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Genre

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Genre is an alien term, hard to pronounce and difficult to define. Entymologically, *genre* comes from French, meaning "kind," "category," "sort," or "gender," and from the Latin *genus,* meaning "descent, family, type, or gender." Genre and its close relative *form* are challenging terms because they are abstractions. No one has ever seen form or genre, only exemplars that we perceive as a particular form or genre. Accordingly, these concepts are malleable and are understood differently by literary and rhetorical critics, those who study communication through language, and those who study discourse communities and their regulation and constitution by rules and conventions.

The notion of categorizing works of literature and rhetoric by type has its roots in the thinking of Aristotle, the great categorizer, whose *Poetics* described the three broad literary genres of prose narrative, poetry, and drama (Connors, 1986) and whose *Art of Rhetoric* described three types of public discourse, the deliberative to enact expedient policies, the forensic as a means to do justice, and the ceremonial or epideictic to celebrate the values of the community and unify its members. Initially, such distinctions were descriptive, identifying basic symbolic processes. That is, to live peacefully in any community, there must be rules; hence, there must be deliberative discourse. If rules exist, some will break them, hence the need for forensic discourse. Because deliberative and forensic speeches involve disagreements, ceremonial discourse is needed to remind the community of its unifying values. Moreover, Aristotle did not treat these as mutually exclusive genres but noted points at which their elements merge or overlap, as in the deliberative implications of ceremonial discourse, illustrated by the eulogies of Pericles for the Athenian dead and Lincoln's address at Gettysburg.

What began as descriptions of public discourse soon migrated into pedagogy for fledgling orators. Training was based on imitation, which required students to analyze form (style, manner, arrangement) and content (themes or lines of argument). Students were expected to analyze a model, then imitate the form but supply new content or imitate the theme but present it in a new form. Exercises in imitation occurred on every level, beginning with exercises in vocabulary and grammar, and taught students to assess what precisely a given form did to create a given meaning or effect (Clark, 1959). Because the models used were outstanding examples from the rhetorical literature, the exercises were also training in invention. "In classical rhetoric, the doctrine of *imitatio* provided the most obvious intersection between the reading of texts and the production of persuasive arguments," Michael Leff (1977) notes, and he emphasizes its central role in rhetorical invention: "*Imitatio* is not the mere repetition or mechanistic reproduction of something found in an existing text. It is a complex process that allows historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production" (p. 201). In the introduction to *Exemplum,* John Lyons (1989) links this pedagogy to the example:

> Example is therefore based on the view that the apparently infinite number of possible events can be contained within a limited structure or repertory of rules. The occurrences or manifestations of a general rule will therefore be limitless, but the underlying rules will be finite,

an assumption underlying the practice of rhetoric, as described by Antonius in Cicero's *De oratore,* that

> all the possible subjects of debate are not founded on a countless host of human beings or an endless diversity of occasions, but on typical cases or character, and that the types are not merely limited in number but positively few. (Loeb Classical Library 34, in Lyons, 1989, p. 28)

Pedagogical exercises taught rhetorical theory by example:

> Given the limitations of theoretical instruction, imitatio played a vital role in rhetorical education, for it could show what the rules could not tell. In the first phase of this process, the reader would learn to identify strategies and forms as actually embodied in a historical text and to judge their significance relative to the construction of the text as a whole and its situated rhetorical purposes. (Leff, 1997, p. 202)

Subsequently, the strategies and forms identified would be incorporated into a new discourse addressing a different set of circumstances. As summarized by Rita Copeland,

> the relationship between model and copy, like that of lineage, is predicated on the act of invention; the model or ancestor, discovers and posits the ground for future invention. Such an evolutionary pattern is enabled or sustained by the very interpretative continuity which it creates. Hence, to justify the imitative enterprise, the copy produces, not conspicuous likeness of the original, but rather what is understood and revalued in the original. (Copeland, 1991, p. 27, cited in Leff, 1997, p. 202)

Leff notes that this kind of imitation is a vehicle for what J. Robert Cox (1987) calls "the invention of usable traditions" (cited in Leff, 1997, p. 203) and constitutes what Leff defines as hermeneutical rhetoric.

As the field of speech emerged out of English departments at the beginning of the 20th century, genre played an important role in differentiating studies of rhetoric from studies of literature. In 1925, Herbert Wichelns responded to the need to define a distinctive mission for rhetorical scholarship. Like the founders of the new discipline, he defended the importance "of the study of the [oratorical] art" (p. 4). Literary analysis was unsuitable for such study because it presupposed "the absolute standard of a timeless world," whereas oratory is "the art of influencing men in some concrete situation" (pp. 21–22). Rhetoric was not timeless literature; rhetorical acts were responses to particular situations, and orators were to be judged by their ability to adapt to and influence the immediate audience. Accordingly, rhetorical criticism "is not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect" (p. 22). He wrote, however, that public discourse lies "at the boundary of politics (in the broadest sense) and literature; its atmosphere is that of the public life, its tools are those of literature, its concern is with the ideas of the people as influenced by their leaders" (p. 26). In other words, oratory was a kind of discourse importantly different from literature, although some of its tools were those of literature.

Early efforts in rhetorical criticism were collected in *History and Criticism of American Public Address* (Brigance, 1943, 2 vols.; Hochmuth, 1955, 1 vol.). Reflecting the distinction between literary and rhetorical scholarship, Brigance (1943) insisted that personal influence and social status, *not artistry,* guided his selection of speakers (Book I, chap. vii). The critical method outlined by Wichelns was systematized and detailed by Thonssen and Baird (1948).[1] Studies following these methods consisted primarily of historical-biographical studies of the situation in which a speech was given and of the man who delivered it. Based on analysis of the essays in the three volumes of *History and Criticism of American Public Address,* Edwin Black (1965) concluded that the standard methods of critical analysis consisted primarily of classifying speeches generically as deliberative/policy related, forensic/legal, or epideictic/ceremonial and analyzing them in terms of the modes of proof to identify argument, appeals, and credibility and the classical canons or arts in order to assess originality, structure, style, and delivery.

The urge to classify discourses, to order them by groups, has been a strong impulse in rhetorical criticism primarily because criticism rests on comparison and contrast, the processes by which we are able to perceive similarities and differences and to identify forms, strategies, and arguments. Comparison and contrast are not, however, of equal importance, primarily because differences are inevitable and endless. Every person, event, object, or situation differs in myriad ways. We cope with "blooming, buzzing confusion" by ignoring some differences to attend to and recognize recurring elements or patterns, which exist at many levels of abstraction and direct and frame the ways in which symbolic acts are to be interpreted. Attempting to understand phenomena by comparing them with other phenomena, similar and dissimilar, is a basic human conceptual activity.

Our ability to recognize any element of discursive practice relies on prior familiarity with other instances—of types of argument (e.g., a fortiori), kinds of structure (e.g., method of residues), issues (stasis), strategies (e.g., refutation, enactment), types of evidence (authority, testimony), tropes (metaphor, metonymy), and so on. Accordingly, all criticism is based on analogy, of perceived similarities among speeches, such as the eulogies for warriors by Pericles and Abraham Lincoln (Wills, 1992, pp. 41–62), Reagan's ceremonial speeches at Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen compared with those at Omaha Beach and on D-Day (Jensen, 2007), or a comparison of Lincoln's Cooper Union address with Barack Obama's speech on race at Philadelphia (Wills, 2008), likenings that are the natural outcome of the comparative foundations of criticism. Evaluation is, likewise, based on comparison. We derive norms for judging immediate and long-term effects from familiarity with past successes and failures. We evaluate the artistry of rhetorical works by comparing them with those we consider models of excellence, of the ethical principles espoused in different works as options from which we might choose, and of the bases for judging truth and propriety through comparison with

outstanding exemplars. The challenge has been to avoid the pitfalls that genre invites—the sense that classifying speeches into types is all that is required of the critic, pitfalls of imposed regularity explored in the collection edited by Aram A. Aghazarian and Herbert W. Simons (Conley, 1986). As the editors note, any example of public discourse can be approached through many different frames so that a given work, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail," can be treated as protest rhetoric, an apostolic epistle, an apologia, Southern rhetoric, religious rhetoric, and so on (p. 11). Each frame is as apt as the extent to which it helps us understand the power of King's letter and the sources of its invention; criticism is not a contest to discover the best niche. Classification, however, courts the dangers of oversimplification and prescription. As critics quickly noted, generic analysis was as vulnerable to cookie-cutter applications as were the neo-Aristotelian methods it was designed to replace, and they argued forcefully that generic analysis was reductive and formulary (Conley, 1986; Patton, 1976). They were right; any critical procedure applied rigidly becomes just that.

As Aghazarian and Simons (1986) point out, "The amorphous nature of discourse continues to be a problem in genre studies," calling attention to the problems of interpretation. What, for instance, counts as "an invitation to contemplation, a call to action, a restatement of political principle, an appeal to unity" (p. 199) in an inaugural address? The essays on presidential inaugurals generally and on Reagan's 1981 inaugural in particular in that volume illustrate the insights of differing frames as well as the problems of interpretation (Joslyn, 1986).

There is no particular virtue to categorizing as such or to organizing discourses according to some principle, group of strategies, or motives (Benoit, 2000; Harrell & Linkugel, 1978; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Identifying a form or a genre is useful only if that identification helps us understand how a particular discourse unfolds and appeals, how it functions. Comparison can be revealing. Looking at the apparently pointless discourse of the Yippies of the 1960s through the lens of the diatribes of the ancient Cynics makes what is apparently nonsense intelligible (Windt, 1972). Through comparison, we can explore the role of enactment in the Democratic convention keynote addresses of Barbara Jordan (1976) and Barack Obama (2004). We can enlarge our understanding of enactment through analyzing Angelina Grimké's use of the mob's protests as proof in her 1838 speech in Pennsylvania hall, and we can discover another dimension of enactment by treating President Kennedy's repeated phrase, "Let them come to Berlin," in "Ich bin ein Berliner," as a call to enactment, asking us to do as he has done, to use Berlin as a test of the claims of the Communists (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, pp. 18–19).

The possibilities for human symbolic action are infinite, yet our capacity to recognize and perceive such strategic moves depends on frames of reference that enable us to discern a kind of argument, a strategy, a metaphor, or a genre. At this level, criticism is descriptive analysis, decoding and identifying the forms embedded in a complex message encrypted in a speech, a photograph, or a memorial. Equally, however, as Adena Rosmarin (1985) suggests, skillful critics create symbolic castles out of textual c(1)ues, drawing attention to Lincoln's control of time in the Cooper Union address (Leff, 1997), pointing to iconicity, the similarity between the form of a sign and its meaning (Leff & Sachs, 1990), such as the assonance in Kennedy's inaugural reference to "the steady spread of the deadly atom," noting Angelina Grimké's use of a prophetic persona and that of the biblical Esther (Japp, 1985), and tokens of ideology in political discourse (Black, 1970). As humans who communicate, we are all practicing critics whose interpretations are tested daily in conversation with our peers. Academic critics draw on their knowledge of rhetorical theory and literature to discern strategies at work that are likely to go unnoticed by most audiences. A disciplinary community of peers tests those claims to judge whether the claim is a mirage or the astute perception/recognition of an example of unusual symbolic architecture. In addition to Black's treatment of Chapman's speech as a morality play, other examples include the aforementioned comparison of the diatribe of the ancient Greek cynics with the rhetoric of the Yippies (Windt, 1972), the post-9/11 rhetoric of George W. Bush as analogous to Puritan covenant renewal (Bostdorff, 2003), the rituals and performance of petitioning (Zaeske, 2003) and voting (Ray, 2007) as rhetorical action, treating Nixon's resignation speech as a farewell address in which he attempts to define his presidential legacy (Campbell & Jamieson, 1990, pp. 207–211), the explanatory power of a dramatistic analysis of the processes by which a shooting in Maine was transformed to shift blame from the hunter to the victim (Tonn, Endress, & Diamond, 1993).

In 1965, Edwin Black offered an alternative to the traditional methods of rhetorical criticism based on language. Fundamental to his alternative were assumptions about linguistic practices. He wrote,

> There will be a correspondence among the intentions of a communicator, the characteristics of his [*sic*] discourse, and the reactions of his auditors to that discourse. . . . to deny that is to deny the possibility of language as we ordinarily understand that term. (p. 16)

Thus, he concluded,

> When we find three factors—strategies, situations, and effects—coinciding, this is a tolerably good reason for suspecting that the three factors . . . are really just three aspects of the same thing. Rhetorical strategies refer to characteristics of the discourse; rhetorical situations refer to extralinguistic influences on the audience; audience effects refer to responses to the strategies in the situations. (p. 134)

What he called the rhetorical transaction combined these three constituents (p. 135).

Two concepts underlying Black's approach to criticism are problematic. One is situation, a concept often reduced to a material reality (Bitzer, 1968). Situations, of course, are real, but only as the shared perceptions of a group. In some cases, these are widely shared perceptions and interpretations, but they are never uniform, illustrated dramatically by differing views among Americans of how to interpret the events of 9/11. They also are unreal, conceptual products of symbolic systems created by communities. Raymie McKerrow's (1989) call was for a critical rhetoric to attack the unreal but hegemonic rhetorical constructs that pervade our lives. Situation needs to be understood as a symbolic context grounded in community, a construct whose limits we recognize when our cultural knowledge is inadequate, as when Gerry Philipsen (1986) provides the background that enables us to understand Mayor Daley's council speech or when Lin-Lee Lee (1997) enables us to comprehend why Zhao Ziyang's speech to the students in Tiananmen Square persuaded them to end their hunger strike.

The other term is *genre,* the subject of this essay. Black (1965) defended his language-based approach to criticism and the importance of the intertextual connections that it emphasized this way: "The neo-Aristotelians ignore the impact of the discourse on rhetorical conventions, its capacity for disposing an audience to expect certain kinds of justifications in later discourses that they encounter, even on different subjects" (p. 35). In other words, discourses alter and shape community norms; their effects extend beyond responses in a given historical moment. Discursive practices are models. Genres emerge and evolve.

In the introduction to *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action,* Campbell and Jamieson (1978) traced the history of generic approaches to rhetorical criticism. Subsequently, Campbell and Jamieson generically analyzed the rhetoric of the U.S. presidency. Their initial efforts focused on inaugural addresses (1986) and the speeches of ascendant vice presidents to identify the functions that these speeches performed (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982). As the analysis expanded to more kinds of presidential speeches, such as state of the union addresses, veto messages, war rhetoric, and farewells, this work became a study of the interaction between an institution and its rhetoric (Campbell & Jamieson, 1990, 2008). Jamieson's early work on the rhetoric of the papacy was especially helpful in moving us in this direction (1974, 1975). The approach taken was pragmatic: what are the ends of these discourses and what means are used to achieve them—that is, the relationship between form and function as a way to discover the knowledge created by the presidential practice of rhetoric.

In contrast to a conception of criticism as grounded in social practice, the literary critic Adena Rosmarin (1985) emphasizes the creative role of critics, whose métier is claiming and expanding our rich symbolic inheritance. In *The Power of Genre,* she explores the key questions that face critics, who, she argues, "strive both to unfold the unique and unmediated particularity of a text or reading experience and to generalize this particularity, phrasing its explanation in terms not its own" (p. 6). She raises some of the most troubling questions:

> Does genre constitute the particular or do the particulars constitute the genre? Are genres found in texts, in the reader's mind, in the author's, or in some combination thereof? Or are they not "found" at all but rather devised and used? . . . Can we "see" them or do they hover on the hermeneutic "horizon," always potentially but never actually in view? (p. 7)

She aligns herself with E. H. Gombrich's studies of the rhetoric of visual representation, who claims that every symbolic act is "intertextual—that each visual text, like each verbal text, is a rewriting of previous texts" (p. 19). Obviously, this claim echoes assumptions underlying Greco-Roman concepts of rhetorical invention. Rosmarin defines genre as "a kind of schema, a way of discussing a literary text in terms that link it with other texts and, finally, phrase it in terms of those texts" (p. 21). In other words, genre is

> the critic's heuristic tool, his [*sic*] chosen or defined way of persuading his audience to see the literary text in all its . . . fullness and then to relate this text to those that are similar or, more precisely, to those that may be similarly explained,

and she adds that "explanatory power, like affective power, tends to be greatest when the affinities are surprising" (p. 25).

There are some similarities between Rosmarin's approach to genre in literature and Black's approach to rhetorical criticism based on linguistic practices. Generic analysis is not precisely a method but an interpretative frame based on the ways in which language works in human interaction. What might eventuate in a generic comparison begins with close readings of texts. Such works can be widely understood to be somehow importantly similar, such as eulogies, with the critic in a search of what key symbolic moves they share. On the other hand, a close textual analysis can lead to an unusual generic claim, as occurs in Black's analysis of Chapman's Coatesville Address. That speech has no surface similarities to classic morality plays such as *Everyman* or *Abraham and Isaac,* but Black works to persuade us to see what it does as symbolically similar to the transformations effected in and through morality plays. Once "seen" or interpreted in those terms, we can understand why and how that address is able to speak to subsequent audiences.

An alternative, social scientific approach to genre has grown out of psychological studies of cognition in everyday life (Nelson, 1969). What is sometimes referred to as activity theory, based on its Russian roots, looks at speaking and

writing as tools that mediate social practices by means of genres. Such genres are functional types, typified semiotic responses to recurring conditions that a group of people involved in some activity network share, and such genres mediate varied social practices in multilayered, multifaceted ways. Every modern profession carries out its activities through written genres, which evolve as conditions change, illustrated by changes produced by developments in law, medicine, and academic disciplines. This approach to genres is called sociohistorical because it traces the history of various genres within and among networks of social practice.

Whereas historically form and genre were preeminently pedagogical tools for honing the skills of fledgling orators, and then became part of the array of methods used by modern rhetorical critics, these concepts have become tools in efforts to understand discourse in postmodern culture. Genre has become less the study of affinities between speeches or symbolic acts and more the study of linguistic conventions and usages that constitute and regulate the practices of academic disciplines, professions, organizations, and institutions. The research studies of Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin (1995), Michael Bernard-Donals (1998), Cheryl Geisler (1994), and Charles Bazerman (1994), among others, illustrate this shift in focus. Its historical roots lie in the work of Lev S. Vygotsky in the late 1920s and 1930s, and it continued in the 1960s in the work of developmental psychologists. In the 1980s, that tradition was related to lines of research into cognition in everyday life (Nelson, 1969; Russell, 1996). Michael J. Shapiro (1986) traces the philosophical support for this shift, noting that

> [Martin] Heidegger displaces the ego-subject, the subject of consciousness, from the center of knowledge and puts in its place a historical, changing subject constituted as a set of skills and/or practices, including (and especially) linguistic practices, which "house" human existence. (p. 160)

The shift is also related to Michel Foucault's notion of

> "discursive practice"—the combination of discursively engendered objects, concepts, enunciative modes, and themes—which creates privileged places for some subjects who are constituted as agents of knowledge while others are relegated to silence. (Shapiro, p. 162)

In other words, Foucault not only studies them but also seeks to undermine the power bequeathed by prevailing discursive practices (Shapiro, 1986, p. 165; see also McKerrow, 1989).

As an illustration of these dynamics of genres in a community, Charles Bazerman (1994) outlines the development of journalistic practices, including the interaction between discursive forms and technology:

> The history of literate forms is a history of inventions, not just of literate forms themselves, but of their use in social circumstances and of the development of social circumstances through the incorporation of literate forms. The history of journalism and the public taste for news includes material inventions, such as printing presses, steam presses, Linotype machines, radio, television, and satellites. But it also obviously includes the invention of kinds of periodicals. . . . Further, within these periodical types are embedded the inventions of thousands of changing genres, such as the sports story, the front-page analysis, the op-ed article, the advice to the lovelorn, and the gossip column. These literate forms appear within changing social structures created around the texts, such as changing distribution networks for the periodicals; the emergence of the profession of journalism; . . . the creation of a consumer advertising culture, and the idea of public opinion. (pp. 38–39)

Here, genres reflect the conditions of a field or profession, and as these change, so do the practices of those engaged in it.

As concepts, form and genre are rooted in the communicative functions of language. Humans are able to communicate as members of linguistic communities that share vocabulary, syntax, and established patterns of usage. It is impossible to communicate one's distinctive personal experiences; vocabulary identifies only classes of objects (desks) or emotions (anger) that include widely varying instances or gradations of feeling. Northrop Frye (1957) links genres to "typical recurring images," "associative clusters," and "complex variables." He compares them with the *topoi* of rhetorical commonplaces and calls them "communicable units" through which our experiences and feelings can be made intelligible to others (p. 99; see also pp. 95–115, 245). Forms and genres are conventions of usage that make it possible to interact with others and to articulate and express values, attitudes, and beliefs.

These concepts, which operate at different levels of abstraction, are discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) in his essay "The Problem of Speech Genres." Bakhtin differentiates between primary and secondary speech genres. Primary genres are found in the local communicative activities of everyday life, such as greetings or asking a friend for a favor. Secondary genres, such as scholarly and scientific articles, written forms of organizational communication (Sharer, 2001; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), legal summons, subpoenas, and patents, codify activity in situations occurring over time and in distant locales; accordingly, secondary speech genres are "complex" (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, pp. 7–8). Bakhtin (1986) describes speech genres as boundless in their diversity because each sphere contains a whole repertoire of them. Secondary genres emerge "in more complex and highly developed and organized cultural communication" (p. 62), such as the artistic, scientific, or sociopolitical spheres that absorb and digest various primary or simple genres. According to Bakhtin,

> Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. . . . [T]hematic content, style, and compositional structure—are inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of

> the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres.* (p. 60)

Primary genres are embedded in the local, intimate milieux in which they occur; in contrast, secondary genres are more removed, distant. Bakhtin (1986) wrote,

> Secondary (complex) speech genres—novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary and so forth—arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. (p. 62)

This approach is developed at length by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), who focus on the genres that develop and evolve in academic cultures. Their central claim is

> that genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use, and that genre knowledge is therefore best conceptualized as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities. (p. 3)

Five principles constitute the theoretical framework for their work: first, that genres are dynamic rhetorical forms developed from responses to recurrent situations that stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning; second, that knowledge of genres is derived from participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life; third, that genre knowledge embraces both form and content, including a sense of what content is appropriate to a particular purpose in a particular situation at a particular moment; fourth, that in using genre rules we constitute social structures and, simultaneously, reproduce these structures; and, finally, that genre conventions signal a discourse community's norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology. They apply these principles to the scientific journal article; to scientific peer review correspondence; to the evolution of a scholarly forum; and to curricular, pedagogical, and classroom genres.

Carolyn R. Miller's groundbreaking 1984 essay "Genre as Social Action" responded to competing views of genre in rhetorical studies, and her analysis links the work of rhetorical critics and students of practices in discursive communities, such as academic fields. Her approach to genre is pragmatic, claiming that "a classification of discourse will be rhetorically sound if it contributes to an understanding of how discourse works—that is, if it reflects the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse" (p. 152). She proposes that "in rhetoric the term 'genre' be limited to . . . a classification based in rhetorical practice and consequently open rather than closed and organized around situated actions (that is, pragmatic, rather than syntactic or semantic)" (p. 155). She calls this approach ethnomethodological because "it seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates" (p. 155).[2] Bazerman (1994) also links ethnomethology to the study of genres:

> It has been the project of ethnomethodology to uncover the everyday understanding of the world that is revealed in our everyday action; equally it has been the project of cognitive psychology to find how we code that everyday understanding of the world into structures of thought that then guide our continuing daily actions. Both . . . analy[ze] how we bring to bear our sense of the world in our momentary actions. (pp. 175–176)

Consistent with her pragmatic approach, Miller (1984) argues 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" (p. 151). Accordingly, genre "must involve situation and motive" (p. 152), "a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action" (p. 153). Because genres rely on the social practices of a community that grow and fade through time, they are "an open class, with new members evolving, old ones decaying" (p. 153). Although genres are responses to them, "situations" cannot be material or subjective. They cannot be material because, as objective phenomena, they are unique and cannot recur (Stebbins, 1967, p. 154, in Miller, 1984, p. 156); similarly, situations cannot be a subjective configuration or "perception" because these, too, are unique. Put differently, "Recurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence"; thus, genres "are social constructs" (p. 156). Here, Miller turns to the work of Alfred Schutz, who argues that our "stock of knowledge" is based on types through which we interpret new situations, "types that are created and shared and evolve through communication and, hence, reside in language," and adds that "language can be construed as the sedimentation of typical experiential schemata which are typically relevant in a society" (Schutz, 1971, p. 234, in Miller, 1984, p. 157). In other words, "it is through the process of typification that we create recurrence, analogies, similarities" (p. 157). Here, Miller cites the work of M. A. K. Halliday, who comments that

> the apparently infinite number of different possible situations represents in reality a very much smaller number of general *types* of situations, which we can describe in such terms as "players instructing novice in a game," "mother reading bedtime story to child," "customer ordering goods over the telephone," "teacher guiding pupils," "discussion of a poem," and the like. (Halliday, 1978, p. 29, in Miller, p. 157)

Although situations are infinite, their typifications are limited.

At issue, however, is how substantive, stylistic, and situational elements fuse in a genre. Kenneth Burke (1968) describes form as "an arousing and fulfillment of desire. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a

reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (p. 124). In other words, form shapes response to content by giving instruction about how to perceive and interpret, which disposes the audience to respond in a certain way. "Seen, thus, form becomes a kind of meta-information, with both semantic value (as information) and syntactic (or formal) value. Form and substance thus bear a hierarchical relationship to each other" (Miller, 1984, p. 159); thus, "we can think of form, substance and context as relative, not absolute; they occur at many levels on a hierarchy of meaning." In other words, "form at one level becomes an aspect of substance at a higher level" (Miller, 1984, p. 160). As an illustration, she points to a hierarchic model developed by Thomas S. Frentz and Thomas B. Farrell (1976), which is composed of context, episodes, and symbolic acts. Context "specifies the criteria for interpreting both the meaningfulness and propriety of any communicative event." Context has two hierarchic levels—form of life and encounters. "Form of life" refers to "cultural patterns, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, that give significance to actions, both linguistic and nonlinguistic." Encounters "particularize form of life through rules of propriety" (Frentz & Farrell, 1976, p. 335). The second level of the hierarchy is the episode, a "rule-conforming sequence of symbolic acts generated by two or more actors who are collectively oriented toward emergent goals" (p. 336). The third and lowest level is the symbolic act, which comprises "verbal and/or nonverbal utterances which express intentionality" (p. 340) and is the "component" of the episode. Thus, what is form at one level becomes content at another, and at each level, form is a frame that instructs us about how to interpret content.

The complex relationships between form and content at different levels of abstraction are part of the ways in which we make meaning, ways in which we expand our rhetorical repertoire. Our ability to understand the form-content relationships created in communal practice are aspects of our social competence, but they also represent communicative potentials. Miller (1984) writes,

> What we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms. . . . We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have: that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another, instruct customers on behalf of a manufacturer, take on an official role, account for progress in achieving goals. We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potentials for failure and success in acting together. As a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality. (p. 165)

Miller's conclusion emphasizes the ways in which social knowledge and language competence teach us how to adopt personae and perform appropriate symbolic acts and to recognize such action in others, which are essential elements in creating and interpreting the discourse that is a part of our daily life as communicators.

Genres are forms that exist in and are understood by members of communities. As such, they are affected by context, analogous to what Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to as language games, meanings that arise out of rule-governed usage, like the rules that create games such as bridge and soccer. Contexts, too, are hierarchical. What was form at one level becomes an aspect of substance at another level, echoing Bakhtin's view of primary and secondary genres. In other words, "Conventions of form and substance combine according to constitutive rules to create the typified rhetorical action of the eulogy; in addition, the action is interpretable under regulative rules provided by larger contexts, like religion or public affairs" (Miller, 1984, p. 161). In other words, genres "exist" at different levels of abstraction.

Bakhtin (1986), too, emphasizes the fusion of form and content and the merging of generic elements, or what he refers to as *heteroglossia,* modes of speaking or writing that people learn to mimic, weave together, and manipulate, such as "formal letter" and "grocery list," or "university lecture" and "personal anecdote" (see also Geertz, 1980). Samuel McCormick (2003) illustrates this process at work in a vernacular speech that reorganizes features of integrationist and nationalist ways of speaking drawn from two key strands in African American public discourse. This analysis is consistent with Bakhtin's (2004) view that any language stratifies itself into many voices: "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions" (p. 674), This diversity of voice, Bakhtin asserts, is the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre, but McCormick's analysis illustrates similar processes at work in public address.

Although form and genre once were pedagogical tools for honing the skills of fledgling orators and then became methods used by modern rhetorical critics, at present these concepts have become tools in efforts to understand discourse in postmodern culture. Genre studies are now less concerned with identifying similarities among speeches or symbolic acts and more concerned with the linguistic conventions and usages that constitute and regulate the practices of academic disciplines, professions, organizations, and institutions.

Notes

1. In 1950, Harold Zyskind innovatively combined close textual analysis with generic criticism, using the Aristotelian genres as a basis for determining whether the Gettysburg Address was best understood as epideictic or deliberative rhetoric. He asserted an important principle, that the value of a generic approach could be tested by asking, "Are the meaning and purpose of the Address—in its uniqueness—in any way illuminated by an analysis of it as belonging to that genre?"

2. In *A Pragmatic Theory of Rhetoric,* Walter H. Beale (1987) writes that pragmatic theory "is concerned primarily with *what human beings do with discourse* . . . with the act of discourse as a human action, in its typicality and in its uniqueness" (p. 1).

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