

Genre Innovation: Evolution, Emergence, or Something Else?

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ABSTRACT

In trying to understand genre innovation and the appearance of what seem to be “new genres” in both new and old media, researchers have relied heavily on the concepts of “evolution” and “emergence,” without theorizing these concepts. These terms are usually associated with science, to analyze biological and physical processes, and both carry entailments worth examining. What work does each model of change do and what work does each keep us from doing? When we adopt the language of evolution or emergence, what do we import to our conceptualization of genres, of large-scale rhetorical action, and of the rhetorical organization of culture? Evolution is anti-essentialist, while emergence allows for the phenomenology of essence; both are terministic

screens in Burke’s sense and thus incomplete and partial. There may be no general conceptual model adequate to the variety of cultural phenomena and domains in which genres are of interest, but we can continue to learn by testing our observations of particular examples against these useful concepts. We should be conscious of the assumptions we make about essences and relationships, of how and why we identify something as a genre; we should also be alert to the differences between classification by abstraction and classification by descent.

Keywords

Genre innovation; Evolution; Emergence; Cultural category

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INTRODUCTION

“Upon those who step into the same rivers ever-newer waters flow ...”

—Heraclitus (DK22B12)

Heraclitus supposedly said that everything is in flux, that you can’t step into the same river twice. Known to us now only from second-hand sources and anecdotes, he reportedly suffered from melancholia and died of dropsy in an unsuccessful attempt at self-treatment in a dung-heap. He was called “obscure” by his contemporaries and “the weeping philosopher” by the Romans, and he might well have wept had he foreseen the ridicule to which his thought about change would be subjected by successors. Plato and Aristotle accused him of

denying the law of non-contradiction, claiming the identity of opposites, and positing that everything that is the same is actually different. Even today, philosophers disagree on how to interpret his cryptic statement about the river (Graham, 2005). Did he mean that it both is and is not the same river? Or did he mean, as some have suggested, that “rivers can stay the same over time even though, or indeed because, the waters change,” that is, that the stability of larger structures is made possible by the fact that constituent elements within them change (Graham, 2005, p. §3)? Or perhaps, according to others, he meant that “the unity of the river as a whole is dependent upon the regularity of the flux of its constituent waters”; that “a complex whole . . . might remain ‘the same’ while its constituent parts are for ever changing” (Kirk, Raven, & Schofield, 1983, p. 197).

It has become less difficult for us now to accept the notion that everything is indeed in constant flux, at both the microscopic and the cosmic levels: we know about the expanding universe, the undulations of lightwaves, Brownian motion, electron spin, sliding tectonic plates, the erosion of canyons and uplifting of mountains, the origin and extinction of species. But my premise is that in the 21st

century, we still struggle to understand sameness and difference, stability and change, tradition and innovation in the world of human experience. Genre studies are part of this struggle, and genre innovation is at the heart of it.

In trying to understand genre innovation and the appearance of what seem to be “new genres” in both new and old media, we have relied heavily on the concepts of “evolution” and “emergence.” Among genre theorists and researchers, both terms tend to be used fairly casually, remaining largely untheorized. These are terms that, in English, at least, are usually associated with science, to analyze biological and physical processes, and both carry entailments worth examining. What work does each model of change do and what work does each keep us from doing? When we adopt the language of evolution or emergence, what do we import to our conceptualization of genres, of large-scale rhetorical action, and of the rhetorical organization of culture?

EVOLUTION¹

The language of “evolution” pervades recent genre scholarship, not only in rhetorical studies (Bazerman, 1984, p. 191; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, pp. 481–482; K. M. Jamieson, 1975, p. 406; K. M. H. Jamieson, 1973, p. 168; Miller, 1984, p. 163) and linguistics (Ayers, 2008, p. 39; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2005, p. 144; Hyland, 2002, p. 115; Skulstad, 2005, p. 72) but also in literary studies (Dimock, 2007, p. 1384; Fowler, 1971, p. 206; Javitch, 1998, p. 169) and media studies (film and television) (Altman, 1999, p. 70; Feuer, 1992, p. 151; Mittell, 2001, pp. 5–11), as well as in information sciences and new media studies (Clark, Ruthven, & Holt, 2009, p. 2; Kanaris & Stamatatos, 2009, p. 500; Liestøl, 2006, p. 266; Paolillo, Warren, & Kunz, 2011, p. 277). The language of evolution (including related biological metaphors, such as “chromosome,” “ancestry,” and “genealogy”) invokes an analogy between cultural change and organic or biological change over time. What this analogy provides genre studies is a model that combines diachronic change and synchronic variation.

¹ An earlier and more detailed version of this discussion of the evolutionary model of genre change appears in Miller (2015).

With diachronic change, we take note of relatedness, that is, an explanation of continuity through some form of “inheritance” or influence over time. With synchronic variation, we take note of alternate forms and “family resemblances,” of co-existing difference and similarity in varying degrees. Both dimensions contribute to the explanation of adaptation or “fitness,” the apparent result of a competitive process by which some variations are selectively preserved over time, producing (incremental) change in a population. “Fitness,” interestingly, is a term of art in both evolutionary and rhetorical theory: Darwin came to use Herbert Spencer’s phrase “survival of the fittest” as a synonym for “natural selection,”² and rhetoricians have adopted Lloyd Bitzer’s expression “fitting response” as discourse

² Though it does not appear in the first edition of *Origin*, Darwin adopted it and attributed it to Spencer in his 1868 work, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*: “This preservation, during the battle for life, of varieties which possess any advantage in structure, constitution, or instinct, I have called Natural Selection; and Mr. Herbert Spencer has well expressed the same idea by the Survival of the Fittest” (6). <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F877.1&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>.

that is adapted to its situation (1968); we also have the related concept of *decorum*, the ancient virtue of appropriateness to time and place (Hariman, 2006). Catherine Schryer’s description of genres as collections of variable features that are “stabilized-enough” or “stabilized-for-now” (1993) captures this process well, and applies as well to organic species as to discourse genres, as suggested by Daniel Dennett: “Since a modicum of stasis is a precondition for the identification of a species, the fact that all species exhibit some degree of stasis is merely true by definition” (1995, p. 293).

If we look into the history of these ideas, we can see “evolution” not as a mere metaphor or handy analogy for the process of genre change but as a set of ideas that has been as central to thinking about cultural change as to biological change. The attempts to understand change and variation in the biological world and in the human world arose at about the same time and informed each other. What we see, in both cases, is a very long and difficult process that involved a fundamental transformation of thinking from essentialism to what the great 20th century evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr calls “population thinking” (1982, pp. 45–46). I believe these two kinds of thinking are both alive in genre studies today.

Essentialism is rooted in Plato’s theory of forms: the fixed, unchanging, and distinct *eidē* or essences, like numbers or geometrical figures (Boyd & Richerson, 2005, p. 420) that exist independent of the phenomenal world, which is merely their imperfect manifestation. From the perspective of the *eidē*, variations are uninteresting, merely signs of the imperfection of the empirical world. According to Mayr, essentialism “dominated the thinking of the western world” to an extent that is now difficult to comprehend (1982, p. 38). Population thinking, in contrast, which Mayr calls “a peculiarly biological concept, alien to the thinking of the physical scientist” (1982, p. 487), takes the unique individual as the starting point for analysis, not the ideal type, valuing diversity and variation rather than stable abstractions. It is more empirical and inductive, less mathematical and abstract, than essentialist sciences. “By introducing population thinking,” says Mayr, “Darwin produced one of the most fundamental revolutions in biological thinking” (1982, p. 487). Let me try to suggest what this change involved.

Linnaeus’s decades-long labor to create a taxonomy of the natural world that would represent the rational plan of divine creation began with

18th century essentialist assumptions: that species were invariant, that the relationships among them would reflect a single orderly system, and that this system would be a linear hierarchy, commonly represented as a tower, or ladder, the *scala naturae*, or “great chain of being,” with nature arranged in order of perfection, or complexity, connecting the divine through the angelic and then the human to the animal, plant, and inanimate levels of existence (Bowler, 1989, p. 59; see also Dennett, 1995, p. 64 ff.; Lovejoy, 1936; Mayr, 1982, p. 201). As he worked, however, Linnaeus came to realize that the burgeoning natural world could not be represented well under these assumptions, but the elaborate hierarchical system of nomenclature that he left us embeds an essentialist worldview even today.³

A century later, Darwin offered his theory of organic evolution, in which natural theology is replaced by a natural mechanics; the notion of the species as a fixed type is replaced by the population of variants, and the linear hierarchy of the great chain of being is replaced by the figure of the branching

3 Biologists disagree about the continuing utility of Linnaean nomenclature, which is based on morphology, at a time when organisms are now understood phylogenetically (Benton, 2000).

tree.⁴ Darwin’s project became thinkable not only as a result of Enlightenment rational empiricism and mechanistic materialism (involving, of course, a great many scientists in addition to Linnaeus), but also because of the intellectual countercurrent of European Romanticism, which challenged the power of stable classifications and hierarchical relations, offering instead developmental views of history (Bowler, 1989; Reiss, 2009). An analogy between the human world and the organic world was made explicit in much Romantic thought, well before Darwin, taking form particularly in discussions of the history of language and the history of literature. For example, 18th century linguists, driven partly by religious interest in discovering the “*lingua Adamica*,” became interested in the study of resemblances and historical links among linguistic forms (Culler, 1986, p. 71). Europeans exploring what is now India had noticed similarities between Sanskrit and the ancient European languages, Greek and Latin. Such observations led

4 The importance of the tree figure has been emphasized in Robert O’Hara’s discussion of “tree thinking,” after Mayr’s “population thinking”; tree thinking changes questions of state to questions of change (1988, p. 151).

to proposals in the latter half of the 18th century that these ancient languages had a common source and that contemporary European languages might also be related in a larger Indo-European family of languages (Hoenigswald, 1962). One of the central figures in this inquiry was August Schleicher, who argued as early as 1848 that language has to be regarded as a natural organism because languages can be classified into genera, species, and subspecies (Maher, 1966), terms that he borrowed from the Linnaean classifications of a century earlier (Richards, 2002). Schleicher used tree diagrams (*Stammbäume*) to represent the historical relationships among languages, diagrams similar to but independent of the tree diagrams used by Darwin to represent biological evolution. publishing the first one in 1853 and using them frequently by the end of the decade.⁵

5 It is likely that Schleicher adopted the tree diagram from his education as a classical philologist, trained to create manuscript stemmata according to the doctrine of shared errors (Hoenigswald, 1962). His teacher, Friedrich Ritschl, worked also on human genealogy, so the family tree may be the most direct model for this form of representation that proved useful in both biological and humanistic inquiry (Maher, 1966). On the genesis and significance of Darwin’s diagram, see Gross (2007).

Linguistics was not the only human science in which an evolutionary model took hold. In literature as well, the evidence of diversity and change became difficult to ignore: the novel, after all, just didn't fit into the essentialist triad of epic, drama, and lyric attributed to Aristotle and Horace and enshrined in literary neoclassicism.⁶ Attention to the historical and contingent nature of the cultural categories that we call genres helped launch the movement that became literary Romanticism and were characteristic of it. A number of developments illustrate the newly fluid role of genres, for example, "the use of generic terms with adjectival qualifiers" such as elegaic sonnet, pathetic ballad, sentimental pastoral (Duff, 2009, p. 51). Such genre-mixing became an overt critical ideal (2009, p. 165), with Friedrich Schlegel declaring that "the romantic imperative demands the mixing of all genres" (quoted in Duff, 2009, p. 162). The very title of Wordsworth's revolutionary *Lyrical Ballads* is a case in point, mixing the classical lyric with the popular ballad. Duff calls Romanticism's abandonment of aesthetic fixity "a remarkable episode in the history of ideas," pointing out that "an effort of imagina-

6 Genette has made clear just how mistaken this attribution is (1992).

tion is required to recall a time when it was believed that genres were static, universal categories whose character did not alter across time" (2000, p. 4). In an interesting parallel, Dennett notes that "We post-Darwinians are so used to thinking in historical terms about the development of life forms that it takes a special effort to remind ourselves that in Darwin's day species of organisms were deemed to be as timeless as the perfect triangles and circles of Euclidean geometry" (1995, p. 36).⁷

An evolutionary model of change, that is, descent with modification, requires replication with variation (innovation) and differential survival of variants (selection), which leads to a changed distribution in the population (Dennett, 1995, p. 343). Darwin, of course, did not know what the

7 After Darwin, an overtly evolutionary model of literary change took hold in the late 19th century, promoted in France by Ferdinand Brunetière and in England by John Addington Symonds (who was influenced by Spencer); this model, like much biological thinking of the time, was linear and determinist. In the early 20th century, the Russian formalists developed a discontinuous model of literary evolution, emphasizing change and competition. On both these developments, see the introduction in Duff (2000).

mechanism for replication with variation was, but he offered explanations for differential survival and propagation, and subsequent biological science has elaborated both of these components of biological evolution. In exploring the mechanisms for replication and propagation in linguistic and cultural change, various kinds of explanations have been offered, prominent among them Richard Dawkins's hypothesis of the "meme" as the unit of cultural replication (Dawkins, 2006), modeled after the biological gene. But it has proven difficult to determine just what kind of unit of replication a meme might be and why this scientific concept is necessary to understand cultural change. Would a word be a meme? a way of pronouncing or spelling or using a word? Would a genre be a meme? We have other ways of understanding the modification and propagation of aspects of culture (in fact, entire disciplines are devoted to this effort). Two of the most powerful mechanisms of replication and propagation are education and imitation, and there are many socio-cultural sources of variation. In exploring how one might conduct a phylogenetic analysis of culture, Boyd and Richerson conduct an extensive critique of the utility of the meme, pointing out that we cannot directly observe or measure memes (as mental representations) and that infer-

ring them from observable behavior is impossible; consequently, we cannot tell how they combine or recombine, how many memes are responsible for any given observable cultural phenomenon, and which memes descend from which (2005, ch. 16). They go on to note that “Users of the meme concept seem to us to believe that it does more work than it really does” and that “most users of the meme concept follow Dawkins in being rather incurious about the existing scholarship on the nature of cultural transmission” (2005, p. 378).

EMERGENCE

In trying to understand the process of genre change, and in particular the efflorescence of what seem to be “new genres” in both new and old media, genre scholars often describe the appearance of something novel and unprecedented as an “emergence.” For example, Lüders, Prøitz, and Rasmussen (2010) studied “emerging personal media genres,” suggesting for example that the camphone self-portrait (the “selfie”) both “emerges” from bourgeois portrait traditions and at the same time offers “new ways ... of visual self-representations [that] have changed ... the act of looking”

(2010, p. 960). They comment on the way that the emerging genre is “a set of repeated acts within a regulatory frame of references” but also is recognized as departing from them. It is connected to and yet distinct from a tradition. Henze describes the way that early contributors to the emerging intellectual discipline of ethnology “applied rhetorical resources learned in other rhetorical contexts to the discipline’s unique problems and exigencies” with a focus on the appearance of something new (2004, p. 397). Crowston and Williams, information architects, have perhaps the most explicit discussion, in which they distinguish between genre adaptation and genre emergence, where adaptation acknowledges relationship to “existing genres” and emergence denotes the creation of new ones, recognized as distinct and named as such (2000, p. 202).⁸ And media scholars Wiggins and Bowers characterize the “emergent [internet] meme” as a genre that “becomes a separate contribution when awareness, distribution, and modification reach a critical mass” (2015, p. 12).

In my own studies of the genre dimensions of blogging, I was struck by how rapidly blogging spread, once blog hosting sites were launched, and

by the rapidity with which the burgeoning numbers of bloggers agreed on the defining features of blogging (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). This practice emerged quickly and decisively from a rather specialized high-tech community to become a widely recognized and widely shared set of expectations that could be demonstrated by evaluations, link patterns, and metacommentary. The blog seemed to be a genre, one that had emerged from prior practices and conventions with dramatic rapidity, as something unprecedented. But just as quickly, it differentiated (or “evolved”) into multiple subspecies. The technology, it seemed, could be put to many rhetorical purposes. However, there was a shared recognition that blogging was new: different from its predecessors the diary, the server log, the clipping service, the commonplace book, and other genres; unprecedented in the way it remixed the public and the private and in the way it motivated shared rhetorical action. It seemed that there was a previously unrecognized, or inchoate, shared exigence, which our study characterized as a “widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self” located in “a *kairos* of mediated voyeurism, widely dispersed but relentless celebrity, unsettled boundaries between public and private, and new technology that disseminates

⁸ See also Just (2008), Paolillo et al. (1989), Yates (1989).

these challenges beyond capital and corporations to individuals” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004, p. 14). It seemed that something new had *emerged* from the stream of social practices, something connected to them rhetorically, yet recognizably unlike them in distinctive ways, something functional and adapted to the complex environment yet unpredictable. What is this process of emergence?

Recently, a general model of genre emergence has been offered by cognitive semioticians Østergaard and Bundgaard (2015). Their model consists of a double feedback loop from situation to text to genre and back: texts respond to situations, and multiple similar texts “propagate” genres; genres then constrain texts, and texts (and genres) modify situations (2015, p. 104). “Genres emerge,” they say, “as amendments, accommodations or suitable modifications of already existing text types with a view to provide an adequate discursive response to a novel kind of situation (or with a view to exploit the affordances of new technology)” (2015, p. 124). At the same time, they emphasize, genres “co-emerge with and, therefore, shape the situations in which they are used” (2015, p. 98). This is, then, a bi-directional model for describing the dynamics of genre change, but it does so in terms of pre-existing genres, texts, and situations: it does not ex-

plain the appearance of the unprecedented. Much as Shepherd and I found for the blog, Østergaard and Bundgaard note that

it is imprecise to content oneself to saying that a genre develops because of a need; here [their example is the development of the novel after the printing press], it is rather the technological evolution that makes it possible to articulate a need and, thereby, the development of the genre (2015, p. 123).

According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, emergence is “a notorious philosophical term of art,” combining the qualities I have been emphasizing: an emergent entity or property “arises” out of something pre-existing and more fundamental and yet is novel or “irreducible” with respect to them (O’Connor & Wong, 2012). More precisely, Bedau and Humphreys (2008) specify five features characteristic of philosophical accounts of emergence: irreducibility, unpredictability, unexplainability, conceptual novelty, and holism (p. 11). Emergence has been of particular interest in both science and philosophy of science, where it has been invoked to describe the way that the holistic properties of water cannot be accounted for by knowing the properties of the component elements, hydro-

gen and oxygen,⁹ and the way that protein folding cannot be predicted from knowing the molecular structure (Bedau & Humphreys, 2008, pp. 11, 16). Recently emergence has been most strongly associated with the study of complex systems, such as the flocking of birds, freezing or melting of ice (or other phase transitions), and various kinds of ecological and social dynamics such as predation, arms races, and cheating (Bedau & Humphreys, 2008, p. 210), which can be demonstrated to generate unpredictable and novel phenomena that cannot be explained by or reduced to their components or prior states. These are situations where change seems markedly discontinuous, as opposed to situations of continuous change where evolution is a preferred model.

Thus the phenomena that have seemed to require explanation in terms of emergence are those concerning fundamental origins—of the universe, of life, of consciousness, and, in the human world, of language and technologies (Arthur, 2009; Bedau & Humphreys, 2008; O’Connor & Wong, 2012). For example, life arises from physical and chemical properties and conditions but cannot be reduced

⁹ This was J. S. Mill’s example, which is no longer a good one, since more is now known about hydrogen and oxygen.

to, predicted from, or fully explained by them: life is in an important sense dependent on but discontinuous with the non-living. Origins like these invite explanation in terms of emergence in two ways, because we can think of them in both scientific, materialist terms and in phenomenological terms: they arose from prior conditions and thus must have come from those conditions, and yet they are perceived and experienced as definitively different from what went before. They seem irreducible to more fundamental or prior conditions and thus are unexplainable in terms of them. They are thus ontologically emergent. But their difference, their novelty, is also conceptual: the only way to fully describe them is to change the terms of description. Thus they might also be thought of as epistemologically, or perhaps phenomenologically emergent (for this distinction, see O'Connor & Wong, 2012).

It's probably fruitless to focus on ontological emergence in the cultural world because any allegedly new entities must be socially constituted in the first place: ontologically, they are conceptual-cultural phenomena, patterns of social meaning. It may be possible to discern in some more-or-less culturally neutral way the existence of new features or patterns of features, but whether these constitute a new genre is a matter that cannot be determined

outside of the recognitions and practices of a community of use. We are thus necessarily concerned not with ontological but with phenomenological emergence: the cultural determination that something is new and meaningfully different. Emergence as a model of phenomenological change for genres suggests that we should examine genres as distinctive functioning wholes, not as bundles of variant features to which the genre can be reduced, and that we should look less to antecedents and origins that "explain" the genre and more to the contexts in which they are taken up as functional, novel, and satisfying. We might say, then, that emergence is a model that looks forward, while evolution looks backward.

SPECIES, CATEGORIES, GENRES

What evolution offers us, then, is a model of incremental, continuous change with an emphasis on connectedness, ancestry, and adaptation to circumstance. What emergence seems to offer is a model less concerned with chronological relations and adaptation and more interested in difference, rupture, and novelty. Thus, emergence seems to have an investment in essences—in types or spe-

cies—which evolution cannot sustain. Let me illustrate what's at stake by returning to Linnaeus and Darwin. Both used tree-like diagrams to try to represent the natural world and its relations. But Linnaeus's essentialist tree and Darwin's population-based tree turn out to be quite different.

The tree diagram generally represents, on its horizontal dimension, segmentation and variation. On the vertical dimension, there are two possible scales: one is level of abstraction, which is characteristic of essentialist, top-down category formation, as practiced by Linnaeus and by virtually every biologist before Darwin (see figure 1); the other is diachronic, showing shared ancestry and relationships of replication over time (see figure 2). (Even earlier, in representations of the Great Chain of Being [Lovejoy, 1936], this scale was one of perfection, or closeness to God; see for example figure 3). Biological thought has generally rejected levels of abstraction for the diachronic relationship of shared ancestry, and Linnaean logic-tree hierarchies are replaced by Darwinian family trees.

The essentialist approach to species presumed that all members of a species share the same essence, that each species is distinct from all others, that each is constant over time, and that the variation of members from the essence is limited

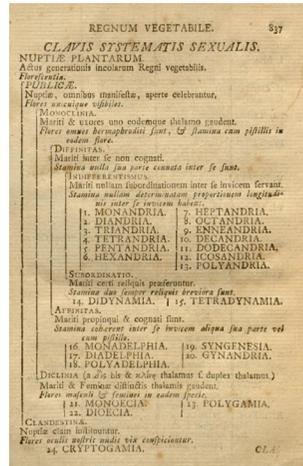


Figure 1. An example of a Linnaean diagram, from *Systema naturae*, 10th ed. (1758), page 837. Wikimedia Commons.

(Mayr, 1982, p. 260). The Darwinian population thinker recognizes both variation and continuities across individuals, and as a consequence the species concept becomes notoriously difficult to pin down. Dennett notes that Darwin declined to provide a definition of species, holding that it was more prudent to consider it a term of convenience rather than one of principle (Dennett, 1995, pp. 44–45), and adds that “More than a century after Darwin, there are still serious debates among bi-

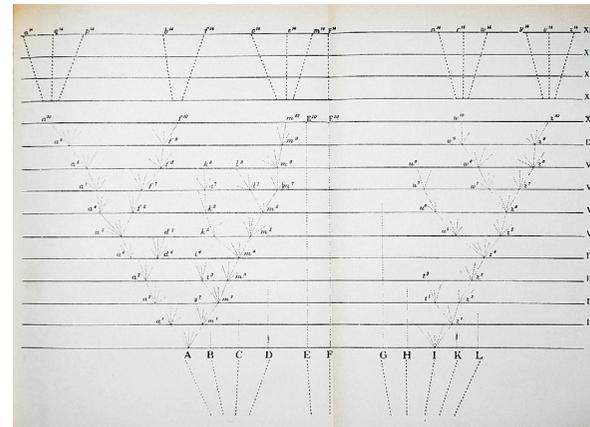


Figure 2. The tree diagram that appeared in Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859). Wikimedia Commons.

ologists ... about how to define *species*” (1995, p. 95). Similarly, Mayr claims that “There is probably no other concept in biology that has remained so consistently controversial as the species concept” (Mayr, 1982, p. 251).

Yet it is just this—the species, the type, the genre—that interests us in genre innovation. We would seem to require some essence, in order to recognize similarity and difference, in order to discern what is recurrent and what is new. In fact, in

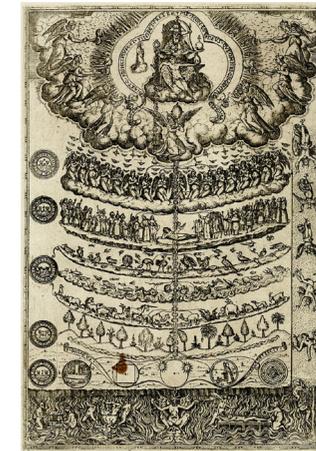


Figure 3. The Great Chain of Being from the *Rhetorica Christiana* by Fray Diego de Valades (1579). Wikimedia Commons.

genre studies, we have our essentialists and our population thinkers. Among the essentialists we might number Aristotle, Northrop Frye, and those linguists and literary scholars who base their definitions on a posited essence—a theory of communication that maps formal possibilities, or fundamental capabilities of language.¹⁰ Among the population

¹⁰ Such formalist approaches include those of Longacre (1996) in literature and of Martin and Rose (2008) in systemic-func-

thinkers we could include ethnographers and applied linguists, like Schryer and Swales, who gather specimens and examine them for similarities of social or linguistic features, developing categories inductively. The genre, in this case, represents the collection of specimens—on the shelf, in the drawer, distributed across the environment. These researchers help us to catalogue the interesting diversity of human communicative activity and the ways it interacts with social and technological change.

But there is another kind of thinking that can shed light on genres, an approach that is neither fully essentialist nor empirical, but perhaps is something of both. What we have learned from phenomenological sociology and from cognitive psychology is that types can be thought of as social agreements, shared recognitions, about what is worth noticing in the world, about what recurs and what signifies. The type represents what we agree has happened and what we expect may happen. This is a nominalist approach to the problem, which makes the type

tional linguistics. Wells (2014) has also recently suggested that the evolutionary model of genre entails an understanding of genre as “species,” which she sees as one of the limitations of the model.

neither a collection nor an essence but literally a “name,” or rather, what is invoked by the fact of our naming something, a shared “concept.”¹¹

I have elsewhere suggested that genres may be found where we have names for types of discourse, that is, for shared expectations about what constellation of discourse features will achieve which social action in which conditions: “the ‘de facto’ genres, the types we have names for in everyday language, tell us something theoretically important about discourse” (Miller, 1984, p. 155). This hunch is borne out by Eleanor Rosch’s work in cognitive psychology on categorization and concept prototypes,¹² which shows that “categories are generally designated by names,” that is, we name groups of objects in our world when we consider the objects to be “equivalent” in some useful way, according to the principles of cognitive economy and perceived world structure (Rosch, 1978, p. 6).

¹¹ Mayr suggests that medieval nominalism influenced early empiricists such as Francis Bacon and might have been an anticipation of population thinking (1982, pp. 308–309).

¹² See the connection between categories and concepts in Margolis and Laurence (2011).

Cognitive economy ensures that category systems conserve mental time and energy while providing maximal information about the world; perceived world structure ensures that category systems provide relevant useful information about the world in a structured, rather than random or arbitrary form (Rosch, 1978, pp. 3–4). Thus, if genres are phenomenological categories of symbolic interaction, we can posit that they help structure the socio-symbolic world in relevant and informative ways.

Moreover, categorization, like evolution, involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions. On the vertical dimension, the most common and useful category names indicate the level that Rosch calls “basic,” which indicates the most inclusive, or abstract, level that also recognizes what she calls “natural discontinuities” in perception (Rosch, 1978, p. 6). Basic categories are those that are relatively easy for us to discriminate from background variation and relatively important for us to interact with and talk about. The psychological research focuses on familiar objects in the world such as dogs and cats, chairs and tables, but it seems reasonable to suppose that the same principles could be at work with discursive-symbolic objects such as sonnets and news reports, blogs and videogames. The

basic level is the level at which knowledge is organized, as shown by subsequent research about how many attributes people can list at different levels of abstraction (for example, furniture, chair, easy chair), which categories children learn first, and at which level people can form mental images (Lakoff, 1987, pp. 46–48).¹³ Members of superordinate categories share fewer attributes and are thus less useful for ordinary purposes; members of subordinate categories share more attributes and are thus more difficult to discriminate. The vertical dimension, then, uses the scale of inclusiveness, or abstraction.

On the horizontal dimension, our categories divide the world into repeatable units, to which we refer when we use names like “dog,” “table,” “news report,” “sonnet,” “selfie,” and “tweet.” According to Rosch, these “basic cuts in categorization are made at ... discontinuities” between “information-rich bundles of perceptual and functional attributes” (1978, pp. 6, 5). Categories both reflect and constitute the perceived structure of the social

¹³ Rosch cites corroborating work showing that “basic-level categories are most often coded by single signs”: for example, ethnobotanists can show this for plant names in various cultures, and others have confirmed this pattern with sign language (1978, p. 10).

world, much like Alfred Schutz’s types. Because perceptions and functions change over time with new conditions and new capabilities and may differ between social groups, category systems are not stable or consistent. Traditional approaches sought to rationalize categories by positing an “essence” to discriminate the dog from the cat, the chair from the table, assuming that criterial features can be used to distinguish these “natural kinds.” But just as evolutionary biologists have had difficulties defining the species, cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that most of our everyday categories are similarly difficult to square with an essentialist approach. Like species, our categories do not have clear boundaries; they change over time and across location; they do not produce clear taxonomies based on consistent criteria (Lakoff, 1987, p. 187 ff.). On the horizontal dimension, then, the category (the type or the genre) is always going to be at least a bit fuzzy, although the relevant test is of social utility.

Media critics have moved in this direction, giving up essentialist views that characterize genres as bundles of identifiable syntactic and semantic (that is, formal and thematic) features and adopting more complex approaches. Film critic and theorist Rick Altman (1999), for example, moves from a se-

mantic/syntactic model of genre to one that adds pragmatics, because it has to account for the fact that films have multiple users, with different readings, and are produced by complex industries. A genre is not “a category capable of clear and stable definition” (it has no essence), but becomes a negotiated and renegotiated understanding between producers and markets (1999, p. 214). Similarly, Jason Mittell defines television genres as “cultural categories”:

Genres are not intrinsic to texts—they are constituted by the processes that some scholars have labeled ‘external’ elements, such as industrial and audience practices. We need to look beyond the text ... locating genres within the complex interrelations between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts. Genres transect the boundaries between text and context (2004, pp. 9–10).

GENRE INNOVATION

If the categories of socio-discursive interaction that genres represent are neither essentialist-objective “natural kinds” nor fully empirical-materialist cor-

pora but rather social concepts, or cultural categories, on a “basic” cognitive level that corresponds with the experiential history and functional needs of the community that sustains them, what are the implications for understanding genre innovation? And what are the implications for evolution and emergence as models of change?

Emergence, in this context, is best understood in a phenomenological sense, that is, as a socially shared impression or perception that something is qualitatively new, experientially distinctive, and at the same time, significant or useful. Emergence pictures genre innovation as uncaused, underdetermined, and unpredictable. Yet at the same time, emergence is always from something: novelty must be understood against the background of a familiar category system. It turns our attention to the impression (within the relevant community) of discontinuity, of “creative disruption” (to use a current buzz-phrase), of surprising novelty. Genre innovation, then, cannot be explained or planned; it must be understood as arising from random events, arbitrary or synergistic combinations of features, and, perhaps, from a user community that is not waiting for a solution to a problem but recognizes a new problem-solution in surprised retrospect. I

think of the emergence of popular blogging in this way: a combination of features designed for one purpose, improvisationally taken up rapidly in another community because it satisfies an exigence that had been latent, unrecognized, but in retrospect, quite powerful (Miller & Shepherd, 2004; see also Siles, 2012). The explanation of emergence as a phenomenon has to be grounded in the relationship between the texts that constitute the new genre and the community in which they emerge as something distinctively new: that is, in the way the genre is taken up, the way it functions or satisfies. The cultural determination that something is new and meaningfully different is less like the birth of a star or the first appearance of self-replicating organic molecules and more like the dawning of a realization.

Evolution, in contrast, gives us a population-based model of genre, focusing our attention on diachronic change and relatedness, as well as on the variation among instances, giving us incremental processes and empirically fuzzy boundaries between apparent genres. Evolution invites us to look for mechanisms that enable or promote change, as Fowler suggests with his list of the processes by which literary genres are transformed (such as

combination, change of scale, counterstatement, inclusion; 1982, ch. 10). Similarly, in her study of genre innovation in academic writing, Tardy suggests a variety of mechanisms that can produce genre change (such as unexpected linguistic form, new modalities, unconventional rhetorical appeals, unusual ideas; 2015, 130–131). Others have studied specific cases of genre change. For example, the evolution of the scientific research article from its precursors has been attributed, variously, to the refinement and elaboration of science’s cognitive goals (Bazerman, 1988), the rise of the market economy and secularization of society (Shapin, 1996), the new technology of printing (Eisenstein, 1979; Ziman, 1968, p. 45), and the influence of visionary individuals (Henry Oldenburg in England and Denis de Sallo in France; A. G. Gross, Harmon, & Reidy, 2002, p. 13). Other studies reinforce these mechanisms and add others, such as institutional requirements and antecedent genres. Several have examined the institutionally mandated genre of the Environmental Impact Statement, invented by the U.S. Congress and evolved through litigation and administrative oversight (Dayton, 2002; Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992; Miller, 1980); others have explored the institutional requirements and discour-

sive contexts that led to the current forms of the papal encyclical and the U.S. Presidential State of the Union Address (K. M. Jamieson, 1975; K. M. H. Jamieson, 1973; Lucas, 1986).¹⁴

For genre innovation, emergence and evolution are “terministic screens”¹⁵ that offer partial descriptions; they both illuminate and obscure. They are also answers to different questions. If we are concerned to explain how innovation happens, under the presupposition that stability and continuity constitute the default condition, then evolution can help conceptualize the processes and mechanisms by which variations come about and are replicated and propagated. If, on the other hand, we presuppose that unrepeatable contingency constitutes the default condition, then we are concerned to explain how the impression of continuity and recurrence comes about, and emergence can help conceptualize how a new category is stabilized within a world of constant flux (Meyer & Girke, 2011, p. 5). There

¹⁴ For a more complete review of research on genre innovation, see Miller (In press).

¹⁵ The term is Kenneth Burke’s, which he uses to call attention to “the fact that any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (1966, p. 45).

may be no general conceptual model adequate to the variety of cultural phenomena and domains in which genres are of interest, but we can continue to learn by testing our observations of particular examples against these useful concepts. I do want to suggest that we be conscious of the assumptions we make about essences and relationships, of how and why we identify something as a genre; that we be alert to the differences between classification by abstraction and classification by descent. We have much to learn about the processes of genre change and innovation, and we need all the tools we can find.

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