Emerging Genres in New Media Environments

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Editors

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Contemporary digital media have enabled what impresses most observers as a dizzying proliferation of new forms of communicative interaction and cultural production, provoking all manner of multimodal experimentation, artistic and entrepreneurial innovation, and adaptive construction and reconstruction. Working with the concept of genre, scholars in multiple fields have begun to explore these processes of innovation, emergence, and stabilization. Genre has thus become newly important in rhetoric, literature, media studies, game studies, library and information science, applied linguistics, and other disciplinary locations. Understood as social recognitions that embed histories, ideologies, and contradictions, genres function as recurrent social actions which help to constitute culture: thus systems of genres can tell us a great deal about social values and cultural power. Because genres are dynamic sites of tension between stability and change, they are also sites of inventive potential.

Conceptually positioned between communication medium, commodity-product, and social action, genre serves as an interdisciplinary tool, possibly as what sociologists have called a "boundary object," taking on different functions and meanings in different theoretical and disciplinary contexts that are "plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing [it], yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (Star and Greisemer 1989, 393). Genre analysis offers an important way to understand the communicative capacities of new media, and conversely, these new capacities and the creative social practices that they enable offer new angles of vision on the highly interdisciplinary history and theory of genres as indexes of culture.

This volume originated with the Fourth Annual Research Symposium sponsored by North Carolina State University's doctoral program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media, held during April 19–20, 2013, in Raleigh, North Carolina.[1] The theme of the symposium, "Emerging Genres, Forms, Narratives—in New Media Environments," attracted an unanticipated number of submissions, and the resulting program featured speakers from Brazil, Canada, Finland, and the UK, as well as from across the USA, representing several different research traditions and a range of experience levels, from senior scholars to graduate students. From this symposium we have selected compelling papers, all focused on how the central concept of genre can address timely questions of social innovation and media transformation.

We have organized these essays into three parts, focusing on medium, genre transformation, and values, themes that are central to the processes of genre change and emergence that are documented and explored in these fascinating studies. If we see genres as more than literary or linguistic (i.e. textual) structures but also as social recognitions that structure our material-symbolic worlds and enable us to engage in meaningful interaction—i.e. if we see genre as a pragmatic, rather than primarily syntactic or semantic category—then we need to understand the ways that media technologies and platforms affect our capacities for and habits of social action. And conversely, we can use genre expectations, and the ways these change and evolve, to help interrogate media transformations themselves. The medium of communication—including modes of representation and technologies of transmission and dissemination—both enables and constrains the possibilities for communicative action and for the development of patterned and recurrent actions that we call genres. At the same time, such media are themselves shaped and interpreted through their cultural contexts, which include systems and collections of antecedent genres, as well as social values and ideologies with various modes and moments of expression. Values are manifested in and reproduced by genres, even as they may enable or provoke genre transformation. The process of genre emergence thus has multiple shaping sources and multiple implications and is difficult to generalize. It is best explored case by case, example by example, in all its historical and situational particularity, as the 14 studies in this collection do.

These studies, all published here for the first time, are preceded by an introductory essay that reviews the ways that genre emergence has been previously treated and conceived in a variety of literatures. This

introduction examines the nature of "emergence" as an explanatory concept for understanding genre innovation, contrasting it with the associated concept of "evolution," which has also been used widely in such discussions. Overall, it addresses the question: Where do genres come from? In asking this question, we seek to understand not only "where" they come from (i.e. their antecedent conditions and causes), but also how they come about (i.e. the social and material promoters of and motives for change), and why they "emerge" (i.e. why their reception is as something new, something different from what came before). In reviewing prior studies, this essay examines how genre has been conceived, how change is understood and documented, how causes and motives and conditions are characterized, and how the role of technological medium has been implicated. We also include a brief Postscript, reflecting on these themes and looking forward to future work in this area.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge those who have made this volume possible. In addition to the other participants in the 2013 Symposium, who made that event even richer than what can be represented here, the team of students who worked on the many logistics necessary to plan and implement the event, and the sponsors who helped pay for it all, we have a number of specific groups and people to thank. Support for the Symposium was provided by the Doctoral Program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media and the Department of English and the Department of Communication at North Carolina State University; SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina; Parlor Press; and Herman Miller Office Furniture. Thanks to the doctoral students who assisted with the conference: Meagan Kittle Autry, assistant symposium planner; and also Kevin Brock, Dana Gierdowski, Molly Hartzog, Keon Pettiway, Wendi Sierra, and Brent Simoneaux. Thanks as well to Stephen Carradini and Danny Synk, who helped with initial manuscript preparation. In addition we thank Felicity Plester and Sophie Auld at Palgrave Macmillan for their efficiency and professionalism as this collection was published.

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Carolyn R. Miller
Ashley R. Kelly

Note

1. https://crdm.chass.ncsu.edu/sites/symposium/2013

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