

Manic Panic: When You're Not a "Natural" Rainbowhead

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In this article, Alicia Shupe explores the importance of genre analysis and convention, and using critical thinking in concert with antecedent knowledge to read people much as we might read a text.

Do You Read Me? People as Genre

Have you ever sat at a restaurant or café table near a window and watched the people on the street walk by? If you have, you know that, in general, you'll see all kinds of people with all kinds of diverse stories and backgrounds moving through all sorts of tasks important to their daily lives. One might be on the way to work, another on the way home; someone is running a shopping errand, another has just picked up their school-age children. As you watch them coming and going, it's likely that you've formed ideas of what their lives might look like. But where do those ideas come from? How do you know that the man crossing the street in the nicely fitted suit talking on his cell phone is a business professional? What do you believe about the young woman riding the bicycle and wearing the brightly colored tie-dye dress? You may not be aware of it, but as you're watching these people go about their lives, you're actually *reading* them. Their clothes, their hair, their posture, their actions—all work together to create a story of who this person is and what their business in the world may be. In other words, their external presentation acts as a genre convention that tells you who they are.

The ISU Writing Program defines **genre conventions** as “all the things a writer could discover (and discuss) about a particular genre that makes us recognize it as, well, what it is.” That is to say, genre conventions tell you how to understand something as belonging to a certain genre.

You may have guessed the man was in business because of this expensive-looking, well-fitting suit, which suggests he is someone who wears a suit often and needs to maintain a certain appearance. You may have also guessed at his profession because he was talking on a cell phone and carrying a briefcase. You may assume that the young woman on the bicycle is a “free spirit” because of the tie-dye dress or her seemingly carefree smile. Some of these assumptions may be completely accurate. Some may not. Unlike reading a text and applying genre conventions to understand the work the writing is doing, reading a person as a genre can be a bit more complicated.

Genre Conventions: Who Are You and How Do You Look?

The ISU Writing Program defines **genre** as “a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.” Whoa! That’s kind of a lot. If genre is a kind of production, then how can it apply to people? Well, that’s actually a simpler answer than you might think. Have you ever heard the terms “product of society” or “a product of their environment”? What those sayings are hinting at is the fact that people are shaped by the places where they grow up and the people they interact with. Each society has its own set of rules and cultural values. As we grow and become active participants in the world, we internalize those values and then learn to behave in a way that fits with those learned conventions. Here’s an example to help it make a little more sense: as a child, you may have been taught to say “sir” or “ma’am” when you’re speaking to someone older than yourself. You may have also been taught to wear certain “fancy” clothes if you attended church or Sunday school. Why? Because wearing “fancy” clothes to church is supposed to show respect. In my house, my Mother’s answer to “Why can’t I wear my soccer shirt to church?” was “Because I didn’t raise a hooligan.” At eight years old, I didn’t particularly have a definition for “hooligan,” but I could understand that it was important to my Mom that I looked clean and well put together: a decent reflection of her parenting. She didn’t want the other church folks to think she hadn’t taught me to be respectful. My Mother knew that other adults would look at me and read me as either well behaved and well taught or “wild” based on my appearance. Just as a reader and a writer might do

when trying to figure out which genre a book, song, or movie is, they would look at the final product—me as a child—and assign me a genre based on the conventions I exhibited. Unkempt hair, soccer shirt, and excitable behavior would equal a “wild” classification, whereas “fancy” dress, clean socks, and smooth hair (impossible with my natural curls) would earn me a classification as one of the “good” kids.

As I’ve shown with the example of watching people come and go on the street, this type of people-reading is not singular to church folks and children. We all do this constantly. It’s how we understand whether we want to engage with someone before we ever say “hello” for the first time. Reading people as a genre gives us some insight into who that person may be, whether we share values, whether we might get along, and whether we want to invite them into our world. But is reading people as a genre always benign? We’d like to think so, but the truth is, people, like texts, do not exist in a vacuum. Our genre conventions can be pushed and even broken. Think of Lil Nas X recording “Old Town Road” with Billy Ray Cyrus: Is it rap? Is it country? Is it pop? Is it something new and something else altogether? The same is true of people. Just because someone wears a suit doesn’t mean they fit neatly into the box of “conservative business professional,” and just because someone has dyed their hair blue doesn’t mean they fit neatly into the “anarchist punk” box. Our value systems that allow us to apply genre conventions to people and read them as belonging to a certain group were shaped by the worlds in which we grew up, which means there is plenty of room for stereotypes, discrimination, and misinformation. There are myriad ways to misread someone based on appearance, and those misreads can have very real consequences for the life of the person who is misread and misjudged on first look.

Did God Give You Blue Hair? The Limits of Antecedent Knowledge

When I was twenty years old, I dyed my hair “Electric Blue.” The logic for this change was quite simple in my mind: After two decades as the daughter of a pastor, constantly concerned with how other people would read my appearance and categorize me based on the conventions of the genre to which they decided I belonged, I’d decided I wanted my external appearance to match the person I knew on the inside—someone who was beginning to realize she didn’t care all that much about fitting specific genre conventions and who wanted a little room to figure out which bookshelf she belonged on all by herself. Also, blue just happened to be my favorite color

Reading is a term often used in Black Queer culture, particularly in the Trans, Drag, and Ballroom communities. The term is typically applied when one points out and “exaggerates” the flaws of another (@robby-pooh).

While the context was different for me, there is some overlap between this term and what happened in the following story.

It is also worth noting that reading people as a genre, when considered in this cultural context, has a traceable history that should not be ignored. The subculture that popularized the term is often marginalized and disadvantaged in mainstream education, literacy, and reading opportunities (texts).

at the time, and I thought it was pretty, so . . . there was that. I grew up in the '90s and was a teenager in the early aughts, so I'd seen brightly colored dyed hair in pop culture for most of my life, but having also grown up in an incredibly conservative church, I didn't know anything about the history of dyed hair or about the history of “reading” people in Black Queer culture. I didn't know anything about punk subculture. And I was definitely not prepared for how the rest of the world would read my new genre. I knew how the church would respond, but since I'd broken from that religion, I wasn't concerned. Naively, I thought the rest of the world wouldn't care what I did or how I looked.

In the summer of 2010, my sister took me and a friend to see Bon Jovi at Soldier Field in Chicago (see Figure 1 at the end of this article for a full-color image). As we walked through the tunnel to the field, we passed several security checkpoints where we showed our tickets, opened our bags, and were waved through. At the last checkpoint, my sister and her friend, a blonde and a brunette, were waved through, but the security guard who checked my ticket asked me to wait. I stood for what seemed like a lifetime—it was probably no more than ninety seconds—before she finally sighed and said, “Blue hair? Did God give you blue hair? Do you believe that God is imperfect in his knowledge and made a mistake when he gave you your natural hair? You think you can improve on God's design with blue hair?” I was stunned. First, because this security guard sounded like she'd spent some time talking to my Father. But, then, even more so because I couldn't understand how the strands growing from my head had anything to do with her or any relationship to whether or not it was safe for me to take my seat (which I paid for) on the field at a rock concert. Of all the places I might have expected to be read as “divergent from the norm,” a rock concert was not on the list. These were supposed to be my people! I couldn't say anything. For the first time since choosing to rewrite my genre, I felt a little wave of shame, like she had just pointed out something very wrong with me and done so for the world to see. I get it now: what I was feeling was a reaction to being “read” both as a genre and in the cultural context noted above. I think about this

moment often, and my reaction varies from wishing I'd said any manner of thing about the politeness of minding one's own business to simply wishing I'd managed a kind word that might have changed her perception. But at the time, all I managed was a defiant chin thrust and a grunted "Mmhhh . . ." which was returned before she summoned me through the gate and to the field.

Of course, more than a decade later, I understand a little better what was happening in that interaction with the security guard. She was using her antecedent knowledge of "natural" hair colors, of religious convictions, and of people with dyed hair and transferring all that knowledge onto her reading of me. **Antecedent knowledge** is "all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing" (ISU Writing Program). And since writing and reading are inextricably linked activities, the same is true of readers. When we read a text or a person, we apply the things we already know to help us interpret what we're seeing and make meaning. Unfortunately, as I've said before, some of what we know about people comes from stereotypes born and replayed throughout our culture. The security guard was simply engaging in **invisible transfer**, which is an "implicit process" that occurs when one is "instinctively drawing from [their] prior knowledge and acquired skills" (ISU Writing Program). As a security guard, I'm sure it had been her job to read people and make snap decisions about them long before she'd ever met me. But when we engage in reading people like genres, that sort of quick reading and reliance on antecedent knowledge that may include stereotypes, while understandable, is imperfect. You can learn just about as much about a person's identity and personality at a glance as you can by skimming a 600-page novel for ten minutes. You might get a hint or a whisper of the gist, but you won't *know* them.

I can't know for certain what was going through her mind as she made those comments and held me back for the extra security check, but I can reflect on my own uptake process after that situation. **Uptake** is "the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense" (ISU Writing Program). It is also a tracing of what we've learned and how we've gone about learning it. It took more than a few years for me to finish tracing my uptake from that encounter, but it consisted of two valuable lessons that I learned, both of which came from standing in that vulnerable position and feeling judged and more than a little surprised. Lesson number one: misreading people as a genre can work from both sides of the conversation. I had assumed that because I was going to a rock show, I would be among like-minded individuals who wanted to express themselves creatively and externalize their internalized individuality. I hadn't thought

about the stadium employees having different values, emotions, or antecedent knowledge. And lesson two: after two trips around my body with the security wand, I learned for the first time that boldly colored, “unnatural” hair can be viewed as a threat to the “norm” and as such, can be a threat in general.

Divergent from the Norm: What Happens When Genre Conventions Are Broken?

That day at Soldier Field just convinced me of the importance of finding people who would know and accept me as I am. I’d always felt a bit different from the people I grew up around, so it became important to me that I show even more of my inner self on the outside. At twenty, I figured that if people could see my divergence before they got to know me and still choose to lean in, maybe they would eventually be able to accept me.

The other thing that day brought up was my curiosity. Why did that security guard think it was OK for her to speak to my personal life? And more importantly, what was it about blue hair that felt so morally or culturally threatening or triggering? After all, I was a law-abiding, taxpaying citizen who was working eighty hours per week as an accounts receivable clerk for an auto parts manufacturer. I didn’t use “party” as a verb. I didn’t even have a “crowd” to run with. When I wasn’t in school, I spent most of my evenings at my eight-year-old niece’s swim practices.

I needed to understand more about the history of brightly colored “unnatural” hair.

It Didn’t Start with Kylie Jenner: History of the Genre

In my twenties, I spent a lot of time trying to catch up on all the trends and pop culture I’d missed as a sheltered teenager and, as young people are wont to do, also trying to figure out what I liked and what kind of artists I could identify with. Music has always been a huge part of my life and my identity, and each time I found a new artist that I liked, I’d end up downloading their whole catalog and falling down a YouTube research rabbit hole (that’s a really polite way to say: I dare you to find a Nirvana documentary that I haven’t seen at this point). So, I feel like I have something of an understanding about the relationship between brightly colored hair and punk subculture. But, for this article, I wanted to understand even more. Once more to the research rabbit hole!

According to an article written for *Byrdie.com* (“Your one-stop destination for insider beauty secrets”), humans have been dyeing hair since 1500 BC, but the first documentation of an “unnatural” color dye is credited to William Henry Perkin who “created the first synthesized dye in 1863”—a mauve color he named “Mauveine” (Hopp). From there, the article chronicles the rise of L’Oréal in 1907, the American obsession with platinum blonde hair thanks to Jean Harlow and Howard Hughes’s film in 1931, and eventually the beginnings of celebrity endorsements and partnerships with hair color brands in the 1980s.

And then, nothing. There is a gap in the timeline of the *Byrdie* article between the 1980s and 2014 when Kylie Jenner debuted her teal tips. “In May of 2014, while most of the population was embracing sombré and other, more natural-looking hair color techniques, Kylie Jenner took the opposite approach and made her first major hair color transformation . . . with the now-iconic teal blue tips” (Hopp). Given what I know about the punk movement and that my own “first major hair color transformation” happened a full four years before Kylie Jenner, I was stumped to see this suggestion of an origin for brightly colored hair. The *Byrdie* article is not the only one I’ve seen that marks the fashion timeline in this way. So, I left behind the mainstream beauty websites and went on to specifically researching punk history with the hope of discovering punk fashion trends that filled in the gap between the ’80s and 2014.

While I was researching punk subculture, I learned that women were dyeing their hair pink as early as 1914 (Felsenthal). However, at that time, it wasn’t a subversive punk move; it was the height of wealth and fashion (Felsenthal). Still, that didn’t explain how brightly colored hair moved from being something coveted by the upper classes to something that resulted in my being stopped by a security guard in 2010. If anything, it just complicated the reading. But that kind of makes sense too, right? After all, genres do not work outside of the systems in which they’re created any more than people exist apart from the systems in which they live. My instincts and antecedent knowledge told me that as fashions change and are taken up by other groups, the meanings change with them. Since the punk movement is more recent than the fashionable ladies of 1914, I continued my search.

To the best of my research, it seems that brightly colored hair dye is a product of the glam punk scene in New York City and was first made popular by Tish and Snooky Bellomo who created the *Manic Panic* brand in the East Village at St. Marks Place in 1977 (Laskow). It was the first punk brand and store in the US, and though they sold all sorts of vintage fashion items, they eventually became famous for their brightly colored hair dye (Laskow).

Kylie Jenner and other famous people who have brightly colored locks have helped to mainstream the fashion and creative self-expression so that “Manic Panic is going through a bit of [a] renaissance right now, as pop stars from Rihanna to Katy Perry decide to dye their hair bright blues, red, pinks, greens, and more”; however, “the company [and brand] got its start [at] the store on St. Marks Place” (Laskow). Given the brand’s success for more than forty years, it feels fair to equate their longevity with the continued popularity of brightly colored hair even beyond the New York punk scene (especially now that you can buy their products online).

So, You’ve Dyed Your Hair. Now What? A Close Reading of Your New Genre

If choosing to dye your hair a bold or bright color is a form of self-expression, perhaps the last and biggest question is what are you expressing? For me, I like to color my hair the way that some people like to decorate their homes for the seasons. For Christmas (2020), I dyed my hair dark evergreen with a single streak of “ice” blonde (see Figure 2 at the end of this article) and ended up matching my Christmas tree. Apparently, green and gold are my Christmas aesthetic.

When I’m choosing a new color, the questions I ask myself (and my stylist) are often about how I’m feeling in the moment, what season we’re in, and just as a practical and logistical consideration, what color am I trying to cover up?

Autumn is my favorite season—I am a Scorpio, after all—so once August hits, I find myself getting excited about going back to school, the leaves changing colors, and upcoming holidays, and that is often reflected in my hair color. This is usually the part of the year where I give up cool blues or bright, summery pinks and start coloring my hair with deep reds, dark purples, or other muted tones one might associate with fall. In honor of spooky season, my current vibe is navy blue, violet, and dark green—colors one might see in typical Halloween decorations. But once Valentine’s Day passes, the winter snow is deep and beginning to turn black on the side of the road, and I’m counting the days until I can see (and sneeze at) grass again: out come the pastel Easter colors. Icy blues, lilac, peach—I’ve even done dusty rose à la 1914 (see Figure 3 at the end of this article). All this seasonal decoration and internal moodiness can be seen atop my head, but you’ll never find marshmallow Peeps in my cupboards, and I just won’t ever remember to hang a cobweb or Easter Bunny on my door.

Final Thoughts: Once More for Those in the Back

I know that some people may make assumptions about my character when they see the color of my hair; I've experienced it not only in 2010, but too many times since then to name here. I also know that the color of my hair does not have any impact on my ability to do my job, to be a kind and ethical person, or to function as a productive member of society.

I guess the trick here is understanding that genre conventions can shift and change given the context in which the genre is working. For example, horror movies are scary. There are certain conventions employed to make you feel unsafe as you watch: dramatic music, darkly lit scenes, cinematography that attempts to replicate the feeling of running or looking over your shoulder (e.g., *The Blair Witch Project*). But when those conventions are employed in an insurance commercial, we understand that those things aren't meant to scare us out of buying the insurance but are being used to make a larger point.

The same is true when we're reading people. Just as you would employ a genre analysis to any other text, we should also employ this critical skill while we read people as a genre. The ISU Writing Program's definition of **genre analysis** teaches us to "[look] underneath the surface features of visual design, sentence-level qualities, and style and tone to uncover how genres can [be] subject to (and can enforce) cultural, social, commercial, and political agendas." My hair is not purple because I identify as a punk; it's purple because I like purple and am excited that it's autumn. But if you asked me about my politics, you'd probably find out that I have some real questions about the genre "people" and the conventions we constructed to define them as a final product.

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Figure 1: Blue hair and Bon Jovi.



Figure 2: Green holiday hair.



Figure 3: Dusty rose hair.



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