

Review

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Genre, Genres, and the Teaching of Genre

Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin. *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995. 216 pages. \$39.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds. *Genre and the New Rhetoric*. Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1994. 240 pages. \$75.00 (cloth); \$27.00 (paper).

Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds. *Learning and Teaching Genre*. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook-Heineman, 1994. 260 pages. \$22.50 (paper).

From the placement of this article and from the headings above with the bibliographical citations of three books, readers of this piece know that this is a type of writing commonly called a review essay. From the editor's invitation, I knew that what I was to write was a review essay. What does that generic knowledge for writers and readers mean? The significance of this potentially shared understanding is much of what the developing new field of genre study—and these three books—is all about. To understand how writing works, theorists argue, we must understand how genre works, for writing is embedded within genre, writing is never genre-free.

Tradition and Theory

Of course, the study of genres has been around since Aristotle, if not before, in the traditional taxonomies of types of oratory and of types of liter-

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ary works. Rhetoricians and literary scholars have differentiated ceremonial from legislative discourse, tragedy from comedy and tragicomedy, argument from persuasion from exposition from narration from description. What is new about this renewed turn toward genre is the study of genre as action rather than form, as a text-type that *does* something rather than *is* something. This rhetorical turn has changed the way genre theorists—and those who have read their recent works—think about genre. That this rhetorical turn has made great progress becomes apparent in the three books being reviewed here: Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway's two collections, *Genre and the New Rhetoric* and *Learning and Teaching Genre*, and Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin's *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*.

All published within the last two years, these books show that we have made great strides in our theoretical explanations of genre and in our applications of that theory to particular genres and to the classroom. Although differing somewhat in their theoretical bases, all of the writers in these books treat genres as dynamic actions that entail much more than form alone. That shift in perspective, from the traditional static form to the rhetorical dynamic action, in North America results in large part from the work of the scholars collected here (with the addition of John Swales, whose book on *Genre Analysis* has proven seminal for many). The two Freedman and Medway books, in fact, derive largely from a watershed conference on "Rethinking Genre," held at Carleton University in Ottawa in April 1992. (Berkenkotter, Huckin, Swales, and I also attended the conference in Ottawa, though we did not contribute to the collections.) Now, four years later, that conference and the work that preceded it have borne fruit in these books and numerous other publications on genre. The word "genre" appears frequently in titles of CCCC presentations, in titles of articles in composition and rhetoric journals, and now in titles of books.¹

For the beginnings of the rhetorical view of genre, many point to a 1984 article by Carolyn Miller, conveniently collected in *Genre and the New Rhetoric* along with another essential genre statement, Anne Freedman's 1987 "Anyone for Tennis?" In "Genre as Social Action," Miller defines genre as the oft-quoted, "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (31). Miller's emphasis on genre as action is echoed in Freedman's treatment of genre as a game, like tennis, embedded in ceremony and place, each genre action as a serve that needs to be returned. Miller's and Freedman's work on genre draws extensively from such theorists as Lloyd Bitzer in traditional rhetoric, M. A. K. Halliday in linguistics, and Mikhail Bakhtin in literary theory. Berkenkotter and Huckin, in their perspective, add the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens and structuration theory. All of these theorists work to remove genre from the traditional,

static notion of a classificatory system of forms by emphasizing the functioning of genres to achieve rhetorical purposes. Freedman and Medway, in their introduction to *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, describe the “new” genre as connecting “a recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use” (1). In the collection focusing on genres in education, *Learning and Teaching Genres*, the editors specify a Millerian definition of genres as “typical ways of engaging rhetorically with recurring situations” (2), but they go on to stress that “it is social motives, then, in response to social contexts that new theories of genre highlight” (3). Berkenkotter and Huckin also stress the social context of genres, particularly the disciplinary contexts of their title, but their social perspective is also explicitly cognitive. They begin their first chapter with the highly social assumption, “Written communication functions within disciplinary cultures to facilitate the multiple social interactions that are instrumental in the production of knowledge” (1). Adding the cognitive, they state their thesis: “Genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures, that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use, and . . . genre knowledge is therefore best conceptualized as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities” (3). Although at times differing in their touchstones, the writers in the three books agree on and make clear the essence of the new genre theory: a dynamic nature, based in recurring rhetorical situations, and always grounded in the knowledge of readers and writers in particular social contexts.

Genre Theory in Use

Going well beyond theoretical definition, these books also demonstrate genre theory in use, as the new conception of genre is applied to multiple genres in multiple contexts. Within disciplinary communication, Berkenkotter and Huckin demonstrate some of their arguments through analysis of scientific journal articles and their attendant genres, through a literary journal, conference proposals, and the genres written by a graduate student in a composition and rhetoric program, their well-known study of Nate. Not limiting their contexts to disciplinary ones, Freedman and Medway range more widely in their collections, including especially use of school genres and school contexts. The authors in Freedman and Medway’s collections explore the genres written by students at a veterinary school, by participants in Department of Defense research grants, by bankers and social workers, and by university-level students, and the genres of criminal sentencing reports, of history essays, and of poems. These applications of genre theory to particular contexts and texts make a wide variety of discoveries—about how genres change, the rhetorical

strategies they employ, and how they reflect (and do not reflect) their progenitors.

From some of these discoveries arises the question of whether to teach these discoveries to novices and, if so, how. The debate over the explicit teaching of genres has received extensive treatment elsewhere, especially in Aviva Freedman's article and responses to it in the 1993 issue of *Research in the Teaching of English*. A version of Freedman's article is reprinted in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, and many of the authors in the Freedman and Medway collections consider classroom applications. Freedman and Medway also represent the so-called Sydney school of genre teaching in *Learning and Teaching Genre* in a helpful article by Paul W. Richardson and response by John Dixon. Based largely on Halliday's theories of functional linguistics, Australian schools have developed a curriculum to teach schoolchildren the specific traits, functions, and contexts of particular genres—such as procedure, description, report, explanation, argument, and “recounts” (narratives). As summarized by Richardson, the debate over this curriculum in Australia is primarily one of believers in a “personal growth” model of education versus social constructionists.

The prior issue of genre acquisition, of how people learn new genres, is at the heart of Freedman's and others' arguments that genre cannot be taught in isolation from its contexts. Russell Hunt and Richard Coe, in separate articles in *Learning and Teaching Genre*, offer helpful analyses of genre acquisition for students, but the issue goes unexamined by some authors in the collections who describe how they teach particular genres. Like Freedman and others, Berkenkotter and Huckin stress genre acquisition as situated cognition, as learned from participating in communicative activities. Given their emphasis on cognition, it is somewhat surprising that they examine the question of teaching genre only minimally in a final chapter. This debate, in both Australia and North America, hinges on not only how people learn language, as Freedman's article explicates, but also on how constraining or liberating genres are. The point is far from settled, but Freedman, Richardson, Coe, Hunt, and others help to advance and clarify its terms.

Put together, these three books demonstrate substantial progress in our understanding of genre theory and in our application of that theory to particular genres. Berkenkotter and Huckin's book—with chapters all written by the authors except for a brief one by John Ackerman—naturally presents a more cohesive theoretical view of genre, although most of its chapters had been published previously and before the authors developed their theoretical statement. Its substantial theory is largely developed in the first chapter (a version of which also appeared in *Written Communication* in 1993), and several studies in later chapters illuminate some of the

basic principles laid out in that first chapter. Freedman and Medway present their theoretical stances more loosely, largely in the two introductions to their collections. Although different authors in the collections often establish their own theoretical bases, the perspectives on genre in both collections are remarkably consistent for the most part. *Genre and the New Rhetoric* is especially helpful for its collection of classic articles (and an update from Miller) and is more theoretically inclined than *Learning and Teaching Genre*, which is explicitly designed to concentrate on classroom genres. All three of these books show just how far we have come in this evolving reconceptualization of genre, having developed significant and coherent theoretical statements, having demonstrated those theories with particular genres, and having considered with some complexity the application of those theories to the classroom.

Challenges Ahead

Perhaps because we have come so far, some of the most difficult territories of genre remain ahead of us. Some of these areas are addressed by some articles in these books; others remain as work to be done.

One of the challenges not sufficiently recognized is the need to begin defining genre against related concepts rather than against past genre definitions. Because a traditional view of genre as taxonomy of literary texts has been so entrenched, genre theorists have, not surprisingly, worked to define the new conception of genre in contrast to this traditional view. The introductions of all three books review the traditional view in their first paragraphs in order to set their new conception in opposition to it.² Such a contrast with the familiar has proven quite useful, helping to get past readers' preconceptions about the concept and opening the possibility of a different perspective. Now that that new perspective has been established so well, however, it is time to turn to finer discriminations. We need to expand our "not-statements," as Freedman calls them, to contrast genre not only with past views of genre but also with current views of related concepts such as situation and context, discourse community, and register.

As we have moved away from equating genre with textual form, the abstractness of the concept has at times made it difficult to distinguish genre from the context of which it is a part. Miller's new article in *Genre and the New Rhetoric* and Berkenkotter and Huckin do address this issue, at least indirectly. All definitions of genre emphasize their relatedness to situations of use, which in turn relate to social context. The emphasis on recurrence of situation within context seems essential to the nature of genre as patterning, to distinguishing genre from rhetorical situation in general and context even more generally. Berkenkotter and Huckin, like Freed-

man and Medway and others since Miller, derive genres from “actors’ responses to recurrent situations” and note that genres “serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning” (4), thus patterning context. Berkenkotter and Huckin see this patterning of situation and context as largely cognitive but based on social experience; they define genre knowledge as “situated cognition” that is “derived from and embedded in our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life” (7).

Berkenkotter and Huckin intentionally blur the distinction between genre and context, however, when they introduce the concept of “duality of structure” from Giddens’s structuration theory, arguing that “in our use of organizational or disciplinary genres, we *constitute* social structures (in professional, institutional, and organizational contexts) and simultaneously *reproduce* these structures” (17). To Miller, such reproduction replaces recurrence and makes genre both a “constituent” of society and “a mid-level structural nexus between mind and society” (Freedman and Medway, *Genre* 71). In proper nonfoundational terms, individuals’ use of genre thus becomes the creator of context, and the patterning so critical to genre becomes a consequence of genre rather than of situation.³

With the emphasis on “social actors *creat[ing]* recurrence in their actions” (Miller, Freedman and Medway, *Genre* 71), these theorists’ use of structuration theory seems to enlarge the role of the cognitive and the individual at the expense of the role of the social and the community. While patterning is what actors do, not what they see—a social perspective—individual actions seem more powerful than the community forces influencing those actions. Individuals, after all, become both the constitutors and reproducers of social structures, as Berkenkotter and Huckin state above. The individual becomes creator, creating in mind and linguistic structure what we see and do in the social world. Yet, as Berkenkotter and Huckin also state in an introductory phrase, individuals become such creators “in [their] use of organization or disciplinary genres.” Context may indeed be what individuals reproduce, but individuals may not reproduce whatever they choose. Too much emphasis on the individual’s role as constituter of context risks too little emphasis on the power of that context, and hence the power of genre.

Some blurring of the lines between context, situation, and genre may be appropriate, keeping us from creating dichotomies while enabling us to see interactions. Yet, in addition to potentially raising the cognitive over the social, the current distinctions or blurring of distinctions often results in confusion over what genre theory is and how it differs from other approaches to understanding writing. Studies of actual genres at times seem to blur such distinctions without comment and to treat analysis of a con-

text as if it were analysis of a genre. Take, for example, two studies: Berkenkotter and Huckin's analysis of peer reviewing for scientific journals (Chapter 4); and Janet Giltrow and Michele Valiquette's intriguing investigation of shared knowledge in two academic fields (Freedman and Medway, *Learning*). Both studies are interesting and informative, and have much to say about the communities within which writers and readers work, but genre itself does not seem to be a strong operative force. What makes these studies of genre? If these interesting studies constitute genre analysis, how do they differ from analyzing those contexts for other purposes—for a better understanding of audience, for example, or of discourse community? What do we learn from these studies that we would not have learned without genre theory? Since genre is “embedded in disciplinary activities” (Berkenkotter and Huckin 3) or a way of “engaging rhetorically with recurring situations” (Freedman and Medway, *Learning* 2), we need to find ways to keep genre embedded and engaged within context while also keeping our focus on learning about genre and its operations.

Distinguishing what is particularly generic from what is not is another challenge ahead for genre theory. Without reducing genre study to taxonomy, scholars need to explain what distinguishes a genre perspective from all others and a genre from other kinds of patternings. Traditional generic debates revolved around such questions as: “Is this text a tragedy or a comedy?” and “Is the Petrarchan sonnet a genre or a subgenre?” Certainly, genre theory must continue to avoid such static taxonomy in favor of its dynamic activity, but it does need to be able to answer the question, “Can genre theory apply in this case, and, if so, how?”. For example, debating whether argument is a genre or a mode may degenerate into taxonomical hair-splitting, but we need to understand what a genre perspective on argument entails and how our view of argument thereby changes. In *Learning and Teaching Genre*, argument is treated as a genre in Chapter 4 and as a mode in Chapter 5, and these different treatments of argument result in different implications for the authors' claims about genre. Similar differences in what is considered a genre and what is not appear throughout the three books, as do differences in what is considered genre study.

In addition to context analysis being treated as genre analysis, studies of formal conventions and language styles are at times treated as genre analysis. In Chapter 7, Berkenkotter and Huckin compare styles across different genres, examining most often what I and others (like Paul Richardson in *Learning and Teaching Genre*) would consider register more than genre. In Chapters 2, 3, and 6, Berkenkotter and Huckin examine novelty as a significant feature of many genres. So is novelty a significant generic trait or a trait that crosses genres? How is examining novelty bringing us closer to understanding genre? It certainly is improving our understanding of

writing, but does that understanding derive from our increased understanding of genre? Such questions call not for a taxonomical debate or creation of artificial boundaries but rather for a clarification of what is significantly generic. Perhaps that delineation should be grounded in not-statements, as Anne Freedman argues, or in critical questions: What are the essential questions in any study of genre? What does genre theory reveal that other theories do not reveal? As genre study continues to develop, it can continue to define itself as a perspective and reveal its unique contribution to the understanding of writing.

As genre study notes its accomplishments, it should also note its limitations and question its initial assumptions (as these scholars are doing, for example, in introducing structuration theory); it should gain critical self-reflection. One of the most important current assumptions needing questioning is the dependence of genre theory on the concept of discourse community—which is, like context, another conceptual link that genre theorists need to examine. Many articles, including my own, have tied genre to discourse community, for discourse community provided a convenient location and specification of situation and context. Thus, Berkenkotter and Huckin use discourse community in one of their five principles—“Genre conventions signal a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology” (21)—and community is an integral part of many of their studies of scientific and academic contexts. Discourse community is a concept laced throughout the Freedman and Medway books as well, from their initial citation and questioning of Swales’ substantial reliance on community in their introduction to *Genre and the New Rhetoric* to the frequent reference to communities in chapters in *Learning and Teaching Genre*. Such common reliance on discourse communities has been useful to developing genre theory; however, now that the concept of discourse community is under attack, genre theorists would do well to consider the criticisms of discourse community as potential criticisms of genre theory and to establish a genre theory based in a revised understanding of community.

Some writers in these books attempt such refigurations. Freedman and Medway briefly raise the issue in their comments on Swales’ work in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, though they pay considerably more attention to the issue of a critical perspective on genre (to which I will return in a moment) and the issue goes unremarked in *Learning and Teaching Genre*. As Freedman and Medway point out, two of the authors in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, Miller and A. D. Van Nostrand, reconsider the relationship between genre and discourse community. Van Nostrand demonstrates the shifting nature of discourse community and its necessary separation from audience but keeps it connected to genre through shared communicative

purpose. Drawing on Giddens' structuration theory, Miller revisits her original use of "culture" for defining genre and proposes "rhetorical community," at a level higher than genre, as "a rhetorical construct. It is the community as invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse" (73). Genre becomes, for Miller, a "centripetal" force (drawing from Bakhtin) that keeps this constructed rhetorical community together by "structur[ing] joint action through communal decorum" (74). The relationship Miller specifies resembles Berkenkotter and Huckin's identification of genres as "the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed" (24). Anne Freedman presents another model, in her article reprinted in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, for she discusses the game of genre in terms of its "ceremonial place," both literally and metaphorically: "To understand the rules of the genre is to know when and where it is appropriate to do and say certain things, and to know that to do and say them at inappropriate places and times is to run the risk of having them ruled out." (59) Rather than genre reflecting discourse community, Freedman suggests that "it is place . . . that constitutes genre, and that the functions and roles entailed by place determine the interlocutory structure of a genre" (60).

As these beginning efforts illustrate, genre theory needs to continue developing its understanding of the cultural basis of genres, of the source of the shared values and epistemology within which genre functions rhetorically. At the same time, it needs to heed the criticisms of discourse community as homogeneous, without conflict and tension, and examine how genre theory can acknowledge conflict and diversity as an important part of genre. As Freedman and Medway note in their introductory section, "Towards More Critical Genre Studies" (*Genre* 11–15), genre theory has been largely uncritical in its treatment of genre as a reflector or constructor of norms, values, and epistemologies. To the extent that genres have been treated as serving the needs of communities, scholars have largely ignored whether those needs should be served or whether the community's use of genres suppresses other needs. I would add that genre study has not adequately dealt with genre's power to inhibit as well as enable writers and readers, perhaps fearing old accusations of genre as *boa constrictor*. With the new awareness of creativity theory, critical pedagogy, feminist critiques, queer theory, and other challenges to the homogeneity of writing, theorists must find ways of incorporating diversity, conflict, and tension in their sometimes overly placid views of genre.

Like early views of discourse communities, genres have too often been seen as neutral concepts, devoid of political and ideological significance. Such neutrality appears in many of the chapters in these three collections.

Freedman and Medway acknowledge this limitation in their introduction to *Genre and the New Rhetoric*.

In the essays collected here, for example, researchers have set themselves the task of describing such genres as those of government and social work, without yet extending their inquiry to encompass the political issues entailed. In general, there has not been much critical analysis of questions such as the following. How do some genres come to be valorized? In whose interest is such valorization? What kinds of social organization are put in place or kept in place by such valorization? Who is excluded? What representations of the world are entailed? The absence of such questions is the ideological limitation we see as most needing to be addressed in the next stage of genre studies. (11)

Two of the articles in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*—one by Catherine F. Schryer on competing genres in veterinary schools and the other by Janet Giltrow on background knowledge in criminal sentencing reports—suggest how a critical perspective on genre can produce rich results. How might Berkenkotter and Huckin's study of Nate's acculturation to graduate school have been different with a critical genre perspective? Nate might not have been described as "freed from the constraints of genre and register" (141) when he writes informally and expressively, but rather his situation might have been analyzed for the differences of power and value in the different genres he writes. Berkenkotter and Huckin's studies, in fact, are rich in suggestiveness about issues of power and value in the scientific and academic communities they explore. As Freedman and Medway point out, "Genre studies are a particularly promising instrument for illuminating the social process in its detailed operation, and afford an opportunity we should not refuse of examining what it means to be part of an institutional process" (12). Structuration theory, as several in these collections propose, may be an avenue into such social critique, into genre studies becoming what Bill Green and Alison Lee (in Chapter 12 of *Learning*) refer to as social activism as well as social action. Berkenkotter and Huckin's and others' detailed studies of generic operations could be expanded to make substantial contributions to a critical understanding of genre.

Conclusion

Now that we are developing a substantial and integrated theory of genre and investigating its applications, we can approach the difficult challenges of more narrowly defining genre in terms of other concepts and their interactions instead of in terms of former definitions of genre; of recognizing what genre does not apply to as well as what it does; and of examining the

ideology and politics implicated in genres and genre theory. In the evolving field of genre study, these three books do an excellent job of gathering and extending what we now know and pointing us to what we can know in the future, of elucidating what generic knowledge for writers and readers means.

So far, we have perhaps inadequately dealt with genre as constraint and restriction for fear of resuscitating traditional fears of genre as formal template, as the straitjacket of creativity, as constricting rather than constructing. Perhaps now critical and cultural theory has developed enough to recognize that all texts and all contexts constrain as well as liberate, that it is never so simple as one text-type freeing us to literary heights while another restricts us to mundane formula. All utterances, all acts of discourse, entail power relationships, valorize some over others, enable some and constrain others. It is not a matter of good texts that are free of genre and bad texts within a genre, for no text is genre-free. It is not a matter of good concepts, like community, free of ideology and bad concepts, like genre, enforcers of ideology, for no concept is ideology-free. There is evidence in all three books of a new critical stage for genre study.

Notes

1. In fact, two earlier books of note should be recognized here. One, *The Place of Genre* edited by Ian Reid, contains seminal articles on genre theory (including Anne Freedman's article), primarily from those concerned with the Sydney school of genre study. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to discover in the United States, published by Deakin, but genre theorists in the US have now had time to work with its ideas. The other more recent book, *The Power of Literacy*, by Cope and Kalantzis, offers a substantial contribution to genre study. Both books contribute importantly to the discussion of how and whether to use genre knowledge in the classroom.

2. To be clear that I see the use of traditional views as having been necessary, not a

failing, I should acknowledge that my article establishing the new theory of genre takes the same approach in its first paragraphs.

3. Most of the writers in the Freeman and Medway collections, however, maintain sharper distinctions between context and genre. One of the writers in *Learning and Teaching Genre*, Sallyanne Greenwood, in fact argues that "familiarity with the context rather than with the text-type enables writers to develop the rhetorical and linguistic strategies appropriate to specific situations" (238). This article's denial of some of the basic arguments of genre theorists goes unremarked, by either the editors or the author.

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