

# 1 Worlds of Genre—Metaphors of Genre

John M. Swales

## INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago, Hyon (1996) published an influential article in *TESOL Quarterly* entitled “Genre in three traditions: Implications for ESL”; indeed, by April 2007, I note it had received 56 references in *Google Scholar*. In it, she argued that work on literary genres had been conceived of in three distinct ways by researchers and practitioners with different backgrounds and representing different parts of the world. As readers may know, she instances the international ESP Tradition, North American New Rhetoric, and the Australian Systemic-Functional School. On the first, she notes that “many ESP scholars have paid particular attention to detailing the formal characteristics of genres while focusing less on the specialized functions of texts and their surrounding social contexts” (p. 695). In contrast, New Rhetoric scholars “have focused more on the situational contexts in which genres occur than on their forms and have placed special emphases on the special purposes, or *actions*, that these genres fulfill within these situations” (p. 696). For SFL scholars, genre is one element in a complex social semiotic system, delineating and exploring the textual features of which is empowering for both learners and (disadvantaged) citizens.

In this 1996 paper, Hyon details some other differences among the three traditions: a broader, more rhetorical mode definition of genre for the Australians, and a greater interest in applying genre studies to high schools and workplaces; a concentration on post-secondary academic and professional genres for the other two traditions; a greater interest in ethnographic methods among the New Rhetoricians, perhaps especially those working in Canada; and a greater reluctance to commit to the pedagogical relevance of genre studies among these scholars. As Hyon notes, one possible explanation for these disparities lies in the target audiences of the three groups. For the systemicists, these are students who are either acquiring English as a second language or whose English L1 literacy skills need considerable scaffolding. For ESP specialists, the primary audiences are students in EFL situations or who need to acquire specialized EAP discourses as part of their professionalization. And for New Rhetoricians, a primary audience consists of undergraduates taking composition or rhetoric courses as part of a Liberal Arts education.

Hyon’s paper was a valuable map-making exercise that made much sense in

the mid- 1990s. As Berkenkotter observed in a web posting dated 27 January, 2006 and entitled “North American Genre Theorists,” “Hyon’s categories have stuck.” However, by 2007, what had become known as the genre movement had coalesced somewhat, with the result that the divisions among the three traditions have become much less sharp—even if they have not entirely disappeared. This rapprochement can be seen in a number of recent books. Even a cursory reading of the following quartet shows trends toward assimilation of views and a shared appreciation of previous work by the likes of Bakhtin, Miller and Myers:

Bhatia (2004) *Worlds of Written Discourse: A Genre-based View*

Devitt (2004) *Writing Genres*

Frow (2006) *Genre*

Swales (2004) *Research Genres: Explorations and Applications*

Bhatia and Swales represent the ESP tradition, Devitt that of US composition/ rhetoric, and Frow is a systemic linguist, yet the following single quotations from each, despite this selectivity, will suffice to indicate something of this coming-together of views:

*Discourse as genre*, in contrast, extends the analysis beyond the textual product to incorporate context in a broader sense to account for not only the way the text is constructed, but also the way it is often interpreted, used and exploited in specific institutional or more narrowly professional contexts to achieve specific disciplinary roles. (Bhatia, 2004, p. 20)

I propose, then, that genre be seen not as a response to a recurring situation but as a nexus between an individual’s actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres. (Devitt, 2004, p. 31)

And I try to stress that genres are not fixed and pre-given forms by thinking about texts as performances of genre rather than reproductions of a class to which texts belong, and by following Derrida in stressing the importance of edges and margins—that is, stressing the open-endedness of generic frames. (Frow, 2006, p. 3)

My current attempt [is] to see genres no longer as single—and per-

haps separable—communicative resources, but as forming complex networks of various kinds in which switching modes from speech to writing (and vice versa) can—and often does—play a natural and significant part. (Swales, 2004, p. 2)

Some of the consolidating trends that emerge from these volumes and from other publications would include (a) a balance between constraint and choice; (b) the role of local contextual coloring in the realization of genre exemplars, such as the Brazilian predilection for using *Considerações Finais* for the final article section title; (c) a greater sense that genres and genre sets are always evolving in response to various exigencies; and (d) a consequent more nuanced approach to genre awareness-raising and genre acquisition. With regard to this last, Anthony has observed, “The proposed methods for teaching genres have changed from explicit approaches to those in which features of genres are ‘negotiated’ through classroom discussion or ‘reinvented’ through elaborate writing tasks” (2000, p. 18).

## METAPHORS OF GENRE

Despite this consolidation, there remains the question of the definition of genre itself, especially when all those recent arrivals on the genre scene (the information scientists and documentarians) would seem to be crying out for a working and workable definition. I offered one such elaborated definition in *Genre Analysis* back in 1990. But when I came to revisit the topic a few years ago, I concluded that I could not basically reiterate a position espoused more than a decade previously but, true to the grand academic imperative, would have to offer something new. (Even though, I have to confess, in my heart of hearts, I felt that there was little actually wrong with that old earlier characterization, except for a mistaken emphasis on genres as distinct independent entities). My rationale for retreat was a little forced, or so it now seems to me. On definitional depictions, I wrote:

For one thing they fail to measure up to the Kantian imperative of being true in all possible worlds and all possible times; for another, the easy adoption of definitions can prevent us from seeing newly explored or newly emerging genres for what they are. (2004, p. 61)

The first rationale looks impossibly demanding, while the second looks unlikely or, at the least, unproven. Instead I offered a suite of six metaphors, mostly borrowed or adapted from others, that I claimed would variously illuminate our understanding of genres. The resulting picture looked like this:

Frames of Social Action	→	Guiding Principles
Language Standards	→	Conventional Expectations
Biological Species	→	Complex Historicities
Families and Prototypes	→	Variable Links to the Center
Institutions	→	Shaping Contexts; Roles
Speech Acts	→	Directed Discourses

The first of these metaphors comes from Bazerman. Here is an edited extract:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. *They are frames for social action.* . . . Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the familiar. (1997, p. 19; my emphasis)

This is an inspiring and helpful characterization, this idea of a frame as a starting place or an initial orientation, and indeed is subtly different from Carolyn Miller's famous 1984 definition centered on the accomplished rhetorical action itself. The metaphor rightly focuses attention on the familiar and the quotidian. However, the metaphor is less helpful when we find ourselves on unfamiliar ground, as when we either have difficulty in discerning the frame for rhetorical action, or worse, in our ignorance, we choose the wrong frame. Often here we are dealing with what I called in a 1996 paper "occluded genres" (Swales, 1996), i.e., those that are hidden and out of sight to all but a privileged and expert few. For a first quick example, I was approached twice in the first half of 2007, once by a colleague in the US and once by a colleague in Europe, because for the first time in their academic lives they had been asked by an Australian university to write an external examiner's report on a PhD thesis. Would I be able send them a couple of examples to help them decide what to focus and, just as importantly, what not to focus on?

## PERSONAL STATEMENTS/STATEMENTS OF PURPOSE

My second example is more extended and concerns a two-page document required of graduate student applications in the US called either *personal statement* (PS) or *statement of purpose* (SOP). This text is now part of a complex bunch of documents including a CV, a GPA transcript, various test scores such as those for GRE and TOEFL, letters of recommendation, and, increasingly, a writing sample. We thus see the forces of generification at work here; in contrast, when

I applied for graduate school at a British university in the 1960s I hand-wrote a short application letter and then was invited for interview by the head of department. In the interview, he asked me what I read in the applied linguistics field (luckily I could mention Halliday, Mackintosh, & Stevens, 1964) and then asked me a couple of questions about Italian loan words in Libyan colloquial Arabic. After 20 minutes or so, the professor remarked “well, you seem a nice enough chap” and I was in.

The PS/SOP remains largely an occluded genre, except perhaps for those who can gain access to the special issue of *Issues in Writing* (15:1; Fall/Winter 2004) guest edited by Brown and Barton and which can be found at [www.uwsp.edu/english/iw](http://www.uwsp.edu/english/iw). And this occlusion is problematic because a “wrong” PS/SOP could block initial entry to an academic career in the US. There are, in my estimation, four main problems:

- The misleading nature of the titles of the genre
- Balancing the past and the future
- Distinguishing yourself (i.e., going beyond the CV)
- For PhD programs, offering a believable long-term commitment

On the first problem, the *Personal Statement* label somewhat over-emphasizes the life story element, its *apologia pro sua vita* aspect; on the other hand, the *Statement of Purpose* label over-articulates the importance of specifying future research projects. In the same vein, there is a tension here between stressing the value of past achievements and the validity and credibility of future aspirations. The third problem raises the issue of somehow going beyond a potted biography that does little more than provide a narrative version of the details in the CV. As a number of the specialist informants in the *Issues in Writing* observed, they are looking for something memorable in the PS/SOP; in particular, something that they might remember an applicant by, something that they can “take away.” Finally, there is the issue for applicants to PhD programs (typically a five-year journey in the US) of how to demonstrate that you have the intellectual resources and the academic persistence to endure a journey of that length. In my experience at the Department of Linguistics at Michigan, this exigency is particularly difficult for students who have recently completed a more practice-oriented MA degree. Members of this group need to reconstruct themselves toward addressing fundamental issues and theoretical concerns, so what might have worked for an MA application, such as “I want to make myself a more professional language teacher and so help improve international communications,” is recognized as not resonating as well at the more advanced level.

In the special issue, Bekins, Huckin & Kijak (2004) offer a move analysis of graduate medical school Personal Statements, which they calculate is followed 60-70% of the time by the texts judged to be effective:

- Move 1: **Hook** (a narrative to grab the reader's attention)
- Move 2: **Program** (why this particular specialization/location)
- Move 3: **Background** (evaluation of skills, landmarks of achievement)
- Move 4: **Self-promotion** (distinctive individual qualities)
- Move 5: **Projection** (personal professional goals/career trajectory)

Here is one of their winning hooks (from an application for medical residency in surgery):

I remember hearing the loud snap resonating across the field and having no doubt it was broken. Looking down at my forearm during the high school football game, the distal end dangling as both the left radius and ulna had been broken at midshaft. I felt certain I had experienced my last football event . . . .

As you can doubtless imagine, the application goes on to say that this forearm was fully mended by brilliant surgical intervention and thus the young man was inspired to follow a career in surgery.

My second example comes from an undergraduate of my acquaintance who graduated last year in linguistics and is applying for an MA in applied linguistics at a leading British university. She opens with this rhetorically arresting mini-hook:

The moment came on Friday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, at precisely 5:25 pm. I was attending the conference . . . .

And her final paragraph concludes:

As the conference went on, I set a challenge for myself: I would ask a question of one of the speakers about their presentation. When the final speaker stepped up to the podium, I knew this was my last chance. . . . And so the moment arrived, that Friday afternoon; I stood up, took a deep breath, and crossed the line from observer to participant in the professional world of applied linguistics.

The clever framing of her SOP doubtless contributed to the success of her application.

Nearly all applicants, of course, have to struggle with this genre. However, there is also considerable anecdotal evidence that these kinds of occluded text, those that involve both the personal and professional, and those that are both evaluative and self-evaluative, are more likely than more formal genres to be influenced by local cultural traditions and conventions, and thus give rise to cross-culturally diverse strategies. From my fairly extensive experience of reading Michigan's Statements of Purpose and occasionally teaching or tutoring this genre, I offer the following slightly tongue-in-cheek observations:

**SOPs from Scandinavia:** Much verbal modesty since “deeds speak louder than words”; a reluctance to boast.

**SOPs from Africa/India:** Appeals for pity and for special consideration, such as “I am the youngest of eight siblings, only two of whom have jobs.”

**SOPs from East Asia:** Considerable early educational histories and particularly on ranking data: “My department is ranked as the fourth best out of 28, and in my final undergraduate year I was ranked third out of 73 civil engineering students.”

**SOPs from Britain:** Because of traditional UK PhD student profiles, a preponderance of very specific research proposals, such as “I would like to analyze anti-accusative structures in serial verbs in Khmer, especially as they occur in personal narratives of those with only an elementary school education.” These are sometimes taken as an affront by my colleagues, along the lines of this kind of reaction: “How can she decide on this particular topic before taking my course on the syntax of Southeast Asian languages?”

**SOPs from the US:** Often an attempt to show interest in everything: “I am interested in generative syntax, nasalization, Jamaican creoles, cross-cultural semiotics, and neurolinguistics. Also name-dropping is common, as in “I took syntax with Chomsky.”

In order to characterize rather more comprehensively what might be happening here, we need to invoke two additional metaphors. For the variation described above, we need to recognize that there are different degrees of approximation from various parts of the world to what experienced US gatekeeper-readers of this genre might come to expect. In other words, there are degrees of divergence from the

prototypical center. This is not to say, of course, that unusual, idiosyncratic or creative SOPs cannot be successful—as Bhatia has noted on several occasions “genre-bending” can be a “high risk, high reward” option—but that there are prototypical expectations underlying the stylistic and linguistic surface. More generally, we also would do well to come to recognize that the PS/SOP is institutionalized. This becomes particularly clear when we read the interview statements made by the appointed readers of these documents. The reading protocol and interview data in the *Issues in Writing* volume indicate that the expert readers on admission committees rely to a considerable extent on first impressions—in effect, whether they are turned on or turned off by the opening paragraph. A wrong step here can be hard to recover from. Barton, Ariail and Smith found that “if the opening failed, either because it was not memorable or because it made no compelling connection to the profession, the readers skipped, skimmed, expressed criticism, and generally reacted negatively to the text” (2004, p. 109). We know that marketing research shows that those junk-mail solicitation letters have only a few seconds to catch the readers’ attention if they are not to be immediately discarded in exasperation. The situation here is, of course, not so extreme, but there appear to be parallels.

More generally, the medical readers studied by Bekins, Huckin and Kijak “most wanted to see in a PS a clear statement of what the applicant had learnt from his or her life experiences” (2004, p. 65). The PS, they conclude, should be “a site for self-reflection on formative experiences” (p. 69). It would seem then that for the powerful and busy institutional gatekeepers this kind of projection is part of putting together over these two pages a convincing and compelling professional identity. I therefore suggest that the three genre metaphors of frame, prototype and institution help us understand these texts a little more clearly and a little more fully.

## THE ART HISTORY MONOGRAPH

The other extended investigation into the roles of genre theory and metaphors of genre in understanding collectivities of documents takes as its subject an important and long-standing genre—that of the art history monograph. This type of monograph is a book-length study of the life, times and work of a single artist—almost exclusively a white male. Typically the volume contains many illustrations of the artist’s work, and perhaps some of those other artists who had had a formative influence on him. It is widely agreed that the archetype for this genre is Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published in Florence in 1550. Vasari laid down the foundation for the belief that the visual arts cannot be comprehended without taking their human origins into account; more specifically, there must exist a dialectic relationship between the biographical identity and the artistic identity of the chosen artist. The monograph, as it



developed, also began to pay particular attention to the identified masterpieces and great works of the artist, evaluating and interpreting them in various ways so that their achievements became more easily recognizable to the non-specialist reader. A visit to any large bookshop today will reveal many exemplars of this genre, and there are a number of important and successful publishers in this area, such as the German firm Taschen.

I will first attempt to illustrate the recent evolution of the art history monograph by taking the case of the American painter Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and his most famous painting *The Gross Clinic* completed in 1875; in fact this large work is arguably the most famous painting in the history of North American art.

The first full length study of Eakins' work was Lloyd Goodrich's 1933 *Thomas Eakins: His Life and Work*. (Note the traditional arrangement of the title.) Here is part of Goodrich's depiction of the picture:

While the picture represents a whole scene, it is at the same time the portrait of one man. Dr Gross dominates it, with his silvery hair, fine brow, and strong features catching the full force of the light—an imposing figure, with the rugged force of a pioneer in his profession. Every detail in the picture contributes to the dramatic value of his figure and the subordinate drama of the group of assistants clustered round the patient. . . . The viewpoint is absolutely objective; the hand that guides the brush is as steady as the hand that guides the scalpel. But there is no lack of humanity; not the sentimentality that hides its eyes and shrinks from the less pleasant aspects of life, but the robust understanding of the scientist who can look on disease and pain, and record them truthfully. (p. 50)

As the above passage shows, Goodrich's focus here is on the affinities between the "scientific" surgeon and the "scientific" painter, as shown most tellingly by the phrase "the hand that guides the brush is as steady as the hand that guides the scalpel." Eakins, by choosing for this major work a scientific "drama of contemporary life," underscores, for Goodrich, both his modernity and his American individuality and originality.

We need to fast-forward 50 years to reach the next major study of the painter—Elizabeth Johns' *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Johns' book was a flagship publication flying under the banner of the new "social art history." The traditional emphasis on the distinctive individual genius of the artist living in his private world is now replaced by closer attention to the material and social contemporary forces that impinged upon the artist. Her discussion, therefore,

of *The Gross Clinic* focuses on the details of the medical setting and of medical science at that time. In a typical passage, she writes:

Moreover, the surgery that defined Gross as a modern surgeon was not the heroic amputation or the bladder-stone removal that had been practiced by earlier surgeons for centuries, but a quiet surgical procedure that in its capacity to improve the life of a patient illustrated incisively the benefits of the evolution of surgery. Including the patient's mother to assure that his audience would not miss the youth of Gross's patient, Eakins makes a point that could only be made with his operation; the happy outcome of the surgery in Gross's clinic is a child with a whole leg instead of a stump. (1983, p. 75)

Four years later, leading art historian Michael Fried published a volume whose title indicates considerably higher aspirations: *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*. In Fried's discussion of the painting, Eakins is no longer the meticulous if somewhat provincial super-realist of the Goodrich account, nor the precise documentarian characterized by Johns, but rather a master in the absorptive tradition of Vermeer and a dramatist worthy of comparison with Caravaggio. For Fried, Eakins achieves powerful *reality effects* by unreal disfigurements and distortions. Further, Fried projects a strongly Freudian interpretation on the painting:

On the one hand, Gross the master healer is deeply reassuring, an exemplum of perfect calm and mature resource; on the other hand, his bloody right hand holding the scalpel may be read not only as threatening castration but as having enacted it, . . . the precise focus of menace would have been an actual channel of access for the painter's fantasmatic identification with the threatening paternal power and thus also for his confirmation of the latter's identification as healer. (1987, pp. 66-67)

Since the publication of Fried's monograph, some further papers have come to light and which are given prominent attention in the latest volume on Eakins—Henry Adams (2005), *Eakins Revealed: The Secret Life of an American Artist*. (Contrast this with Johns' title!) Fried's psychological reading is now reinforced by more details about Eakins' ambivalent relationship with his father, the mental illness of his mother and of other members of his family, and his exhibitionism, narcissism and his voyeurism. The darker story revealed by the Bregler papers

allows Adams to compare literary scholars, who traditionally have no problem with discussing tragic aspects of writers' lives, with art history scholars:

. . . art historians have always tended to impose idealizing notions that have little bearing or relevance. Their practice of polishing the artist's biography goes along with a tendency to prettify the art itself. But neither Eakins' art nor his life offers an ideal. The lessons they teach are of a very different kind. (2005, p. xiv)

The story I have recounted about a single painting shows, I hope, a complex historicity. The conventional expectations of the art history monograph that had remained relatively fixed from Vasari to Goodrich have evolved and diversified through social history, psychoanalysis and various post-modernist tropes. In the case of Eakins, the inspirational volume of 1933 had evolved by 2005 into one that is darkly tragic. A key work of art, *The Gross Clinic*, which started out as a new historicist demonstration of surgical advance and prowess in Philadelphia in the third-quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has changed into a troubled and disfiguring depiction of highly conflicted, if largely suppressed, family relations. After 125 years, the great power of the painting remains, but the lesson it now teaches seems to be of a very different kind.

The larger context of the art monograph can also be illuminated by the metaphor of genre as institution, and here my arguments rely in part on a 2006 volume by Guercio entitled *Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project*. Despite the popularity of "life and works" monographs in bookshops and in libraries, it can be argued that this genre has lost a considerable part of its institutional status. For one thing, many of the leading art historians of the last century looked beyond individual artists and/or their schools to larger trends: Wöfflin's studies of general cultural zeitgeist allowed a contrastive analysis of the features dividing the classical and the baroque; Baxandall's explorations of the artistic consequences of theories of perception in 18<sup>th</sup> century France; Panovsky's pursuit of iconology in pictures from the Low Countries; and what we might describe as Gombrich's "viewer response theory."

In addition, the monographic tradition does not sit well with contemporary views of the individual human subject. Perhaps since Barthes' famous essay on "The Death of the Author" (1977), the stability of the person, both artistic and otherwise, has transmuted into plethoras of co-constructed and shifting identities. As Guercio states, "Under the influence of psychoanalysis and of philosophies weary of the burdens of metaphysics, the idea that a subject is a fundamental essence, consistent and unitary, was undermined and exposed as a vanishing illusion" (2006, p. 9). Feminism and post-colonialism also added their

dissenting voices to the European tradition of the life and works of male artists; as Nochlin's (1971) famous essay title trenchantly put it, "Why have there been no great women artists?"

A further factor resides in a shift in the priorities of the leading graduate programs in art history or fine art. The traditional doctoral dissertation in the form of a so-called *catalogue raisonné* (a careful and heavily footnoted chronological list of all works properly attributed to an artist, accompanied by a biographical sketch) fell first out of favor, and, more recently, this fate, at least for the best students, has befallen the artist's monograph. One obvious reason is that these art departments are running out of individual artists worth devoting huge amounts of time and effort to; less obviously, interest has shifted to more interdisciplinary topics, involving literature, sociology, psychology or various kinds of complex scientific analyses, such as micrographs of paint layers. In consequence, the monograph output is no longer dominated by university departments but by museum curators, connoisseurs, fine art dealers, and specialists in major auction houses. This in turn has led to a considerable amount of commodification in the sense that publishing a monograph on a hitherto unmonographed artist very often leads to increased interest in and knowledge about that artist's life and works. This in turn often leads to a considerable appreciation in the value of those works.

The genre-as-institution and genre-as-species metaphors are also particularly helpful in the way they can elucidate the rise and fall of genres over time, from creative beginnings, to distinguished products, to tired replicas, and possibly on to various kinds of revival—from archetypes to divergences, to spin-offs, and to splits that might break the original central genre into several more specialized ones. And so it has been with the art history monograph. Further, the metaphor helps us in seeing the genre not only in terms of itself, but also in terms of its institutional ranking, where it stands in the world. Thus, what might seem on the surface to be a highly successful genre, may in reality turn out to be much less so.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I see it, the work of genre is to mediate between social situations and the texts that respond strategically to the exigencies of those situations. As Frow notes, when texts are well conceptualized and well constructed, they *perform* the genre. When these performances proliferate, genres tend to drift through time and geographical space, partly inherently and partly as a result of intertextual acceptances and rejections. The work of genre analysts is to track these textual regularities and irregularities and explain them in terms of the relevant and pertinent social circumstances and the rhetorical demands they engender.

Part of the work of those genre analysts with applied aspirations would then be to refashion these findings so that, by comparison and contrast, by episodic dissection, by rhetorical consciousness-raising, and by task designs such as the systemic-functionalists' "wheel of genre," they can become more transparent to those who would wish or need to become better consumers or producers of textual exemplars in the targeted genre or genres. I have attempted to show how these latter developments might work out at least in part with the genre of the personal statement/statement of purpose.

But this is not the case with art-historical discourse. This type of discourse, as I have discovered to my cost, has so far proved recalcitrant in revealing its secrets. As Tucker (2003) has noted, discussions of art works show a stronger interdependence of description and evaluation than we customarily find. In addition, there are puzzling relationships between the verbal and visual, and between banal ostensive reference to some feature in the art object and highly allusive and symbolic commentary. It seems clear that this kind of discourse, in its more successful manifestations, succeeds in engaging the reader on many levels, and can do so with very different trajectories for handling the general and the particular, and for describing, invoking and evaluating. Untangling these layers or laminations in ways that would help aspiring readers and writers of such texts remains a task for the future.

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