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Social Forms as Habitats for Action¹

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ABSTRACT

The refiguring of genre as a socio-historic phenomenon highlights its status as a social fact, making it part of people's definition of each situation in which a genre is visibly identifiable. As a social fact genre can be understood through research and theory in psychology, sociology, and anthropology on social, cultural and psychological typification. This essay synthesizes what can be gleaned from each of these areas as well as literary, linguistic, and rhetorical studies to conclude typification of discourses into various types is a fundamental process in the formation of our sense of where we are, what we are doing, and how we can do it. Genre appears to be a constitutive mechanism in the formation, maintenance, and enactment of society, culture, psychology, imagination, consciousness, personality, and knowledge, interactive with all the other processes which shape our lives.

The concept of genre, text type, literary species or kind has been an enduring puzzle to literary studies.² As readers, critics, historians, teachers and writers, we regularly need to characterize the sort of text we are working with. As readers, we use genre to locate the kind of world we are entering into in each text; to identify the kinds of symbolic, emotional, intellectual, critical, or other mental activity evoked; to recognize the kinds of games at play we need to attune to. As critics and historians, we explicitly attribute genre to categorize ranges of texts as similar and to map the changes in literary practice. We implicitly rely on genre in our invocation of interpretive and evaluative procedures we consider appropriate to each text according to its type. As pedagogues, we use genre to organize courses and teach students. As writers, we use

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² Hernadi (1972) provides a comprehensive survey of twentieth-century theory of genre. See also Dubrow (1982), Fowler (1982), Strelka (1978). For a more recent bibliography of literary genre criticism see Beebe (1994).

our sense of genre to focus our efforts, to locate and display resources typical and appropriate to the genre, to recognize appropriate style and decorum, and to provide frames for blurring and other disruptions. As both readers and writers, we often feel the need to rebel against the apparent conservative constraints of genre on creativity, novelty, imagination, and socio-political realignment.³ And as critics and teachers, we find it important to point to how texts accomplish more than the typicalities of genre might suggest.

Nonetheless, despite all our interest in locating and transcending genre, we can never seem to get stable taxonomies (beyond "common sense common knowledge") or a definition of any genre that will satisfy more than a few people for a short time, and attempts at taxonomies, let alone use them to evaluate and enforce critical standards, inevitably become associated with reductive formalism. Each author's creation of a text in an identifiable genre is so individual in its characteristics that genre does not seem to provide adequate and fixed means for describing the individual accomplishment of each text, without impoverishment. Attempts to enforce generic uniformity have recurrently been seen as constraints on creativity and expression. Each reader's recognition of

³ The most prominent of recent calls for disruption of genre are in Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" (1980) and Clifford Geertz's "Blurred Genres" (1983). Calls for generic disruption are historically recurrent, accompanying moments of generic change, when former shapes of communication no longer seem adequate to new situations and new purposes. While such calls usually are usually explicitly cast as rejections of the constraints of genre in general and the faults of particular genres associated with a prior regime, they often can be read to forecast the features of the new regime the critics are reaching for. That is they can be seen not only as a complaint and an escape, but as an implicit definition of a new direction for discursive transactions.

An interesting case in point, suggested to me by Gregory Gonsoulin, is the explicit rejection of traditional Chinese literary genres by the cultural and political reformers of the early twentieth century, known collectively as the May Fourth Movement (named after a 1919 uprising), intent on overturning the Confucian tradition and opening up to western influences. They saw traditional genres deeply tied to the court and educational practices they wished to displace. They claimed to reject genre outright, but implicitly, they moved towards the imitation of Western fictional genres, particularly in the Russian transformation, to reflect the new values and social relations they hoped to establish as part of a new political order (Goldman 1977). Birch (1974) contains a number of essays that attempt to categorize these traditional genres with some of their political and cultural implications.

Frederic Jameson in "Magical Narratives: on the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism" in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) points to both the ideological meanings captured in generic forms and the tensions enacted by each particular use of genre, where the political and social situation is never uniform or unfractured. Thus he points to a constant tension within every generic performance.

special and personal resources in a text also seems to make the generic shaping at most a trivial guide to interpretation. What is entailed in any generic designation then seems to move from text to text, so that there is no certain and historically and culturally stable knowledge we can gain from a generic designation. What general characterizations we may make on such loose categories that genre can provide, as a consequence, do not seem deeply useful in individual acts of reading and writing (except under procrustean conditions of coercive enforcement).

This dilemma has led a number of theorists in recent years to emphasize a socio-historical account of genre, as a series of ever-changing, culturally salient categories that shape the places of literary activity in any time and place.⁴ Genres are what people recognize as genres at any moment of time. They may recognize genres by explicit naming, institutionalization, and regularization through various forms of social sanction and reward. Or people may recognize genre through the implicit organization of practices within patterned forms of literate interaction. Ralph Cohen (1986, 1987) has made this argument most fully and directly, as has Todorov (1990), drawing on Bakhtin.⁵

⁴ One of the early sites of this historicization of genre was in Renaissance studies, in part, as Colie (1973) has pointed out, because the classical tradition was transmitted to Renaissance cultures within distinctive generic categories that then explicitly framed and regulated the literary practices of the period. See also Lewalski (1986).

⁵ Bakhtin as genre theorist, while often serving as the inspiration for recent reinvigoration of genre, seems to be a different Bakhtin for his literary and non-literary readers. Non-literary scholars in the social sciences are most likely to draw on the essay "The Problem of Speech Genres" while literary scholars and theorists are most likely to draw on the essays on the history of the novel, such as those published in English in the volume *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin 1986a). The social scientists, by reading the "Speech Genres" essay in isolation from the rest of Bakhtin's corpus too readily attribute a strong social action orientation to Bakhtin's genre theory, based on only preliminary speculations in that direction in that essay. The substance of his theory arises out of his contemplations on literary genres. In the studies of literary genres, Bakhtin is most interested in literary genres as forms of consciousness, expressing the author's attitude toward individuals and collectivities, and accordingly expressing the author's embrace of or distancing from the consciousness of others. He views the history of genres as a history of consciousness, with certain genres, such as the Dostoevskyan novel or the Bildungsroman being more highly valued as representing more advanced and socially aware states of consciousness. Because his views of genre were developed largely through his contemplation of novels, he also sees non-literary genres in novelistic terms, as fostering recognition of others' utterances, mutual understanding, and sympathy. These everyday primary genres of personal communication then are transformed into what he calls the secondary genres (such as novels) that aggregate and embed the primary genres, creating a higher heteroglossic consciousness. He is only minimally aware of social actions beyond the

Genre as Social Fact

Identifying genre historically takes the concept of genre from an essential fact residing in texts to a social fact, real insofar as people take it as real and insofar as that socio-psychological reality influences their understanding and behavior, within the situation as they perceive it. Thus, in the classic formulation of the sociologist W. I. Thomas, if people "define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (1928: 572)

The move of genre into the realm of social fact itself has consequences for our understanding of genre, for it makes possible the invocation of work in psychology, sociology, and anthropology on social, cultural and psychological typification. Moreover, we now enter an interdisciplinary consideration of the interaction between culturally received categories created in social processes and personally salient categories arising in psychological activities. This is a particularly fruitful move at the current moment, for issues of typified social practices and genre have been of great interest in the social sciences in recent years, as they have been struggling to understand how larger socially distributed patterns of relations and cognition are possible within the minute negotiative local interaction they are observing. Moreover, rhetoric and applied linguistics have recently developed ways of thinking about genre that draw on the social sciences in order to examine the kinds of texts people produce to accomplish the various works of the world, how these texts circulate and are responded to, and what makes such texts successful in the accomplishment of their work. The interaction between individual production in local circumstances and larger patterns of social practices that have the appearance of systems remains a very live and consequential problem for students coming to learn critical, but located, literate action.

In all these areas, a concern for understanding the social construction of knowledge, culture, society, the polity, and daily life has led to finding those mechanisms by which we create some order and comprehensibility in our relations with each other. Without such mechanisms, a social constructivist view could easily lead us to perceive life as absolutely unpredictable, ad hoc, always and ever thoroughly local and unique.

Although this problem is familiar to literary studies in the long-recognized tension between individuality and tradition, to the human

communication of one's perception, feelings, or condition. Driven by a moral aesthetic, he develops a rich theory that tells us much about consciousness, intersubjectivity, and the relations between everyday representations of self and more elaborated representations of social consciousness. But Bakhtin's understanding of genres provide only minimal clues for describing the range, history, and mechanisms of social interaction.

sciences the problem has taken on a force that has until recently been unfamiliar. Until recently within literary and cultural studies, the tension between tradition and individuality has been seen largely as a problem of self-definition for the individual artist or a newly emergent nation or community rather than as a fundamental problem for the maintenance of the cultural system. The cultural system was taken for granted as an inheritance which made the individual differentiation possible. Despite the contradiction of the artist, at least since the time of the Greeks, being seen as both the conveyer of the cultural heritage and as an unconventional, disruptive, creative, dionysiac bohemian, the arts have tended to be called into question only by those outside the arts who wished to control culture for the sake of maintaining social order or advancing particular cultural values. However the recent turn in literary and cultural studies to examine how the arts produce cultural types that exclude, oppress, differentiate, and pursue interested advantage has placed a burden on art as the cultural center of conservative hierarchical political and social order. As a result cultural forms and traditions become not only sites for individual struggle toward individual accomplishment, but targets for critique and widespread rejection in order to remake culture on more equitable terms. The contemporary rejection of genre is part of this movement to denaturalize the forms of social order, saying these are no longer forms and rules we must live by. In this rejection of the cultural system as system, however, literary and cultural studies are now finding themselves in the same dilemma as the other human sciences, without a warranted or warrantable social order within which to locate individual action. Literary and cultural studies, just as the other human sciences, need to find mechanisms which make the local possible, which help us identify the cultural space within which we operate at any historical moment.

Seeing the current cultural dilemma as the same as that besetting many of the human sciences brings with it two broadenings of perspectives. First, it invites us to take seriously the ways in which the concept of genre (as well as other concepts of socio-cultural construction borrowed from the humanities) is reinterpreted and expanded by anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, and others. Second, it invites us to see the kinds of texts and cultural objects typically studied alongside the kinds of texts and cultural objects typically studied by other fields in the human sciences. This placement of literature and the other arts within the wide array of culturally produced objects recognizes other texts and objects are of cultural value and makes them available for forms of literary and cultural interpretation (a move already taken by new historicists and other cultural studies analysts). Even more radically, this move opens literary and other cultural objects to the kinds of examination and questioning posed by other fields. Thus in looking at how other fields

have taken up the use of genre we may start seeing literary texts in new lights.

Genre within the Social Sciences

Anthropology, in gathering increasing accounts of diversity not only among cultures but within individuals' participations within cultures and in no longer trusting structural accounts that reify notions of otherness and obscure agency within exotic custom, has been looking more at the concrete discursive interactions out of which cultural practice emerges. John Gumperz, a linguistic anthropologist, in studying cases of cross-cultural misunderstanding, has found that in spoken interaction we signal each other as to how we should orient toward the situation, what presuppositions and understandings we should invoke, and how we should take the words that are spoken (1992, 1995). These contextualization cues in short help us identify the kind, or genre, of speech event that is occurring. If we do not recognize each other's cues and thus have divergent understandings of the event, we miss each other's meanings and actions, even though we may be perfectly familiar with the precise connotative meaning of the utterance. These contextualization cues index us to the intangible social understandings of genres of speech events as much as words like *now* and *later*, *here* and *there* index us to the temporal and physical aspects of the speech situation. Where we do not share contextualization cues, as likely in cross-cultural situations, we may talk at cross purposes leading to misunderstandings, disagreements and ideologized stigmatizations of each other's conduct. Where we do have a finely tuned shared sense of social types of events we can engage in complex negotiations and strategic adjustments of definitions of events in difficult circumstances, as also noted by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1981).

Other anthropologists have been looking at the way in which entrenched social genres have created power, negotiated relations between and within groups and created naturalized habitus for continuing political relations. William Hanks, for example, has examined the genres of colonial documents by which Mayan society was brought under regularized Spanish control, namely letters to the crown, chronicles, and land surveys. The representations Mayans were able to create for themselves within these Spanish-determined documents formed the official identity of the Mayans, defining their relations with Spanish officialdom.² Over time these official representations came to structure a naturalized social order, an unreflective environment for daily life. Here we see the practical power of particular genres to express identity and form the basis of daily life, even under foreign shaping, and we see the way in which genres are realized and transformed to provide locations for political and economic negotiation and struggle.

Similarly Alessandro Duranti has examined in detail how a traditional Samoan oratical genre known as the *laugu* operates in council gatherings as ritual performance enacting group solidarity, individual performance demonstrating individual merit and establishing political credibility, local assertions of interest in judicial and deliberative settings, and instruments of political alignment. On ritual occasions such as weddings and festivals the speech is given in its most traditional form, and those who can perform it most eloquently establish their leadership roles, granting them the ability to sit literally most closely to the center of power at council gatherings and therefore to have most voice in council considerations. On deliberative and judicial occasions, speeches begin in the form of traditional *laugu*, asserting the group solidarity, but vary flexibly to allow the assertion of complaint or defense or witness to the judicial matter at hand, or to present argument in deliberative matters. Moreover, on all occasions, the ways in which the speech is enacted allows acts, events, and people to be represented as more meritorious in harmony and subservience to the will of the gods or as being more self-interested and therefore less noble. Duranti presents a picture of the single genre of *laugu* as being the rhetorical center of communal construction and negotiation, flexibly combining the classical rhetorical genres of *epideictic*, *forensic*, and *deliberation*, overtly asserting an untroubled social harmony while covertly advancing particular interests within social struggle.

Folklorist Richard Bauman (1986), in studying the artistry of American folktale genres such as the dog-trading tales, practical joke tales, and anecdotes, has pointed to the specific linguistic and performance skills that create the narrative event and reconstruct the event narrated.⁶ This work points to how the texture of lived and remembered experience is shaped by genre-focused performances using genre-specific skills. He and Charles Briggs in a recent review essay of anthropological work on genre have extended the idea of virtuosic performances organizing experienced and remembered events to examine how performers can draw on the intertextual reverberations of genre to reverberate with senses of traditional order, emotions, and continuity, or to set the performance in ironic, comic, or critical relation to traditional cultural representations (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

Perhaps even more fundamentally, Hanks (1990) has considered how genres are part of the deictic system by which Mayans create their sense of the here and now, how they identify the space they are partaking in, and thus the sense of the universe they are moving through at any moment. The generically organized linguistic practices by which people point to or rely on features of time, space, people, or their own bodies,

⁶ For other work on folklore genres, see Ben-Amos (1976).

continually construct what is discursively salient, and thus what forms the relevant context for utterances. His detailed and concrete study of the social construction of lived time and space among the Maya gives a realistic and fine grained interpretation of Bourdieu's sociological concept of habitus (those dispositions or habits that we carry about with us, that orient us to situations, and that provide the basis of our social evaluations) and of Bakhtin's novelistic concept of chronotope (the time-space in which we perceive events represented in texts, and by extension experienced in our lives).

Sociologists as well have been looking into how recognizable regularities of discourse and social encounters (that is, how we perceive talk and events as realized in typified genres) not only provide an orientation to settings but allow the enactment of basic elements of social order, with the result that social structure can be seen as concretely enacted in micro-events created by individual agents. Genre thus becomes a way of bridging traditional macro-sociology of roles, norms, and classes with recent micro-sociology, which in looking at the details of concrete interactions has been skeptical about traditional macro-categories that are not easily identifiable at the level of unique encounters among individuals. Genre provides a means for individuals to orient to and enact situations in recognizable ways with recognizable consequences and thereby establishes a concrete mechanism for structural theories, that suggest that social structure is constantly remade in every interaction which reenacts ordered relations (Giddens 1984). Luhmann (1983, 1989) has further suggested that society exists in the communications that go between individuals rather than in the aggregation of individuals, who always act as individual agents, and thus social structure is to be found in the structuring of communications, which in turn structure social relations.

Structural theories rely on Schutz's idea of social typification in the production of everyday life. One of Schutz's students, Thomas Luckmann (1992), has specifically drawn the connection between genre and the construction of daily life:

The elementary function of communicative genres in social life is to organize, routinize, and render (more or less) obligatory the solutions to recurrent communicative problems. The communicative problems for which such solutions are socially established and deposited in the social stock of knowledge tend to be those which touch upon the communicative aspects of those kinds of social interactions which are important for the maintenance of a given social order.... Different societies therefore do not have the same repertoire of communicative genres, and the communicative genres of one epoch may dissolve into more "spontaneous" communicative processes, while heretofore unbound communicative genres congeal into new genres....

In general one may say that, at any particular time in any particular society the repertoire of communicative genres constitutes the "hard core" of the communicative dimensions of social life.

Susanne Guenther and Hubert Knoblauch (1994) further refine the idea of repertoire of communicative genres to a communicative budget which attends not only to the available range of genres, but how these genres are socially distributed (according to characteristics such as gender, caste or office; according to institutional domain such as religion; and according to heterogeneous groupings such as family and leisure groups). The communicative budget then gives concrete form to Bourdieu's more general notion of a linguistic field, specifying the kinds of linguistic acts available to the various participants, thus shaping their roles and forms of interaction.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) first raised the issue of how we develop accounts of our lives that in turn influence our perception of and participation within unfolding events. Luckmann, in collaboration with Bergmann, has since pursued our practices of forming life accounts, by examining what he calls reconstructive genres, where individuals create public memories of events that have allegedly previously occurred (Bergmann and Luckmann 1994). Gossip and story telling are reconstructive genres, and we may note have some relation to fictional literary narratives. Bergmann has explored genres of gossip at some depth in his book *Discreet Indiscretions* (1993), where he notes that gossip is filled with ambivalences, denials and ploys to cope with its dangerous violations of the public and the private, the discreet and the indiscreet, the taboo and the envied, the intimate and the condemnatory, and other social boundaries. In doing so, it creates a special recognizable social discursive place, a habitus, where gossip occurs and into which gossip partners must make entry, even as the person gossiped about must be excluded. In doing so it creates a specialized kind of interaction with its specialized pleasures. Nonetheless, the creation of this holiday from usual social norms reconfirms the speaker's commitment to everyday morality about which the gossip so carefully plays. Moreover, it creates accounts that evaluate everyday behavior and to which the gossipers thereby make themselves accountable. Here we see the importance of genres for formation of attitudes and behavior both within the given genre and others which may be held under inspection. We also see concretely the difficulties of moral evaluative discourse and the mechanisms by which it may have force in other circumstances. And we see finally how social relations and groups are built around the moral recounting of daily life. These are issues of some interest for the practice of literature.

Conversational analysis, another related mode of micro-sociological inquiry, in trying to give a precise empirical grounding to social observations, has tended to set aside any abstractions about context,

event, or organization that individuals may bring with them to situations. They have attended to the smallest details which might indicate a kind of syntax of interaction, with most attention to the way in which turn taking is negotiated. However, in examining how people manage to gain the floor for longer turns, Schegloff (1994) has been considering larger recognizable turn units – which are something like recognizable genres. If someone is telling a joke, you know to let her continue until the punchline.

Genre in Linguistics and Rhetoric

In linguistics, the turns to language in use and to discourse analysis have renewed interest in genre as a means of organizing linguistic features in relation to situated action. And so we get studies of the way in which semantic and syntactic elements aggregate in different genres and the ways in which the internal organization of genres stage the linguistic unfolding of speech events in a series of typified moves that are describable in both formal and functional terms (Atkinson 1993; Bhatia 1993; Biber 1988; Devitt 1989, 1991, 1993; Galindo 1994; Halliday 1989; Halliday and Martin 1993, Hasan 1985; Kress 1993; Martin 1992; Swales 1990, 1993). Pare and Smart (1994) have further examined the relation among genres, their function and the organizational and professional settings which create functions, resources and constraints. Devitt demonstrates the ways in which particular genres have highly patterned intertextual relations with related documents; for example, tax accountant's letters of advice to clients and tax protests to the Internal Revenue Service each have strong interestextual links to the tax code, but the links are different, are used for different purposes, and are displayed in different ways. She further shows how a series of related genres comprise the regular discursive world, or genre set, of a profession, and that within that profession, the collection of a specific instantiations of the genre comprise a file which is the totality of the representation of a case within the professional discourse. Kress (1993) and Fairclough (1992) have critically examined the ideologies attached to various public genres. The educational implications of using linguistic categories to explicitly teach genre in primary and secondary schools has become a major topic of controversy focused in Australia (Cope and Kalantzis; Freedman; Freedman; Freedman and Medway; Richardson – see references).

In rhetoric, as in literary studies, genre has a long history, based on the several genres for which rhetoric provided practical advice: forensic, deliberative, epideictic, sermon, letter, writing, college essay, business and technical communication. Since 1965, rhetorical criticism developed renewed interest in genre based on Edwin Black's program of examining genre as a component of the rhetorical construction of society (1965; see also Miller 1984); attention has particularly focused on political genres (see Campbell and Jamieson; Jamieson; Lucas; and Simons and Aghazarian).

For rhetoricians concerned with the teaching of writing, genre has been a way of coming to terms with the particular characteristics of situated writing - a way of moving beyond process and the particularities of ethnography to attend to form as it is actually perceived and deployed in communicative settings, rather than as it is idealized in abstractions about correctness and the modes. Genre has been particularly useful in understanding academic and professional discursive practices where highly individual and strategic statements are produced in quite distinctive and recognizable forms - forms which have extensive self-conscious histories and which writers new to a domain must spend some time learning and orienting toward no matter how much writing skill they bring from other domains. Bazerman in examining the historical development of the experimental article has observed how the features of the genre evolved to carry out arguments within changing contexts of empirical practice and forums of communication (see references). The emergence of genre is intricately bound with changing professional roles and relations, changing institutions, the emergence of professional norms and professional identities, ideology, epistemology, ontology, and psychology. The genre of experimental article changes as it moves among periods, sites, and specialties, each with different dynamics, assumptions, and needs as well as different material practices represented in the data and narrative. Ongoing role conflicts, tensions in professional projects, and dialectic between agonism and cooperation also influence the genre and related forms of professional practice. Genre, once established, becomes a structured environment for writing and reading, which then has specific influences on other aspects of professional work. Moreover, Bazerman has found the typified procedures for representation of intertextuality related to the social organization of various fields and citing practice is a strategic site for codifying the work of a field. The genres of research have been most dramatically influenced by particular individuals (such as Hans Oldenburg, Isaac Newton, Joseph Priestley, and Adam Smith), but are constantly being reshaped by each individual writer working within their understanding of genre, their profession, and their project. Bazerman has also argued for the way in which genre allows the attribution of unified speech acts to extended texts and facilitates the structuring of interactions within genre systems. Most recently, in an in-progress study of Thomas Edison, he has been considering the ways in which certain worldly accomplishments (i.e., the development of incandescent lighting technology) requires successful representation in a number of differently structured, genre shaped discursive fields (such as patent law, finances, popular press, and technical literature) in order to establish meaning and value in each. Further, he notes that the discursive systems interact in specific ways, and that meanings and values established in one can translate into specific meanings and values in another.

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