



The
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School
Of
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**Support Materials:
So Conventional**

Skills: So Conventional

As consumers of art, we love to categorise things. We love to label and cross-reference, to trace family likenesses and connections between artists and art forms. These categories help to manage the abundance of texts that surround us: like a map, we use them to locate art, and our encounters with it, at a more or less precise point in a vast, sprawling landscape. We talk of conventions, genres and traditions, and we cannot help but describe texts in relation to these things: a detective novel; a love poem; an action film. It can be disorientating to encounter a text with only part of the map in our hands. Have you ever started watching a film or TV series part way through, not really knowing what you've discovered and how to respond? Lucky for us, most texts will find a way to announce their genre: it's there in the marketing; it's there in the reviewing; it's there in our encounters with the material object. We might think, for example, of how we often (always?) judge a book by its cover. And we might ask how the very things that make a text present in the world (some of which are listed in the 'Complicated Texts' worksheet) inform and orientate us?

On occasion, a certain derogatory sense might creep into our language: conventional, generic, traditional – these words can be read as grand synonyms for boring, predictable, conservative, old and tired. But to dismiss convention is to dismiss our map and those deep histories that inform and shape the art we love. For rules to be broken, the rules have to be established – innovation is indebted to habit; the new requires the old.



Viewing Activity: Just My Type

Explore YouTube, or similar, and watch the trailers for a range of different films – some you may have seen, some you may not. Consider the following questions:

*How do these trailers convey the type of film being advertised?
Compile a list of stock conventions. (e.g. How do you know it's a romantic comedy, a horror movie, etc.? Don't forget to think about the sound and music, as well as the visuals.)*

[If you have seen the film, comment on the relationship between the trailer edit and the film. Are the expectations raised in the trailer met or dashed by the film? And why might this be so?]

Who benefits, and how, by this shared audio-visual language of film convention? What might be the economic imperatives?

More generally, consider who is involved in the production of this shared language, and what this means for our understanding of the relationship between art and the artist: how many pairs of hands are at work, and who (if anyone) controls the meaning of the trailer and the film? (It might be useful to think about this in relation to the authorship debates explored in the 'Complicated Texts' worksheet.)

General questions

In 1976, the influential literary critic and theorist, Tzvetan Todorov, offered an evolutionary model for understanding genre: rather than being fixed categories, genres can be seen to change and adapt over time. He was particularly interested in rule-breaking:

From where do genres come? Why, quite simply, from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination. (p. 161)

The fact that a work “disobeys” its genre does not make the latter nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible—lives—only by its transgressions. (p. 160)

'The Origin of Genres', trans. by Richard Berron, *New Literary History*, 8.1 (1976), 159-70,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/468619>¹

Can you think of examples of texts in any medium (novels, poems, plays, films, songs, performances, etc.) where genres blend and mix, or where genre expectations are put under pressure?

What is the result of such “transgression”, as Todorov calls it? Is a new genre being created? Are the rules of genre, in being bent and broken, made more visible?

1 During the COVID 19 pandemic, JSTOR are making some content available open access, but you can also register for six free online articles per month. A range of access options are available here: <https://about.jstor.org/get-jstor/>

In 1919, in the aftermath of WWI, T.S. Eliot mounted a staunch defence of literary tradition. In his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he argued that poetry of the present should be fed and nurtured by poetry of the past – in fact, the literary past was still present: it lived in the poems of “great” writers who detached their work from individual personality, anchoring it instead to literary tradition. Eliot was not against innovation, but rather he saw innovation as something that responded to, and reformed, what had come before:

[Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal, and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.

Read the complete text of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' here:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>

Can you think of any artists in any medium (novelists, poets, musicians, dancers, etc.) who is self-consciously engaged with their “relation to the dead”? How is this knowledge and/or appreciation of tradition evident in their work, and how does it shape your experience as a reader, viewer, listener, etc.?

Eliot's defence of tradition is also a defence of the canon, with its belief that some works of art are "great" and "timeless." He also advocates for the "great labour" of working to obtain a thorough understanding of literary tradition.

What is at stake in these ideas for the kinds of art, and the kinds of artist, who society will recognise and value? Who are the insiders, and who are the outsiders?

Suggested further reading:

Chapters 6 (Monuments), 13 (Laughter) and 14 (The Tragic) in Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 5th edn (London: Routledge, 2016) [These chapters explore the canon, comedy and tragedy, these last two being foundational genres in the Western literary tradition.]

John Frow, *Genre* (London: Routledge, 2006)