

Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014) *Gênero como Ação Social (1984), revisitado 30 anos depois (2014)*

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RESUMO: O artigo "Gênero como Ação Social", publicado há 30 anos, foi, ao longo do tempo, retomado em inúmeras discussões acerca do gênero. O presente artigo revisita as principais ideias daquele texto, o modo como essas ideias foram retomadas nos estudos do gênero realizados nos Estados Unidos, e a forma com que a teoria e a pesquisa sobre gênero foram ampliadas desde então, especialmente com o advento das novas mídias digitais. As questões centrais da pesquisa atual são as seguintes: a relação entre estabilidade e mudança e as formas como os gêneros são ou não regulados. A adaptação desses estudos às mídias digitais tem expandido a teoria de gênero, tornando-a um conceito multidimensional. Nesse contexto, o gênero é tomado como umnexo estrutural que faz a mediação não somente entre intenção e exigência, forma e substância, mas também entre ação e estrutura, meio e produto, o material e o simbólico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gênero. Ação social. Internet; categoria social; blog

ABSTRACT: The article "Genre as Social Action" was published 30 years ago and has been taken up in numerous conversations about genre in the time since then. This paper reviews the main ideas in that article, the ways those ideas were taken up in North American Rhetorical Genre Studies, and the ways that genre theory and research have been extended since then, particularly with the advent of the new digital media. Central issues in current research are identified: the relationship between stability and change and the ways in which genres are or are not regulated. The adaptation to digital media has expanded genre theory to become a multidimensional concept, with genre as a structural nexus mediating not only intention and exigence, form and substance, but also action and structure, medium and product, the material and the symbolic.

KEYWORDS: Genre. Social action. Internet. Social category. Blog.

I'm delighted to be here in Uberlândia, thanks to the invitation by Professora Elisete and the organizing committee for IV SIELP. I have been in Brazil before but this is my first visit to Minas Gerais. I apologize that I cannot talk to you, teachers of Portuguese language, in Portuguese but must speak (and write) in English.

Let me begin with a summary and review of genre as social action (MILLER, 1984). We understand genre to be

- a typified rhetorical response to (uptake of) a recurrent rhetorical situation
- pragmatic, not formal or substantive; a "macro" speech act

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- a significant social action, which creates meaning
- a mediation between private intentions (purpose) and socially objectified needs (exigence)

Some further entailments of genre as social action include these considerations:

- Genres are categories, or types, of social action.
- Typification is culturally dependent.
- “De facto” genres are culturally important because they mark cultural categories; as such, genres collectively help to “constitute” society, in Giddens’s sense (GIDDENS, 1984).
- Genres are recognized by those who use them, as opposed to those who study them.
- Rhetorical genres are an open, evolving class and as such, genres do not constitute a neat, mutually exclusive taxonomy.

The problem I was working on, more than 30 years ago, when I turned to genre theory, was the question of why Environmental Impact Statements had been so unsuccessful. These documents were created by the United States Congress in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, in response to public concern about water pollution, nuclear power, and clean air, and toxic pesticides such as DDT. This legislation mandated the production of an Environmental Impact Statement for every "major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment."

However, this genre was troubled from the start. Complaints came from all directions—from federal agency officials, from scientists, from environmental lawyers, from developers and other interests that stood to benefit from federal actions. Environmental Impact Statements were found ineffective in influencing government decisions: insufficiently detailed to provide the basis for decision-making and yet at the same time too long and overburdened with uninterpreted data. They had multiple readerships, each of which wanted something somewhat different from the genre. By the end of 1977, 938 lawsuits against federal agencies had been filed under the provisions of NEPA, with a series of court decisions that helped refine and implement the EIS requirement.

In my dissertation, which examined only the first five years of NEPA, I asked whether Environmental Impact Statements, an officially defined class of documents, were in fact a genre? Was it sufficient that the 10,000 documents produced by 1975 were all labeled

“Environmental Impact Statement” and served the same legal and administrative function? Did they constitute a genre simply because they were recognized as such and had legal and administrative force as such? Or did the disagreements about their function and the dissatisfactions with their fulfillment of their function mean that they were not serving rhetorically as a genre? I concluded that

This clearly defined class of documents did not constitute a rhetorical genre because it did not achieve a rational fusion of elements—in spite of obvious similarities in form and substance, and in spite of a recurring rhetorical situation that was, in fact, defined by law. These documents had no coherent pragmatic force for two reasons: first, the cultural forms in which they were embedded provided conflicting interpretive contexts, and second, there was no satisfactory fusion of substance and form that could serve as substance to higher—level forms and contexts. For example, the probabilistic judgments that are the substance of environmental science conflicted with the formal requirements of objectivity and quantification; further, the patterns of thinking in the context of administrative bureaucracies created a set of values at variance with the environmental values invoked by the legislation requiring impact statements. Overall, the imperfect fusion of scientific, legal, and administrative elements prevented interpretation of the documents as meaningful rhetorical action. This conclusion was, of course, substantiated by the legal and administrative problems the early impact statements created and their frequent criticism in industry, government, and the environmental movement. (MILLER, 1984)

In order to reach this conclusion, genre theory as it then existed it didn't help much. I needed a theory and definition of genre that would allow me to understand how these documents were doing their work—or failing to do the work they were intended to do. My conclusion that early Environmental Impact Statements had “no coherent pragmatic force” and consequently did not constitute a rhetorical action required an understanding of “pragmatic force.” For this, I turned to speech-act theory, with its notion of illocutionary force, and began to conceive of genre as a macro-speech-act with analogous generic illocutionary force, the pragmatic action (see MILLER, 1984); importantly, the social action of genre is not the consequences of the speech act, the perlocutionary effect. This was also an attempt to represent the “dynamic” postulated to be at the heart of genre by rhetorical critics Campbell and Jamieson (CAMPBELL, 1978, p. 59), i.e., the welding or unification of form and substance into action-as-meaning.

I was able to corroborate some of my intuitions about the hierarchical structure of pragmatics by comparing them with other similar theories, suggesting that genre is an important mid-level concept, a mid-level ordering of social life and interaction (see: MILLER,

1984, p.24, Figure 2). John Swales' later work on rhetorical moves as characteristic of certain academic and research genres seems to fit at the level just below genre, which I called episode or strategy. So constituent parts are transformed by the "fusion" of form and substance into the pragmatic dimension of action.

Let me now consider the uptake of these ideas about genre as social action. The first point to make is that it was addressed to the field of rhetorical communication studies in the U.S., as I understood it at the time, and there was very little uptake within that community. Genre studies in rhetorical criticism developed after the publication of Edwin Black's book, *Rhetorical Criticism*, with its call to expand the scope of rhetorical studies beyond political oratory to more vernacular and popular forms and to expand the critical perspective applied beyond neo-Aristotelianism to studies of styles, genres, and social movements (BLACK, 1978). But genre criticism in the U.S. flourished only very briefly in the 1970s and 1980s, with the work of Campbell and Jamieson and a few others (CAMPBELL; JAMIESON, 1978; SIMONS; AGHAZARIAN, 1986).

Rather, the uptake was in composition studies, professional writing, and applied linguistics—all disciplines with a central pedagogical interest—an interest in apprenticeship and socialization. The difference, as I came to realize, is that in communication-rhetoric the focal figure, the paradigm rhetor, if you will, is someone like the President: the expert, authoritative, powerful figure, and critics are interested in how discourse exceeds or expands the norms. In contrast, the focal figure in the pedagogical disciplines is the apprentice, the novice, and scholars are interested in how to meet the norm. I believe my 1984 resonated in the pedagogical disciplines because it was consistent with the prevailing rejection of formalism; with the growing interest in pragmatics, utterance, and action; and with a concern for everyday, "de facto" genres. Its connections to linguistics and social theory, as well as to issues of pedagogy, apprenticeship, and socialization, are also likely reasons for its uptake. At the time of its publication in 1984, Bakhtin's work was not yet widely available in English, with the essay on speech genres not translated until 1986, but once this became available, the similar perspectives on language as utterance, as relational, contextualized action, became obvious (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 11).

Ten years later, with the publication of two volumes of essays from the 1992 conference on genre in Ottawa, organized by Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway at Carleton University, the movement that became known as North American Rhetorical Genre Studies was under way

(FREEDMAN, 1994, p. 445, p. 636). Here are some examples of the uptake of “Genre as Social Action” from that time period:

- “A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.” (SWALES, 1990)
- “Genres are sites of contention between stability and change.” (BERKENKOTTER; HUCKIN, 1993)
- “Genres can be described as stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action.” (SCHRYER, 1993)
- “Genre . . . has been concerned with the development of single types of texts through repeated use in situations perceived as similar. . . . I wish to present a vision of systems of complex located literate activity constructed through typified actions.” (BAZERMAN, 1994)
- “North American students of genre . . . have tended to be descriptive, with . . . an uncritical acceptance of the status quo.” (FREEDMAN; MEDWAY, 1994)
- “Dialogic interactions in courses and curricula interact intertextually, through the mediation of genre systems, with activity systems of both formal education and wider social practice.” (RUSSELL, 1997)

Twenty years later, by 2004, we had entered the Internet Age, and genre studies became newly invigorated by the burgeoning discursive and communicative activity of the web, with its new media platforms, new audiences and producers, new communicative interactions, new exigences, and new genres. We find ourselves using terms like “proliferation,” “velocity,” “remix,” “modularity,” and “chaos.” As Giltrow and Stein put it, “The Internet enables a new communication setting which reconfigures the conditions to which pragmatic features of language respond” (GILTROW; STEIN, 2009a).

Constant and rapid change seem inherent in the new web-based media. The internet has created two big issues for genre studies. One big issue is how to reconcile stability and change. As Dawn Shepherd and I noted in our second study of blogging,

There’s something problematic about the very idea of genre change. Genre change problematizes precisely what makes genre generic. Our understanding of genre as a recurring, typified, reproducible, “stabilized-enough” (SCHRYER, 1993) symbolic action requires that it resist change. If a genre is a mark of recurrence, what is it that recurs, especially in a setting of dizzying volatility like the internet? how do communities create collective typifications when neither technology nor culture will hold still? what is it that can be reproduced

sufficiently to create genre identity in varying instantiations? can there be a stable or identifiable dimension of a genre as it is adapted from one medium to another?" (MILLER and SHEPHERD, 2009).

Although this issue is newly important, it has been part of North American Rhetorical Genres studies from the beginning. We say, for example, that genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations," and yet that "genres change, evolve, and decay" (MILLER, 1984), that genres are "stabilized-for-now" and also that "Genres come from somewhere and are transforming into something else" (SCHRYER, 1993). And we have engaged in studies of genre change: Bazerman's history of the experimental article (BAZERMAN, 1988) and Berkenkotter & Huckin's follow-up study (BERKENKOTTER; HUCKIN, 1995b); Yates's study of emergence and evolution of the memo genre in the 19th and 20th centuries (YATES, 1989); and many recent studies of the emergence and evolution of genres on the internet. And we should note that literary theory and film theory, too, take account of genre change: Todorov asked about the origin of genres (TODOROV, 1976), and Fowler proposed a life cycle of genres (FOWLER, 1971). Yet I believe that we still don't know enough about the dynamics of stability and change as social change provokes genre change and vice-versa.

A second big issue is how genres are structured, controlled, or determined. This issue points up the fact that there are different forms and degrees of structure and control in different realms of discourse. For example, early work in rhetoric, writing studies, and applied linguistics focused on structured contexts of disciplinary knowledge-construction and the workplace. Berkenkotter & Huckin focus their inquiry on "disciplinary communication," where genres are "the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed" (BERKENKOTTER; HUCKIN, 1995a); and Yates and Orlikowski have focused on bureaucratic organizations such as business corporations, where "genres of organizational communication [...] influence a wide range of organizational phenomena" (YATES; ORLIKOWSKI, 1992).

The internet introduces a new arena with less control and regulation than academic disciplines and corporate or government (or educational) organizations. On the internet, we find voluntary activity, user-generated content, emergent communities of use, and much experimentation and play.

One early topic was blogging, and there were three nearly simultaneous studies exploring the blog as a genre: one by Susan Herring and her colleagues, published in the journal *Information, Technology, & People* (HERRING et al., 2005); one by José van Dijck in the online journal *Fibreculture* (DIJCK, 2004); and one by Dawn Shepherd and myself in an online collection, *Into the Blogosphere* (MILLER; SHEPHERD, 2004). In Giltrow and Stein's 2009 collection, *Genres in the Internet*, most of the essays are about blogging (GILTROW; STEIN, 2009b). This topic has attracted such scholarly attention possibly because it is so accessible and possibly also because it has become ubiquitous, with so many different types of blogs used in everyday life (such as classroom blogs, movie blogs, cooking blogs, and the like). For whatever reason, blogs were one of the first ways scholars tested the application of genre to the internet. This was part of the motivation for the two studies I conducted, in 2004 and 2009, to test the notion of genre as social action and to apply the method of analysis that I had used so many years earlier in studying the very different genre of the Environmental Impact Statement. Working with my student at the time, Dawn Shepherd, I examined the following dimensions of the blogging phenomenon and developed these characterizations from a variety of data sources (MILLER; SHEPHERD, 2004):

- Context: cultural “kairos”: confession, celebrity, commercialization
- Content: semantic immediacy, self-reference, freedom of selection, “personality”
- Form: links, commentary, frequency, brevity, reverse chronology, time-stamping, present tense
- Motivating exigence: need for cultivation and validation of self
- Generic action: self-disclosure and self-construction
- intrinsic functions: self-clarification, self-validation
- extrinsic functions: relationship development, social control

But this study was outdated even before it was published, since things on the internet change so fast, and that what we had studied needed to be classified as a particular type of blog, the personal blog, to distinguish it from the many others that were developing. Several years later, we did a follow-up study for the Giltrow and Stein collection (MILLER and SHEPHERD, 2009). We determined that there were three phases to personal blogging:

1. Before 1999: tech-savvy programmers, information sharing

2. 1999–2004: blog hosting sites, personal commentary, self-disclosure
3. After 2004: social-networking sites, user-generated content, Web 2.0

We concluded that the cultural context after 2004 remained similar, with celebrity voyeurism, commercialism, reality media still important and that personal blogging had changed very little. But we found in this later period many blogs not focused on the personal but rather on various aspects of politics and civic life. So we were led to explore a new phenomenon as a point of contrast with personal blogs, which we came to call the public affairs blog. This distinction was initially based on the results of a telephone survey of 233 bloggers conducted in 2005–06 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (LENHART; FOX, 2006). The following table summarizes the data that helped us make this distinction:

Chart 1

blogging	personal	public
... about what?	my life and experience, 37%	politics and government, 11%
... for whom?	for myself, 52%	for an audience, 33%
... why?	to express myself, 52%; to document personal experience, 50%	to motivate others to action, 29%; to influence others' thoughts, 27%

Data from (LENHART; FOX, 2006)

We attempted to characterize these publicly oriented blogs following the same pattern we had used for the personal blogs, and these were our conclusions:

Context, cultural “kairos”

1. World events, political events, disasters (9/11 attack, 2001; U.S. invasion of Iraq, 2003; Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004; etc.)
2. Changed media regulation, consolidation, commercialization
3. New technologies and affordances
4. Continued culture of celebrity and self-disclosure

Content: news, political opinion, exhortation, self-reference, freedom of selection, “personality”

Form: links, commentary, frequency, brevity, reverse chronology, time-stamping, present tense (same)

Motivating exigence: corporate commodification of news, loss of public engagement, political impotence

Generic action: public engagement, communal participation

This new type of blogging, we discovered, resulted in part from an important contextual change, the U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996, which deregulated much of the mass media. The conclusion we drew from the comparison of the differing contexts, participants, and exigences of the personal and public affairs blogs was that the blog is not a genre but is rather a technological medium that can support multiple genres. We also suggested the following more general implications from our study of these two types of blogs:

- The internet has reminded us that recurrent social action is always **mediated** in some way. The coming of new media has required us to notice the old media that were there all along but had become invisible through habituation. So the relationship between genre and medium has become a central interest.
- However, mediation is not determining: exigence and cultural context all interact with mediation and technology platforms: thus, we can have two (and actually, many more) different types of blogs.
- “For an exigence characterized by the corporate commodification of news, perceived loss of authentic public engagement, and a shared sense of political impotence, blogs provided useful ways to engage issues, to participate in discussion, to undercut corporate media homogeneity, and to turn audiences into participatory communities. These effects addressed directly the growing unease with public discourse. The interactive capabilities, the immediacy of response, and the ease of access all contributed to the hope that blogging could support what Benjamin Barber has called “strong democracy,” which he characterizes in rhetorical terms as “a democracy that reflects the careful and prudent judgment of citizens who participate in deliberative, self-governing communities” (BARBER, 1999). Those engaged in public-affairs blogging have seen the fulfillment of this technological promise in the bottom-up involvement

of ordinary citizens on the internet, which they call the “netroots” movement” (MILLER and SHEPHERD, 2009).

We ended our study with a hypothesis about the relationship between medium and genre, which is that early uses of new media tend to obscure the distinction between medium and genre. A look at the early uses of other media when they were new, such as telephone, radio, television, and film could test this hypothesis. One suggestive study along these lines is Bazerman’s informal study of the letter as an ancestor of multiple genres, such as paper currency, patents, contracts, wills, petitions, and the scientific research article (BAZERMAN, 2000).

Further studies like these are needed to understand the full complexity of genre in its multiple manifestations—across media, across communities, across history and cultures. And this effort will require the efforts of scholars in multiple disciplines. For genre has become what Star and Greisemer have called a “boundary object,” taking on different functions and meanings in different theoretical and disciplinary contexts, “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; GREISEMER, 1989). Here is a list of just some of the academic disciplines in which genre has been of interest in recent years:

- literary studies
- rhetorical studies
- education
- applied linguistics
- film studies
- art history
- cultural studies
- musicology
- television and media studies
- information and library science
- anthropology

This diversity of disciplines leads, of course, to multiple definitions of and approaches to genre, such as these:

- formal properties (aesthetics)

- commodity or object (popular culture)
- use-value (cultural studies)
- medium of transmission (mass media)
- shared purpose (applied linguistics)
- social action, exigence (rhetorical studies)

Another major difference among disciplines is the kind of category genre is taken to be. Does it belong to the researcher/critic or does it belong to the community of users? Todorov first brought to our attention the fact that there are two fundamental ways to conceive of genres as categories. We may call these the *analytical* and the *empirical* approaches to genre, which Todorov calls the *theoretical* and the *historical* approaches, the first resulting from deduction or inference from some principle and the second from observation of natural socio-discursive practices. The following table summarizes this distinction:

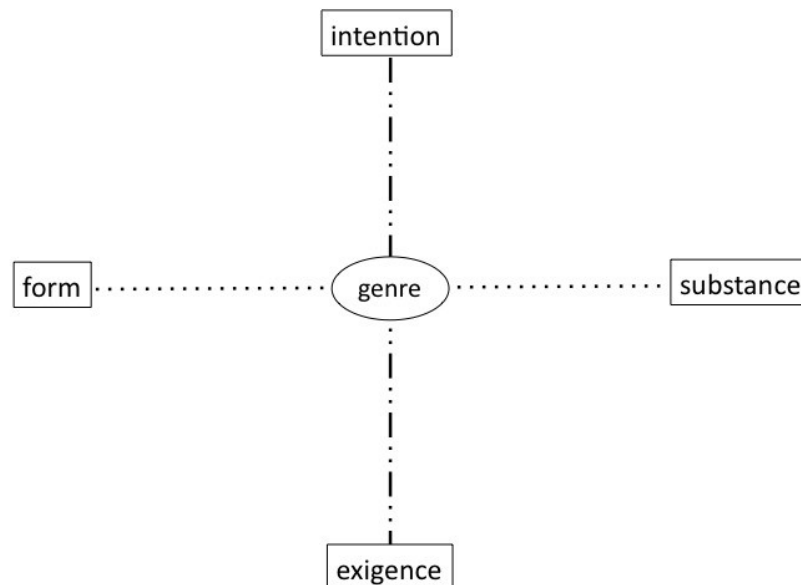
Table 1.

Two conceptualizations of genre	
Theoretical or Analytical	Historical or Empirical
scholar/researcher	user communities
theoretical basis	phenomenological basis
closed-ended taxonomy	open-ended ecology
consistent features	significant features
systematic similarities	family resemblances
static	dynamic

Literary scholars, some linguists, and some rhetorical scholars have preferred the theoretical conceptualization. It's neater, more manageable, more congenial to the theorist. The historical approach has been preferred by some film scholars, some rhetoricians (including myself), and some linguists, ethnographers and anthropologists. Todorov finds the latter approach (right-hand column) the more productive, saying, "One can always find a property common to two texts, and therefore put them together in one class. But is there any point in

calling the result of such a union a ‘genre’? I think that it would be in accord with the current usage of the word and at the same time provide a convenient and operant notion if we agreed to call ‘genres’ only those classes of texts that have been perceived as such in the course of history” (TODOROV, 1976). This is similar to my own emphasis on “de facto” or vernacular categories, as well as that of Swales, who says, “A discourse community’s nomenclature for genres is an important source of insight” (SWALES, 1990).

To return, then, to the idea of genre as social action, rhetorical studies has tended to highlight two dimensions of genre, the intention/exigence dimension and the form/substance dimension, with genre somehow mediating these polarities, as suggested in the diagram below:

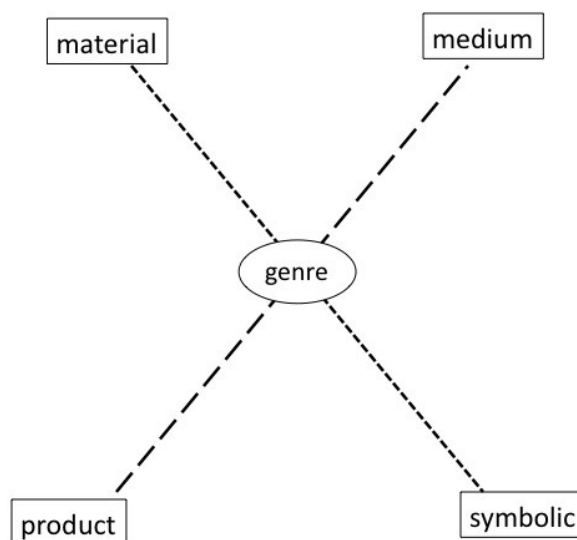


Picture 1.

Along with others, I have found it useful to conceive of this mediating function of genre in terms of Giddens’s notion of “structuration” (GIDDENS, 1984). Giddens uses this term to explain how social relations are structured across time and space, how they are materially reproduced. Structure, according to Giddens, is a “virtual order” that is “both medium and outcome” of the social practices it recursively organizes. The instantiation of structure is always the reproduction of structure. We can see genre as an example of such a mid-level structural nexus, that aspect of situated communicative action that is capable of reproduction and thus as the means by which these polarities produce and maintain each other:

form is manifested substantially and substance formally; individual intentions and socially objectified exigences mutually produce and sustain each other.

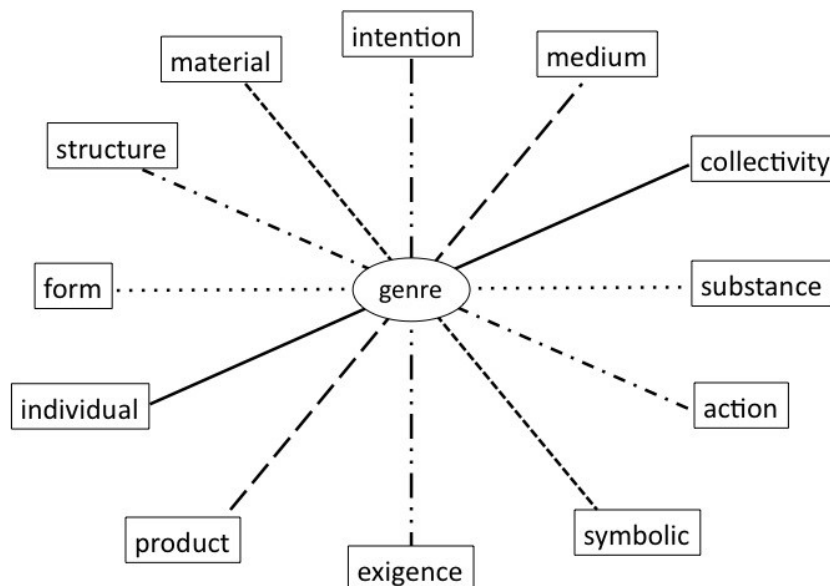
The new media have introduced two additional polarities for which genre can be seen to serve a structurational role: the material/symbolic and medium/product. As an apparently immaterial phenomenon of recurrence and reproduction, of habituation and social expectation, genre has been theorized as symbolic, social action; but such action is materialized in practices and has empirical consequences. The medium/product polarity has been pretty much unexamined in rhetorical studies, but the new media—and the vernacular uses of the term—call attention to this dimension. Further, much of the vernacular use of genre is tied up with issues of commodification and transmission; genres at times seem to be commodified products or things and at times media of transmission. And although we may often treat product categories as genres, calling them genres signals something more than the use-value of a particular movie or videogame or webinar. The form, or the combination of the content and the medium, also must have use-value. And on the other dimension, genre is what makes commodities reproducible and transmissible, and conversely it is what makes media commodifiable, as suggested in this next diagram:



Picture 2.

Structuration, of course, is also the explanatory nexus between individuals and collectivities, between the concreteness and particularity of action and the abstractness and

endurance of institutions. So we can think of genre as a multidimensional construct, as suggested in this final diagram:



Picture 3.

In summary, to revisit “Genre as Social Action” and where we’ve come in the past 30 years, I think that genre has become a much more complex, multidimensional social phenomenon, a structural nexis between action and structure, between agent and institution, between past and future. Multiple disciplines have taken up genre as a productive conceptual probe, and I think we can continue to learn from the diversity of recurrent categories that structure our social worlds. Genre continues to be a useful concept because it

- characterizes communities
- offers modes of engagement through joint action and uptake
- connects the flux of experience to our sense of the past and the future
- makes recurrent patterns significant
- provides satisfactions and pleasure

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