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► **To cite this version:**

Nicolas Labarre. Comics Genres: Cracking the Codes. The Cambridge Companion to Comics, Cambridge University Press, pp.166-184, 2023, 9781009255653. 10.1017/9781009255653 . hal-04512619

HAL Id: hal-04512619

<https://hal.science/hal-04512619>

Submitted on 20 Mar 2024

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Chapitre publié dans Ahmed, Maaheen, éd. 2023. *The Cambridge companion to comics*. Cambridge companions to literature. Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp. 166-184

8.1Chapter 8

Comics Genres: Cracking the Codes

Nicolas Labarre

Genres serve as common and efficient shortcuts through the sprawl of popular fiction. For instance, when Austin Price reviewed the work of mangaka Junji Ito in 2018 for *The Comics Journal*, he described the artist as “the premier *horror comics* talent of our era” [my emphasis] in the very first sentence of the text, below the reproduction of four black-and-white panels showing a huge bandaged creature waking up (Frankenstein’s monster, from Ito’s adaptation of Mary Shelley’s novel) (Price). The title and the opening characterization of the author imitate a content warning, discouraging certain readers from delving into an article discussing and presenting gruesome imagery. Price then refines his initial claim, by noting that Ito’s work is “singular” and cleverly suggests that his horror comics often include “comic horror.” The text thus states that Junji Ito works within the genre of horror, as identified by a major critical institution, but also that he exceeds the boundaries and expectations of that label. Meanwhile, “horror comics” serves a pragmatic objective in keeping away certain readers, who may not care about the specificities of Ito’s output but are keen on avoiding a broad range of content, based on a shared assumption of what contemporary horror may look like.

A generic label performs several discursive and social functions, with varying degrees of specificity and with the understanding that it cannot fully account for the work it is applied to. This multifaceted and somewhat slippery use of genre is not singular to the article or the *Comics Journal*: it points to the fact that genres are constantly negotiated discursive formations, for which usefulness trumps specificity.

Functions of Genres

In his influential *Film/Genre*, film scholar Rick Altman identifies three main functions of genres: as *blueprints*, as *labels* and as *contracts* for viewers (Altman 14). Furthermore, genres possess a *structure*, which corresponds perhaps more strongly to shared assumptions about them, and refers to defining features or to narrative formulas: the setting for a western, the representation of sex in erotic works, the endangerment of the body in horror, etc. However, Altman sees this structure less as an absolute than as the consensual byproduct of the various social functions accomplished by the genres. Genres are mutable categories, flickering groupings, the boundaries of which are frequently challenged and evolve over time. They are discursive, social constructions, not platonic ideals. As

such, they are only relevant insofar as they are useful. Broadly defined, the functions described by Altman are not specific to any medium; however, the social groups and institutions producing these discourses, or to put it differently, the identity of the users of genres, are contingent. They depend not only on the medium but also on the specific historical and cultural context.

Altman's *blueprint* function refers to the act of creating works within a genre, or taking account of classical generic structures so as to purposefully deviate from them. The genre is then understood as a set of features, a roadmap, which can be followed or open new paths.

The *label* function is useful to advertisers, distributors and cultural intermediaries such as libraries or bookstores. Genre then serves as a mode of classification, a box to tick in online databases or the choice of a shelf or section to display a given book.

Finally, the *contract* refers to expectations. Viewers, or readers in the case of comics, use genres to manage their expectations, both prior to consumption of a given cultural object and afterward. The Junji Ito article in *The Comics Journal* offers a typical example of the process, since it starts by positioning the mangaka within a genre – the better to ward off certain readers – then compares the expectations of the genre to the actual comics.

Of course, these functions interact constantly: the blueprint is useful inasmuch as it facilitates efficient labeling, which helps manage expectations, while a well-received work can quickly feed back into the blueprint. This does not imply that labeling engenders conformity: a creator may willfully deviate from generic blueprints yet rely on (or be forced to conform to) classical labeling, thus creating surprise among readers and possibly shifting the entire system to accommodate this deviation. For instance, *House of Secrets* #85 (1970) contains a two-page story, "Reggie Rabbit" (Len Wein and Ralph Reese), in which anthropomorphic animals are revealed to be disgruntled alien invaders, who eventually leave Earth on a glittering 1950s comics rocket. This has little to do with horror, but it was published in a long-running horror/fantastic anthology, often tinged with humor. In this case, labeling and expectations aligned closely, but the blueprint did not: the story is arguably made much more memorable by this generic framing than if it had been published as satire in the *National Lampoon*, which Reese frequently worked for. Later stories published in *House of Secrets* do not offer evidence of a change in the blueprint but "Reggie Rabbit" does shift readerly expectations by suggesting the comic book may have been open to more radical deviations from its erstwhile formula; it opens up the range of plausible narratives which readers might expect from the series.

As indicated above, the functions of genres in comics, films and literature are broadly similar. Furthermore, genres help bridge the gap between media by offering a shared taxonomy. Labels such as "horror" or "romance" are useful in part because they can serve to market cultural products or to shape expectations across popular media. They foreground the incessant intermedial exchanges at work in popular culture and reflect what Benoît Berthou calls the "cumulative logic" of cultural consumption: a broad survey of French readers of comics published in 2015 indicated for instance that comics readers played videogames nearly twice as much as the general population (64% against 36%) and were also more frequent cinemagoers (82% against 57%) (Berthou 120). Given these figures, which would likely be replicated other countries, genres serve as convenient intermedial navigation tools, alongside other meaningful organizing principles, such as brands (Disney, Marvel, etc.), characters (Sherlock Holmes, Batman, My Little Pony, etc.) and authors (though author names across media are often akin to brand; e.g. "a Stephen King movie").

Genres across Media

Intermedial circulations are central to comics publishing and reading. As Shawna Kidman has shown in her institutional history of US comics: “At no point in history did comics develop in isolation; they were both deeply informed and deeply impactful on the culture industries writ large” (Kidman 4). This presence in a complex media ecosystem involves direct transpositions and adaptations but also a variety of mutual influences, which confirms the usefulness of discursive categories spanning several media. For instance, the superhero genre does not have the same history in comics and in movies, but the similarities between a movie like *The Incredibles* (Bird, 2004) and *The Fantastic Four*, regardless of their respective medium of origin, can be explained by examining the way the whole superhero genre has spread from one medium to another.

These transmedia genres tend to have an even weaker structure than medium-specific versions, since they have to accommodate a broader range of users and discursive situations, and typically apply to extensive bodies of texts. Defining most genres is often an exercise in futility (even apparently clear-cut cases, such as the western or pornography, which could be defined respectively by a setting and a legal framework, are open to ambiguities and borderline cases, not to mention cultural specificities); definitions become more fluid when attempting to consider genres across media.

Beyond the variety of usages that they have to accommodate, the amorphousness of transmedia genres can be explained in two ways. The first is the specific history of genres in each medium: they evolve over time, and successful innovations are then taken into account by their users. To take one example, superhero comics in the early 2000s moved closer to a cinematic model of representation, typified by the early issues of *The Authority* (Ellis and Hitch, DC/Wildstorm, 1999-200) and refined in *The Ultimates* (Millar and Hitch, Marvel, 2002-2007) [see fig 8.1]. These influential comic books integrated a “widescreen” aesthetic, with black margins and long horizontal panels typically occupying the whole width of the page, combined with radical decomposition of movement in action scenes and abundant use of photographic references. Later superhero comics could then choose to adopt or to ignore this “cinematic” style, making it a significant creative bifurcation in the genre’s blueprint. That distinction between cinematic and non-cinematic superhero stories is of course not applicable to superhero films of the same period: an important historical juncture in the comics version of the genre is thus not replicated in the film version or in the transmedia version. Conversely, the Batman TV show in 1966-1967, introduced a version of the superhero genre on television inspired by the 1940s serial and ignoring the transformations of the genre in comic books in the ensuing decades. In addition to adopting a campy tone, the TV show foregrounded the diverging histories of the genre in the two media, and was for years regarded as an aberration by superhero fans (Reynolds 43).

INSERT FIG. 8.1 HERE

A second phenomenon help explain the lack of specificity of transmedia genres: media affordances, or mediageny. Media affordances refers to the specific possibilities of a given medium – such as the possibility for film to reproduce sound. The concept of “mediageny,” devised by Philippe Marion (“Narratologie médiatique”), offers a slightly different version of the same idea by suggesting that

certain media may be especially *appropriate* for a specific type of content.¹ Both ideas point to the fact that media have specific properties, respectively considered as ontological or conventional, which shape the type of content they offer. It is hard to imagine how certain videogame genres, such as the First-Person Shooter, could even exist in comics, for instance, since they rely on properties which the medium does not have (spatial continuity, movement control, etc.). Beyond these cases of radical incompatibility, genres within a medium often resort to specific formal strategies. Much has been written for instance about the rhetoric of the archive in graphic memoirs – which led, for instance, Alison Bechdel to redraw the pages of the novels she discusses in *Fun Home*, so as to make sure everything in the book bore the trace of her own hand (Cvetkovich; Chute 185–86). The adaptation of *Fun Home* as a musical in 2013 also sought to convey authenticity, but did so through very different means, notably through the embodied performance of the singers (Anderst).

The two interacting factors, history and mediageny, can result in a drift, whereby medium-specific versions of genres come to differ so much that transmedia labeling no longer functions. The “graphic memoir” may be a marginal example of such a drift: it is a comics version of the broader “memoir” genre, but also, arguably an autonomous and medium-specific body of work. However, as I have argued elsewhere, while medium-specific versions of popular genres constantly deviate from the broader intermedial umbrella term, these multiple versions are regularly realigned: successful works exert their influence across media either through officially sanctioned transpositions – *The Ultimates* had been designed as a blueprint for the *Avengers* movies and served that role – or by exerting an influence on creators in other media (Labarre, *Understanding Genres* 23–24). Even comics genres which function in constant dialogues with other media – such as horror, or the western (Wandtke; Martinez; Goodrum and Smith) – undergo such drifts apart from their meaning in other media before aligning again: the domestic horror of many 1950s comics starkly differed from the shape of the genre in other media at the time, but their influence later helped reshape horror films and novels. These moments of intermedial realignments help ensure the continuing relevance of broad genre labels. When they fail to occur, the process simply generates new genres which may then expand to other media: such was the case when the superhero genre emerged as distinct from adventure narratives in other media in the late 1930s.

The Superhero Genre

Superheroes have formed the most influential genre in the history of comic books. After the creation of Superman in *Action Comics* #1, these characters dominated the market until the end of the Second World War. Contrary to popular histories, they did not disappear afterwards but they did fade away, to become prominent again in the 1960s and then, arguably, from the 1980s to the present day.

The existence of the superhero genre cannot be contested. If you were to create your own superhero story, you would probably have a blueprint or mental scheme at your disposal, possibly involving a traumatic origin story and certainly having the hero use extraordinary abilities to stop crime. If you

¹ This helps circumvent the problem raised by marginal examples which imbue a medium with atypical properties. *Most* comics do not involve diegetic smells, but some have included “scratch-and-sniff” systems for instance (Hague 136–38). Mediageny avoids this issue by describing what is plausible, rather than possible, in a given medium.

had to market a superhero story, you could direct the online platform Comixology to file it under the appropriate generic label, “superhero,” where it would coexist with the output of dedicated publishing institutions, such as DC or Marvel. If you were so inclined, you could also seek out academic texts, such as *The Superhero Reader*, in which scholars confirm the currency of the label. Finally, as a reader, the mention of the superhero may bring to mind specific characters and is likely to provide a useful starting point to help you decide whether you want to read a specific comic book or not. In addition to fulfilling these various functions, the label appears remarkably stable: it can be applied to texts spanning decades, and it is difficult to think of an alternative denomination (“capcs and tights”?).

Several authors have attempted to provide a definition of the genre, or, as I have described it above, a definition of its structure. The most influential of these attempts was by Peter Coogan in his book *Superhero: the Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006) and has been reprinted or commented upon in numerous readers and textbooks (Heer and Worcester; Hatfield et al.; Duncan and Smith; Hatfield and Beaty). According to Coogan, who draws notably from the conclusion of a 1939 trial on the alleged plagiarism of Superman, superheroes have three main characteristics: a pro-social mission, superpowers and a distinctive identity, including a codename and a costume (Coogan 30–60). Coogan also notes that all of these three elements may be downplayed or even completely absent, even in canonical examples such as the Batman (created in 1939) or the Hulk (1961).

This is of course a very broad definition but making it more specific would require moving away from an overview of the genre to a more openly historicized approach. For instance, superhero narratives of the early 1940s frequently include horror elements, with various monsters, haunted castles and mad scientists. By the late 1950s, these elements had been excised from comic book publishing through the Comics Code, and superhero stories gave a more central role to themes, designs and plots associated with science fiction and engineering. Shortly afterward, Marvel Comics took to integrating elements of romance and self-parody, before opening up to horror again as restrictions on the genre waned in the 1970s. In short, the ahistorical approach to the genre, much like the intermedial one, erases features which would have been seen as key to the genre at specific points in time, in order to account for the broadest possible range of text.

INSERT FIG. 8.2 HERE

Furthermore, Coogan’s model does not explain how the fairly stable consensus since the late 1930s was constructed. Nor can it offer an absolute way to distinguish what belongs to the genre and what does not. Asterix the Gaul fills certain criteria but is not usually labeled a superhero by virtue of being a French comic hero, for instance. Conversely, Marvel’s Ka-Zar, essentially a copy of Tarzan, has nevertheless been a key component of several superhero tales. Originally a pulp character in a jungle setting in the 1930s, Ka-Zar was reintroduced in an episode of *The Uncanny X-Men* in 1965. Ka-Zar has been published by Marvel in a format and with creators associated with superhero fiction and has frequently been shown interacting with superheroes. Unlike Tarzan himself, Ka-Zar functions *at least for a sizable group of readers* as a superhero: he is described as such on his (user-maintained) *Wikipedia* page, in several entries of the (user-maintained) *Grand Comic Book Database* as well as on the (retailer-curated) *Comixology* app. Ka-Zar may be a marginal case, yet the character functions as

part of the superhero genre, and has even been the main attraction in titles marketed and presumably consumed as superhero fiction.

To understand the plasticity of the superhero genre, it may be useful to turn to one of its canonical examples: *The Fantastic Four*. An often-told story suggests that the series was created in 1961 as a reaction to DC's team of superheroes, The Justice League. Yet, *The Fantastic Four* only partially resembles that model. The first issue recounts their transformation as a horrifying experience, describes them as reluctant, squabbling protagonists, before pitting them against an army of giant subterranean monsters. The issue does not use the phrase "superhero" or any variation thereof and repeatedly emphasizes the monstrosity of its protagonists rather than their superhuman nature. In fact, only one of the four characters, the Human Torch, corresponds to a pre-established component of the genre: a character with the same name had been popular in the 1940s, and the figure of the flying man is likened to Superman when bystanders are shown declaring "Look! A blazing burning comet!//No!! It's not a comet!! It's – It's –" echoing the recurring line "It's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's Superman!", introduced in the 1940 radio show and used in various media afterward. In the second issue, the team, still in civilian clothes, repels an alien invasion by showing their leader pictures taken from giant monster comics, themselves clearly inspired by the giant monster science-fiction films of the 1950s.

In subsequent issues, the connection with the superhero genre is clarified in three ways. First, some of the narrative choices follow the genre's blueprint, bringing in colored uniforms, a secret base with elaborate gadgets and super-powered villains (most memorably Dr. Doom). Secondly, the stories include explicit intertextual references to established superhero texts. In #4, the Human Torch is shown reading a comic book featuring Namor, a character created by Bill Everett in 1939, before Namor himself shows up in the story. The series still includes non-superhero references, especially to *Frankenstein*, but the explicit allusions to 1950s sci-fi quickly become rarer; the comic book is not positioned as *only* a superhero series, but as a plausible update and extension of the genre. The gradual emergence of a shared superhero universe is part of that strategy.

The third strategy, chaperoning genre identification, consists in selecting and presenting testimonies from the readers who describe their own perception of the comic book. Letter columns are a place of co-construction, in which publishers acknowledge the reception of the comic book, while curating and in some cases inventing these messages (Stein; Labarre, *Heavy Metal* 100; Licari-Guillaume), and they offer a fitting forum for the co-construction of genres. The first mention of superheroes in *Fantastic Four* is to be found in the letter column to the third issue (March 1962) – the first issue to have one – in which a reader notes: "It's nice to see a group of super-heroes who aren't naturally buddy-buddy." Strikingly, this message appears in the same issue when the costumes and other conventional superhero features are introduced.

Early issues suggest that this affiliation is not that clear-cut for all readers, with multiple references to other possible genres. The letters frequently debate the identity of a possible fifth member, or of a replacement for one of the existing characters. In #7, a reader from New Jersey suggests that this new member could be "a scientific genius and assists Mr. Fantastic, or a wizard who uses magic to fight crime – or perhaps an alien from space." The list seems to imply that the generic affiliation of the title was still up for debate: none of these characters is characteristic of the superhero genre, though all of them could possibly work in that context. In fact, the letter as printed, ended with a:

“What do you think?” addressed to the editors (and not the creators). The generic negotiation was also happening outside the comic book itself: *Alter Ego*, a fanzine very much focused on superheroes discussed *The Fantastic Four* in the context of the best comics of 1961 and included an original drawing of The Thing by Jack Kirby, inviting readers to buy the publication.

INSERT FIG. 8.3 HERE

These glimpses into the various discourses suggest that the title quickly migrated towards the superhero genre, as the result of a dual movement of consolidation and expansion: it foregrounded recognizable elements of established superhero prototypes, and it simultaneously shifted the boundaries of the genre by virtue of its success. This process culminated in-text in #9, an issue in which the Fantastic Four realize they cannot afford the rent for their expansive headquarters in NYC. The story is tongue-in-cheek, verging on self-parody (a vein Marvel fully embraced with the *MAD*-inspired *Not Brand Echh* [1967-1969]), and has Mr. Fantastic declare: “If only we could be like the super heroes in some of these comics magazines, Sue! THEY never seem to worry about money! Life is a BREEZE for them!” (emphasis in the original) [see fig 8.3]. The joke works by appealing to the readers’ generic literacy: the Fantastic Four are *of course* superheroes, yet they *also* remain atypical. Here, as elsewhere the individual text exceeds and inflects the genre it belongs to.

Performing Genre

The above example also suggests that self-parody does not undermine generic affiliation and can even reaffirm it. This is only superficially paradoxical. To quote Linda Hutcheon, parody is “repetition with a critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity,” while “playing with multiple conventions” (Hutcheon 6;7). Parodies thus replay generic conventions to better establish their singularity. In the conclusion of the same study, Hutcheon quotes approvingly from Robert Burden, in a passage which suggests broader similarities between genres and parody: “[Parody] defines a particular form of historical consciousness, whereby form is created to interrogate itself against significant precedents” (quoted in Hutcheon 101). In other words, parody, like genre, confers visibility to what Gérard Genette calls the “architext”: “the relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourses it belongs to” (Genette 82).

In the *Fantastic Four* example mentioned above, the tension between adhesion to the genre and deviation is openly performed for the amusement of the reader. However, I would like to suggest that in the case of any text deliberately positioned within a genre by its creators, that belonging is always performed: writing in the genre involves including references, sending signals and acknowledging expectations. Parodies thus appear as one end of a wide spectrum of imitation and other intertextual relations. Conventions are constantly replayed and performed, though parody emphasizes the singularity of the text more strongly than other performances of the genre.

Conversely, writing in the genre is never naïve. Much has been made of the generic playfulness exhibited in contemporary author-driven popular comics, such as those by Alan Moore or Matt

Fraction. Marc Singer has pointed out that while such playfulness has become ubiquitous in popular culture, it has arguably always been present in comics (Singer 47–50). Superman’s classic wink to the reader, for instance, is not only a metaleptic device but also a way to underline the convention which played out time and again in the 1950s version of the character (which Eco wrote about in “The Myth of Superman”) (see Gordon 150–51). Similarly, horror hosts literally perform genres by functioning as metatextual hucksters, who frequently poke fun at the conventions used in the stories (Round 624–27). Even romance comics, long derided as rigidly formulaic performs its own conventions in the extreme narrative condensation of its covers.

It is of course possible for readers and critics to assign generic labels retroactively, to works which were not conceived as such. In this case, the notion of performance vanishes, but such examples are usually bracketed away as “precursors” or oddities. Once the genre is established, once the notion of *writing in the genre* emerges (Letourneux 175–216), playfulness and performance become normal modes of engagement with that genre: as we have seen, the early issues of *The Fantastic Four* offer a whole spectrum of such performance.

It is tempting to suggest that comics are singular in that regard. For starters, unlike other media, they often comprise a complex and meaning-laden, paratext meant to be consumed along with the text itself (as points of comparison, the poster for a movie or the box-cover illustration for videogames are optional paratexts). Comic books, as opposed to graphic novels, are especially rich in that regard, and offer many sites for contradictions, self-parody and displays of self-awareness: Dr. Doom’s seriousness is undercut by its use to hawk subscriptions to the magazine, for instance [or see the Ka-ZAr cover above, fig. 8.2]. More crucially perhaps, Jared Gardner argues that comics constantly require their readers to be aware of architextual principles, to make connection and to reflect on them:

As a form that works with traditionally incommensurate systems of meaning–text and image–to tell its story, it also requires its readers at every turn to make active decisions as to how to read the two in relationship to a larger narrative. (Gardner xi)

As a uniquely dialogic and participative form, one that exhibits its codes and discontinuities at all times, comics offers a fruitful ground for the creation and the exhibition of discursive constructs such as genres.

Social functions

Genres serve as productive taxonomies, efficient, consensual and often institutionalized architexts. But genres are not only used to talk about the texts themselves, as in the three functions identified by Altman. They also serve as powerful building blocks for cultural hierarchies. In his work on *The Obscure Cities*, Jan Baetens notes that “the age of the emerging graphic novel culture [is] often highly critical of the existing genre classifications and restrictive genre formats,” resulting either in parodies or in the avoidance of established formula (Baetens 75). The “existing genre classifications” in this

sentence should be understood as referring to “popular genre”, since the graphic novel frequently relies on other genres, such as the coming-of-age story or the memoir.²

One key difference between legitimate genres and illegitimate ones may be seriality. Though a number of canonical graphic novels were published in chapters or installments (see Baetens and Frey), they tend not to function as cycles or a series; they refuse, in other words, the lingering stigma of what Sainte-Beuve called “industrial literature” and more broadly the association with popular culture. This may be even more pronounced in the North American context, in which the superhero genre played an outsized role in the perception of the medium and appeared to some creators and critics as a force constricting its possibilities. Criticism of the genre could thus serve as a claim for artistic autonomy. In Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan*, for instance, Superman and the superhero genre are ridiculed in-text, even as Ware professes admiration for other elements of comics history. The genre, in this case, is clearly the “bad object” (Altman 113), the stigma of popular culture against which Ware’s psychologically complex characters and sophisticated narrative are to be read. Jillian and Mariko Tamakis’ *This One Summer* offer an interesting and more nuanced engagement with genre by having the protagonist of their coming-of-age story watch horror movies: the legibility of Spielberg’s *Jaws* is contrasted with the complexity of the protagonists’ emotional state, but at the same time, the narrative acknowledges the pleasure of such simplicity and the fascination popular films can exert. The range of critical attitudes towards genre can be observed in various author-centric series engaging with romance, from Image’s *Twisted Love* (playing within the sandbox while updating the formula) to Vertigo’s *Hearthrob* (pushing the formula to unlikely extremes), to the 1970s comic *Young Lust* (attacking the ideological underpinning of the genre).

Taking a different stance, authors such as Charles Burns, Frank Miller or Michael DeForge have embraced genres in the context of what Christopher Pizzino describes as “autoclasm”: the refusal of legitimizing discourses by some comics creators. As Pizzino puts it: “The way Burns uses pre-code comics is neither nostalgic nor curatorial; he asserts the direct utility of horror comics, their power to speak meaningfully to the present moment” (Pizzino 137). Indeed, I always qualify my recommendation of *Black Hole* to new readers by warning them that the book relies on body horror. While *This One Summer* gestures towards horror, *Black Hole* embraces it, along the cultural stigma it carries. In all of these examples, genres serve less as categories within the medium than as way to position their authors, if not the entire medium, in the spectrum of social hierarchies.

Furthermore, and although this is beyond the scope of this essay, genres tend to foster communities. Certainly, other architexts do, the “Marvel zombies” are fans of a specific publisher (Pustz), and in “Platinum Age” discussion groups, dates of publication serve an architextual principle. However, many of these architexts are neatly bounded, or even fully closed. Whether a book is published by Marvel is by and large a binary question, though specific imprints such as the creator-owned Icon may induce some ambiguity. By contrast, genres are amorphous and changing, they are discursive battlegrounds with porous borders. This creates opportunities for idiosyncratic convictions but also for the kind of border-patrolling which matters so much in the creation of communities, by helping define insiders from outsiders.

² Several comics authors, wary of the label have in fact produced tongue-in-cheek recipes for aspiring graphic novelists. See for instance Bill Griffith’s *Zippy* for April 5, 2015 or Lisa Mandel’s *Une Année exemplaire* (2020).

Limitations: Genres and Other Architexts

Genres thus coexist with other architexts, which fulfill somewhat similar functions. Authors' names, characters, series, publishers, collections and imprints, to name a few of the most prominent examples, obviously serve as marketing labels and in some cases at least, shape readers' expectations. The editorial control exercised by publishers can also generate literal blueprints for new authors willing to produce works fitting the norms of these institutions. As many scholars have remarked, it is not uncommon for powerful editors to function as co-authors of the works, in which case the blueprint and the label function in close synergy.

Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* offers a complex example of these interlocking architexts. When Mignola started publishing the series in 1994, *Hellboy* functioned as a slightly idiosyncratic reading of the superhero genre. It followed that blueprint to a large extent, included a recognizable superhero in its cast and the onomastic of the protagonist's name clearly inscribed him in the genre. Not unlike Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (Brayshaw and Mignola), *Hellboy* quickly moved away from the superhero label. The first collected edition foregrounded the gothic elements of the narrative and boasted of a preface by horror writer Robert Bloch. While the film adaptations were widely read in the context of the superhero genre (especially the 2004 and 2008 versions), the comic books carved a specific niche, embracing folk tales and the fantastic in a way which do not neatly align with institutionalized comics genres. Mignola thus occupied an unusual but not entirely novel position as an author – he retained the right to his creation, and his distinctive graphic approach was noted immediately – working in an unusual genre setting. The same could be said of Schuiten and Peeters in Europe, of most of Howard Chaykin's output in the 1980s, and of some of Grant Morrison's work in the US, to mention but a few creators emphatically straddling the divide between auteuristic and popular approaches (Baetens; Costello). However, starting in 1998, Mignola expanded the franchise with *Abe Sapien: Drums of the Dead*, a spin-off story featuring a popular character from the main series. Though Mignola neither wrote nor drew the story, he drew the cover for the one-shot, and his name is the largest on that cover, thanks to a backup *Hellboy* story. In 2002, the franchise expanded more significantly, with a team spin-off, *B.P.R.D.* Not all early issues featured Mignola covers (in 2002-2003, *Hollow Earth* did, but *Dark Waters*, *Night Train* and the *Soul of Venice* did not), but they all bore the mention "Mignola's B.P.R.D.". That mention was dropped in 2004, but Mignola's name remained prominent, on par with that of the other creators, though he was only credited as a plotter. He also drew the covers for all the collected volumes. Furthermore, even with minimal direct involvement from Mignola, the whole series hews close to *Hellboy*: in its narrative mix of pulp tropes, Universal horror movies, 19th-century occultism, Lovecraft and superheroes, in its use of colors and even idiosyncratic graphic choices, such as the use of small panels detailing statues and other bas-relief. In this case, the franchise and the author's name work together to delineate a closed architext, albeit one that is sprawling and contains many different flavors. For instance, it is flexible enough to accommodate an artist like Richard Corben, working in his distinctive style, quite unlike Mignola's, for *Hellboy in Mexico*. Like a genre, the Mignola architext functions as a cluster: Mignola's own *Hellboy* stories are its prototype, but ancillary work deviate from this model in a variety of ways. Still, that architext is not *entirely* closed. It can be open through parodies – as shown for instance in Warren Ellis and Stuart Immonen's *Nextwave, Agents of H.A.T.E.* #10 (Marvel, 2007) – and through other works, which reuse some of Mignola's distinctive approach. However, even works which

resemble *Hellboy* to some extent, such as Ted Naifeh's *Courtney Crumrin* or Serge Lehman, Fabrice Colin and Gess's *The Chimera Brigade* cannot, by definition, be part of the *Hellboy* architext. Readers may decide to create and use this grouping, for instance in recommending a book to others, but unlike genres, proprietary architexts are not negotiated.

As a result, these architexts are more profitable to publishers than genres, since they can be protected by copyright or trademarks. DC entertainment, for instance, has a monopoly on Vertigo comics, and Archie cannot be used outside of books published by Archie comics. Such groupings and the expectations they generate cannot be meaningfully extended by competitors the way genres can. Marvel and DC thus promote the Marvel and the DC Universe respectively rather than the superhero genre, which they share. Simultaneously, the entertainment industry consolidates around a small – and probably diminishing – number of mega-franchises, constellations of objects produced in a variety of narrative modes and for various types of audiences, in which genres are subsidiary to the franchise rather than alternative modes of engagement. Readers can consume Spider-Man as body horror (*Carnage, USA; Spider-Man: Bloodlines; Marvel Zombies*), Spider-Man as romance (*Mary Jane; Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane*) or as a noir investigator (*Spider-Man: Noir*) and such variations coexist with a constellation of other tweaks on the character for any potential market.

The increasing importance of franchises and massive proprietary architexts is also a transmedia phenomenon, which ensures a high degree of compatibility across media. As we saw above, genres are a rough guide to navigating cultural objects across media, but tightly controlled proprietary architexts do not suffer from the same lack of specificity. In other words, for all their usefulness, the current state of the cultural industries tends to turn genres into increasingly subsidiary architexts.

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