

Crossing the Boulevard: The Action of “Genre as Social Action”

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My first encounter with Carolyn Miller’s article “Genre as Social Action” had such a powerful impact on me that I remember exactly where I was when I discovered it and exactly my first thoughts. I was crossing Jayhawk Boulevard between my campus building and another, reading someone else’s discussion of genre (who the source was is a detail I’m afraid I’ve lost to time) when I discovered a reference to Miller’s title, and my first thought was, “Damn! I’ve been scooped!” In retrospect, my location was much more significant than my first thought. My first thought was just young and naïve and wrong (being the “brash” junior scholar that Miller in her interview describes herself as). When I read the article itself, I discovered that I had not, in fact, been scooped. Instead, I had been helped, enormously, by this brilliant scholar’s ability to make genre an interdisciplinary and genuinely rhetorical concept.

At the time I first saw a reference to “Genre as Social Action,” I had been struggling for more than three years to find a conception of genre that would explain my research results. I had been working on a book about the process of standardization in written English, a thoroughly linguistic methodology wedded to a compositionist’s interest in Standardized English. My data revealed genre as a statistically significant variable in how the standards changed, and the explanation I had been proposing was that genres represented particular combinations of contextual traits that encouraged or inhibited change in use of different language standards. I was explaining genre’s effects one genre at a time, pointing to this genre’s audience in a particular political climate, another genre’s combination of medium and purpose, and other contextual variables for other genres. I got that genre mattered, and that it reflected its context, but I was pointing to other rhetorical concepts to explain why. Miller’s article provided a theoretical conception of genre itself, rather than ever-shifting traits of particular genres, which explained why genre would matter so significantly. Although it was not until years later that I grasped the significance of her theoretical conception of genre as social action itself (in that first book I stayed wedded largely to Bitzerian rhetorical situation), the insights of Miller’s article enabled me to pursue genre as an object of study itself, leading, eventually, to my own interpretation of her work, and of others’, in my article “Generalizing about Genre.”

My first young and naïve thought of being scooped was certainly nonsense, but my physical location at the moment of discovering Miller’s article did prove meaningful. I discovered the article as I crossed from Wescoe Hall, the “Humanities building” in which the English Department was housed, to Bailey Hall, which now houses the Department of Communication Studies. Miller’s article opened for me the genre scholarship in rhetoric and communication and led me to integrate my previous knowledge of linguistics and composition studies with communication studies and rhetoric more generally. She crossed the street, developing a truly interdisciplinary perspective to create a genuinely rhetorical conception of genre. She used linguistic speech act theory and the social semiotics of Malinowski and Halliday, and introduced me to the rhetoricians Campbell and Jamieson, Black, and even Bitzer. Here is an indication of how wide the gulf between composition and communication studies was at the time, at least in my experience: During my first year at the University of Kansas, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell was a faculty member at KU in Communication Studies (and directing the Women’s Studies program), but I had never met her, didn’t know of her, and had no idea that KU had been the site of a major conference on Form and Genre fewer than ten years before. By the time I

discovered these facts through Miller's article, Campbell was gone from KU. Today, rhetorical scholars in English and Communication Studies at KU have frequent and close connections, but at the time of Miller's article, her combination of theories from linguistics, composition and rhetoric, and communication studies was remarkable. With those fields united, genre studies could encompass language form and rhetorical context; be grounded in empirical data or critical analysis; and apply to everyday discourse, including student writing and workplace documents, as well as to unique oratorical performances. Rhetorical genre studies could have it all.

It is Miller's remarkable reunion of different disciplinary approaches to genre that has enabled so many of us in different disciplines to pursue genre. It is her remarkable theoretical insight about genre that has enabled me and so many others to grasp genre as significant action rather than critical construct. Miller's article explained genre by broadening, as she says in her interview in this issue, "who 'we' are, who's in this particular conversation," and in that action Miller created not only a new understanding of genre but also a space for me and other genre scholars to explore.

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