

Schmid, Sonja. *Im Netz der Filmgenres. "The Lord of the Rings" und die Geschichtsschreibung des Fantasygenres* [Inside the Net of Film Genres. "The Lord of the Rings" and the Historiography of the Fantasy Genre]. Marburg: Tectum-Verlag, 2014. 294 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-3-8288-3296-1. EUR 29.95.

Academic discourse on genre is characterized by a peculiar contradiction: on the one hand, there is genre theory which tackles the phenomenon on a conceptual level and tries to answer the question of what genres actually are and how they historically come into existence. On the other hand, there is research on the history of specific genres, and these two endeavors have surprisingly little overlap. Though film and literature studies have different foci, today, both disciplines have given up on the idea that genres can be conceptualized as abstract and logical systems. Film scholars like Rick Altman or Steve Neale understand genres rather as pragmatic and multi-discursive concepts that can only be sensibly analyzed in actual use. It follows that research cannot confine itself to the mere analysis of the (film) text but must also look into the production and reception of a particular work. It should ask (and answer) questions like: against what historical background was a film produced, how was it marketed and sold, to what degree did it react to already existing movies or in turn influence later filmmakers? Taken seriously, this approach ultimately turns genre theory into genre history.

Such an analysis is not only complex and time-consuming but also, by its very nature, quite limited and always only preliminary. This might explain why the findings of genre theory had surprisingly little impact on "practical" research, studies that really take the insights of genre theory to heart are still quite rare.

Sonja Schmid's *Im Netz der Filmgenres* at first glance seems like the pleasant exception to this rule. Her book, which is based on her PhD thesis at the Universität Bayreuth, is meant as "a plea for a cross-linked historiography of genres" which conceives genres as "intertextual switches" (13; my translations throughout). Schmid looks at Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to "show the multifaceted processes and dynamics which, both on a diachronic and synchronic level, lead to the production of the film [...] and also had a significant influence on the further development of the genre of fantasy itself" (16).

Schmid's study is quite typical for doctoral dissertations — especially German ones — insofar as she spends far too much time with theory. Traditionally, German-speaking humanities disciplines are much more interested in theorizing than are their English-speaking counterparts, and Schmid's book is a case in point. Almost 100 of the overall 250 pages are spent on theoretical preliminaries.

Schmid first discusses various theoretical approaches to genre—from Aristotle through Ludwig Wittgenstein, Northrop Frye and Tzvetan Todorov to Rick Altman and Barry Langford—to finally arrive at an understanding of genres as “multi-discursive switches” (92) which can only be properly described with a “cross-linked *historiography* of genre” (69) operating “both on a synchronic as well as diachronic level” (*ibid.*). This specific approach, which is heavily influenced by New Historicism and is therefore sometimes referred to as New Film History, significantly widens the scope of traditional film historiography. It disbands of the sole focus on the film and also rejects the idea of reducing film history to a mere succession of masterpieces.

Once these theoretical foundations are laid out, Schmid turns specifically to fantasy as a genre. Part III is a walk through various definitions of the genre. All the usual suspects are mentioned and the similarities and differences with adjacent genres like sf, horror, and fairy-tales discussed. A special emphasis is, not surprisingly, put on films. Schmid discusses the work of Georges Méliès, and the two 1924 films *Die Niebelungen* (Fritz Lang) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh) as early examples of filmic fantasy.

After more than 170 pages, we finally arrive at the main thing—Jackson’s trilogy. In part IV Schmid works through a whole catalogue of relevant questions and approaches: she talks about *Lord of the Rings* as a typical example of fantasy, but also about technical, economical and socio-historical aspects as well as questions of intertextuality and transmediality. While there is much to agree on here, one wonders whether the previous theoretical effort was really necessary, especially since Schmid does not really live up to her own demands. She rightly insists that one has to “look at the multiple discourses which are part of the production of a film” (254) to properly locate it inside a genre, but she rarely succeeds in doing so. She also mostly fails to properly synthesize her material. Instead, she is just reporting on existing research and adds little of her own.

Given Schmid’s approach, the chapter titled “*The Lord of the Rings* im multidiskursiven Netzwerk der generic user” (Inside the discursive network of its generic user) should actually be the heart of the book, but it is, quite the opposite, particularly weak. The parts on CGI and the economy of the trilogy are fairly superficial and Schmid’s thoughts on connections with National Socialism simply outrageous. Here, she somehow mixes the reading of Tolkien’s trilogy as an allegory of World War II—an interpretation Tolkien himself famously disapproved of—with the question of to what degree Jackson makes use of the iconography of Nazi propaganda movies; two issues that are completely unrelated.

*Im Netz der Filmgenres* is published as a hardcover and looks rather nice at first glance. But upon closer inspection it turns out to be riddled with small and big errors—from typographical glitches and all kinds of typos as well as

sloppy phrasing to statements that are just plain wrong. Altogether, Schmid displays a curious combination of over exhaustiveness and sloppiness. In her overlong discussion of different concepts of genre she, for example, claims that Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic locates "the question of genre inside the reader" (24), which is simply not true. Earlier, she wrongly writes that the term fantasy only became popular in the 1980s thanks to films like *Excalibur* (1981) or *Time Bandits* (1981) (119). Equally curious is a footnote on the merchandising of *Star Wars*. According to Schmid, the franchise made a meager 20 million dollars with this line of business (184 n.545), although the source she is quoting actually talks about 22 billion. Even stranger is her weirdly distorted perception of time. Among other things, Schmid refers to *American Nightmare*, Robin Wood's 1979 collection of essays, to describe "newer tendencies in the horror genre" (202 n.592) even though there is a 30-year gap between the films Wood talks about and Jackson's trilogy. On a similar note, she moves the era of New Hollywood, whose beginning is commonly dated to the end of the 1960s, into the 1990s.

While some of these errors are quite fundamental, they could probably be overlooked if Schmid actually came up with genuinely interesting insights. But the overall impression is rather "much ado about nothing." An analysis of Jackson's films informed by modern genre theory could certainly result in an interesting book, but *Im Netz der Filmgenres* is definitely not that book.

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