

Re-fusing form in genre study

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Current theories of genre based in action neglect form. While recognizing that genre study needed to reject earlier formalism, this chapter argues that genre necessarily encompasses form as part of the fusion of form, substance, and action and should be re-examined as contextualized form. Neither Carolyn Miller nor Mikhail Bakhtin, seminal genre theorists, rejected form but rather rejected formalism. Form in this chapter is defined as the visible results and notable absences of language-use in generic contexts. A contextualized treatment of generic form embeds form into its individual, social, and cultural contexts; recognizes generic form as variable individually, synchronically, and diachronically; balances treatment of generic forms as both unique and shared; and views generic forms as inter-genre-al, interacting with other genres.

1. Introduction

Reconceiving genre as rhetorical action over the last twenty years has led to breakthroughs in our understanding of genres and how they operate in human communication. Those breakthroughs have been achieved through shifting attention from genre as predetermined form, even formulae, to genre as social action, acting in social and cultural contexts to achieve rhetors' aims and fulfill groups' functions. This common description of the shift in genre study—from genre as form to genre as action—places genre study solidly within rhetoric by attending to the purposes and effects of language rather than language alone. Yet genre itself still involves language, and any complete understanding of genre will need to include the language forms that serve to achieve those purposes and effects, the forms that make generic action happen. In pursuing new perspectives on genre, form has largely been set aside. With decades of studying generic action and context beneath our feet, it is time now to return form to genre study lest form, as Janet Giltrow (2007) recently said, continue to haunt us.

The seminal articles that helped create this new genre study did not explicitly discard form; rather, each placed form in larger contexts. The shift to treating genre as social action opened the concept to new directions of research and theory, revitalizing the virtually moribund subject of genre. When Carolyn Miller extended

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson's discussion of form and genre in Miller's often cited article on "Genre as Social Action" (1984), she created a framework for understanding generic activity rather than just generic form. The extensive and now seminal work that has followed—from Charles Bazerman's study of the experimental article (1988), through Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin's theory of social cognition (1994), through David A. Russell's use of activity theory (1997)—has developed a view of genre as richly embedded within historical, social, and cultural contexts. Dozens of major articles have explored the operation and the meaning and significance of genres within their institutional settings, and some have examined genres as individual acts as well. No well-informed person could say now, as a literary colleague said to me in 1985, "Oh, you really shouldn't keep studying genre. It's an old and boring topic with nothing more to be said."

But, now as then, there is something more to be said, something that has not been said openly in rhetorical genre study in a while: Genres also involve forms, and the forms that genres take matter. In an action-based theory of genre, returning form to genre study will require reconfiguring form as rhetorically, socially, and culturally contextualized. Neither Campbell and Jamieson's nor Miller's work openly disavowed form. In their theories, form played an essential role in constructing and making genres meaningful. Rather, these scholars and others rejected *formalism*, rejected treating form in isolation of its contexts. Another major source for rhetorical genre study, Mikhail Bakhtin and especially his work "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1981) also rejected formalism but not form. Returning to these articles can illuminate why form has gotten lost along the way and why it must be reintegrated into genre study, as well as the roles form might rightly take. The fluidity of form in genres on the Internet, particularly the case of blogs, especially challenges old notions of form and illustrates the need for dynamic and rhetorical views of form.

2. Fusing form into action

Genres require form, in action-based theories of genre, for form combines with substance to create meaningful generic action. Carolyn Miller's original article expressed her debt to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and their shift in emphasis. Their collection, entitled *Form and Genre*, argued for a shift in how rhetorical criticism treated genres, moving away from emphasizing form to emphasizing the action that the form helps to create. Campbell and Jamieson write that, "a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic" (1978: 21), resulting in generic classification that is "based on the fusion and interrelation of elements in such a way that a unique

kind of rhetorical act is created” (1978: 25). Miller spells out that fusion as semiotic, fusing substance (semantics), form (syntactics), and action (pragmatics). Miller characterizes their view of genre as—and her own work creates—a “situation-based fusion of form and substance” (1984: 153). Endorsing Campbell and Jamieson’s perspective, Miller objects to rhetorical criticism that defines genres by similarities of form alone, arguing that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (1984: 151). Miller then adds the situational level by calling on speech-act theory and Wittgenstein to note that form and substance must be encompassed by context, thus “enabling interpretation of the action resulting from their fusion” (1984: 159).

Her explanation of the hierarchical nature of this fusion is important for my purposes because it demonstrates how form on one level “becomes an aspect of substance at a higher level (this is what makes form ‘significant’), although it is still analyzable as form at the lower level” (1984: 160). “It is through this hierarchical combination of form and substance that symbolic structures take on pragmatic force and become interpretable actions; when fused, the substantive and formal components can acquire meaning in context. A complex hierarchy of such relationships is necessary for constructing meaning.” (1984: 160) Although she privileges situation, Miller does not neglect form in her theory. Form and substance are the two key building blocks of action. At each level of action in her hierarchy, form and substance must develop from the form and substance at lower levels: “The combination of form and substance at one level becomes an action (has meaning) at a higher level when that combination itself acquires form.” (1984: 160) At each level, substance must acquire form in order to become action.

It is in fact a fusion of all three—substance, form, and action—that Miller argues for in her article as creating genre, even though she privileges action in her definition. That privileging of action and situation may be a response to prior genre criticism. Miller’s stated purpose in writing this article emphasizes the needs of critics rather than genre participants: she aims for “a single, clearly defined principle of classification that could promote critical agreement and theoretical clarity” within rhetorical criticism (1984: 154). Miller promotes the semiotic framework as offering “a way to characterize the principles used to classify discourse, according to whether the defining principle is based in rhetorical substance (semantics), form (syntactics), or the rhetorical action the discourse performs (pragmatics)” (1984: 152 emphasis added). She argues that any classification of discourse chooses a set of similarities based on a principle of selection. While that certainly is true for critics’ creation of generic categories, it need not be—and I would argue is not—true for readers and writers, who interact with genres as substance, form, *and* action. This merging of the three is in fact what Miller articulates in her framework, and she

insists that any classification be rhetorically sound, presumably sound for the users as well as for the critics. Yet, in her discussion of that framework, Miller privileges action over substance and form. Doing so helps her react against critics' earlier privileging of substance and, especially, form, and it gives her an action-based principle for classifying texts. But such privileging of one component in the semiotic framework is unnecessary if our goal is not to classify texts but rather to capture what people interact with when encountering and using genres.

Even requiring a single principle of classification focuses on the critics' need for classification principles rather than people's use of those classifications. Miller herself argues for an ethnomethodological approach to classification to "explicate the knowledge that practice creates. This approach insists that the 'de facto' genres, the types we have names for in everyday language, tell us something theoretically important about discourse" (1984: 155). But on what basis do people in practice classify discourse into genres? Miller concludes that "A useful principle of classification for discourse . . . should have some basis in the conventions of rhetorical practice, including the ways actual rhetors and audiences have of comprehending the discourse they use" (1984: 152). With Miller, I would argue that readers and writers use form as *part* of the ways they have of comprehending discourse. Miller describes form as "guidance" to readers or listeners: "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way." (1984: 159). Form shapes textual substance in particular ways; it shapes response to textual situations in particular directions. Without form, of course, there is no text to interpret, no action. Form and substance comprise the action that genre creates. The fusion of form, substance, and situation creates the generic action that people, rather than critics, practice. All three elements—form, substance, and situation—contribute to writers' and readers' knowledge of genres; all three elements shape genres.

None of this argument, I suspect, would have been news to Miller when she wrote her "Genre as Social Action." She begins with the necessary fusion of form, substance, and situation. Throughout, she requires form to merge with substance at each level of her hierarchy in order to create meaning. She describes genre as both distinct from form and one example of form (1984: 163). She characterizes generic forms as revealing of culture (1984: 158). She notes that a set of discourses must have significant similarity of form to constitute a genre (1984: 163). Miller had no difficulty recognizing the importance of form to genre; rather, she was presenting an alternative to a rhetorical criticism that recognized form as the *only* important element of genre. In urging rhetorical critics to treat genre as more than form, she

privileges action and situation over form, but she never denies the significance of form to generic knowledge or practice.

Reading Miller's now classic article in the context of her times and her purposes, I see a rejection of formalism, not of form. Scholars who followed Miller's lead (I among them) emphasized contextualized action in order to correct previous emphasis on formal classification. The fusion that Miller and Campbell and Jamieson and others have argued for as defining genre should lead us back now to form, to the recently most neglected element of the triad. As we return to form, though, we return with the caution against formalism and with the perception that genre's form contributes to social action. I reject formalism but accept materialism. Individual texts have a material reality, a physical, formed existence, and their material matters to people's construction of genre. The material reality of texts is formal, but our approach to it need not be formalistic.

3. Contextualizing form into utterances

Keeping form contextualized is a challenge we might meet by keeping forms embedded in utterances as well as genres, drawing on another seminal article on genre, Mikhail Bakhtin's "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1981). Bakhtin similarly criticizes past work that analyzed language form without a communicative context. Instead of form, he emphasizes the context of the utterance. His work should remind us to keep form embedded in utterance, with a speaker/writer and addressee, and to recognize the dialogic nature of form.

Like Miller's fusion of form and substance into meaningful action, Bakhtin begins with a combination of thematic content, style, and compositional structure that are "inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication" (1981: 60). That is, content and linguistic and discursive form fuse to create a context-specific utterance. The "relatively stable types of these utterances" are speech genres (1981: 60). Like Miller, too, Bakhtin criticizes previous genre criticism. Bakhtin complains that previous study of genre, primarily literary, has studied genres in terms of specific features that distinguish one genre from another but not as utterances that share a language. Critical for Bakhtin is to distinguish the "sentence as a unit of language" from the "utterance as a unit of speech communication" (1981: 73). Rhetorical study, he claims, has also focused too much on the specific features of specific genres rather than "their general linguistic nature" (1981: 61). So Bakhtin, like Miller, seems to be reacting against prior formal emphases. As he insists repeatedly, "A speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance" (1981: 87).

Although Bakhtin emphasizes the utterance as the unit to analyze, that emphasis asks that analysis of linguistic form be embedded within its larger context, not that form be ignored.

Linguists, too, along with literary and rhetorical critics, have neglected the social nature of utterances and genres, according to Bakhtin. He argues that they view the utterance as strictly individual, while the language is social. Many linguists, he claims, “see in the utterance only an individual combination of purely linguistic (lexical and grammatical) forms and they neither uncover nor study any of the other normative forms [including genre] the utterance acquires in practice” (1981: 81). Again, he is concerned that the language be seen in the context of the utterance: “When we select a particular type of sentence, we do so not for the sentence itself; but out of consideration for what we wish to express with this one given sentence. We select the type of sentence from the standpoint of the whole utterance, which is transmitted in advance to our speech imagination and which determines our choice. . . . The chosen genre predetermines for us their [sentences’] type and their compositional links” (1981: 81).

Although Bakhtin thus criticizes approaches to genre that emphasize linguistic form over utterance—much as Miller criticizes rhetorical criticism that emphasizes formal categories over social action—Bakhtin, like Miller, is not denying the linguistic basis of genres: “After all, language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well” (1981: 63). Both language and context are necessary for expression: “only the contact between the language meaning and the concrete reality that takes place in the utterance can create the spark of expression. It exists neither in the system of language nor in the objective reality surrounding us.” (1981: 87) Utterances are “constructed from language units: words, phrases, and sentences” (1981: 75), but those language units only take on meaning in context of an utterance in its context. Bakhtin distinguishes language forms from genre forms, though, largely equating language forms with sentences and genre forms with larger structures. He notes that, “Speech genres organize our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others’ speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length . . . and a certain compositional structure . . .” (1981: 78–79). He also considers generic forms more flexible and less mandatory than language forms (1981: 79–80). Although much of what Bakhtin says about language forms seems applicable to syntax only, the speech that we hear, triggering our genre guess, involves form at all levels. Bakhtin acknowledges form as essential to genre, even as he cautions critics to treat form as meaningful only when contextualized within utterances.

Bakhtin’s article also supports the argument that genres’ forms are necessarily and essentially involved in people’s lived experiences of genres. While again emphasizing that people acquire language only as parts of utterances, Bakhtin notes that people

acquire forms of utterances only along with forms of language, as “The forms of language and the typical forms of utterances, that is, speech genres, enter our experience and our consciousness together, and in close connection with one another” (1981: 78). From both Miller and Bakhtin’s original arguments, then, we find insistence on form as a necessary element of genres, inseparable from people’s experiences with genres. From both as well, we find conviction that such forms must be analyzed always in their contexts—of utterances, situations, or actions.

What might be lost with less contextualized analysis of form appears in Bakhtin’s final comments, and those comments suggest ways to treat form as we reintegrate it within genre study:

When one analyzes an individual sentence apart from its context, the traces of addressivity and the influence of the anticipated response, dialogical echoes from others’ preceding utterances, faint traces of changes of speech subjects that have furrowed the utterance from within—all these are lost, erased, because they are all foreign to the sentence as a unit of language. All these phenomena are connected with the whole of the utterance, and when this whole escapes the field of vision of the analyst they cease to exist for him. (1981: 99–100)

4. Sketching four principles of form in generic practice

Analyzing form in genres without neglecting addressivity, dialogism, and the whole of the utterance is neither easy nor impossible. Neither should analyzing the whole of the utterance neglect form since form is a necessary part of the utterance, as both Bakhtin and Miller argue. A balanced genre study should address the whole and the part, the context and the form, without denying either. A balanced genre study should address the form and the substance that comprise the social action. In practice, though, scholars typically emphasize one or the other. In practice, too, actual genres challenge such a balance. In the rest of this paper, examples from genres on the Internet, especially blogs, will challenge and illuminate this proposed balance of form and context.

First, though, based on current understandings of language and notions of form, I would define form more inclusively than does Bakhtin and would blur Miller’s distinction between form and substance. Bakhtin distinguishes syntax from genre form, perhaps because he is reacting against stylistic approaches to genre. I include as genre form all material embodiments of genre, linguistic and textual elements that might vary from one genre to another. Most obviously, then, form includes words, sentences, organizational structure, format, layout, and other visual elements. In “Genre as Social Action” (1984), Miller distinguishes form from substance, but in her 2004 article on blogs, “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog,” co-authored with Dawn Shepherd, endnote 5 comments

on the “limitations of the distinction” between content and form. I would argue that, although necessary at times for the analyst, any distinctions between form and substance or content deny the essential fusion of the two. One does not exist without the other in the reality of actual texts. In fact, form may be an artifact of analysis.¹ The cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch, in the video “Web 2.0” posted on YouTube, argues, for Internet material in particular, that content can never be devoid of form and that form will influence what and how we interact with genres, as well as with all text, whether digital or penned (Wesch 2007). Finally, I would add that generic form/substance includes choices that are not made as well as ones that are visible. Absences of forms may be as revealing as presences, just as what is not taken up, what is silenced, can be as significant as what receives response (Bawarshi 2007). I will define generic form here, then, as the visible results and notable absences of language-use in generic contexts, from words and symbols to organizational structure and layout. It is what is said and written, and what is not said and written.

I must also, like Miller and Bakhtin, reject formalism, in order to avoid potential misunderstanding before form without formalism becomes well accepted. Merely raising the subject of form is not privileging the subject of form. I am not interested in studying form apart from context or technique without substance or action. Formalism privileges technique or text over content or context. New genre study—and this article—aims to treat technique or text along with content as comprising action in context. Form is part of genre, not all of genre.

Once we reintegrate form into our study of genre, a wide range of research questions requires investigation. In the rest of this article, I hope only to raise some of those questions, using computer-mediated communication and especially others’ research on blogs as examples. Finding answers to those questions will come only with much more research. Even initial scanning of a few online genres, though, reveals the outlines of a new treatment of form in genre study.

In the rest of this article, I will propose four basic principles for a fused study of form in genre. I am claiming neither originality nor comprehensiveness with these four principles. Rather, I hope to offer words with which others can interact to build a new fusion of form within genre study. I begin, in fact, with another’s words. Bakhtin describes words as existing “for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other’s* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a

1. I am grateful to Janet Giltrow for this observation, as well as others that emerged through her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression” (1981: 88). The first two principles that I will propose reject Bakhtin’s first aspect by rejecting the fruitfulness of treating form in genre as ever neutral or “belonging to nobody.” The following principles address form in genre as echoing others’ words and as yet expressing an individual’s words.

- The forms of genres are meaningful only within their full contexts—cultural, social, and individual.
- The forms of genres range widely, both synchronically and diachronically, and cannot be pinned down with closed or static descriptions.
- The forms of genres vary with each unique instance of the genre, but unique instances share common generic forms.
- The forms of genres are inter-genre-al, interacting with forms of other genres.

4.1 The forms of genres are meaningful only within their full contexts—cultural, social, and individual

Generic forms are never neutral and always belong to somebody. Since genres are always, as Miller explains, pragmatic actions, they always exist within contexts. Since generic forms are those forms that comprise genres, they are always embedded in contextualized action. While descriptive and structuralist linguists might describe linguistic form as neutral, abstracted systems, contemporary genre study describes not an abstract system but realized actions. Genre study has more in common with sociolinguistics than with theoretical linguistics. As in sociolinguistics, the forms in genres take their meaning from who uses them, in what ways, with what motives and expectations.

Since weblogs (blogs) have been analyzed by genre scholars, they will serve as a primary example. Both genre scholars and technology specialists have described the forms of blogs, but forms in isolation rather than in context and more often as a neutral system than an active constructor of meaning. As recounted in two articles published in 2004, one by Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd and another by S.C. Herring and co-authors, bloggers themselves have defined blogs in formal ways. According to their definitions and descriptions of blogs, blogs offer dated entries arranged in reverse chronology, they are updated regularly, and they include links to other websites. Miller and Shepherd also note the prevalence of present tense. Herring et al. quantify also the presence of comments, calendars, archives, and badges, which, they write, initially appear to identify blogs as blogs (2004: 5). Both sets of scholars also analyze blogs’ content and purposes. The content and purposes of blogs vary widely in these studies, but both sets of scholars found that personal logs had become the most common.

Neither set of scholars had as their purpose to demonstrate my point—that form should be analyzed in context—but each article illustrates how a contextualized treatment of form might bring new insights to the study of genres. Of course, as relatively early describers of blogs, these scholars may have focused more on the form of this emerging genre than would be the case if they were studying the more well-established genre today. Herring et al.'s aim in their analysis is to discover whether actual blogs at the time match common descriptions of blogs and what prior genres might serve as antecedents for this new genre. They discover that some formal features vary from claims, with blogs being more personal and less linked than expected (2004: 1). They also conclude that, based on those structural features that blogs have adapted, blogs are best characterized as hybrid genres (2004: 10). Although Herring et al. do include purpose in their analysis and do note a few contextual variables, their analysis largely isolates structural features and bases their conclusions on forms alone. In fact, Herring et al. go on to describe blogs as a “format” that “can express a wide range of genres” (2004: 10), ending with some uncertainty about the nature of blogs as a genre. Format is precisely form removed from substance, not generic form at all. In such isolation from context, the significance of the formal characteristics and discrepancies that Herring et al. describe remains obscure. What is the significance of the blogs having fewer links than expected? When the authors use similarity of structural features to identify potential antecedent genres that blogs might derive from, they treat genres as if they were species evolving genetically from common biology or related languages deriving from a common parent language. Consequently, the meaning of those common features remains unexplored. Perhaps the antecedent genres share with blogs important rhetorical features, common audiences, purposes, or subjectivities. Perhaps they share traits or ideologies of their cultural moments. Without a contextualized discussion, these formal facts remain descriptive facts that could have multiple significances.

Similarly, the authors detail the formal differences between personal home pages and blog home pages:

[H]ome pages of the blogs in the sample differ from those of personal home pages in several respects. Blogs appear to be less likely to contain a guest book, a search function, and advertisements than are personal home pages [3]. Blogs are relatively image-poor as well, compared to other genres which make greater use of the multimedia potential of the Web. At the same time, blogs exhibit features that personal home pages lack. Archives (links in the sidebar to older entries; 73.5%) and badges (small icons in the sidebar, header or footer advertising a product or group affiliation; 69%) are found in a clear majority of blogs. These are not, to our knowledge, characteristic of any other Web genre, at least not in combination. In contrast, while a calendar in the sidebar was perceived by us initially to be a typical blog feature, it turned out to be less frequent than we had thought (13%), as did the feature of allowing readers to comment on entries (43%). (2004: 7)

Such neutral quantification of formal differences between two related genres—including negative descriptions of forms that one genre does not have—provides great material for more fully understanding these genres and may be an important step as we try to rediscover the importance of form. The simultaneously necessary step requires interpreting those formal differences in context. A formal difference—that personal home pages more likely include advertisements and guest books—instantiates several possible contextual differences—perhaps greater acknowledgement of individuals as connected to others, less confidence in the individual's worth alone, heightened desire to please others, or even self-aggrandizing greed. That blog home pages include archives and badges might point to a willingness to identify the self as defined through time and associations, less confidence in the value of the synchronous self, or even self-aggrandizing greed. Identifying form is a necessary but not sufficient component of genre analysis; interpreting it in context gives that analysis meaning and significance.

In their own genre analysis of blogs, Miller and Shepherd apply Miller's semiotic approach to genre more fully, describing not only the form and substance but also the "pragmatic action" of blogs. Yet they describe each component in turn, in separate sections, and do not examine in any substantial way how form contributes to the action. As a result, they embed form no more fully in context than do Herring et al. Miller and Shepherd's primary aim in the article is to use blogs "to explore the emergent culture of the early 21st century" (2004), and they find the most revealing sources for that aim in bloggers' descriptions of their purposes, rather than descriptions of their forms. While they describe form and, like Herring et al., compare the features of actual blogs to features expected of successful blogs, their primary aim leads them to fuller exploration of purposes and culture than of form. They develop remarkable conclusions about the functions of blogs in creating some stability in subjectivity, in helping writers create a less fragmented self. Yet they do not explore directly how the forms of blogs contribute to that stability. The discussion of form remains isolated, in a separate section, to be included in a concluding list of the factors that combine at the cultural moment:

We see the blog, then, as a genre that addresses a timeless rhetorical exigence in ways that are specific to its time. In the blog, the potentialities of technology, a set of cultural patterns, rhetorical conventions available in antecedent genres, and the history of the subject have combined to produce a recurrent rhetorical motive that has found a conventional mode of expression. Bloggers acknowledge that motive in each other and continue enacting it for themselves. The blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self. (Miller & Shepherd 2004)

Form takes its two rightful places in this list, as available conventions that combine with context to create action through a newly developed form of expression. But isolating form from the discussion of motive, exigence, and subjectivity in the

rest of the article misses the potential for analyzing a genuine fusion of form and substance into action. A more contextualized analysis of blogs' form would examine how those discovered formal patterns contribute to this stabilizing of self. How does that exigence, which Miller and Shepherd so aptly describe, take shape? Perhaps the authors considered the connection too obvious at times to detail, but the connections between the forms and the action seem potentially quite rich. Reverse chronology, for example, enables fragments to create stability without a pre-formed identity, as those fragments are compiled into a single text, layer added to layer until a self emerges. The time and date stamping and the use of present tense allow that self to appear still transitory, acknowledging current cultural beliefs, even as the document creates a historical stability, a record. The fact that links are not as common as expected—a negative fact of what the genre does not include that both studies find—furtheres Miller and Shepherd's claim of using blogs to create a self. With fewer links, the self in a blog is only somewhat linked to other people and is instead self-contained within this genre. Herring et al. found also that links for readers' comments were less common than expected, another negative formal instance of the blogger constructing a self within a more fixed and less fluid or fragmented parameter. Of course, no scholar can study everything, and Miller and Shepherd enabled my own brief analysis here by their thoughtful analysis of social and cultural context. In returning form to the mix of essential elements of genre to be analyzed, though, treatments of form will need to be connected to treatments of action more directly and explicitly. Doing so will open up new discoveries about how pragmatic actions are achieved.

Still missing from this brief discussion of the contexts of blogs, however, is the individual context. The genre belongs quite distinctly to the bloggers and readers of blogs. Genres in action must consist of all their instances, whether conforming to analysis or not, in order to capture the full and multiple meanings of form/substance in context. Both Herring et al. and Miller and Shepherd discovered that the formal similarities they found applied to some but not all the actual blogs they examined. I will explore this fact more in the next two sections, but I need to note here that the individual and peculiar situation of each generic instance must help interpret form as well. If, for example, some blogs include more links than others, those differences are likely meaningful in light of the individual bloggers' purposes, interests, personalities. As these careful analysts of the genre delineate, the genre of blog might encourage multiple primary purposes, might generally encompass different categories of interests, and might create particular types of subjectivities. Yet individual bloggers might still adapt these multiple varieties of the genre to a unique purpose, to a different interest, or to a distinct personality. No analysis of form is complete without recognition of this individual variation. How to include such recognition remains a difficult task for genre study. Perhaps

we will draw from ethnographic methods, as Miller and, in more detail, Mary Jo Reiff (2003) propose, to build our knowledge one group of individuals at a time. Perhaps we will accumulate studies of individual generic performances, drawing from methods of rhetorical criticism but with the goal of understanding the genre rather than of evaluating the quality of each instance.² Genre largely accrues through experiences with individual texts, so our understanding of genre might best develop through an accretion of individual instances. It will surely require mixed methods to gain sufficient understanding of how generic forms make individual, social, and cultural meaning.

4.2 The forms of genres range widely and cannot be pinned down with closed or static descriptions

Not just individual but also group characteristics of genres include a wide range of variation, so that generic form never exists as the static, neutral system that Bakhtin characterizes for words. Rather, generic form destabilizes as well as stabilizes. That genres are dynamic constructs has been well established by multiple genre scholars, captured most vividly in Catherine Schryer's description of genres as, at best, "stabilized for now" (1993). I would argue that genres are not even stabilized for now, as they live and breathe through individual instances and interactions across and within genres. The stability of genres may be more an illusion of genre theory or genre criticism than a reality of genre action. Genres are destabilized for now and forever.³ Any static description of a genre seems doomed to incompleteness and to contradiction from actual instances. Even action varies within a genre. Miller and Shepherd as well as Herring et al., for example, note that blogs vary in action from political commentary to self-definition, from knowledge forums to website filters. The most common purpose that Herring et al. found, the personal journal, still captured the purpose of only 70.4% of the actual blogs they examined. Perhaps this range characterizes emerging genres only, but established

2. In Endnote 8, Miller and Shepherd distinguish linguistic and rhetorical study of genre: "We might note now that characterization by statistical means represents a linguistic approach to genre, in contrast to a rhetorical approach, which is more interested in expectations, motivations, and terms of success." I would suggest that such a rhetorical approach should depend first of all on linguistic as well as cultural and social information about the genre. I would like to see genre study broaden its sights beyond evaluating success in order to understand everyday achievements as well.

3. I first argued this point in *Writing Genres*, especially pages 187–188. The constant instability of genres appeared to me at that point through the multiplicity of genres existing within any single text. It applies as well to the instability of genre categories.

genres also often carry a range of actions. Consider the range of actions executed by the novel, the memo, or the architects' sketchbook (see Peter Medway 2002). Even such an apparently fixed and unified genre as the grocery store coupon acts to advertise as well as offer discounts; the workplace incident report covers legal liability and provides safety information. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the forms that construct generic actions also range widely and resist static characterization. Nothing remains constant and static across all instances of a genre—not context, not substance, and not form. The individual variation of form creates generic variation of form, so that form—rather than stabilizing genre—participates in the destabilizing of genre.

Forms act to destabilize genre in part through their absence as well as their presence. As I noted earlier, Miller and Shepherd and Herring et al. report that bloggers define blogs by having dated entries in reverse chronology, updating regularly, and linking to other sites. In their studies of actual blogs, though, they found that updates varied from daily to rarely, with a range in Herring et al.'s study of 0–63 days between individual entries (2004: 7). Links to other websites appeared in just 53.7% of the blogs Herring et al. studied, and some sites (seventeen of them) had no links at all (2004: 8). The entries themselves tended not to contain any links, averaging just .65 links per entry (2004: 8). One of the most common structural characteristic that Herring et al. found in their study, the inclusion of archives, occurred in only 73.5% of the blogs (2004: 7). Allowing comments from guests, one commonly noted feature of blogs, appeared in only 43% (2004: 7). Even such a commonly expected feature as a header was missing in a minute but still variable .5%, the date missing from 6.4%. The only feature these scholars did not describe as missing from some of the blogs is the reverse chronological order. Such a format seems very little from which to construct a generic action. As I commented above, format is form without substance, lacking the necessary fusion for generic meaning. Perhaps blogs are part of a subset of genres that can be defined by format alone, denying our action-based definition of genres. More likely, I think, is that the form in context becomes substantive. Find reverse chronology online, and readers assume particular blog-like meanings and actions. A list of statistics or random names or nonsense syllables, formatted online in reverse chronology, would be interpreted as a meaningful blog—or as a meaningful poem, if formatted in short lines on the pages of a book, a different context. Reverse chronology may be the most visible form in blogs, but it still requires context and combining with other forms, variable as they are, to create meaningful generic action.

Such variation in form might suggest that form does not matter to genre, but form clearly matters to genre users. Bloggers are not alone in defining their genre by its common forms. Form seems definitive to everyday users of many genres, whether memoranda or talk shows, grocery lists or dictionaries, databases or blogs. Just as

we must contextualize generic form culturally, socially, and individually, we must contextualize our *descriptions* of generic form culturally, socially, and individually. Miller and Shepherd note the formal variation in blogs and use it to question whether genres should be defined “by an ideal or by the mean, by expectation or by experience” (2004). Their emphasis on the ideal and expectations is evident in their follow-up statement, that “We should not define a genre by its failed examples, even if they are a majority, but at the same time we must be open to the possibility that there may be multiple forms of success” (2004). If our emphasis shifts from the critic to the user, however, then our emphasis can shift from defining and evaluating to experiencing and acting. I suspect that all genres resist statistical regularity of form. All genres-in-use reveal unique variations. We should accept and expect a range of generic forms just as we accept and expect a range of generic purposes. As emphasized in the first principle, form exists always in its contexts, so the range of formal variation is interpreted within a context. The formal features of a particular blog—whether including comments, archives, badges, date stamps, present tense, or not—occur online, in the context of a topic search, a link, or a recommendation, at a particular time, for particular purposes, by particular people. The forms that fuse with content to create generic actions will necessarily vary as their particular actions vary.

Description of a genre’s forms, then, should be embedded in context by remaining an open class (rather than a closed set of fixed features), incorporating absences as well as presence of forms, and encompassing variation both synchronically and diachronically.⁴ Scholars of a genre can then address that openness and variation by explaining how individuals adapt forms to their own situations, how the genre’s forms vary in different social settings, and how the genre has changed over time and continues to change in response to cultural changes. Sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods again might help capture this range of variation and its meanings. Generic forms exist not at the level of language system, belonging to nobody, in Bakhtin’s terms, but rather at the level of language-in-use, belonging to everybody. Bloggers and their guests do not encounter genre forms in isolation but rather as collections and absences of features in specific blogs. Actual blogs construct their actions through multiple forms, and neither bloggers nor readers require a single, closed set of unchanging forms to participate in blogging. If we

4. In an earlier version, I had another principle: that the forms of genre are always multiple and appear at multiple levels of textual analysis. I trust that extensive linguistic and rhetorical scholarship has made it unnecessary to state this point, that no one today would reduce a genre to a single formal trait. I state it here just to caution against studies that might concentrate on a single, significant formal trait to the exclusion of the multiple forms that help make that trait meaningful.

abandon trying to define genres through closed, static sets of forms, we can permit forms to be what they appear to be: multiple, fluid, and yet constructive of generic actions.

4.3 The forms of genres vary with each unique instance of the genre, but unique instances share common generic forms

My conviction in the unique nature of each generic instance has surely become obvious through my discussion of the previous two principles. Particular genres, like particular languages, exist only in actual utterances.⁵ Since each utterance is unique, each instance of a genre is unique. As noted in the last section, those unique utterances are not just unique combinations of the same forms. Each instance constructs itself from multiple forms, even multiple genres, in order to construct the specific action. Yet humans share experiences that create shared genres. The notion of genre itself exists across particular utterances, in human brains, as one type of categorization that humans make. These experiential and cognitive facets of genre contribute to genres being not only unique but also shared. One metaphor for genre that has become increasingly common is genre as performance (pointed out by Heather Bastian 2007). While that metaphor successfully captures the unique character of each instance of a genre and captures the live action of genres, the metaphor fails, I believe, because it requires the existence of a particular, pre-existing play or composition to be performed. The metaphor of jazz performance might better capture the play of the already existing and the unique that I am trying to describe. Jazz performers operate from some shared purposes, strategies, and forms, but each performance employs those shared elements and brings in others to create a unique composition.

Because keeping form within individual contexts is as critical as keeping it within social and cultural contexts, one of the particular challenges in studying genres is balancing the individual and the social. Rhetorical genre study has attended largely to the social, but attending to form in particular enables seeing the individual and the social simultaneously. Generic form, like language itself, is at once shared and unique. Speakers and writers of a language share a common language, but each uses the language in unique ways. Similarly, genres are always shared, but

5. Languages do, however, seem to have a significant cognitive component that comes from birth, not experience. I think it likely that genres, too, have an inborn cognitive component. Human brains make patterns and group items. Genres may be one of the kinds of groupings that the human brain naturally makes, though the particular genres, like particular languages, of course would be culturally and individually specific and would exist only through actual use.

each text embodies that genre in unique ways.⁶ As Bakhtin wrote, cited earlier, the word is always expressed within a particular situation and so “is already imbued with my expression” as well as with the words of others (1981: 88). Bakhtin, of course, most notably acknowledges the shared nature of utterances, their dialogic nature as well as their addressivity. “After all,” he writes, “our thought itself . . . is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well” (1981: 92). Studying the forms of genres, then, can reveal not only their systemic but also their dialogic and expressive nature, including the individual as well as the shared forms.

Even though those forms will always be imbued with individual expression, genres require shared forms. The existence of genres in everyday parlance—like the recognition of blogs, for example—affirms the existence of shared forms since genres require form to fuse with substance to create the generic actions that are recognized in the word “blog.” Even though the blogs studied, for example, resisted formal consistency, groups of them developed enough similarities for scholars to propose possible sub-genres (k-logs, for example, or filter versus personal blogs). The very notion of sub-genre affirms the connectedness of form to action and the significance of form: groupings of similar forms indicate groupings of similar actions, with formal similarities calling attention to action similarities. Since genres fuse form and substance into action, identifiable similarities of action should reveal similarities of form, and identifiable similarities of form should reveal similarities of action. Studying a genre from either end of the fusion can prove fruitful.

The studies of blogs have come early enough in the development of this emerging genre, in fact, perhaps to be watching shared generic form emerge as individual blogs interact and struggle with others. The scholars both note some history of blogs and of early bloggers, including well-known prescriptions for the forms that blogs should take, based largely, it appears, on the forms that those early bloggers themselves chose. As both sets of scholars discovered, though, actual blogs do not match those early bloggers’ prescriptions. Links are proving less significant to the genre than reverse chronology, for example. Daily updating is less the norm than biweekly updating. Unimagined forms like badges are making appearances. The range of what is formally possible in the genre of blogs emerges through the choices individual bloggers are making and the receptions they are receiving. As individual bloggers take up the actions of previous bloggers,⁷ they take up also

6. For more discussion of this balance of creativity and choice, see Frances Christie or, from a linguistic viewpoint, Devitt *Writing Genres* Chapter 5.

7. See Freedman and Bawarshi for more on the concept of uptake in genre theory.

the associated forms. Since genre forms remain open and dynamic, though, as discussed in the preceding principle, the forms remain at play. In the multiplicity of generic and individual actions, the blogger plays a new composition jazzily, transforming the repeated forms in ways at once recognizable and variable.

4.4 The forms of genres are inter-genre-al, interacting with forms of other genres

Genres interact with other genres in what has been called genre sets (Devitt 1991) and then genre systems (Bazerman 1995), within the framework of metagenres (Giltrow 2002), activity systems (Russell 1997), or a variety of relationships dependent on their actions in context (Devitt 2004: 54–59). Just as all texts are intertextual, so too are all genres inter-genre-al. For the study of genre forms, that fact means that genres take up forms from the genres with which they inter-act. Their overlapping actions influence their overlapping forms. That overlap creates another place to see genre forms in action.

The case of blogs, once again, illustrates inter-genre-ality. Of course, blogs form a set of genres for computer-mediated communication, along with text messaging and e-mailing, for example. The forms of each genre within that set vary as the types of actions vary. Experiences and contrasts with both e-mail and IM, for example, likely help shape the length, tone, and organizational structures of blogs. Blogs interact inter-genre-ally with other websites as well, linking to and commenting on personal home pages, news sites, and non-profit organizations' web sites, for example. The nature and shape of those links derive in part from the nature and shape of those other web genres, as do such structural features as side bars and archives. The common use of archives, for example, on home pages of organizations with listservs as well as journals surely contributes to the meaning of the archive link on a personal blog. Full study of generic forms would include studying the forms of other, related genres to see how the forms take their meaning in part from the forms of other genres.

Historical inter-genre-ality is an important element of genre forms that scholars could examine, but keeping in mind the fluidity of genre forms and the need to keep them contextualized. The studies of blogs by Miller and Shepherd (2004) and by Herring et al. (2004) speculate on the antecedents or sources of blogs in other genres. Herring et al. trace some formal similarities among genres and finally define the origins of the blog as “a hybrid of existing genres, rendered unique by the particular features of the source genres they adapt, and by their particular technological affordances” (2004: 10). While they do discuss the purposes and content of genres, the “features” that blogs “adapt” include static structures apart from their contexts. Miller and Shepherd, on the other hand, identify source genres primarily from the actions that the genres perform and develop insights about the ways

that blogs construct contemporary selves. Miller and Shepherd neglect forms in this source history, however. An interesting follow-up study would identify sets of forms that serve to create such identity constructions. What forms from the sources are adapted into blogs, and how do those traces serve to construct identities differently from the sources?

Since genres and their forms remain open, fluid, and dynamic, the inter-genre-al traces that studies might discover would likely also appear fluid and irregular. One example from the study of blogs, though, suggests that some computer-mediated inter-genre-ality may inhibit fluidity and variation and may even restrict the meaningfulness of forms. Herring et al. note an important contextual frame for the form of blogs: the limitations of the Blogger software most commonly used to create blogs (2004: 7). As a technology, like HTML more generally, blogging software not surprisingly sets limits on forms. To make different formal choices requires knowing HTML, being able to write programming that will create the desired forms. For most bloggers, then, who use the commonly available freeware, some forms come more easily than others. These limitations become even more interesting when viewed in light of inter-genre-ality. As a genre and perhaps even meta-genre (Giltrow 2002), blogging software delimits another genre. When bloggers choose one instance of the blogging software genre—most commonly the blogging freeware called Blogger—they choose an entire set of forms and, with them, a set of potential actions. Those forms both enable and limit. Without Blogger, novice bloggers would be very restricted in the forms and resulting actions they could choose. With Blogger, they can add links, archives, badges, time stamps, and more. With Blogger, they cannot easily allow comments. Actions they might have chosen, such as interacting with their readers, become more difficult. Of course, the genres of blogging software and blog interact in the reverse as well. If bloggers insist on allowing comments in their blogs, perhaps choosing different instances of blogging software in order to allow comments, then the blogging software genre is likely to change to incorporate commenting in more instances. The inter-genre-ality of the two genre forms once again reveals the interaction of individual and social as well as the interaction of two genres. Individual decisions about forms and actions in one genre can influence the forms and actions available in another genre. If the example of blogging software and blogs is not unusual, then such inter-genre-ality may serve as a source of new variations in genre forms.

5. Concluding in a different form

Even these simple, basic principles demonstrate, I hope, that returning to form in genre study will require caution and vigilance against formalism but at the same time leaps of imagination. The moebius strip of the individual and the social in

genres requires considerable twisting and turning to maintain the connection. The relationship of form and action in genres resembles nothing so much as the visual relationship between figure and ground, the most famous example of which is the lamp that suddenly becomes a lady's head when the viewer shifts perspective. The jazz that each generic instance performs shows how impossible it is to separate Yeats' dancer from the dance. To simplify any of these metaphors in order to study one part, to quantify one element, requires breaking some essential connectedness in the actual play of forms within genres. The answer, I would argue, is not to stop when the moebius strip turns, nor to blind oneself to either the lamp or the head, nor to describe jazz or the dance without any details from the specific composition or dancer. The answer, instead, is to acknowledge the two-sidedness, the simultaneity, the inseparability of form, meaning, and action, of individual, social, and cultural context, of actual genres and genre-ness. Such a fusion is far more difficult and far more satisfying as genre study continues into its next twenty years of vital research.

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