination is based on my recollection from when MTV first featured and discussed the *Beat It* video. Whether or not its policy was a serious concern at MTV or just an excuse to continue to exclude Jackson's videos (I would guess the latter) is less important than that the case exemplifies how conceptions of a genre's definition can operate culturally in specific instances.
34. Similar film practices include differentiating movie bills in the 1930s and 1940s into separate newsreel, animation, "A" feature, and "B" feature slots, genre-defined theaters (such as art houses or porn theaters), and generically delimited film festivals or screenings. Yet film genre analysis mostly ignores these issues. Any attempt to draw parallels between these practices and television scheduling and channel delineation would need to be rethought significantly.
35. Exceptions include film series, such as *Star Wars*, but certainly television serials are far more common.
36. Note that in arguing for "breadth" over "depth," I am not calling for studying a genre broadly. Rather, the breadth must encompass the widest range of discourses and sites

of genre operation as possible, all focused on a specific historical instance framing the genre study.

37. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 13–14.
38. Theoretical genre creation has been less common in television studies than in cinema studies. Few examples seem to take hold in TV studies as widespread generic terms. An attempt to propose a theoretical model for television genres that falls short is Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). Leibman attempts to redefine the 1950s domestic sitcom as family melodrama, but in doing so she neglects to account for the centrality of comedy and humor within both the texts and their cultural circulation.
39. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). I map out the talk-show genre onto other cultural hierarchies in Mittel, “Telegenres.”