

# The Problem of Genre Explosion

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**Abstract.** Genre discourse is widespread in appreciative practice, whether that is about hip-hop music, romance novels, or film noir. It should be no surprise then, that philosophers of art have also been interested in genres. Whether they are giving accounts of genres as such or of particular genres, genre talk abounds in philosophy as much as it does the popular discourse. As a result, theories of genre proliferate as well. However, in their accounts, philosophers have so far focused on capturing all of the categories of art that we think of as genres and have focused less on ensuring that only the categories we think are genres are captured by those theories. Each of these theories populates the world with far too many genres because they call a wide class of mere categories of art genres. I call this the problem of genre explosion. In this paper, I survey the existing accounts of genre and describe the kinds of considerations they employ in determining whether a work is a work of a given genre. After this, I demonstrate the ways in which the problem of genre explosion arises for all of these theories and discuss some solutions those theories could adopt that will ultimately not work. Finally, I argue that the problem of genre explosion is best solved by adopting a social view of genres, which can capture the difference between genres and mere categories of art.

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## 1. Introduction:

Genre discourse is widespread in appreciative practice, whether that is about hip-hop music, romance novels, or film noir. Fans spend considerable time debating whether works or artists are works or artists of a given genre. Meanwhile, artists spend just as much time attempting to have their work counted in a genre or trying to escape the genres that they have so far been pigeonholed into. Genre attributions matter for rankings, awards, appreciation, understanding music history, and for our ability to find new similar artists and works. It should be no surprise then, that philosophers of art have also been interested in genres. Whether they are giving accounts of genres as such or of particular genres, genre talk abounds in philosophy as much as it does the popular discourse. As a result, theories of genre proliferate as well.

However, in their accounts, philosophers have so far focused on capturing all of the categories of art that we think of as genres and have focused less on ensuring that only the categories we think are genres are captured by those theories. Each of these theories populates the world with far too many genres because they call a wide class of mere categories of art genres. I call this *the problem of genre explosion*. In the section that follows, I will survey the existing accounts of genre, say a little about why people have found those theories compelling, and describe the kinds of considerations they employ in determining whether a work is a work of a given genre. In section 3, I will demonstrate the ways in which the problem of genre explosion arises for all of these theories. In section 4, I look at potential solutions to this problem that appeal to audience expectations, and why these are ultimately unsatisfactory. In section 5, I will introduce another potential solution that all of these theories could adopt in order to avoid the problem and explain why adopting this view leads to a related problem that I am calling *the problem of genre invention*. Finally, in section 6, I argue that the problem of genre explosion is best solved by adopting a social view of genres, which can capture the difference between genres and mere categories of art.

## 2. Theories of Genre:

Existing philosophical theories of genre can be broken up into three broad camps: genres-as-features, genres-as-functional-kinds, genres-as-traditions.<sup>1</sup> While theories that fall within each of these categories frequently disagree about the particulars (and accounts of various genres on the same theory might also disagree), this distinction does capture at least most of the existing accounts. The first of these, genres-as-features, regard genres as sets of works picked out by their common features (Todorov 1973; Currie 2004; Friend 2012).<sup>2</sup> Typically, these features are internal to the work and accounts vary in strength, with some arguing that we can give necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition of each genre (Todorov 1973) and with others only saying that these features form a cluster concept (Currie 2004; Friend 2012). For example, a Western might be

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<sup>1</sup> This schema builds off of one introduced by Terrone, between genres-as-concepts and genres-as-traditions (Terrone 2021). Here, I refer to what Terrone calls genres-as-concepts as genres-as-features in order to distinguish it from genres-as-functional-kinds, since both functional kinds and sets of features are kinds of concepts.

<sup>2</sup> France Fabbri and Iain Chambers have also defended a prototype version of this view (Fabbri & Chambers 1982; Fabbri 2012). This account is supposed to explain how genres take on the features we associate with them but, as in the case of the other views, we are still supposed to look at characteristic sets of features internal to the work in determining whether a work is a work of that genre. As such, what is said of other genres-as-features views also applies to the prototype account as well.

characterized by cowboys, tumbleweeds, duels at high noon, and scenic desert vistas. We could then think (on a definitional account) that these features are all necessary and jointly sufficient for a film to be a Western, or (on a cluster account) that a film needs at least some of these features to count as a Western and the more that it has, the more of a Western it is. In this way, whether we think we can provide an account of the conditions sufficient for inclusion in the genre, both definitional accounts and cluster accounts agree that the work needs at least some of these features in order to count as a work of that genre and that having one (or some combination) is sufficient.

While most of the features that people tend to pick out as characteristic of a genre are internal features of the work (like those described for Westerns), other accounts focus on features external to the work, or ‘mixed’ accounts where we look to both internal and external features in diagnosing a work as a work of a particular genre. For instance, a mixed account might allow us to describe Texas Country Music as works that have the internal features of country music and the external feature of being by artists from Texas (Abell 2012). These mixed accounts help us explain genres like this which are confined to a certain location or period in time (German expressionism, post-punk, etc.). Alternatively, we could have a completely externalist genres-as-features account. Indeed, genres-as-functional-kinds accounts are actually just genres-as-features accounts which pick out one external feature (that is, the artist’s intention to produce a work with the function characteristic of that genre). While there is no reason that the external feature needs to be the function, this does seem to be a popular (if not the only) purely externalist account. As such, I have given functionalist accounts their own category here.

On these genres-as-functional-kinds accounts, genres are picked out by the function that works of that kind are supposed to play (Abell 2014; Carroll 1987; Carroll 1997). For instance, horror films are supposed to induce horror, suspense films are supposed to cause us to feel suspense, and cringe comedies are comedy films that are supposed to be comedy films that cause us to cringe. As the examples above indicate, the function in most accounts of specific genres which utilize a genres-as-functional-kinds model is that of bringing about a particular phenomenological or affective state within the audience.<sup>3</sup> However, functionalists have also provided accounts of

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Carroll’s account of genre argues that the work 1) have the relevant intended function and 2) have the right particular means of bringing that function about (Carroll 2009; Carroll 2016). For instance, being a work of horror might require the intention for the work to scare us and the intention to scare us through the presence of a monster. In this way, a certain feature is required. The account is included as a theory of genres-as-functional-kinds because the relevant feature is subordinate to the function that feature aims to fulfill.

documentary in which it is seen as a genre in which works function as filmic assertions, so the function need not be purely affective (Carroll 1997).

Beyond this, most functional accounts of genre are intentionalist in that it is not fulfilling the function that secures genre membership, but the artist's intention that the work should fulfill that function. If horror films are just films that scare us, then we couldn't make a horror film that fails to do its job and we could make one by accident. Without a turn towards intentionalism, a genres-as-functional-kinds account of horror would tell us that the film either is a scary horror film, or it failed to be a horror film at all. However, if horror films are those *intended* to scare us, then we have grounds to criticize a horror film that is bad qua horror film. The filmmaker made a horror film in virtue of intending to make a scary film and they failed insofar as the film failed to scare anyone. It is the intention to produce a work with this functionally defined appreciative plan that establishes the extension of the genre and the success conditions for works of that kind.

Finally, we have genres-as-traditions. Here, genres are traditions of artistic production in which artists reference earlier works and in which audiences appreciate the works in a shared historical context (Evrine 2015). For example, a sci-fi writer might include certain features in their work as a reference to earlier sci-fi works so that we understand the work in the context of the sci-fi tradition. Whether or not such an account is internalist or externalist will depend on whether we think the work must reference earlier works in that tradition or whether the artists must intend it. With these four broad categories of theories in hand, we can turn to the problem of genre explosion.

### 3. The Problem of Genre Explosion:

Looking, first, at genres-as-features accounts, we might worry that if genres are just sets of features, then we have no way of distinguishing the meaningful sets (which we think are genres) from those that we would hope to deny. On the genres-as-features view, there are the genres that we know and care about, but there are also those that are merely waiting to be discovered. Why give any more weight or significance to films featuring characters in cowboy hats, duels at high noon, and scenic vistas over films featuring sassy cartoon cats, underwater fight scenes, and characters wearing lederhosen? Since this latter category is characterized by a set of features works can have, it is a genre on the genres-as-features view. Likewise, there is a genre of film characterized by those films featuring dialogue in Telegu and depicting adult men drinking milk, a genre of novels beginning with

the letter Q and ending with the letter P, and a genre of sculptures less than five feet wide and greater than two feet long. Indeed, there are (on a genres-as-features account) as many genres as there are sets of features. This proliferation of genres seems to me to be a case of genre explosion. These are ways of categorizing art, but they are not genres. They are considered genres by the genres-as-features view. The account can attempt to limit the number of genres by saying that the number of genres is limited by the number of actual features and actual clusters of features that actual works do have, but this, once again, leaves too many remaining. Even if there aren't any songs featuring tubas and a tempo over 500 bpm, there are sculptures which satisfy the size requirements mentioned above. As such, sculptures of that size still make up a genre. The same can be said for sculptures less than 4 feet wide and greater than 3 feet long (as so on). The genres-as-features account tells us that there are a great many genres like this that are merely waiting to be discovered.<sup>4</sup>

With regards to genres-as-functional-kinds, the problem of genre explosion arises from the fact that, if genres are kinds of works fixed by the functional role they fulfill, then the only limit on the number of genres in the world is the number of different functional roles works could play. If there is a genre which functions to induce horror or suspense, then there is also a genre which functions to elicit the feeling of ennui and one which functions to induce a fugue state. Further, since there is no in-principle reason that the function be inducing a particular and proprietary phenomenal state, the list of genre-fixing functions is actually much larger. There is a genre of works which function to make the artist's ex jealous of their success, a genre of works which function to give the artist an opportunity to collaborate with another artist, and so on. This can be limited on most functionalist accounts of genre by the intentional clause, in that the upper bound on the number of genres in existence is set by the number of actual intentions that artists have had for the function of their actual works. As such, a genre fixed by its ennui-inducing quality only exists to the extent that an artist has actually intended a work to fulfill that function.

However, this still seems to posit too many genres. For instance, since Willie Nelson created and released his 1992 album *The IRS Tapes: Who'll Buy My Memories?* with the intention that it

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<sup>4</sup> Friend's genres-as-features account requires that the relevant features play a role in the appreciation of particular works. In this way, we can exclude categorizations of works which aren't appreciatively relevant from our list of genres. However, if appreciation here means something like understanding and evaluating works, then there will still be categorizations which fit the criteria and which, nevertheless, do not strike us as genres. For instance, we might think it is relevant for understanding and appreciating the At the Drive-In album *Acrobatic Tenement*, that it is their only album not featuring Tony Hajjar on drums. However, works of this kind (without Tony Hajjar) don't seem to constitute a genre, even though there are plenty of them. In any event, it is important to note that Friend's view is more nuanced than a simple genres-as-features view and, in that way, comes closer to avoiding the problem of genre explosion than others.

function to raise him enough money to pay what he owed the IRS in back taxes, we know that there is at least a category of actual works which function to raise money to alleviate the artist's legal troubles. The genres-as-functional-kinds account tells us that this category is a genre. Once again, this genre has at least existed since 1992, we have only so far failed to discover it. Of course, this is only one of the many genres which currently go unnoticed by us. The same can be said of works intended to provide an opportunity for a specific collaboration (as in the case of Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett's *Cheek to Cheek*). The list of functional intentions will outpace the number of actual genres. Likewise, part of the attraction of functionalism about genres is that it provides us with an appreciative plan for works of that kind. Saying that  $x$  is a horror film tells us that it is a good horror film to the extent that it satisfies that function. If the function of collaborative albums is to provide artists with collaboration opportunities, so long as they successfully record an album together then they succeeded qua collaborative album. Since the success at fulfilling the intended function doesn't track how we appreciate those works, this seems to work against the appeal of genres-as-functional-kinds. I take this to be another case of too many genres, and unintuitive appreciative plans.

The problem of genre explosion also comes up for genres-as-traditions accounts as well. If genres are traditions of artistic production established when works reference earlier works so as to link the works together in a tradition, then we should be able to have a genre with just two works. That a genre could have only two works isn't, itself, problematic. However, the genres-as-traditions account has no way of preventing every instance of reference between works as counting as genres of their own. Anytime that an artist pays homage to the work of another in their own work, they will have thereby created a new genre. This means that every cover song creates a new genre, along with every quotation. We can limit the number of actual genres to only instances where inter-work referencing has actually occurred, but this still means that there many more genres in existence than any of us are aware of. Aretha Franklin's cover of Otis Redding's "Respect", along with the original and subsequent covers, represent a genre. The same is true for John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, and the Bee Gees' "For Whom The Bell Tolls" (the names of both of which reference Donne's "Meditation XVII"). This should strike us as another instance of positing genres where none exist.

While Evnine, at various points, argues that traditions are comprised of or constituted by things like "people, books, objects, places, institutions, styles of music...", these are not taken to be jointly or disjunctively necessary (Evnine 2015, 5). If it were the case that supporting people and

institutions were necessary for a category to be a genre, then we might be able to avoid the problem of genre explosion (as there no such institutions specifically set up for, for example, instances of the song “Respect”). However, these features are merely characteristic for Evnine. These things might serve as evidence for something being a tradition of artistic production, but “what is essential to a tradition’s being a genre is that the works themselves are.... responsive to other works that are parts of the tradition.” Evnine 2015, 6), and at where Evnine’s account is strongest and clearest is in his saying that “a genre *is* an ongoing discussion...” (Evnine 2015, 6). However, as we have seen, thinking of genres in terms of an ongoing conversation of subsequent works is not sufficient to avoid the problem of genre explosion.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. The Role of Expectations:

In terms of solutions to the problem of genre explosion, Currie’s version of genres-as-features does attempt to limit the number of genres by distinguishing genres that are mere sets from ‘instantiated’ genres, or genres ‘for a community’ (Currie 2004). Here, an instantiated genre is a genre that corresponds to “people’s tendencies to associate features together via patterns of expectation.” (Currie 2004, 50) As a result, if audiences don’t have an expectation for a given work to have certain features on the basis of recognizing a pattern of features for works of that kind, then that set of features isn’t an instantiated genre. Thus, Currie might be able to distinguish mere categories of art (genres) from genres (instantiated genres). However, as Enrico Terrone points out, for Currie, “a genre, as such, is just a set” (Terrone 2021, 19). While Currie has the resources to make the distinction, they are both still kinds of genres to him. The problem is that the non-instantiated categories aren’t what we normally think of as genres, only the instantiated ones are. To make the issue more explicit, if the genre exists as a mere set (prior to audience expectation), then instantiation amounts to little more than discovery. These sets of features are sitting out there now, and they are merely waiting for us to stumble upon them and start forming expectations on the basis of them. However, genres are invented, not discovered.<sup>6</sup> To say that a genre is discovered is equivalent to

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<sup>5</sup> It may be that the genres-as-traditions view can avoid the problem of genre explosion by adopting a disjunctive account along the lines mentioned here, but working out the details of such a view is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> The genre Platonist will argue that genres are, indeed, discovered and not invented. However, folk and critical linguistic practice seems to more closely reflect their being invented. Artists are often said to have ‘created’ or ‘invented’ new genres and are seldom said to discover them. This gives us some prima facie reason to find invention to be a more

saying that baseball was discovered (rather than invented), since every combination of rules already exists in possibility. Yet, the first artists to produce work in a genre didn't just instantiate its timeless form. They developed it themselves. To count mere sets as genres fails to fully recognize the kind of thing that genres are, and that genre invention and development is a human enterprise.

Similar to Currie's account, Terrone's cluster theory also argues that audience expectations are central to genre. Terrone develops Currie's theory further, arguing that genres are "[clusters] of norms that [prescribe] certain features to the works that are meant to belong to [them]." (Terrone 2021, 20). Since Terrone draws on Christina Bicchieri's account of norms as "networks of interlocking expectations" (Terrone 2021, 20; Bicchieri 2005), Terrone's account might be able to avoid the problem of genre explosion by appealing, once again, to the fact that audiences simply don't have an expectation that works will feature tubas and a tempo over 500 bpm (for instance). Thus, we can limit the number of genres on the basis of what audiences actually expect. However, it doesn't seem that audiences forming expectations for the features of a work of a particular kind on the basis of pattern recognition is sufficient to produce a genre either. For instance, having seen *Men in Black* (1997) and *Wild Wild West* (1999), we might reasonably conclude that a film's having the feature of including Will Smith in the cast is highly correlated with its having the feature of including a song performed by Will Smith. We could then expect (on the basis of Will Smith being in the cast) that a film like *Men in Black II* (2002) will feature such a song. We would even be right in this case, but this combination of interlocking expectations is not sufficient for those features to constitute a genre. Similar stories could be told of the patterns we recognize between a novel's having been written in English and its including instances of the letter T, statues being made out of marble and being heavy, and so on. Thus, we still face the issue of genre explosion. The problem is that not all clusters of features we expect (or should expect) for works of a certain kind form the basis of a genre, and not all of the features we reasonably expect from works of a certain kind are appreciatively relevant.

Terrone takes the role of expectations in his account to be a boon for his theory. Since genres are supposed to be relevant to appreciation, a good theory of genre might be able to explain the normative force that genres have. If audiences are expecting certain features from works of a particular kind (that is, of a particular genre), then whether or not a work satisfies those expectations

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attractive story than discovery. Platonists will have the challenge of explaining why artists, audiences, and critics so often get this wrong.



can form the criteria for the appreciation of the work in the context of its genre. As Terrone tells us, “what is crucial to appreciation is... the collection of features that a work is expected to exhibit as a member of the relevant genre...” (Terrone 2021, x).

The problem with this account is that if norms are just networks of expectations about certain features, then we have no way of distinguishing the constitutive norms from the accidental features we expect as a result of those constitutive norms. Consider the case of punk rock. We might expect that works of punk are short, upbeat, and often involve three or fewer chords, and a particular band might instantiate this by replacing the lead guitar with a church organ. This is not a problem for Terrone, as our core expectations are still satisfied. Terrone’s view allows us to be pleasantly surprised by, and appreciate, the novel ways in which our expectations about works of a genre are fulfilled. However, if I am recognizing patterns of features among works of punk, I could also recognize that the songs are normally instantiated on an electric guitar. Thus, if appreciation is a matter of satisfying my expectations, then a punk song’s having a guitar provides me with some grounds to value it qua punk. Punk fans, however, would recognize that this is an accidental feature. Thus, the issue isn’t that this account can’t make sense of valuing being surprised in small ways, its that the account assigns some positive value to any satisfied expectation. Yet, thinking that a punk band’s having a guitarist is a point in its favor (because it’s what we expect) seems to be equivalent to saying that the baseball game you sat through was a good game because all of the players were wearing hats. Of course, we know that hat-wearing isn’t a constitutive or valuable feature for baseball even if it is reasonably expected by the people in the stands. However, we know this because we can point to the actual norms (that is, the rules) of the game as being constitutive, and those rules are what assigns value to a homerun and not to hat-wearing. By appealing the relevant extent of our expectations, Terrone has the resources to say that hat wearing isn’t a core feature, but since it is an expectation, this is merely a difference in degree, not a difference in kind. The problem is that we don’t just value hat wearing in baseball a little bit and scoring homeruns a lot, nor do we value a punk band’s having a guitar player a little bit and playing three chord songs a lot. The issue is that these incidental features that we might expect don’t give me a reason to value the work or game in question at all. They’re just things that we expect to happen. Our expectations for a good baseball game issue from the rules of the game, the rules don’t merely amount to whatever we expect to be the case. Reducing norms to expectations fails to recognize this and, in doing so, mischaracterizes what facts are appreciatively relevant.

## 5. Hard Intentionalism & The Problem of Genre Invention:

It is worth pointing out that all of these accounts could avoid the problem of genre explosion by adopting a particular strong kind of intentionalism (that I will refer to as *hard intentionalism*). This tells us that, in addition to satisfying whatever criteria constitute a given genre, a work must also be intended by the artist to be a work of that kind in order to count as a work of that genre. For instance, (on the genres-as-functions account) it might be that the artist must intend for the work to have the function that horror films have (soft intentionalism) but also the intention that the work is a work of the kind picked out by that function (hard intentionalism). This is the difference between intending to produce a work that induces horror and intending to produce a *horror film*. Hard intentionalism of this kind has been defended by at least some theorists of genre (Laetz & Lopes 2008).<sup>7</sup> This resolves the issue of genre explosion because (presumably) no artists have actually intended their works be works of the kinds picked out by the problematic cases we have so far discussed. No one has intended their work be a part of the tradition that includes the Bee Gees and John Donne, of the set of sculptures that are greater than five feet wide and less than two feet long, or of the kind which functions to induce a fugue state. As such, the number of genres is limited to just those that actually exist.

However, this has two consequences that should concern us. First, this will not allow an artist to accidentally produce a work of that kind. For instance, a Robinson Crusoe-like filmmaker, who has been living their entire life on an island and cut off from the rest of cinematic history, will not be able to produce a horror film despite producing a work with the intention that it fulfill the functional role that horror films have. Likewise, a film made by such an artist which has all of the features associated with a western film is not a western. Indeed, even an artist who knows of comedy as a genre and makes a funny film will not thereby make a comedy film. Further, even if that filmmaker has the intention to produce a work that fulfills that function, they will not have made a comedy film unless they have the additional intention that the work be a work of the kind picked out by that function.

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<sup>7</sup> Likewise, others have argued against any form of genre intentionalism (Collingwood 1938). See (Ridley 2002) for a more detailed discussion of this argument.

I take it to be controversial how problematic it is for an account that an artist can't produce a work of a genre on accident but notice that the hard intentionalist has no resources for that work becoming a work of that genre later either. We might be fine with the idea that our Robinson Crusoe-like filmmaker didn't initially mean to produce a horror film, but when the outside world finds it and horror fans categorize it as horror because it fulfills the function they expect from a horror film, they are wrong. They are wrong even if subsequent artists reference that work in their own horror films. Genre membership is fixed at the moment of creation by the intentions of the artist alone. No further facts can play a role in determining if a work is a work of a given genre if hard intentionalism is true.

The second consequence, which I take to be more worrying, is that any hard intentionalist view can only permit of new genres under rare circumstances. As it stands, the only way for a hard intentionalist account to capture the invention of a genre is when an artist intends to produce a work of a new kind (whether that is fixed by a functional role or by a cluster of features). It isn't enough that they intend to produce a work with a new combination of features or new function. They must intend that this decision form the basis for category of art to come. I take it that this has occurred in history, but I also take it that this is not the predominant way that genres emerge. Innovative artists often set out to do something new, but they rarely set out to create a new genre, they just happen to do so. By contrast, a hard intentionalist version of the genres-as-traditions account does better here by allowing the development of genres by the first follower. The second artist can hear or see or watch a work and intended to produce a work of that kind. This might be a more common occurrence in the formation of genres than artists setting out to invent new ones. However, we have no basis for including the initial work that they are referencing in their genre because its artist did not share that intention. Thus, the work which serves as the initial inspiration or prototype for a genre cannot be a member of that same genre. The referencing and referenced works can both be members of the same genre on a genres-as-traditions view, but not a hard intentionalist version of it. All of these theories face *the problem of genre invention*, in that they fail to capture the variety of ways that genres develop.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hard intentionalism will also struggle because it requires that works have unambiguous intentions. We might worry about aggregating intentions for works produced by groups of artists, or in cases where the intentions of the artist are unavailable to us.

## 6. Toward a Social Theory of Genre:

If hard intentionalism does not present us with a good solution to the problem of genre explosion, then we need some other way of distinguishing mere categories of art from genres. Each of these theories accepts that not all categories of art are genres. For instance, for each theory, the genres picked out by the opposing theories are actually just categories of art. For the functionalist, clusters of features are just ways of categorizing art (and vice versa). However, there are also (for each theory) categories of art which take the form of genres but aren't. These are the problematic cases that we have discussed. The genres-as-functional-kinds theorist needs a way to distinguish the functional kinds that are genres from those that aren't, and the same is true for the genres-as-features account and the genres-as-traditions account. Something key to understanding genres as distinct from mere categories of art is missing on all of these accounts. One way of getting at this difference is to posit a genre which conforms to the requirements of a given theory and to determine whether it is an actual genre or another problematic counterexample (a mere way of categorizing art). How would we tell?

Using the genres-as-features account, we could posit a genre that is characterized by songs featuring minor chords, prominent and extended glockenspiel solos, and tempos below 45bpm. Few of us would think that I have just described an actual genre of music, but the genres-as-features account doesn't get us any closer to understanding why it isn't. The same could be said of songs that function to elicit a sense of melancholy in the audience. Surely there are songs that do this, and we could categorize them according to their ability to do this, but this is not a genre that actually exists. Finally, on a genres-as-traditions account, we might think that the collected body of works referencing the fight choreography of *The Matrix* represent a genre fixed by their being understandable in the common historical context of that work. Yet, this is surely not a genre. All of these are not genres but just mere categories of art.

The thing that moves kinds of works from being mere categories of art to being a genre is that genres are social categories. That is, they are not just categories of art, but communities engaged in aesthetic practices. Of course, we could categorize songs according to whether they feature the A-minor chord, a glockenspiel solo, or a tempo below 45 beats per minute. What makes the genre characterized by these features only a way of categorizing art is that no one cares about it. No one does categorize art in this way, and there is certainly not a community built around this category.

Fans do not dress to signal their interest in this genre, subdivide their high school into communities based on whether people listen to this genre, or argue that they (as fans of it) must all satisfy a common ethos. They don't do that for songs featuring the A-minor chord, for just one film referencing another, or for films that were intended by their filmmaker to make their exes feel jealous of their success. The missing component which distinguishes genres from mere categories of art, and which we look to in order to tell whether our posited genre actually exists or not, is this social component.

By contrast to the potential genres posited above, people do these kinds of things all of the time with regards to actual genres like punk, hip-hop, goth, and metal. The aesthetic practices of a genre provide members of that genre community with a sense of common identity, common fashion sense, in-jokes, special ethical obligations, and so on. Genres carve out and unify communities according to their aesthetic practices. These genres take different shapes, and they demand different things of fans and artists. Whether we think that they are sets of features, functional kinds, or traditions, we are still left with categories of art that we can recognize as having this community building power. That is, one solution to the problem of genre explosion (adoptable by any theory of genre) is to require a social condition in addition to the formal condition which characterizes the theory. Genres are the category of art that is characterized by this social component. These particular categories of art are genres because their mattering to their respective communities is manifest in that community's practices. The way that we check whether we have posited a mere category of art, or a genre is check against the social practices of communities.

The worry of genre explosion is one of how to exclude arbitrary categorizations of art as genres. We might have a similar worry here. Couldn't, after all, communities elect to care about any particular categorization of works? We might worry, then, that there is a kind of arbitrariness in what a community takes up. This is true in the same way that we might think it's arbitrary that baseball exists, since it could have been otherwise. Why hit a ball with a stick when we could just as well hit a stick with another stick or run a pentagonal arrangement of bases? This misses something important about social practices. People could have played shmaseball instead of baseball, they could have cared about works that elicit ennui instead of art-horror, and they could have shown respect to others by stomping loudly instead of bowing or shaking hands. What a social theory of games gets right is that it recognizes that the earliest baseball players decided that they should take those rules to be behavior-constraining and value-generating and, in doing so, made a game of it. The same applies

to genres. Fans and artists make a genre of a category of art when they take it to be behavior-constraining and/or value-generating. They decide, rather than discover, that it provides them with reasons to conduct their aesthetic practices in this way as opposed to some other. A properly social theory of genre will capture this. The non-arbitrary line dividing the genres from the mere categories of art, on a social view, is that a community has decided to make a genre of it (like the inventors of baseball decided to make a game of it), and thereby take that particular categorization as giving them aesthetic reasons.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, this condition does the work of distinguishing categories of art and genres while avoiding the problems associated with hard intentionalism. First, it allows for artists to produce works of a particular genre on accident. Take, for example, our Robinson Crusoe-like filmmaker who produces a scary movie. On a functionalist account which adopts a social condition rather than adopting hard intentionalism, there is still room for the filmmaker to make a horror film even if they have no awareness of the larger horror genre insofar as they intend to make a work which satisfies the function that is characteristic of that genre. Further, when horror fans come to learn about the film, they are not wrong in categorizing it as a horror film. This holds for social versions of genres-as-features and genres-as-traditions accounts as well. Finally, new genres can develop by becoming social. Hard intentionalism only allows for new genres to be created when artists have the intention that their work be the first entry into a new genre. A social account can allow genres to develop when the social condition is satisfied. Artists can all produce works with a particular variety of features, or with the intention that those works satisfy a particular function, and that category of art becomes a new genre when communities begin organizing around it. In this way, social accounts of genre avoid the problem of genre invention.

## 7. Conclusion:

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<sup>9</sup> Another reason to prefer this view over genre Platonism is that it captures the fact that genre membership is taken to be *reason enough* to shape our aesthetic practices. If asked why their music is so heavy, a musical group may respond by saying “because we’re a metal band”. This is descriptively true and explanatorily satisfactory. No further justification is needed. An exploded or Platonist view of genre will not appropriately track this feature of genre because there are plenty of other equally descriptively accurate categories that a given work will fall into, all of which are taken to be genres, and which don’t provide us with reason enough to shape our aesthetic practices (be that fan appreciation or artistic production).

Genres have the power to organize people, provide them with a sense of identity, and structure their common aesthetic practices. The thing that separates the examples from the counterexamples is that people use genres to find new works and artists like those that they know and love. People think in terms of these categories. Punks don't sell out, and goths wear black. The reason why we know that songs featuring glockenspiel solos, 13/8 time signatures, and power chords isn't a genre, even if there is something in the extension of this set of features, is that there is no community of enthusiasts organized around it. The mere tradition of covering a song is not a genre because the artists who cover and quote (and the fans of works by those artists) do not form or constitute a community with which they identify with. This communal dimension distinguishes the genres from the categories of art in a way that avoids the problem of genre explosion. It is able to do this because it recognizes the kinds of considerations we would employ in determining whether an art category is an actual genre or not. Beyond this, a social theory of genre avoids the problems of hard intentionalism because it allows for accidental works of a genre, and it allows for the variety of ways in which genres develop (and thereby avoids the problem of genre invention). Whether we think that genres are functional kinds, sets of features, or traditions of artistic production, genres are ultimately more than that. They are communities engaged in aesthetic practices, and a good theory of genre will recognize this.

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