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Genre theory, knowledge organisation and fiction

Abstract
Where the institutionalised study of literature goes, knowledge organisation (KO) approaches to fictional works tend to follow. At the level of generic labelling and categorisation, theoretical conventions of the professional literary critical world appear to be adopted by the information science world, for example in the generic categorisation undertaken by the British National Bibliography. This paper, which is concerned with the epistemological assumptions underpinning fiction categorisation, explores current genre theory and argues for an approach to the understanding of genre, and ultimately the description of genre, that is based on a cultural-materialist, historical world-view. In addition, a novel framework for a genre mapping KO tool is described. Fiction information retrieval is still a fairly underdeveloped area of information science. There have been some developments, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s, which focused on user warrant as the basis for developing retrieval systems (e.g. Pejtersen 1992) but there is still space for a generic approach which can identify and describe novels at a micro-level while situating them within a broader systems view. In the current information retrieval context, any such tool, which would be developed for web use, should incorporate both informational fields and affective dimension indexing in the form of user derived tagging.

1: Access to fiction
There have been many approaches to fiction retrieval in the 20th and 21st centuries. During the 19th century, the tendency was to treat fiction from a knowledge perspective in classification schemes but the 20th century saw the development of initiatives concerned with facilitating access to fiction through cultural, leisure and pleasure aspects (e.g. Beghtol 1989; 1990; 1994; 1995; Pejtersen 1978; 1979; 1993; Saarti 1999; 2000; 2002). Fiction retrieval systems can be predominantly literary-warrant based, for example Beghtol’s Experimental Fiction Analysis System (EFAS) (1994), or predominantly user-warrant based, for example Pejtersen and Austin’s Analysis and Mediation of Publications system (AMP) (1984). Genre marking is being used now by Library of Congress and British Library. Interestingly, the British Library published a fiction policy document paper in the late 1990s, which has now been removed from their site, in which they state that a number of conventional literary genres did not exist before 20th century publishing:

“Historically speaking, several genres have only come into existence in the twentieth-century, for example, thrillers and modern love stories. To place classic, pre-twentieth-century novels in twentieth-century genres would be anachronistic. To avoid this Appendix C contains a list of genre headings regarded as belonging to the twentieth-century and which therefore should not be used to index classic works of fiction.”

In their examples any link between Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre and later love stories is explicitly denied (BL’s Fiction policy document <www.bl.uk/services/bsds/nbs/marc/655list2.html>). This paper is no longer hosted on the BL website and reference is made instead to “The Application of Form Data to Works of Fiction: Discussion Paper”. However, the caution with which the British Library dealt with genre, with the relationship between individual works and larger categorisations of works, is indicative of the problem facing fiction retrieval, and cultural documentation retrieval more generally, which is, how do we deal with intertextuality? The topic of intertextuality has already been considered in IR literature, for example Rowley & Hartley (2008) where intertextuality is considered in very material terms to be manifested in cataloguing rules,
while classification schemes provide a framework for acknowledging and marking the interconnectedness of individual works at the level of subject.

Saarti (2000, 4), commenting on existing models of fiction indexing, argues that “what is altogether omitted from the categories mentioned above is the history of different interpretations of a work of art as well as its position in the literary-historical continuity. This fact could be interesting and clarifying in some cases”. Vernitski (2007) goes some way towards dealing with interpretations of a work of art by other writers in her use of intertextuality. Vernitski approaches intertextuality by mapping the explicit relationships between one text and another. Vernitski’s categories, which are based on Beghtol’s system, EFAS, and the IFLANET report, are quotation, allusion and adaptation. These categories are subdivided, so that quotation includes exact quotation and misquotation, allusion includes title allusion and name allusion, and adaptation includes adaptations of the same theme in a different form, adaptation of the same form with a different theme. The final category is sequels. Vernitski’s prototype system is creative and potentially very interesting, but is constructed with scholarly workers in mind, and is based on a scholarly view of intertextuality. The current paper interprets intertextuality in a less explicit form relative to genre history. Its approach to intertextuality is closer to a description of intertextuality in which the text is considered as “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1986, 37).

In Kristeva’s conception of intertextuality, the text is not a complete and discrete whole but exists within a web of textuality. Moreover the meaning of any text is fully constituted in reading practice by specific concrete readers, each of which brings his or her own cultural understandings and meanings to the reading of the text. Barthes (1981, 39), following Kristeva, wrote about “text” in terms which subvert the traditional notion of the individuality of the author through the concept of intertexts and the web of textuality. This interpretation of intertextuality is very anti-humanist. In the current paper intertextuality is explored using methods which focus on the materiality of specific individual texts constructed by specific individual authors, but the notion of the web of textuality underpins the general approach.

In general models of fiction indexing lack much in the way of historicity. Where genre is invoked, the notion of genre is often ontological. Saarti and Vernitski both favour Beghtol’s EFAS model as a foundation for fiction indexing, Saarti relating the EFAS model to Ranganathan’s PMEST formula, but what might be needed to enrich descriptions of fictional works is the inclusion of some notion of historicity in the fiction description model. In this paper, the inclusion of historicity is at the level of genre history and the web of textuality within which individual works reside.

2: Genre theory
Recent literary critical approaches to genre theory emphasise genre as classification, with the attendant problems of establishing the constitution of the “class”, and of unit members within the class (e.g. Dowd et al. 2006; Fowler 1982; Frow 2006). John Frow uses the concept of schema to explore generic systems. To speak of schema is to assume that knowledge is organised, so that knowledge about a specific domain is not knowledge as unconnected facts but knowledge that coheres in specifiable ways. Genre acts as the cues which enable us to interpret the knowledge in relation to the relevant
domain. Fowler devotes a chapter to describing some of the spatial maps that have attempted to represent aspects of genre, but ultimately argues that such representations are necessarily chimeras. Genres cannot be mapped out in this way because the features of literature are too numerous for a map of corresponding dimensions to be useful. Moreover, literary factors do not belong to a real order of nature. Genres are nominal. They are types, not fixed categories with borders, and are therefore unsuitable for factor analysis. Perhaps the most important argument that Fowler makes is that ontological mapping of genres cannot work because genres have a cultural history that “denies them the innocent passivity of mere substance”. He argues that “[i]f genres are to be represented in feature space, therefore, a series of synchronic maps will be required, in order to do some justice to their changing relationship. No existing maps, however, make much of an attempt to take the diachronic existence of genres into account” (Fowler 1982, 249).

Genre can be seen as a set of conventions and rules about the discursive possibilities within specific information domains, which operate in and through institutionalised means of dissemination, however, the rules and conventions are not static, but are diachronically dynamic, determined in the last instance by the arbiters of authority within the specific domain in fiction, traditional publishers. Generic categorisation in the historical context is more complex than the ontological schema or any notion of the novel as a pure, historically determined, but ultimately individual unit can describe. Generic formation is the interplay of elements, chosen, modified, critiqued, engaged with, manipulated by material, generically aware writers in and through a specific historical context.

3: Mapping generic history
A key assumption in the present project is that literary genres are constructed in and through the writings of individual authors who use the codes and conventions of the genre and thus, in some way, but not necessarily the “received way”, perpetuate the genre. Genre, viewed diachronically, is dialogic, in that there are relationships between texts written at an earlier date and texts written at a later date, and dialectic, in that instantiations of structural codes and conventions in individual texts may over time change generic codes and conventions at, what might be termed, the structural level. When a genre no longer ideologically fits with a society it may wither away or become substantially transformed. Producers of generic cultural products are themselves, at some level, already consumers of the generic cultural products, the production of which they are contributing to. This means that in popular culture consumption is always a pre-requisite of popular culture production.

The methodological framework for the generic knowledge organisation (KO) tool enables intertextual connections in and through a large data set of genre novels in the form of generic codes and conventions to be identified. Specific texts are mapped out in relation to the generic codes and conventions, themselves the product of specific concrete texts. The initial set of generic codes and conventions (plot, theme, characters) are constructed through reference to pre-texts and literary criticism and history. This framework has the flexibility to allow cultural artefacts to be considered as the products of human agency, but also recognises that those human agents always work within the possibilities and limitations of existing societal constructs and constraints. Using the
framework of diachronic transformation allows us to think about authors as both
producers of texts and as receivers or consumers of texts, and it begins to be possible to
see authors as possessing knowledge of generic conventions in advance of producing
their contributions to the genre which, in turn might modify the generic conventions.
The framework has been piloted using Troubles genre novels and the approach
consisted of the following steps:

• The characteristics of the genre were identified using literary history and criticism.
• A representative data set was acquired for the pilot exercise.
• Texts were described and coded using data gathering sheets designed for the study.
• Texts were sorted into historical order and pre-texts were identified.
• Syntagms (narrative chains) and paradigms (dominant genre type, characters) were
  identified within the initial historically organised sub-set of novels. In the case of
  Troubles fiction, this was the sub-set of novels published in 1969 and 1970.
• Using the historical framework, each novel was coded as a replication novel, a
  modification novel or as a challenging novel against an initial set of generic codes
  and conventions. A picture of small transformations emerges from this analysis
  which provides a rich diachronic analysis and described the micro-history of the
  genre.
• Data was input into a Primary Sources Database.

This approach is concerned with the production of genre novels by authors-as-
producers in relation to the consumption of genre novels, either specifically (reading
concrete texts) or generally (awareness of codes and conventions as a result of general
circulation of the genre). To map out material instances of intertextuality, analytical
concepts drawn from semiotics, specifically, paradigms and syntagms which have their
origins in Saussurean linguistics, were used. For the Saussurean linguists, meaning in
language is constructed through difference, so that signifiers only have meaning relative
to other signifiers, present or absent. The construction of meaning is governed by
operations on two planes, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic.

Paradigms refer to the choice of specific signifiers in opposition to other possible
signifiers. For semioticians working within critical theory frameworks the choice of
specific signifiers involves ideological implications. Syntagms are the combinations or
chains of elements which form a meaningful whole within a text. In text or speech,
syntagm refers to the syntactical rules and conventions which govern language. In this
study, paradigmatic choice relates to the types of characters included in the novel, in
particular to choices about characters. Evidence takes the form of logging descriptive
words and phrases and constructing a descriptive summary of significant characters.
Identifying the syntagmatic axis in this study takes the form of identifying the chains of
signifiers which contribute to make meaning within the novels. In relation to popular
culture novels, syntagmatic combinations refer to plot and narrative. Following the
Russian formalists, it is possible to suggest that plot and narrative are not necessarily the
same. The plot is the story; the narrative is the way in which the story is told. The range
and types of plots circulating in novels at any synchronic moment is of interest, as are
the transformations in plots over time. Genre is determined by both paradigmatic
selections and syntagmatic combinations. Genre is governed by expected codes and
conventions. Generic conventions which figured in the pilot hybrid Troubles genre
include conventions associated with romances, thrillers, crime novels, bildungsromans, comedy and fantasy novels.

In relation to Peirce’s typology of signs, all text is symbolic (Chandler 2002, 37). If this assertion is accepted, then the question of what constitutes “reality” within popular culture texts is an issue. Cultural products can be, but are not necessarily, representations of the real. In figurative art, representing the real might consist of producing a style of work which resembles, or seems to resemble, the real. In text, which is always symbolic, representing the real refers to codes and conventions of written language which are subject to diachronic transformations. Discussing the representation of the real in popular culture is not to invoke the literary genre of “realism”. In the context of this study, what is of interest is verisimilitude, which, in relation to textual representation, is a question of using modality markers, where modality refers to a relationship with the material world (Hodge & Kress 1988, 27). Verisimilitude, or modality, in this context is a matter of the codes and conventions, which the readers of a particular genre, at a particular given historical moment, learn to read and interpret as “real”. Modality markers might include reference to historical and geographical facts in the material world.

A summary plot synopsis was for each novel in the pilot set. Initial categories were developed from pre-texts and the secondary literature. Specific plot types were determined from empirical analysis of the texts, and include hunting the IRA enemy, IRA plots against British government or royal family or other establishment figures/institutions, specific instantiations of Romeo and Juliet love stories, growing up in Northern Ireland, and escape from Northern Ireland. Paradigmatic choices that authors make regarding the representation of heroes, villains and female characters have been recorded. Wherever possible, modality markers have been established and identified. These include reference to the material world (places, people, institutions, events).

In the pilot, evidence of the ideological stance taken by the author in and through the book is text that reveals positive, neutral or negative attitudes towards personnel, policies, politics and activities relating to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Evidence of ideological stance might be drawn from the plot, from representations of characters, or from clues in the narrative or style of discourse. It is in relation to ideology that Hall’s framework becomes particularly useful. Hall’s framework was designed to map ideological reception positions. Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model was used to map intertextuality in the genre. Hall’s communication model is more appropriate than either the mathematical models of communication theorists or the positivist needs-gratification models of media theorists because Hall’s model emphasises active reception. While Jakobson’s (1960) communication model is particularly useful for analysing levels of meaning within the message, it does not focus on reception. The approach advocated in this paper is to take empirical data, in the pilot this data takes the form of descriptions of Troubles fiction novels, and read this data against a novel adaptation of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model to analyse specific diachronic transformations emerging in and through genres. Hall (2001, 174-175) distinguished between three theoretically possible decoding positions. These are the:

- Dominant-hegemonic position.
- Negotiated code or position.
• Oppositional code.
  Hall’s model was modified to suit the needs of the current project so that three
categories are used to describe the relationship of specific novels to earlier novels.
These categories are:
• Replication: this category is used to describe specific novels which adhere closely
to the conventions of the genre identified through an examination of the earliest texts.
In the pilot study, this category includes many of the Troubles thrillers. The heroes
tend to be members of the British Security Services, villains are IRA operatives, and
women are depicted as girlfriends or victims.
• Modification: this category is used to describe specific novels which generally
adhere to the conventions of the genre identified through an examination of the
earliest texts, but which display specific differences. In the Troubles genre, it is
possible to discern ideological shifts through the fiction of the Troubles. In particular,
post-Hunger Strike novels begin to question the role of the British Security Services.
• Challenge: this category is used to describe specific novels that do not adhere to the
conventions of the genre but construct alternative representations. Within this
category are also included novels which critique conventional representations. It is
expected that in most genres this category will be much smaller than the other two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories in data gathering sheets</th>
<th>Description and function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibliographic information</td>
<td>Author, title, publisher, date of publication, place, nationality of author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant affective genre</td>
<td>The dominant genre type that best describes the novel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot summary label</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of key characters</td>
<td>Paradigmatic choices about heroes, villains and female characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modality markers</td>
<td>These might include reference to the material world (places, people, institutions, events).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology stance</td>
<td>Ideological stance is related to positive, neutral or negative attitudes. Evidence might come from the plot, characters, or from clues in the narrative or style of discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation to genre conventions</td>
<td>Replicate, modify or challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Categories in the data gathering sheets*

A data gathering instrument, which includes fields for recording bibliographic information and content description, has been developed. This would form the record
for the fiction KO system which would include information recorded at the level of
denotation (bibliographic, character identification, plot summary, modality markers)
and connotation (ideology markers, categorization). To map out material instances of
intertextuality, analytical concepts drawn from semiotics, specifically, paradigms and
syntagms, have been used to record informational elements in the novels. Paradigmatic
choice relates to the types of characters included in the novel, in particular to choices
about heroes and villains. Identifying the syntagmatic axis takes the form of identifying
plot and narrative. The range and types of plots circulating in novels at any synchronic
moment is of interest, as are the transformations in plots over time. Table 1 shows the
data categories included in the fictional knowledge tool.

4: A fiction retrieval tool
This KO tool might best be implemented through a user-based website with reader
ratings forming the interpretative analytical activity that assigns each novel a “relation
to generic conventions” position. The status of each novel as interpreted by the
community of readers is itself open to historical shifts and alterations over time. Previous work on the notion of democratic indexing (e.g. Rafferty & Hidderley 1997; Hidderley & Rafferty 2007) offers an approach to recording any such interpretative transformations through the process of reconciliation. This process examines the terms
or tags attached to each field and creates a collective interpretation for each field based
on counting terms. It is acknowledged that interpretation changes over time, so this
would have to be an iterative process.

Recent innotations in tagging and Web 2.0 approaches to IR open the door for
affective dimension indexing which could potentially allow for the development of
interesting approaches to the retrieval of cultural documentation including fiction. There
are issues, however, about user tagging when users undertake the tagging without a
referential guidelines and frameworks. In an earlier paper, Hidderley & Rafferty (2007)
identified some of the problems inherent in tagging practice undertaken on Flickr,
including the use of tags that are too broad, too specific, “false” use of terms, private
use of language, ambiguity, and uncontrolled synonyms. It was noted that despite
rhetoric that often celebrates the freedom of user-based tagging, there are hints in the
literature of the need for post-hoc disciplining of tagging of some sort. The suggestion
in the Flickr paper was that the democratic indexing approach could mediate
between totally denotative indexing and user-orientated connotative indexing. The
modified Hall framework might offer a similar type of solution, that is, it might provide
a structure which could be used to discipline user based tagging while still allowing for
user interpretation and the recording of historical shifts in our understanding of generic
history.

References
International classification, 16, n. 3, p. 134-140.
II, International classification 17, n. 4, p. 21-27.


