

## Against “Hybridity” in Genre Studies: Blending as an Alternative Approach to Generic Experimentation

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This article presents a critique of the notion of hybridity which has, in recent years, become increasingly popular within genre studies and has been applied chiefly, though not exclusively, to generic experimentation in contemporary literature. In this article I seek to show that the main reasons for this are that the concept conveniently fits the semantics of the field of genre studies which has largely been structured by genetic analogies, and because its use within postcolonial studies to describe the allegedly subversive potential of ‘mixing’ has inspired many critics to apply the notion of ‘hybridity’ to literature which combines different genres in their fictional critique of hegemonic discourses. Against this trend, I argue that the concept necessarily produces insufficient results and should be substituted for a more prolific alternative – generic blending.

David Duff defines generic hybridization as “[t]he process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work” (“Key Concepts” xiv). At first glance, this explanation is both plausible and illuminating. Intuitively, the term ‘hybridization’ appears to capture quite neatly the forms of overt experimentation with genre conventions often considered characteristic of contemporary literature (Hassan 170) and other art forms. There is frequent talk of the ‘blurring’ or even ‘dissolution’ of genre boundaries (Hutcheon 9; Duff, “Introduction” 16). According to Ian Gregson, the allegedly ‘postmodern’ form of magic realism presents an example of a hybrid genre, because it “collides fairy tale with the realist strategies of the traditional European novel” (Gregson 75). Ansgar Nünning, on the other hand, speaks of a “proliferation of hybrid genres [...]” (*Mapping the Field* 282) which integrate factual material into fictional narratives, such as “the ‘New Journalism’ and the ‘nonfiction novels,’ ‘historiographic metafiction,’ ‘documentary fiction,’ a revisionist type of ‘postmodernist historical novel,’ ‘uchronian fantasy,’ ‘parahistorical novels,’ and ‘factifiction’” (ibid.).

In medical terms, 'hybridity' has become such a common and accepted diagnosis with regard to contemporary literature that a closer examination of individual 'patients' more often than not only seeks to identify textual 'symptoms' but do not questioning the value and validity of the 'condition' itself. Despite its popularity and ubiquity, however, 'hybridity' is ultimately both inadequate for a fruitful interpretation of innovative uses of generic forms, and misleading as to the functions and effects of genre, for three reasons: 1) it harks back to a highly problematic discursive tradition; 2) the conjunctive and homogenizing logic underlying the concept is inherently flawed; and 3) it continues to describe genre in terms of text-intrinsic features rather than with regard to the cognitive processes involved in, and effects produced by, different forms of genre usage. At first sight, the discussion surrounding the validity of 'hybridity' to describe genres may appear as theoretical nitpicking. However, I contend that the fixation on this conception not only detracts critics from the many different facets of generic experimentation in contemporary literature, but is also misleading in terms of the true political potential of installing and subverting specific genre conventions. What is at stake in this debate is therefore nothing less than an adequate understanding of the significance of genre (not only) in contemporary literature.

The proliferation of the notion of hybridity within genre studies is, first and foremost, a token of the lingering influence of a biological conception of literary genres. That genres present cultural constructs rather than organic entities in Ferdinand Brunetière's sense<sup>1</sup> is universally acknowledged nowadays and, as a result, the biological species paradigm is rarely drawn on explicitly within genre criticism today.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, its semantics – the notion of the individual text 'belonging' to a specific class, the idea of a uni-directional development, or 'evolution' of that class, the concept of 'kinship' between certain texts and classes of texts – has become so naturalized that it still continues to structure our thinking about genres. This becomes manifest, for example, in the recent popularity of the notion of 'family resemblance' in genre studies. With regard to genre, the analogy is used to describe the way in which texts grouped together under a generic label relate to one another, each genre presenting a 'family' and the texts associated with the same as the 'family members.' Its popularity can in parts be attributed to the appealing openness of this concept (Fishelov, *Metaphors* 54), as its fuzziness at first glance seems to provide a felicitous analogy to the relationship between different texts subsumed under a genre. However, the adoption of this metaphor from the field of language philosophy to that of genre theory can partly be attributed to another, often overlooked, factor: the family presents another schema that is nowadays conceived mostly in terms of genetics; it shares many semantic features with the biological species analogy and therefore lends itself easily to an application to literary genres. Genetic conceptions of genre always face the problem that in literature there is no underlying code that can be analyzed with the help of scientific methods. Biological relations are unequivocal (the underlying source for all phenotypic resemblance within a family is genetic makeup), whereas genre membership

is not. The concept of 'hybridity' deriving from genetics, its application to literary genres is riddled with such inconsistencies. Despite the prevalent view that the notion can serve to undermine or even explode traditional categories and taxonomies, it remains inextricably caught up in their essentialist logic, as becomes clear if we consider the application of the term in biology. According to Amar Acheraïou, Charles Darwin was the first to use the term in its modern sense in his experiments with cross-fertilization in plants: "The concept of 'hybridity' then had a purely biological dimension and suggested fixed essence" (88). The underlying genetic logic implies maybe not classificatory unequivocality (after all, borderline cases and mutations are part and parcel of the evolutionary paradigm), but certainly unequivocality of development and principal exclusivity of the categories: the liger may be impossible to categorize as either lion or tiger, but this does not render the distinction between the two species problematic or obsolete. Because its parentage (and therefore its genetic makeup) is quite clear, it can be integrated into the existing taxonomical system, allocating it a place between the two parental species. Far from problematizing the integrity of the classification system, hybrids can serve to measure the genetic distance between, and compatibility of, two species and thus ultimately illustrate the principles of common descent and progressive diversification that underlie the notion of evolution. Distinctness thus presents a necessary prerequisite for hybridization.

Ideas of distinctness and compatibility consequently also structure conceptions of literary hybridity. Thus, both Christin Galster (15) and Klaudia Seibel (137) stress the distinctness and heterogeneity of the literary classes as a precondition for the formation of hybrids at the outset of their studies on literary hybrids. According to Julia Ernst's definition, the term 'hybrid genres' denotes literary forms that unite characteristics of different genres and can therefore not only not be adequately described with the genre designations used in the Western poetic tradition, but also explode conventional genre typologies (267). However, unlike biological species, which are classified on the principle of descent, generic attribution occurs on the basis of vastly disparate and incommensurable criteria: "[g]enres can be defined socially, historically, functionally, authorially, politically, stylistically, arbitrarily, idiosyncratically, or by a combination of any of these" (Stockwell 28). Generic equivocality is a logical consequence of the unsystematicity of generic labeling. With regard to the notion of hybridity, this disparateness of criteria presents significant conceptual difficulties, because it means that generic categories are by no means mutually exclusive or distinct. While the genre designation 'short story' is understood mainly in terms of certain formal and narrative conventions (e.g. length, focalization, abrupt beginning and 'open ending'), 'ghost story' refers to a specific theme, usually complemented by a high level of indeterminacy (e.g. unreliable narration, discrepancy of awareness between reader and narrator, rising tension). Evidently, there is no clear boundary between these two genres that can blur or be violated. As none of the key characteristics that play a role in the attribution of a text to the genres 'short story' and 'ghost story' are in direct opposition to one another, it is not hard to imagine a text that fits into our conception of both

genres. Saying that such a combination constitutes a hybrid is like saying that a motorbike is a hybrid because it combines the notion of 'bike' with that of a motorized vehicle, or that a house cat is a hybrid because it can be classified both as a predator and as a pet.

Due to this incommensurability of criteria texts can *always* be attributed to more than one genre, according to which features are foregrounded: "how texts are grouped depends on which features the classifier has selected to observe – common prosody, organization, tone, aim, or effect on the reader, for example" (Devitt 7). Thus, *Robinson Crusoe* can variously be labelled as a) an 'Erziehungsroman', as it portrays the development of a young man rebelling against social and familial constraints into the epitome of a self-made man; b) a 'utopia', if one comprehends the work first and foremost in terms of social critique and Robinson's insular society as a Puritan alternative to England; c) a 'picaresque', if one focuses on the "strange surprising adventures" promised in the title and the protagonist's cunning; d) as a 'myth', if one considers the work in terms of its socio-historical significance, as the exemplification of "characteristic aspirations of Western man" (Watt 95); e) as the prototypical 'robinsonade' (Broich 58), for which setting, character constellation and the motif of the struggle against nature are central; f) or simply as a novel. Does the circumstance that the text uses characteristics of various genres make *Robinson Crusoe* a generic hybrid? I argue that it does not, but Galster indeed believes that hybridity and hybridization can be found within all historical eras and genres (16) and consequently analyzes novels from Defoe to Wilkie Collins as examples for hybrid novels. This already indicates the limited heuristic value of the concept of hybridity – which texts, then, do *not* fall under the category 'hybrid'?

Here, Seibel proposes an interesting solution by drawing on Marie-Laure Ryan's taxonomy of generic worlds (Ryan 34), which distinguishes genres in terms of specific accessibility relations. Ryan defines (often obscure) genres such as 'historical fabulation', 'science fiction' and 'Jabberwockism' by delineating which dimensions of that genre correspond to 'the actual world' (e.g. natural laws and shared language). Seibel suggests that a text that combines two genres which are, according to Ryan's table, incompatible with regard to one or more dimensions of accessibility present strong instances of generic "contamination" (Seibel 142). However, Ryan's positivistic conception of reality not only disregards forms of ontological and epistemological doubt, as well as the existence of many alternative reality designs, but the binary system underlying her classification also reveals a static and normative understanding of genre and implies that the non-compliance with generic standards is tantamount to generic exclusion.

Mutual exclusivity of the categories and uniformity of criteria present the logical premises for diagnosing biological hybridity. Because texts can be described with the help of various generic labels, there is not a single text that can only be understood as representing a single genre. The absence of

consistent criteria for classifying genres means that no two genres are entirely incompatible. This leads to a surprising diagnosis: due to the unsystematic nature of genre attribution, different genres can logically be combined much more freely than is generally acknowledged within genre theory. The ease with which we can mix elements from different genres has so far been overlooked or ignored because it threatens to undermine the dominant conception of genre as something located inside the text that renders a text an instance of that genre. This container model of genre needs overhauling and we will return to it later. For now, we can say that the answer to the question “‘Why Can We Have Romantic Realism and not Doggy Cats?’” (Harshav qtd. in Fishelov, *Metaphors* 20) is the absence of an underlying systematicity and not, as Fishelov declares, that “hybridization in literature is [...] more common than hybridization in nature [...]” (*Metaphors* 20).

### **The Political Dimension of ‘Hybridity’**

As we have seen, the concept of generic hybridity perforce relies on an essentialist genre conception, as it depends on the ascription of a fundamental, even ‘natural’, difference between two genres and thus neglects both the diversity and adaptability of genre usage. Without such a static normative model it would be impossible to ascribe the status of ‘hybrid’ to an individual text or genre. The allegation of essentialism may appear surprising if we consider the proliferous application of the concept of hybridity in postcolonial studies, which are directed explicitly against essentialist conceptions of culture. As the term’s ubiquity within genre criticism is intricately connected to its career within the postcolonial discourse, it is necessary to digress a little and consider its uses and connotations with regard to colonial power structures. Heterogeneity presenting a precondition for hybridization, the application of the label ‘hybrid’ to the offspring of “[...] human parents of different races, halfbreed [...]” (“Hybrid”) played a significant role in discursively establishing a fundamental difference between colonizer and colonized. From 1980 onwards, the term has, as Monika Fludernik explains, been appropriated and reevaluated in the context of the postcolonialism debate (10), most famously by Homi K. Bhabha, who proposes to employ it to dislodge authority and domination:

*Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of authority – its rules of recognition [...]. Hybridity reverses the formal process of disavowal so that the violent dislocation of the act of colonization becomes the conditionality of colonial discourse [author’s emphases]. (114)*

Thus, Fludernik observes, “[h]ybridity revalues, that is to say: reconstitutes, colonial identity through deformation and displacement and by means of strategies of subversion. The reversal occurs by means of the inversion of the gaze – from the colonizer on the knowable colonial subject

and back to the colonizer” (27) – as an “act of civil disobedience” (31). Fludernik thus describes a shift in the use of the term from a tool used for the oppression of colonized subjects to one of emancipation for same subjects, which implies the inversion of the values ascribed to each side of the binary. It is, however, difficult to assess in how far the term has within the postcolonial discourse become progressively dissociated from the biological paradigm from which it derives:

The term hybridity, from its moorings in sexual cross-fertilization, racial intermixture and intermarriage, has now drifted free to connote (rather than denote) a variety of interstitial and antagonistic set-ups which are clearly linked to a ‘subaltern’ (Gramsci, Spivak) perspective and a positive revaluation of hybridity. Hybridity comes to function as a key concept of cultural diversity in which racial ‘impurity’ has been reinscribed as a subversive multiplicity and as progressive (but not unidirectional) agency. (Fludernik 21)

The question is in how far this shift includes a change in the way we conceive of hybridity itself and in how far the term continues to transport some of the implications that served to legitimize hegemonic thought. Fludernik’s explanation proves quite illuminating in this respect. Her mention of ‘agency’ (a notion that is entirely alien to biological conceptions of hybridity) indicates the first, as does as her emphasis on the verb ‘connote’ which implies a certain cognitive detachment from the term’s origin. Indeed, the term is more and more often used as largely synonymous to ‘pluralism’ or ‘multiplicity,’ inviting charges of “theoretical vagueness and ‘elasticity’ of the concept itself” (Acheraïou 102). At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, the very notion of ‘interstice’, the space between, shows the concept’s continued reliance on a binary, essentialist model, as the two poles are still understood as oppositional in nature (not only in structure). In other words: the concept of ‘hybridity’ is thinkable only in connection with its opposite – that of ‘purity’ – which is located at both poles. Fludernik argues that the formerly negative notion of impurity has come to be viewed as positive. This revaluation, however, can hardly be said to present a “transcendence of binary oppositions” (Fludernik 11); instead it is an inverse repetition of a logic that continues to foreground the heterogeneity of colonized and colonizing subject and thus fails to grasp the complexity of both relations of power and processes of identity formation.

Moreover, I argue that ‘hybridity’ presents an altogether different schema to that of multiplicity: the first is based on the logic of amalgamation, of fusion at some elementary (or essential) level, while the latter describes one of concurrence. A hybrid thus combines two heterogeneous things A and B to form a third, C, which presents an amalgam of its ‘parents’, while multiplicity describes the juxtaposition of elements from A and B, which then coexist alongside one another. Two popular metaphors for cultural diversity can serve to illustrate the difference: the melting pot presents a metaphor for hybridity, while the salad bowl is a metaphor for pluralism. Conceiving of

personal and cultural identity in terms of hybridity leads to the reduction of a person or culture to one specific dimension, that of a particular interstice, thus overlooking the diversity and complexity of individual and cultural identity. To refer to former colonies as 'hybrid' not only perpetuates the false implication that these societies were quite homogenous prior to the interference of the colonizers, but simultaneously implies that the culture of the colonizers does not have the same status. After all, what sense would it make to speak of 'hybridization' if all cultures were always already hybrid? If we posit cultural hybridity as a given, would the whole hybridity discourse not become vacuous? Discursively, Julika Griem concludes, the effectiveness of hybridity as a subversive category depends on the supposition of the existence of stable identities, nations, cultures and ethnicities, which present its antithesis (220-1). Hence, the notion of hybridity relies precisely on that which it seeks to undermine, because drawing on an essentialist and binary schema necessarily results in the perpetuation of its very logic. What is more, the concept reiterates the colonizer's overemphasis on the significance of categories such as cultural heritage, ethnicity and nationality, which present but some of many dimensions that contribute to the formation of an individual's identity. I contend that these are not fundamentally different from other socially defined roles individuals perform on a daily basis, from that of parent to that of employee to that of sexual partner, neighbor or consumer. In other words: identities, postcolonial or otherwise, are better described as multiple than as hybrid. Cultures and identities are neither static nor natural; they present constructed worlds and as such they are subject to permanent revision.

In how far is all this relevant to our discussion of hybrid genres? Firstly, the popularity of the notion of hybrid genres with regard to contemporary literature is clearly inspired by the concept's success within postcolonial studies. It is quite evident that the same issues surrounding questions of identity, knowledge and power that lie at the heart of much contemporary theory (from poststructuralist to postcolonial and gender theoretical approaches) also inspire the literary production in general and uses of genre conventions in particular. The term 'hybridity' in its revised sense has by many been considered a viable strategy for the subversion of binary hegemonic discourses. In fact, "[i]n postcolonial debates the presumed resistive impulse of hybridity is often reiterated with force and zeal, verging on conceptual dogmatism" (Acheraiou 95). Translated to the realm of literary production, this assumption ascribes to works that overtly mix genres a veritably subversive dimension: generic experimentation is considered to exemplify the strategy of hybridity on the level of cultural forms. It is evident that many contemporary texts employ generic experimentation to express their critique of hegemonic discourses, but the mechanisms and effects of generic experimentation are much more complex and diverse than the notion of hybridity can possibly capture.

## Reconceptualizing Genres as Schematized World-Constructions

The first and most important step to a reconceptualization of genre 'mixing' consists in the rejection of what Amy J. Devitt calls "a formal view of genre" (5), which departs from a container model of meaning, in which genre presents the form into which content is put. This conception of genre is not only static and normalizing, it also focuses on the finished product rather than on processes of meaning-production. Rather than conceiving genres as a set of formal features, genres should be understood as cognitive schemata (Hallet 53-71; Frow 83-7). David Rumelhart defines schemata as "[...] certain forms of rules of 'productive imagination' through which the understanding is able to apply its 'categories' to the manifold of sense-perception in the process of realizing knowledge or experience" (2). Learning thus takes the shape of pattern-acquisition, in other words: we learn to understand and experience objects, activities, ideas, situations, etc., in terms of typical spatial and functional relationships associated with them. We can then recognise either part or whole of that concept and through the activation of the respective schema, infer information on the nature of the object, activity, idea, situation, etc., that is unavailable to our sense perception:

Once we have accepted a configuration of schemata, the schemata themselves provide a richness which goes far beyond our observations. Upon deciding that we have seen an automobile, we assume that it has an engine, headlights, and all of the standard characteristics of an automobile. We do this without the slightest hesitation. [...] This allows our interpretations to far outstrip our sensory observations. In fact, once we have determined that a particular schema accounts for some event we may not be able to determine which aspects of our beliefs are based on direct sensory information and which are merely consequences of our interpretation. (Rumelhart 10)

As they present the smallest units into which our knowledge is packaged, Rumelhart describes schemata as "the building blocks of cognition" (2). Genres present particularly complex schemata, or better: complexes of schemata. They form, through association, sets or clusters of typical features I refer to as 'construction kits' from which the writer can draw in his/her textual production, and which, in turn, shape the reader's expectations towards a text. Thus, genres, as John Frow observes, project specific worlds (73), or, more precisely, genres provide the parameters for constructing worlds<sup>3</sup>:

Examples of such generically projected worlds would be:

- the world of the tabloid press, populated by celebrities, criminals, victims, nude models, and scenarios centred on scandal, crime, and sport. Its moral tone tends to be at once moralistic and salacious, and its time is that of a static continuum punctured by arbitrary events;



- the world of the picaresque novel, a world of sharp-witted servants and dull masters, of confidence tricks, of hunger and the constant threat of poverty, of the road and the unforeseen adventure, of upward and downward mobility, of a time which is at once episodic and recurrent;
- the world of the Petrarchan sonnet, where lovers are constant and fair mistresses are not, where suffering or bliss are the poles between which love moves, where eyes shoot beams to twine souls together, and where time is that of biological decay and its transcendence in love or in writing [...]. (Frow 86)

These different worlds are evoked by the text through specific markers (Seibel 138). From the moment we pick up or purchase a book and throughout the entire process of reading, we come across numerous generic indicators in different shapes: the designation on the cover, as well as the cover design and the title of the book or text, furthermore characteristic phrases, such as “once upon a time”, and typical motifs such as space and time travel in the case of science fiction or the shipwreck motif in the case of the robinsonade. We recognize these indicators which in turn activate our schematized knowledge and result in a tentative attribution to a specific genre (Hallet 59). This attribution then largely determines the reader’s expectations. We approach any text (as well as films, plays, paintings, music etc.) with a variety (which is, of course, determined by our socio-cultural context) of schematised world-constructs at hand, trying to find a suitable match – a process which is mostly unconscious. Thus, when we read the word ‘cowboy’, we draw on our generic knowledge of the western and consequently visualize a characteristic setting in the Old American West, a setting which includes such things as saloons, ranches, stagecoaches, sheriffs, bandits, roulette, cancan, show downs and tumbleweed, to name but a few. Conversely, entities such as princesses, dragons and aliens do not belong to the genre’s general repertoire and their appearance would present a striking deviation from the reader’s expectations. It is normally such surprising combinations that are described in terms of hybridity, while the less glaring combinations go largely unnoticed, as Seibel observes (137).

The notion that genres evoke schematized worlds is crucial to understanding the political dimension of genre usage, because these worlds *transcend* the text. Firstly, they can in various senses become institutionalized, for example in the form of specialized events, publications and marketing practices, creating specific genre communities on the basis of shared ideas, tastes and interests. Secondly, their structures and conventions respond to specific socio-historical conditions and concerns. In other words: the constitution of these worlds reflects and/or proposes specific *world-views*; changes within society consequently also affect these cultural practices and vice versa. Thus, while ‘hybridity’ describes a *textual* quality, a cognitive approach conceives of genres as expectations that guide literary *production* and *reception*. In order to capture this communicative dimension of genre

'mixing', I propose to borrow another concept from cognitive literary theory that provides a productive alternative to hybridity: conceptual blending.

### **Conceptual Blending as an Alternative Concept for Genre 'Mixing'**

Unlike 'hybridity,' 'blending' does not describe the status of a cultural artefact, but a cognitive process – a text, genre or culture *is* or *is not* hybrid, while 'blending' refers to something one *does*. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner describe blending as the partial projection of structural elements and schemata from one mental space onto another. Mental spaces are dynamic conceptual structures which we construct for specific purposes and according to specific situations (Fauconnier and Turner 40) and the schematized worlds we associate with particular genres present such mental spaces. Although Fauconnier and Turner's concept clearly suggests itself for an application to literary genres, its potential has so far gone largely unnoticed within genre studies, with the notable exception of Michael Sinding, who, to my knowledge is the first and only genre critic to employ 'blending' to genre mixtures.

Processes of blending are ubiquitous within all areas of language use; they are involved not only in the creation of parables, metaphors and other tropes, but wherever schemata from a specific realm are transferred to other realms. Thus, for example, the saying "[w]hen the cat's away, the mice will play' can be projected onto stories of the office, the classroom, infidelity, congressional oversight committees, computer antivirus utilities, and so on, over an unlimited range" (Turner 87). Most blending remains covert and unobtrusive; we only become aware of the blended character of a construction when we come across surprising twists, logical inconsistencies or structural clashes, thus prompting the 'hybridity diagnosis'. Although the concept's application to genres is, as I have shown, inherently flawed, when and how it is used is nevertheless significant because this provides an important clue as to the ways in which the quality of genre 'mixing' in contemporary literature may differ from combinations of genre schemata in other periods: processes of blending are increasingly foregrounded through the deliberate disappointment of, or confrontation between, generic expectations.

Blending involves the following dimensions (Fauconnier and Turner 41-2): *Input Spaces*: with regard to genre 'mixing,' the mental input spaces are the world-constructs evoked by genre labels. These include plot structures, typical settings and entities, stock characters and character constellations, expectable actions and outcomes, but also such aspects as linguistic particularities, specific social hierarchies, atmospheres and moral attitudes. *Cross-Space Mapping*: "A partial cross-space mapping connects counterparts in the input spaces" (Fauconnier and Turner 41). Everything the input spaces have in common is contained in a so-called *generic<sup>4</sup> space*. Thus, reading a text as the instance of a genre involves identifying counterparts between our construction kit of that genre and the text at hand. Cross-space mapping also enables us to blend different genres because their worlds (that is, the mental spaces we construct in relation to these genre labels) either share, or are

compatible with regard to, certain elements and structures. The relevant aspects from the input spaces are then projected onto a fourth space, the *blended space*, or 'blend.' Through the *composition* of particular elements and processes of *completion*, the blend can develop emergent structure that is not part of the inputs (Fauconnier and Turner 42-3) but results from the interaction of the newly combined elements. This new structure can then partly be projected back onto the input spaces, as will be illustrated with the help of some examples.

Unlike 'hybridity,' the concept of blending does not rely on an essentialist model, but describes cognitive constructions, and therefore does not conceive of the input spaces as stable or pure. Consequently, any blend can provide an input space for new blends. Indeed, the application of the notion of 'hybridity' from biology to colonial and postcolonial discourses to literary genres quite neatly illustrates the multiple stages involved in many processes of blending. Because genres evoke worlds with the help of complexes of schemata, genre worlds are themselves already blended spaces and can in turn serve as input spaces for worlds that combine schemata from different genres. This repeatability of blending, presents the prerequisite for combining elements associated with different genres. Incidentally, this observation also provides a new perspective on generic labels such as 'gothic thriller' or 'romantic comedy', which are often understood in terms of subgenres or modes in the adjectival sense. Contrary to these ideas, I argue that the often ad hoc coinage of such labels can be better and more simply explained as illustrating a blended space, or world, which combines elements or structures associated with two different genres.

### **Generic Blending in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver***

An example will serve illustrate how the described multistage process can help us understand different forms and effects of generic 'mixing' – Martin Scorsese's cult film *Taxi Driver*, which mixes elements associated with the psychological thriller and such associated with the western genre. 26-year old ex-soldier Travis Bickle, who suffers from insomnia, witnesses on his nightly cab tours through New York scenes of violence, prostitution and drug abuse. "All the animals," Travis contemplates, "come out at night – whores, skunk-pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies... sick, venal. Someday a rain'll come and wash all this scum off the street" (qtd. in Ray 352). Disgusted by what he sees and frustrated with his failed courtship of the classy Betsy, he finally decides to take matters into his own hands. He meets the 12-year old prostitute Iris whom he decides to 'save' and kills her pimp and his henchmen in a dramatic shootout. The film thus exhibits the dark mood and vivid depiction of violence, as well as the narrative perspective and pre-occupation with mental processes characteristic of many films labelled 'psychological thriller' and a plot structure and character constellation considered typical of the western. Before analyzing how the viewer integrates these two different genres, however, I would like to consider how another blend, namely that between the world of the western and late-70s urban

America, is established. The primary input spaces here are 'New York' and the world of the western. The cross-spatial mapping of these spaces connects the lawlessness, vice and corruption associated with the Wild West with the lawlessness, vice and corruption Travis sees in the streets of New York. Once this connection is established, one can identify many more counterparts in the generic space: the armed robbery of a convenience store resembles the bank robberies we frequently find in westerns, New York's prostitutes present counterparts to the 'easy girls' in frontier towns (Iris's nickname, incidentally, is "Easy"), Sport's long hair and headband recall the stereotypical Indian, and, most importantly, the loner Travis in his taxi recalls the lonesome cowboy, who aimlessly roams the wilderness on his horse. These parallels or 'mappings' become so suggestive to Travis that he adapts his behaviour to that of the cowboy: having decided to take matters into his own hands, he buys several revolvers, begins to practise his quick draw and tapes a knife to his cowboy boots. It is at this point that Travis's blend becomes overt. This illustrates how blends develop emergent structure: once Travis has recognized key similarities between the input spaces, he begins to complete the structure and identifies an 'adequate' solution to the perceived problem – vigilantism. Scorsese's film is particularly interesting, because while the protagonist is quite obviously psychopathic, it is never entirely clear whether his blend is merely the delusion of an individual who is losing his grip on reality, or if it indeed corresponds to a widely accepted world-view, as the implausible ending shows Travis being congratulated for his murderous actions. Conversely, some of the insights gained within the blend can be projected back onto the input spaces: the impressions of brutality and insanity the viewer gains from Scorsese's film can be projected back onto the western to reveal the violent logic underlying dominant conceptions of this genre, while the surprising ending can (depending on the viewer's interpretation) lead one to assume the lingering influence of the world-view associated with the western within parts of the US. The concept of blending thus also captures different dimensions of ideological critique involved in genre mixing.

Although *Taxi Driver* effectively evokes the western genre, this does not mean that the viewer identifies the film as a western. Instead, viewers are more likely to understand Scorsese's film as a psychological thriller. The reason for this is not so much that elements associated with the psychological thriller 'outweigh' those associated with the western, although the contemporary urban setting may, for some, disqualify the film's classification as a western. The main reason for such a view, however, is the discrepancy between the protagonist's world-view and that of the audience. Travis interprets his surroundings as analogous to the world of the western, whereas the viewer, confronted with various signs of the taxi driver's mental decline which somewhat forestalls the identification with the protagonist, tends to understand Travis's interpretation as a delusion, a result of his pathological state of mind. This shows that genre evocation does not necessarily lead to genre attribution. That the majority of references to a specific genre do not lead to genre attribution is a circumstance that is routinely neglected by

proponents of generic hybridity, because although *Taxi Driver* evokes two very different genres the film can hardly be termed a 'hybrid' of western and thriller. By the same token, the fact that a newspaper article refers to an event as a 'tragedy' does not mean that we classify it as pertaining to that literary tradition. Instead, the selective projection of schemata we associate with a particular genre enables us to interpret new information with the help of familiar patterns which then also govern our (re)actions, as *Taxi Driver* dramatically illustrates.

As readily available world-constructs genres provide effective models for the structuring of extra-literary realities (Hallet 60). This presents the true political dimension of generic experimentation, because a text's failure to adhere to our generic expectations leads to the foregrounding of these expectations, which renders them accessible to rational critique. Moreover, the discrepancy between generic expectations and textual actualizations may result in the adjustment of our genre schemata and therefore ultimately also to a revision of our understanding of extra-literary realities. This shall be illustrated with some cursory reflections on blends drawing on the fairy tale, one of the few genres where criticism often explicitly focuses on questions of ideology and pedagogy, or on what I call 'the politics of genre'.

### **Fairy Tale (Re)Visions**

The tales subsumed under the label 'classical fairy tale' gradually found their way into the households of the literate classes, particularly of the bourgeoisie, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Counter to common knowledge, the familiar versions read in families and schools, such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, exhibit significant alterations compared to the oral folk versions most of them are based on (*Zipes Magic Spell 2*). Far from faithfully reproducing tales that were orally transmitted for generations and generations, the 'classical' versions were adapted for a bourgeois audiences with the purpose of promoting the morals and codes of behavior of the patriarchal bourgeois society in order to prepare men and women for their respective roles therein:

[T]he male hero learns to be active, competitive, handsome, industrious, cunning, acquisitive. His goal is money, power, and a woman (also associated with chattel). His jurisdiction is the open world. His happiness depends on the just use of power. The female hero learns to be passive, obedient, self-sacrificing, hard-working, patient, and straight-laced. Her goal is wealth, jewels and a man to protect her property rights. Her jurisdiction is the home or castle. Her happiness depends on conformity to patriarchal rule. (*Zipes Fairy Tales 57*)

I would argue that up until today most people's conceptions of the fairy tale are shaped mainly by the literary versions by Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Hans-Christian Andersen, which are still widely read in families, but also circulated as children's entertainment by the mass media. This means

that there is a relatively limited stock of culturally shared generic schemata, which renders the projection of fairy tale motifs and structures to other genres and world-constructs both appealing and effective. At the same time, because many of these structures are intimately tied to an ideology that is increasingly seen as problematic, they are often evoked against themselves, that is, to reveal and critique their ideological bias.

Thus, in the last thirty years or so, there have been a growing number of rewritings of fairy tales that renegotiate the fixed gender conceptions promoted by the classical versions, often by portraying the fairy tale 'heroine' as active and ingenious rather than passive and simple-minded. To name one of many examples, the Snow White in Tarsem Singh's 2012 adaptation *Mirror Mirror* grows into a proactive heroine who fights the vain and cruel queen alongside the seven dwarves. When the queen enters the forest to kill Snow White, the latter locks up her male helpers, including the prince, in the dwarves' dwelling, resolved to confront the queen on her own. She tells the prince: "You know, all that time locked up in the castle, I did a lot of reading. You read so many stories where the prince saves the princess. I think it's time we changed that ending!", at which the prince protests: "But it's been focused grouped and it works!". This meta-generic quip foregrounds the cognitive process and implications of the completion of the genre schema by linking the gender roles promoted by fairy tale conventions to audience expectations and marketability. Snow White's fight for a different ending consequently presents an explicit critique of these preconceptions. In order to grasp the real political potential of genre it is paramount to understand that it is only through the familiarity with the generic schemata that the emancipatory message of subversive versions becomes effective in the reader's mind, leading him/her to revise received genre conceptions, and thus renders the alterations socially relevant.

Jack Zipes provides another intriguing example of a subversive blend: a television advert for a cleaning agent blends the generic input spaces of the fairy tale and of advertising by employing the Cinderella story to illustrate the key sales argument for the product.

One older sister: *Cinderella, wash the floor.*

Other older sister: *Yeah, wash it, and then re-wax it.*

[Sisters leave for the ball.]

Cinderella: *Wash, wax, pfui.*

[Fairy Godmother appears.]

Fairy Godmother: *Phew, ammonia. That strips wax. But use Mr Clean with no ammonia. Mr Clean gets the dirt but leaves the wax shining and you get a shine.*

Cinderella: *Wow.*

Fairy Godmother: *And now off to the ball?*

Cinderella: *Ball-schmall. Tonight's my bowling league. 'Bye.* [author's emphases] (Proctor and Gamble TV ad, qtd. in Zipes *Magic Spell* xxi)

This blend overtly deconstructs the expectations associated with both genres: firstly, instead of envying and emulating the haughty sisters and subscribing to the upper and upper middle-class ideal of sophistication by attending a formal ball, where she could show off her beauty and find her prince, this self-determined Cinderella chooses a more working-class activity where she can roll up her sleeves and show her skills as part of a team. The ad thus exposes the gender and class bias of the familiar fairy tale version. Secondly, the emancipatory twist also presents a critique of the conservative image of the happy housewife often evoked in the promotion of household products by the marketing industry, because by using Cinderella as a model, this advert portrays housework not as the woman's vocation or a familial duty, but as a *chore* forced upon her by others, thus subtly hinting at the coercive dimension of role allocation.

Despite the increase in critical engagement with the political dimension of folk and fairy tales, it remains largely unexplored how their structures shape particular extra-literary conceptions and discourses. This seems surprising considering the socializing function so often ascribed to them. While the scope of this question certainly exceeds this article, I would like to suggest that they not only continue to affect gender conceptions and received notions of beauty and romantic love, but are also blended with other popular genres. Thus, many romantic films evoke, sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly, fairy tale motifs and metaphors, not to mention the 'happy ever after' formula. By the same token, the hierarchical structure of the fairy tale world tangibly inspires celebrity coverage in the popular press and on TV, because in the present age of communication and globalized markets, the celebrity occupies an elevated position analogous to that of the aristocracy in the feudal world of the fairy tale. Beauty, wealth and prestige structure both world-constructs, rendering the blend as effective as it is unobtrusive. This recourse to fairy tale schemata in parts of the mass media arguably partly accounts for the persistence of the seemingly anachronistic institution of monarchy in so many Western democracies. As in the time of Perrault and the Grimm Brothers, the fairy tale semantics still imbues the royal sphere with glamour and fuels people's hopes and aspirations of social advancement.

In this light, the recent crisis of the British monarchy could, to some extent, be attributed to the failure of the projection due to an overt discrepancy between fairy tale conventions and the events surrounding the marriage between Prince Charles and Diana Spencer portrayed in the popular media. This discrepancy becomes starkly apparent precisely because the projection at first seemed to fit very well indeed: although Diana is of noble descent, this is consistently downplayed or altogether neglected in the media's portrayal of her as a Cinderella-figure (Gephart 157), which allows Prince Charles to become Prince Charming and select the beautiful young woman as his princess. More important than their 'fairy tale wedding' is the circumstance that the Princess of Wales came to be seen as the embodiment of the very virtues of the heroine of the classical fairy tale tradition: young

and beautiful, her initial shyness made her seem both passive and obedient, while the concern she displayed for the sick and poor, and her commitment to the battle against landmines, showed kindness, caring and selflessness. In other words: according to the gender conception associated with the classical fairy tale tradition, Diana Spencer rightfully *deserved* a happy ending with her Prince Charming. That she was denied this happy ending because the Prince had an affair with a married woman arguably undermines the belief in the validity of the projection of the fairy tale court, where the adherence to the bourgeois moral code is rewarded, onto the British monarchy. The fairy tale happy ending can arguably be considered to represent something of a 'symbolical contract' between nobility and bourgeoisie, according to which the bourgeoisie's acceptance of the nobility's supreme status is premised on the latter's acceptance of bourgeois values. In the aftermath of Diana's death, the institution of monarchy in Britain came increasingly under scrutiny, and was openly criticized as outdated. Today, this crisis seems to have been entirely overcome. Again, the reinvigoration of the fairy tale projection can be considered to be of symbolical significance to the revitalization of monarchism: although the initial blend failed, the corrected cross-space mapping which substitutes Charles for his son in the role of Prince Charming seems to provide a suitable match including the desired happy ending in the shape of a fairy tale wedding. As I have sought to show, genres are not only relevant in terms of classification, but as complexes of schemata they also present meaningful patterns that govern our interpretation of cultural artifacts, as well as of extra-textual worlds. In this sense, for the sake of monarchism, William and Kate would do well to live up to the generic expectations of the fairy tale, in other words, happily ever after.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brunetière conceives of genres as possessing a life-span that can be divided into three stages: birth, maturity, death (13). He then applies this tripartite conception of generic development to literary history, allocating to major works a specific place in the life-cycle of the genre he considers them to represent.

<sup>2</sup> David Fishelov, who calls for a revivification of certain aspects of the evolutionary paradigm (*Life*, 616) presents a notable exception.

<sup>3</sup> I depart from a constructivist world-concept that defines worlds as structures which are conceived as having defined boundaries, their own specific rules and laws, and exclude certain individuals or entities.

<sup>4</sup> Fauconnier and Turner use 'generic' here in a broad sense, not in relation to artistic genres

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