

Microgenre: A Quick Look at Small Culture [Book Review]

Danielle Rudnicka-Lavoie^{ab}

^aYork University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; ^bRyerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence: drudnickalavoie@ryerson.ca

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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The essay collection “The Microgenre: A Quick Look at Small Culture” presents a look into overlooked cultures of the past in a short essay format that spans a great breadth of niche territory. A microgenre can be any short-lived snippet of culture, whether associated with literature of the 18th or 19th centuries, or the current-day economy of algorithms in our media consumption. As the editors say, a microgenre is “the classification of increasingly niche-marketed worlds in popular music, fiction, television, and the internet” (p. 1). As anyone who has a Netflix account that suggests “Dramas with a Strong Female Lead” or a Spotify account that hooks them into niche genres of music they have never hear of, the concept of the microgenre is particularly useful to understanding current media use habits. While they may be small, diffuse and obscure, the microgenres presented in this collection all demonstrate distinct cultural specificity and intertextuality that defines them. The chapters are presented chronologically, which allows the reader to get an overview of how these different phenomena have come to be genres from the 5th century BCE to current-day internet lore.

While the “quick” format itself limits the depth that each microgenre is accorded, the range of this book is truly impressive. From literary microgenres of the 18th Century like the “Premature Ejaculation Poem,” to the more contemporary discussions of Mommy Memoirs and Minecraft Fiction, the authors of these essays artfully present the intricacies of their object of analysis. A few examples of microgenres will be highlighted here in lieu of an extensive summary of all parts.

“The Myron’s Cow Epigram” by Paul Hay delves into the origins of the namesake cow that inspired so many poems by Greek and Byzantine authors. The microgenre is a specific sample of a cultural artifact, the bronze cow, being a prolific inspiration for poets over a millennium. As Hay states, “The statue activates a variety of thematic explorations and gives the poets a wide range of topics to discuss in even a two-line epigram” (p. 11). Myron’s cow may be considered an early example of a literary meme: through its use by several poets and authors of the time, the original becomes effaced through replication.

In “The Premature Ejaculation Poem,” Chistopher Vilmar highlights how raunchy sexuality has always been present in literature: “What students don’t know is that serious authors have been writing about boners since way ‘back in the day’” (p. 15). Pointing to the historically dynamic nature of the “premie” microgenre, Vilmar highlights how these works used ironic eroticism as political satire. Double-entendres related to the sexual prowess of Louis XIV in France, for example, served as critiques of his moral authority. Here, “fornication becomes a symbol of the more permissive culture that followed the Restoration [...] at least as long as everyone involved was satisfied” (p. 19).

Alistaire Tallent’s “Prostitute Narratives of Ancien Regime France” demonstrates how tales of sexual promiscuity served as important critiques of structural inequality and class. Part of the French libertine novel popularized by such authors as the Marquis de Sade, this microgenre is defined by sex workers openly admitting their profession and prioritizing their own pleasure while refusing social norms of marriage and monogamy. By rejecting stereotypes about women’s maternal instincts and highlighting feminists sharing principles and representing powerful men as “corrupt and degenerate fools” (p. 27), this microgenre foregrounds the agency and humour of 18th century French sex workers.

In the “Neoclassical Plague Romance,” Matthew Duque offers insight into Thucydide’s account of the plague of the 5th century BCE, suggesting that people – not the gods – were the source of “death and misery.” In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Duque’s essay presents a necessary short history of contagious disease as represented through art. Examples such as that of “Philothea: A Grecian Romance” by Lydia Maria Child, where “men fall down senseless in the street” seem particularly timely in the wake of the current pandemic. Through other examples of neoclassical paintings, Duque demonstrates how the handling of these disasters is telling of how bodies were affected by early industrialization and how corruption exacerbated this suffering. As Duque argues,

fictionalized accounts of plague and contagion often rely on historical works. There is no doubt that this microgenre will flourish in its exploration of people causing and containing disease, speaking to the precarity of human life.

“Anesthesia Fiction” by Jennifer Diann Jones explores fiction that relates specifically to the “use and abuse of anesthesia” (p. 39). Jones states that the advent of chloroform used for surgery in the 19th century evoked malpractice for patients, who feared what their bodies would undergo while unconscious. Furthermore, the underregulated nature of its use created anxieties about medical advancements and its effects on individual patients, as demonstrated by depictions of doctors performing procedures without patients’ consent, or other breaches of consent such as sexual assault while unconscious.

“Grangerism” is defined by Megan Becker-Leckrone as “the practice of cutting and pasting illustrations or other material into published books” (p. 71). This began in 18th century Britain as an elite practice popularized by James Granger, who left space for portraits in his *Biographical History of England*. The cut-and-paste ethos of grangerism and “extra-illustration” in general, persists in contemporary media examples from the absurd animated television (*South Park*) to the hilarious cannon of comedy (*Monty Python*).

In “Shirley Temple’s ‘Baby Burlesks,’” Nora Gilbert addresses the infantilization of children actors in all-child theatrical productions in the 1930s. Temple notably played a baby at the age of four and also a mother of three in some of these films. These roles created dualisms of old/young, prude/sexy and nude/clothed for these child actors in a profoundly disturbing microgenre defined by “age transvestism” and precocious sexuality that played into racial stereotypes.

Cynthia J. Miller and Thomas M. Shaker define “Nudie-Cuties” as “exploitation films that use thin, amusing, and often implausible story lines to create a context for nudity and titillation” (p. 93). These films were produced mostly in the 1960s and feature various levels of nudity but do not include full nudity or sex between characters, as per the Motion Picture Production Code rules of the time. The women in these films are said to hold the power in the sexual dynamic, as they are portrayed as “out of the league” of men, who are seen as shy and awkward, compared to the large-bosomed female leads. These films drew heavily on burlesque, bridging the two forms of art in what today would probably be seen as exploitation of women’s bodies through voyeurism and objectification.

“Giallo” by Gavin F. Hurley explores the realm of popular films from

the 1960s-1970s based on the yellow-covered British and American detective novels (*Giallo* means yellow in Italian). These films took on a postmodern allure, making them into “anti-detective” narratives such as “The Case of the Bloody Iris” using the “through the eyes of the killer” point-of-view that relates their subjectivity to that of the viewer while creating anticipation of violence through camerawork. This vernacular type of film served as the foundation for the slasher films to come in its wake.

The more contemporary examples of microgenres in the book address such subjects as “Nuclear Realism” to “Machine-Classified Microgenres” which draw on algorithms. John Carl Baker discusses the history and context of “Nuclear Realism” films in the 1980s Cold War period. *The Day After* (1983) and *Testament* (1983) are two examples of this style fraught with nuclear anxieties and defined by key characteristics of “everyman” characters, “extreme viscerality” and reflexivity of the complicated relationship between news media as information and apocalyptic consumption (p. 115). This nuclear realism movement was quite short-lived, as its end coincided with Ronald Reagan’s election in 1984 which commenced disarmament talks between the USA and the Soviet Union.

In “Home Depot Art,” Danielle Kelly states that this art movement uses the unusual juxtapositions of building supplies and other objects to subversive art pieces. Kelly describes the use of building supplies as a sort of “radical activism within the art world,” bearing symbolism associated with blue-collar work and deconstructing the association of fine art with high class (p. 135). Artists from currents such as Neo-Dada and *Nouveau Realisme* have popularized these techniques, which are now considered common place in most student art for their affordability and “inherent meaning” (p. 136). This democratizing effect is not without the obvious caveat that these pieces are made for an elite audience and displayed within high-art galleries.

Mary Thompson explores the world of “The Mommy Memoir” which had its heyday from the 1990s to the early 2000s. These memoirs present a historically silenced perspective of first-person accounts of motherhood as a reaction to the “surveillance of mothers” (p. 147). Their postfeminist tone is defined by a disenchantment with 1990s feminist ideals of autonomy and individualism exemplified by the mantra of “having it all” (p. 149). Here, motherhood and digital technologies are allied with reproduction in a movement that could have spawned radical potential but has instead been fodder for anti-vaccine discourse and other skepticism about the medical community. Thompson rightfully points out that this space skews excessively White and North, calling into question what types of

people are allowed to be considered “mommies”.

Heather Lusty presents “Heavy Metal Microgenres” such as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) and Black Metal. These Heavy Metal microgenres go beyond regionality to display technical acuity and experimentation in music, integrating elements of prog rock, jazz and unusual time signature and compositions to the Heavy genre (p. 163). Djent, Space Metal, NWOBHM, Speed Metal and Christian Metal are all different styles within this microgenre. Other more politically radical and reactive genres include Norwegian black metal and National Socialist black metal, which have far-right and neo-Nazi connotations, respectively. Lusty delves deep into the many offshoots and fragmentations that metal has experienced since the 1980s, offering a delightfully detailed account of metal genres around the world such as Thrash metal, Teutonic metal, metal at da club, folk metal, among others demonstrating the global nature of the phenomenon.

Aurelio Meza introduces the “Mexican Neo-Surf Microgenres” as a music scene coming out of the 1990s tied to the resurgence of garage and surf in the United States. This type of surf pairs the traditional surf elements of Hawaiian shirts with the more “authentically Mexican” elements luchador masks to create a truly absurd and surrealist live music experience (p. 171). These visual markers define the microgenre, popularized by acts like Fenomeno Fuzz, les Elásticos, and Lost Acapulco. While Pulp Fiction’s soundtrack may have popularized the American surf genre at the time, Mexican Neo-Surf is a truly original assemblage of garage rock, surf rock and rockabilly that remains an underground genre still sought out in Mexico today.

Ultimately, the editors’ goal of trying “to present previously untreated points of cultural curiosity in an effort to reveal the profound truth – that humanity’s desire to classify is often only matched by the unsustainability of the obscure and hyper-specific” (p. 6) is achieved, even though the quick and small format leaves more to be desired in some cases. The reader who is not familiar with classical literary genres may find themselves lost in the lack of space dedicated to the contextualisation of certain chapters. In sum, “The Microgenre” is a worthwhile dive into obscure and hyper-specific niches otherwise ignored by larger literary and cultural currents in the humanities.

Danielle Rudnicka-Lavoie is a PhD student in the Joint Program in Communication and Culture at York and Ryerson Universities in Toronto, Canada. Her doctoral research investigates the contemporary digital labour landscape in the Canadian influencer industry, by looking at sexism, racism and precarity in feminized labour carried out on social media platforms.

To cite this article:

Rudnicka-Lavoie. (2021). Microgenre: A Quick Look at Small Culture [Book Review]. *Journal of Communication Technology*, 4(3), 115-121. DOI: 10.51548/joctec-2021-021.