

Gender, Genre, Film. Methodological Problems and Theoretical Approaches*

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Introduction

The categories gender and genre, to formulate the basic assumption of this presentation right at the beginning, are fundamental for the narrative film. The perception of the film text, so the hypothesis which can be formulated in various theoretical frameworks, is dependent upon these two interacting categories: the signification processes are *engendered* as well as *generic*; the perception of film genre is dependent upon gendering processes and the perception of gender is – at least partly – a consequence of processes of genre. The “narrative image” of film (to use Teresa de Lauretis’ term) is simultaneously generic and engendered, and so on.

Gender and genre as analytical categories have a history in traditional – i.e. semiotic-psychoanalytically oriented and usually textual analysis driven - film theory, and this history is in both cases problematic: gender and genre are often conceptualized as fixed, stable, a-historical and universal categories, entities which are considered categorizable by compounding lists of features, defining respectively the different genres or genders. Point of departure for such theorising is that genre is essentially a component of the text, and that genre attributes can be derived relying solely on textual analysis; or, a little more complicated in the case of gender, that universal gender attributes are imprinted into the cinematic

* Vortrag am 8. Internationalen Kongress der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Empirische Literaturtheorie, in Pécs, Ungarn, 21. – 24. August 2002.

apparatus, structuring our pleasurable perception of narrative cinema exploiting the hierarchical structure of patriarchal gender-division. (cf. Mulvey 1975) The main shortcomings of such approaches become evident if one, first, tries to theoretically bring the two categories together and second, if one tries to operationalise gender and genre empirically. The discrepancy within film theory between the theoretical obsession with the symbolic “spectator” and the almost complete ignorance of the empirical “audience” has been pointed out by many critics of traditional film theory. By studying gender and genre within one theoretical framework which is suggestive of an empirical research approach, I hope to show some alternative possibilities for film theory. The notion of genus – referring to both gender and genre – in terms of cognitive schema theory will be developed, and a methodological empirical consequence will be sketched out. But before I venture into this endeavour, let me state a humble caveat: I will neither present empirical findings nor results from studies already undertaken. I am at the beginning of my research project and intend my presentation above all to be a first move towards a theoretical and methodological framework. For me, this presentation is a great chance to engage in a discussion about methodological problems with an audience which is well-experienced in an area where I am very much the novice. In this sense I am already indebted to your patience.

Analogy without Essence: Gender and Genre

Mary Gerhart summarises the aims of her 1992 book *Genre Choices, Gender Questions* as follows: "Genre and gender as concepts share a history of misreading that ranges on the one hand from their being completely ignored to their being cast into unbreakable stereotypes on the other. My book wagers that once these two concepts are together opened to inquiry, they become central to the process of interpretation and their changing relationships afford a key to

understanding." (Gerhart 1992, 3) Gerhart's thesis – formulated for literary theory – proves to be valid for film theory, too: the concepts of genre and gender are fundamental in the formation of the signification process in narrative film and need to be brought together for productive analysis. David Bordwell's definition of film narrative as those aspects of the film plot that are responsible for the way the spectator will construct the story of the film (Bordwell et al. 1985, 24) points to the various elements that are both to be considered generic as well as engendered: The elements of the film narrative – characters, plot patterning, setting, point-of-view, temporality – function, according to Bordwell, as sign systems which are structured and organised by specific codes. (ibid.) Staying in his terminology, gender and genre could be conceptualized as two overreaching codes that determine various other codes simultaneously. Narrative verisimilitude can serve as an example here: the believability of the diegetic fictional world of a narrative film is dependent on generic knowledge. Only our generic knowledge about the Science Fiction film enables us the suspension of disbelief necessary to take filmic time-travels, disembodied space travels and star ships as everyday transportation devices for granted. And similarly do we depend on our knowledge about gender conventions in science fictional representations in order to be amused (or infuriated) by the meeting of our expectations by the film text. It is for example our gender knowledge that makes us comprehend the relations between the characters of a film narrative, which are in many cases highlighted by structures of sexual desire.

These formulations call for further distinctions and definitions of what is exactly meant by "convention", "expectation" or "knowledge," or, in other words, for a concise concept of gender and genre and their relationship.

This relationship between gender and genre has often been conceived of as self-evident and as a result appears under-theorized and essentialized. "Everybody knows a horror film when she sees one", "we can communicate effectively about films with the usage of numerous genre

names”, “we know what to expect when we go and watch a romantic comedy”. Gender appears in a similarly easily classifiable way: the gender dichotomy of male and female belongs to the most basic category in our lives and representations of this dichotomy all too often appear unconstructed and naturalized. Media theorist Irmela Schneider summarizes three main approaches to gender and genre undertaken in film theory and their respective theoretical problems: first she distinguishes the (historically early) strand of genre theory that focuses on the establishment of classification categories and taxonomies in the methodological context of structuralist linguistics. The Musical, for example, is seen to be determined by the way its structural components of music, song and dance interact in relation to the narrative and how accordingly the forms of revue, operetta, musical comedy, musical drama, the backstage musical, the rock musical, the integrated musical and so on can be observed. (cf. Cook, Bernink 209) One of the main theoretical shortcomings here lies in the unresolved problem of putting the classifying category itself in a historical context, i.e. to explain changes of genres. Second, Schneider isolates approaches that try to define genres via attributes. Taking this approach one would define a musical as a film that integrates song-and-dance-numbers in the diegetic narrative, i.e. song and dance can substitute dialogue. These approaches cannot solve a certain empirical tautology, as the genre-determining attributes are usually derived from those films that have to be isolated as genre films first. Third, Schneider makes out approaches that determine genres via the intention they aim at producing with the spectator. Films that intend to make the audience cry are to be differentiated from films that intend to horrify, or to laugh, or to sexually arouse and so on. Apart from the difficulty of taking into consideration that films might intend to produce several of these emotions within one film text, there are certain genres that can hardly be defined via their intentions: the Musical’s main intention has been made out in its capacity to “entertain,” (especially since the so-called self-reflexive Musicals are about the entertainment-industry) yet “entertainment”

can hardly be a differentiating intention within the medium of the cultural commodity film, which always has to entertain to do well at the box office. And Schneider holds that only if intentions are theorized as the spectators' satisfied (or unsatisfied) expectations can such an approach avoid the homogenisation of spectators' differing reactions to a film. Schneider finds analogies to these theoretical approaches and their problems in gender theory. The definition of gender via (physical or psychological) attributes for example leads into the same essentialism as the respective approach for genre definition: to quote Schneider: "Such a definition affirms, what is historically prone to change, wants to stabilize, what is varying." (Schneider 94).

Alternatives

In order to avoid the essentialism of gender and genre which is often produced in film theory by bringing these categories together – Tania Modleski for example talks about the Soap Opera as a predominantly female genre, as its narrative rhythm resembles the labour rhythm of housewives which implies universalising implications about women being housewives and housewives being structured by basically the same rhythm (Modleski 1987 in Schneider 2001) - Irmela Schneider suggests with Barry Grant, Steve Neale, Nick Browne, Linda Williams and others a "contextual approach" to genre. Instead of defining genre (and gender) via pre-existing attributes the categories can be developed as discursive processes or "discourse formations, which are built up within a specific context and have the possibility to change again" (Schneider 2001, 94).

Jason Mitell also goes back to Michel Foucault's notion of discourse formations when he identifies genres as textual *categories* rather than as textual *components*. Genres as discourse formations are constructed bottom-up from disparate micro instances: advertisements, production manuals, reviews, programmes, and films. Mitell emphasises that although these

instances are marked by discontinuities and irregularities, they follow a certain regularity and fit into a cultural context's larger "regime of truth." (Mitell 2001, 8) Through various discursive practices genres "transect texts via their cultural interactions with industries, audiences, and broader contexts." (Mitell 2001, 12) Genre analysis thus involves the study of all texts that are transected by the discursive clusters of genre, including press material, production manuals, reviews, parodies, advertisements etc. Mitell's Foucauldian approach situates genres within "larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations" and thus established the possibility for gender analysis, although he does not mention the category of gender decidedly: "Since genres are systems of categorization and differentiation, linking genre distinctions to other systems of difference can point to the workings of cultural power." (Mitell 2001, 18) Using Foucault's discourse theory – which has been very much used in the service of gender theory (cf. Laqueur; Butler; etc.) – as a starting point for genre and gender analysis thus sounds promising.

Both Schneider and Mitell open up exciting possibilities for gender and genre analysis which is indebted to the project of de-essentializing both categories. But both are vague when it comes to specific methodological tools. In the end, their proposed discourse analysis is based largely upon textual analysis. Instead of looking exclusively at film texts they propose to examine various other texts in order to analyse the generic (and gendered) implications. In order to focus on a more implicit and precise methodological practice, I would like to suggest a concept of gender and genre within the notion of cognitive schemata.

Orienting Perception: Genre and Gender as Cognitive Schemata

S.J. Schmidt proposes that "genre concepts and genre labels [function] like cognitive schemata and are there to help reduce the complexity of perceived information, and to socialise and to communise cognitive operations, as they form temporary or permanent

patterns/orders within the instable cognitive processes.” (Schmidt* 1996, 168) Cognitive schemata help us to perceive reality in a more effective way. Instead of perceiving numerous details and performing numerous cognitive operations we have the ability to economise this process by forming entities out of details in one cognitive operation. With Schmidt's concept it is possible to explicate the shared ('intersubjective') modes of how we perceive certain media phenomena. The formula *gunfight with villain in American Western landscape equals the genre Western* is no longer simply a matter of presumed 'common cultural consensus' (Tudor 1995, 5) - a term only too readily used in genre theory and a term which homogenizes differences of class, ethnicity, gender etc. - but can be recognized as a complex, only partly conscious and individually different though inter-subjectively constant cognitive schema. Genre as a cognitive schema thus is seen to function in order to structure our perception of the represented text fundamentally.

Gender can be described in a similar way. In her book on feminist autobiography, Austrian media theorist Sibylle Moser develops gender as a cognitive schema in the context of a Radical Constructivist argument: "[G]ender identity must be seen as a result of individual, not identically reproducible histories of experience. It is constituted along personal relevancies and leads to situation-specific behaviour. [But] people can realise their individuality only in terms of social and communicative contexts. The realisation of gender-specific perception of the self follows the rules of social communication." (Moser 1997, 72) Moser thus defines the connection between gender schema, self-concept and culture/society as the "knowledge of the individuals how to successfully (meaning not-sanctioned) act in an environment which is gender-specifically coded." (ibid.) Conceptualizing gender as a cognitive schema that determines the perception processes of the self and the perception

* All quotes from Schmidt 1996 are translated from the original German into English by A.B.

processes of the environment and understanding the schema as playing a vital part in the communicative processes integrates the subjective, individual and the social, symbolic level in gender analysis: The double role of gender as both result and instrument of power can thus be focused.

Feminist theorist Joan W. Scott emphasizes that the category of gender as knowledge functions both in terms of being an "instrument" as well as a "result" of social and cultural power relations. (Scott, 1999) Social and cultural power relations determine the way the cognitive schema of gender is shaped. And we need to take account of the multidimensionality of the categories of gender identities, gender practices, gender bodies and gender structures. (Waltraud Ernst, 2002) In emphasising the interdependency of these dimensions, Austrian feminist theorist Waltraud Ernst integrates the individual level and the social and cultural level of gender within each of these dimensions. With reference to the communicative functions of gender, Ernst states that there is a connection between the hegemonic, symbolic signifying practices of gender and the individual perceptions and constructs of gender; however, Ernst points out that these connections are up to a certain point diverse and context-bound. (Ernst 2002)

To briefly sum-up what has been claimed so far: a de-centering of the text and consequently a de-essentialisation and de-naturalisation of the categories of gender and genre can only be achieved by proposing a theoretical framework which enables to focus on the perception-level of gender and genre. This, I have argued, can be achieved by identifying both gender and genre as cognitive schemata. From a radical constructivist background, cognitive schemata integrate cognitive, emotive, imaginative and associative aspects of cognitive activity. They are organised in networks and are the prerequisite for perceptions and actions because of their

capacity for complexity reduction, for the selection and combination of details. (Schmidt 1987, 380f)

The important question now remains how to integrate such a theoretical model of genus in an empirical research design. My proposition here is the dialogue-hermeneutic method developed by Scheele and Groeben. In the last section I will briefly review this method, which is, I am sure, well known to everyone here, and give some cursory hints towards how the method could be employed in my research project. Again, this proposition is tentative and should be seen as a starting point for discussion.

Methodological Consequence: Subjective Theories

In the late 1970s Brigitte Scheele and Norbert Groeben developed the *dialogue-hermeneutic method* to describe and evaluate *Subjective Theories* as a specific part of the phenomenon cognition. The historical starting point for this project, and I quote Groeben and Scheele 2001, "has been marked by the "psychology of the reflexive subject, which criticizes the behavioristic model of the human being as a non-autonomous subject controlled by his or her environment. A central premise for this model is the structural parallelism between the everyday theories of the researched and the objective (scientific) theories of the researcher. Both entail an implicit argumentative structure that fulfils the functions of explanation, prognosis and technology. Communication between researched and researcher is the key to a description of the *Subjective Theories* of the former, which are to be related to the reasons and effects of human action. This implies a two-step research model that includes reaching a *consensus* between researched and researcher concerning the (verbal) representation and description of the formers *Subjective Theory*. The first step is devoted to understanding the content of the cognition / of the Subjective Theory. This is realised in most methods suggested by Groeben/Scheele in a half-standardized interview, combining open questions

with hypothesis-oriented and counter questions. The second step contains the verbal description and pictorial representation of the structure of the *Subjective Theory*. The contents of the interview are represented in a graphic structure which visualises definitions of categories, relationships between categories, sub-categories, effects of combinations and so forth. Both researcher and researched develop such a graphic structure. In a second meeting they come together to discuss their structural pictures and to reach a consensus about possible differences. The consensus is represented in a third structural representation. (cf. Groeben, Scheele 2001; Scheele, Groeben 1988; Scheele, Schreier 1994)

The cognitive schemata of gender and genre can be theorized as part of the *Subjective Theories* of film recipients and consequently we are able to effectively connect these two categories in the analysis. Within the *dialogue-hermeneutic method* complex connections and transactions can be analysed in a detailed interview based upon hypothesis oriented, hypothesis un-oriented and counter questions. The researcher's hypotheses about for example the interaction of gender conventions and generic verisimilitude in films which are perceived as *Musicals* can be tested in complex hermeneutical processes without losing the possibility of representing the results of this process in a (potentially) quantify-able manner. We are also able to connect the textual level of the film with the reception processes of the spectators: the hypotheses about gender and genre used for the interviews are derived from textual analyses and research conducted by the interviewer in the respective fields. In this way we can integrate macro-level aspects unearthed by research and textual analysis with micro-level data derived from the individual *Subjective Theory*.

Conclusion

There only remains the time to emphasize that textual analysis on questions of gender and genre as indicated above can only be the first step within a specific research project. The

hypotheses generated by the film analyses are merely a first (subjective) hunch of how gender and genre might work within film perception. The key to a detailed description of how the two categories are interacting are the *Subjective Theories* of the recipients. And only the cognitive agent will produce the data necessary for an observation of individual differences in reception, production and communication of film gender and genre. The analysis of the multiple workings of gender and genre in filmic discourse are thus possible without re-affirming the existing descriptions of gender and genre as pre-discursive categories.

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