Article

# Genre Constituents in "Reflections on Genre as Social Action"? A Search in Light of Four 1980s Key Texts

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## Abstract

The article searches main components of genre in a special issue on genre in *Discourse and Writing* in 2020, asking what the key genre constituents are if genre is seen as a general semiotic concept. Possible constituents are first searched in four early theoretisations of genre as a general concept, Frow (1980), Miller (1984), Bakhtin (1986), and Freadman (1987). These texts work as a platform for further inspection of genre perceptions in the special issue, focusing Freadman (2020) and Miller (2020) in particular. They both started theorising genre in the 1980s and have continued their genre re-/search with increased interest in genre as multimodal and semiotic. These six texts form the basis to discuss what may constitute a possible general, multimodal, semiotic communicational genre concept. Three issues are covered more in depth, aspects, levels, and processes of utterances and genres. Problems of applying concepts coined in a (sub-)field, for instance in rhetorical genre studies (RGS), when lifting genre to an interdisciplinary concept are also discussed. The inquiries lead up to the assumption that both utterances and genres can be seen as consisting of five constitutive aspects, form, content, act, time, and space. Four levels are suggested, sign, utterance, genre, and lifeworld. Signs and utterances are seen as mainly surface-phenomena, genre and lifeworld as sub-surface, mental phenomena. Key processes operating between these levels and aspects are briefly outlined. Aspects, levels, and processes of utterances and genres are modelled in a conceptual, pentagonal framework. Finally, some empirical studies are referred to, to demonstrate possible implications of a broad genre concept.

## From 'fontes' to future

The 2020 volume of *Discourse and Writing* contains the special section *Reflections on Genre as Social Action* where Freadman (2020) pays Miller (1984) a "tardy" visit. Miller has a rejoinder,

and three other scholars give their comments. In these contributions' threads to old 'fontes', or sources, come to surface, not only Miller (1984), but even Frow (1980), Bakhtin (1986), and Freadman (1987). Drawing lines from 1980s to 2020s enables inquiries of general, interdisciplinary genre perceptions (Auken, 2020, p. 161).

Since the 1980s both Miller and Freadman have, over four decades, searched and indeed generated new invaluable, much used, and praised re-/sources for future genre research (Miller, 1994, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020; Freadman, 1987, 1994, 2002, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2020). Especially impressive is their continued drive to draw new lines both from their own texts and from new sources generated since the 1980s, when they first published their seminal texts. Their critical, but respectful 2020 exchange on crucial aspects of genre has motivated a search for constituents of an interdisciplinary concept. This extension of the view implies to look beyond specific sub-fields, such as rhetoric, literary studies, writing genres etc.

In the 1970s Todorov searched "the origin of genres" (Todorov, 1976) and Miller has recently asked *Where do genres come from?* (Miller, 2017). In the 1990s, after years with a surplus of new theories in different fields, it was asked *What is this thing called 'genre'?* (Freadman & Macdonald, 1992). Before answering questions of origin one needs to answer the what-is-question. A come-from-question thus forces investigators to argue mainly diachronically while an is-question craves a synchronic perspective and a ditto synchronic answer, often ending defining a phenomenon by a noun. A likely dilemma may occur if the focused research object, here genre, would turn out to be, not only a static phenomenon, a category, but even a developmental process (Berge, 1994), in other words genre as a verb, as 'genrefying', nominalised as genrification (Frow, 2015, p. 147). The inevitable conflict between these two research positions should be addressed. For the sake of validity (Hirsch, 1967; Bakhtin 1981; Ongstad, 2014) both perspectives should be made explicit, because they presuppose each other (Miller, 2016, p. 5-6).

Further, while an is-question may lead to possible genre constituents, questions about the origins of genre raised by a field risk to end in the origin of the field, whereby genre might be perceived as intrinsic to specific kinds of communication, rather than to communication at large. A general perspective may challenge specific field-views: "An inquiry into the nature of genres (…) ramifies out in every direction and involves one's attitudes not merely towards literature but also towards life" (Babbitt, 1910). Admittedly, it makes sense to talk about sorts of film, types of music, kinds of text etc., but taken as a whole it even makes sense, hypothetically, to see genre as a mental faculty to handle communication in life more in general. Kinds of communication can in other words be perceived as life-genres, a term inspired by both by Babbitt (1910) and Luckmann (2009), as well as Voloshinov (1973) (Ongstad, 2019 and 2021). According to Brandist, Voloshinov imagined that all forms of utterance could be treated as genres of various types,

ranging from the small, shifting 'life-genres' enmeshed in direct social interaction to the crystallised forms of 'objective culture' (ethics, politics, philosophy etc.) (Brandist, 2004, pp. 33-34).

## Which sources – and why?

The article is thus framed by searching a set of sources from the past that may deserve to be re-examined in a hunt for what main genre constituents might be. The aim is not to contribute to a history of modern genre theory. It is rather asked which crucial issues seem overlooked or under-researched that in 2021 might still be relevant for (future) genre research, genre studies, and genre pedagogy (Auken, 2020). This 'narrow' focus on particular texts regrettably leaves out other sources and later publications that may have 'taken up' the same issues.

The preferred texts will hence not be analysed according to their own goals and intentions. Focus is rather on prioritised issues, being aware the danger of removing elements of texts from their co- and contexts. Since this focus is motivated by what might still be mostly downplayed, the search is probably influenced by pre-perceptions of what genre in general could be, which the priority of texts may indicate. They discussed genre 'proper', although raised in somewhat different fields og text-studies. Further, all texts have been influential, though in different ways, to different degrees, and along different paths. Besides, Frow, Miller, and Freadman, have continued to clarify their perceptions of genre. Last, but not least, three of the texts share a crucial pattern, an explicit triadic understanding of text and communication. This pattern seems still under-communicated in genre studies and will hence be a key point for this inquiry. A first hypothesis is thus that both genre and communication in context could be seen as basically triadic (Halliday, 1978; Habermas, 1981; Witzany, 2014; Ongstad, 2019). Inspections start with triads found in Frow's, Miller's, and Bakhtin's texts and are followed up by problematising the trilemmatic nature of communicational triads.

## Frow (1980) and Miller (1984)

Frow (1980) departs from Halliday's register theory (Halliday, 1978). The semiotic structure of a situation can be analysed in terms of the three variables of field, tenor, and mode. Field is associated with the ideational function, tenor with the interpersonal function, and mode with the textual function (Frow, 1980, p. 73-74). In other words, Halliday proposes separate sets for the contextual and for the textual level. As commonly known this separation of triadic sets has become a theoretical basis for Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)/Grammar (Martin, 1997). As a contrast, Frow seems to prefer to discuss genre on one level, although he explicitly discusses

Halliday's two-level-solution (text and context). Further, he also prefers the term genre for Halliday's register. In Frow (1980) he does not propose own terms for constitutive, key aspects. However, in his book *Genre* (Frow, 2006), he holds that the structural dimensions that cluster together to constitute the specific configuration of a genre are the formal organisation, the rhetorical structure, and the thematic content (Frow, 2006, p. 74-75). Regarding terminology, Frow (2006) turns his back to Halliday and SFL, prioritising some rhetorical notions. Yet, Frow explicitly says that his own genre concept is (still) roughly equivalent to Halliday's concept register and that genre is seen as a complex of the three dimensions cited above (Frow, 2006, p. 16). In this statement there is no claim that one aspect is *dominant* (Jakobson, 1935). However, in 2005 he had stated:

> The thesis I want to argue in this article is a simple and in some ways rather formalistic one: that textual meaning is carried by formal structures more powerfully than by explicit thematic content; that what texts do and how they are structured have greater force than what they say they are about; and that genre — by which I mean merely the kinds of talking and writing, of imaging and of structured sound — is perhaps the most important of the structures by which texts are organized (Frow, 2005, p. 129).

In the 2015-version of his 2006-book on genre Frow asks: "Given the diversity of dimensions along which genre can be defined (formal structure, thematic structure, mode of presentation, rhetorical function (…), is it possible to produce a coherent account of the interrelations between them?" (Frow, 2015, p. 12). I reveal his answer till later, but reformulate his question: Leaving the specificity of a sub-field of genre studies, what aspects, levels, and processes seem necessary for describing genre as a general, semiotic communicational phenomenon? This question structures further search.

A fully coherent view of genre seems far-fetched, but a sensible starting point for discussions could be Miller (1984), a source much referred to. Miller's view on genre is explicitly triadic, most clearly illustrated in her Figure 1 (Miller, 1984, p. 160) applying and integrating the notions form, substance, and action. Yet, it is worth noting that there exists a hierarchical relationship between substance, form, and meaning-as-action, since she argues that the combination of form and substance at one level becomes an action (has meaning) at a higher level when that combination itself acquires form. Each action is thus seen as interpretable against the context provided by actions at higher levels (Miller, 1984, p. 160). Although Miller briefly mentions both Halliday (1978) and Frow (in note 19), it becomes clear that giving action primacy, hence implying a pragmatic perspective, rather stems from Frentz & Farrell (1976) and Pearce & Conklin (1979). It is probably even inspired by the breakthrough of Wittgensteinean and Searlean ideas of language use and speech acts (respectively) in the 1970ies. Miller argues that a rhetorically sound definition

of genre should be centred, not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish (Miller, 1984, p. 151). Although text and rhetoric are crucial, Miller nevertheless takes a general semiotic perspective arguing that a semiotic framework provides a way to characterize the principles used to classify discourse, according to whether the defining principle is based in rhetorical substance (semantics), form (syntactics), or the rhetorical action the discourse performs (pragmatics) (Miller, 1984, p. 152).

However, Miller still gives primacy to situated actions. In other words as pragmatic, rather than syntactic or semantic" (Miller, 1984, p. 155). An interpretation of this statement is that Miller does not see text (and hence genre?) as triadically even, at least not in the way Frow (1980) and Halliday (1978) seem to do. As commonly known, Miller has later both moved beyond and returned to her seminal text over the years. In Miller (1994) she looks back on some key aspects of her 1984-article, among other her (dynamic) model of aspects and levels. She still would like to stick to the main idea, although she now considers it as "merely a nifty hypothesis at best":

> In the lower levels of the hierarchy, from language up through genre, I relied on the pretty firm foundation of pragmatic linguistics and conversational analysis, and it is here that the triple nature of each level is comprehensible; that is, each level is interpretable in its pragmatic aspect as action, in its syntactic aspect as form, and in its semantic aspect as the substance for the next higher level of meaning. (Miller, 1994, p. 68).

Based on this quote it could be tempting to believe that Miller now has left her crucial idea, namely that form and content (substance) primarily serves action. Since she in 1994 seemingly treats the three aspects as even, we need to follow her further discussions on levels. Regarding the basic question of genre in a system of levels, listed in Figure 2 in Miller (1984, p. 162), nine levels were then suggested of which genre was one. However, in Miller (1994) she discusses Giddens' concept structuration. She admits its relevance, but still concludes that her (new) emphasis on Giddens' notions of structure and structuration will not lead to revise her claim that genre is social action to the claim that genre is social structure. Hence, we are probably back to some form of hypotaxis, when she underlines: "I would still maintain that structure, or form, is a constituent aspect of action and that action is primary" (Miller, 1994, p. 61). In other words, form is not here seen as a main independent constituent of discourse, but primarily as a means for action.

Both with Frow and Miller we are left with a certain openness about what might be the most basic principle for main aspects of genre, hypotaxis (form + content = action) or parataxis (form + content + action). Based on the above first inspections of Frow and Miller some critical issues have come to surface, the question of constituting aspects and the problem of level(s). Further, aspects and levels of course presuppose and imply processes between them too. Finally, as hinted,

the scope should be moved from genre characteristics regarding aspects, levels, and processes coined in a field to genre in general (Auken, 2020; Ongstad, 2019).

## The trilemma of syntax-semantics-pragmatics – some principle positionings

Discussing genre aspects and their relationships there are probably a restricted number of ways these aspects can be positioned. Simplifying crudely, taking a Saussurean or a Chomskyean position is, as a first move, to leave out the pragmatic aspect altogether, giving priority to a synchronically described system (or a grammar) rather than to communication as a real-world process (Bakhtin, 1986; Bavarshi, 2016). According to such a perspective a system is seen as in use first when applied. This essentialist dyadic position, leaving out pragmatics, is rare in genre theory, but has occurred. The most explicit example is Altman's *A semantic/syntactic approach to film genre* (Altman, 1984). However, later he abandoned a dyadic view. The title of the final chapter in Altman (1999) was, *Conclusion: A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre*.

Another position is to apply an integrated triadic view, but to give primacy to one aspect, for instance pragmatics. This position is in my interpretation explicitly taken in Miller (1984) where form and substance ('content') are means to act. Yet, aspects and levels are explicitly mixed. Miller (1984) is far from alone taking this position. A similar variant is SFL's position. Although Hallidayans obviously argue for a balanced triadic view both for their textual and contextual levels, their systemic approach is basically functional (Martin, 1997). Further, what language does, dominates the thinking, at least regarding the kind of genre pedagogy that followed in the wake of Halliday's functional approach (1978).

Even Habermas' position, emphasizing communicative action, is somewhat similar to Halliday's (Ongstad, 2009). However there is a difference. Although genre theory is absent in Habermas' work, he holds that communication and thus what a Husserlean tradition has termed lifeworld is triadic (Habermas, 1981). According to Habermas lifeworld's three key aspects, combining person, world, and society when uttering, should be seen as simultaneous (Habermas, 1998, p. 73 -76). Applying this parataxic principle of simultaneity on utterances and genres gives in the outset key aspects equal status. Habermas nevertheless places his own work among those who give implicitly primacy to action, as symptomatically present in the title of his major work Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1981). Regarding triads, Habermas does take into consideration Searle's Austin-inspired speech act theory (Searle 1971), which is triadic, differentiating between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary 'acts'. Nevertheless, Habermas rather prefers to refer to Bühler (1934). Bühler sees symptoms, symbols, and signals

as three different, in parallel valid sign-perspectives. These are perspectives, not *a* perspective, veiling the problem of parts and/as whole, or the challenge of the hermeneutic circle.

One who seems to argue for a balanced triadic view, surely on the utterance, and likely even on genre, is Bakhtin (1986). If this is the case, we are dealing with basically two triadic positions – one where pragmatics, action, use, or function in different ways and to different degrees is given primacy, a view taken by most theorists, and one where the three aspects are seen as even and equal, taken by few, of which Bakhtin is one of the most prominent.

To conclude so far—openness persists. Given that genres could be seen as communicational triads, one could still ask, with Frow, how these aspects are distributed and organised (Frow, 2015, p. 79). Bakhtin's ground-breaking answer is regrettably mostly overshadowed by strong tendencies to interpret of his work solely as 'dialogism' (Ongstad, 2004). A close reading of his seminal text is needed to show why dialogism is insufficient to understand Bakhtin's work on utterance and genre.

## Bakhtin (1986)

So far, what has been exemplified are some principal positions vis-à-vis the form-content-act trilemma. To repeat, one solution is dyadic, for instance to stick with just form and content. Another is triadic, but gives for instance pragmatics the upper hand, though in different ways and to different degrees. A third is, as will be demonstrated, to define genre as an even balance between the three aspects (Bakhtin, 1986). It is worth noting that Bakhtin did not really claim to construct a genre theory. He primarily described constitutive features of *utterances* and in between wrestled with the challenge of relating these aspects of utterances to aspects of genres and vice versa. It should further be noted that he titled his outlines "*The Problem of Speech Genres*" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60-101).

Bakhtin (1986) first claim seems dyadic as he sees the utterance, its style and its composition as determined by its referentially semantic element (the theme) and its expressive aspect, that is, the speaker's evaluative attitude toward the referentially semantic element in the utterance (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 90). Yet, he does not say that the utterance is determined only by these two. He starts searching for a third element. Pages later he can conclude:

> Thus, addressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist. The various typical forms this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 99).

There are unclear points and possible inconsistencies in his outlines. In Ongstad (2004) they are described in detail. Here follows a concentrated, in somewhat rearranged order of his scattered descriptions of features and aspects. This order follows the logic of the timeline or sequence when uttering (A, B, and C) and establishes a likely compatibility between the parts he has outlined (both sets of 1, 2, and 3):

    A. Delimiting (to discriminate a new utterance from former utterances).

    B. Positioning (the utterance as such by establishing the three key dynamic aspects).

        1. Expressing (by which expressivity becomes a constitutive aspect).

        2. Referring a content (by which referenciality becomes a constitutive aspect).

        3. Addressing (by which addressivity becomes a constitutive aspect).

    C. Finalising (the utterance and make it into a whole by ending the three above aspects).

        1. Finalising expressed forms (by which form as aspect contributes to wholeness).

        2. Semantic exhausting (by which content as aspect contributes to wholeness).

        3. Ending speech will (by which intention as aspect contributes to wholeness).

It should be underlined that the three steps, marked with big letters, delimiting, positioning, and finalising do not form a triad. They are uttering sequences. However, expressing, referring, and addressing, marked with numbers, do. They are parallel, intertwined, inseparable, reciprocal, and simultaneous aspects and processes. In connection with the two sets of the same three aspects Bakhtin has dwelled with and outlined the utterance's relationship to genre as an overarching phenomenon. This can be seen in the last lines of the quote above where an utterance's addressivity was seen as a constitutive feature of various speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 99). Based on the detailed study of this central text (Ongstad, 2004) one could suggest, without having Bakhtin's own explicit words for it, that not only should utterance be seen as triadic, so could even genre. The paradigmatic, epistemological consequences of this view were, as far as known, never drawn by Bakhtin, though there are suggestions that a book on this topic could have been intended (Bakhtin, 1986, p. xv).

Bakhtin's triadic approach was far from new. The triple aspects have their parallels (in different ways though) in inherited triads found in Aristotelian rhetorics, Kant's critiques, Bühler's sign theory, Austinean/Searlean speech act theory, and Halliday's and Habermas' ideas about language and communication (Vejleskov, 1978; Kattenbelt, 1994; Hernadi, 1995; Ongstad, 2004).

There are advantages with Bakhtin's approach. Firstly, he focuses on the utterance, a term that facilitates a possible move away from verbal perspectives to other kinds of semiotics, which is favorable discussing genre as a general phenomenon. His own word for this position was translinguistics (Bakhtin, 1986, p. xv). Secondly, he establishes a dialogical relationship between utterance and genre, and not only between utterances, which has been a more common uptake of

his dialogism. These implicit processes help explain how genres are both maintained and changed and why an utterance in principle is always new and "never the last word". Thirdly he wrestles (elsewhere) with the temporo-spatial concept chronotope, which contains two more dimensions or aspects needed to define communicating as uttering, namely time and place (space) (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 84-258). I have not come across texts where Bakhtin explicitly connects utterance as a triad with chronotope as a dyad though. I return to the issue of 'connecting' these after discussing Freadman (1987/1994 and 2020) since she deals with both with time and place.

Independent of Bakhtin the utterance's constitutive aspects can now be termed form, content, act, time, and space. These five reciprocally defined aspects can by the same token be seen as the necessary building blocks constituting genre as a phenomenon (Ongstad, 2019). If these interpretations are valid, Bakhtin's translinguistic genre concept seems roughly in line with Halliday's outline of register in context as they consider both utterances/texts and genre/register to have basically three aspects, elements, or components with equal weight. Further they both operate with a close relationship between utterance/text and genre/register as two interdependent levels. Finally they both point to semiotic processes that connect and continuously develop this relationship. In Halliday's introduction to functional grammar, these are termed theme-rheme processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013, p. 64). I return to the issue of process briefly when presenting Freadman. In another part/text of the 1986-book, titled *The Problem of the Text*, Bakhtin discusses a related question, "The given and the created in a speech utterance". He describes their intimate interplay as follows:

> An utterance is newer just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and, moreover, it always has some relation to value (the true, the good, the beautiful, and so forth) (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 119-120).

These values point in turn to epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics as well as to Kant's three critiques. The "absolutely new and unrepeatable" in utterances urges genre theorists and genre studies to put more weight on the role dynamics of utterances play for how genre works, a key concern for Freadman.

## Freadman (1987/1994 and 2020)

It is clear that Freadman's well-known key concept *uptake* is at the core of genre seen as a (diachronic and a semiotic) process. Since priority is on the synchronic question – which elements may constitute the utterance, and not on how genres develop, uptake is not taken up, here. Briefly though, if related to Bakhtin, uptake can be seen as a first step that concerns the concrete flow of

discourse, what Bakhtin termed delimiting and finalising of utterances and not the triad as such (Bakhtin, 1986).

Of the prioritised texts Freadman's is the only one that does not dwell with an explicit triadic perspective on genre. Where to position Freadman then in this picture? One of the main values of Freadman's critical inquiries in genre theory as a field is questioning 'certainties' (Freadman, 1987/1994, 2012, and 2020). Since priority here is on inspecting genre as triadic, a main point in Freadman (2020) is hence omitted, sharpening awareness about the nature of exigence. However, she does discuss other issues relevant for inquiring aspects, levels, and processes, and even the question of 'fields'. I will dwell with five.

A first point is her argument in Freadman (1994, p. 54) that the 'nature' of genre as combinations of like- and not-statements obstructs fixations of genre as a concept. Genre means like, but not the same as. Genres have 'family resemblances'. Freadman points to the paradox-like semantic-logic 'nature' of genre as a notion (similar to kind, sort, and type). She convincingly argues that this genre pattern needs clarification (Freadman, 1994, p. 54-60). With my words the dilemma like-but-different could be illustrated by the letter Y, visualizing a tree, which trunk is 'sameness' and branches are 'differences'. In short, seeing a whole as a both/and. Further, a trunk may be short (more open genres) or long (more closed genres). Yet, to describe an actual concrete blend in a specific genre, is rather a question for empirical studies of concrete utterances when returning to (sub-)disciplines and (sub-)fields.

Two major pitfalls in genre studies when aiming for expansion of the concept are common. Either to study only more closed genres concluding that genres are dominated by the pattern similarity or to study only more open genres concluding that difference is the core defining pattern. Taking Freadman's position genre should be seen as a kind of kind of kind etc., where further differentiation of each kind is related to the actual sub-field's particular semiotics (to be clarified empirically). Most important, they could be seen as semiotic signs, working as independent elements in utterances (Ongstad, 2019).

Secondly, she dwells with the need to integrate place, claiming that the notion of place should be seen as relational rather than absolute:

> It is most unlikely, however, that any linguistic feature taken in isolation could be held to be characteristic of a genre; rather, what we might expect is that combinations of features might count as the conventional markers of a genre. It is a quite other question whether such combinations of features count as constitutive of a genre in the same way that the use of performative verbs in the firstperson, present tense indicative mood indicate the typical cases of many speech acts. My argument leads me to suggest that it is place, rather, that constitutes

genre, and that the functions and roles entailed by place determine the interlocutory structure

of a genre. (Freadman, 1994, p. 51).

If place (or space) is claimed to constitute genre and it is argued that no linguistic feature taken in

isolation can be a characteristic of a genre, a more likely perception of genre could rather be that

all key/main features/aspects of sign and utterance characterise and constitute even genre as a

phenomenon. Hence, although Freadman does mention speech act, content, and form, and she

writes about time elsewhere, there is not yet a putting-together, a mustering of these key aspects,

of how they may relate, else than the suggestion that place is the necessary first, basic, dominant,

crucial piece in the puzzle to get the whole picture. Nevertheless, it is easy to support her

argument that place is crucial, but harder to think that it is an overall *dominant* except in specific

genres (Jakobson, 1935/1971).

A third point is a dispute on genres as system(s). In Freadman (2020) she critiques what she

considers as square (closed) use of the concept system. Here I find both Miller's and Auken's

comments appropriate (Miller, 2020; Auken, 2020). In line with them I think most users and

interpreters ('scholars') in 2020 see genre systems as partly open, as general, as local etc., as

systemic (Ongstad, 2019). Aspects and levels may be related in many different ways, using such

metaphors as Chinese boxes, as (ever) growing trees, as rhizomes, as complex cells, as mineral

structures, as skyscrapers, as terrace houses, as cauliflower, etc. It is hardly ever a (closed) system.

Hence, one could agree with Freadman's own use of Miller (1984, p. 153) claiming that the set of

genres is an open class and of Frow (2006, p. 102) holding that genre norms are shared and

shareable and are built into more or less durable infrastructures (Freadman, 2020, p. 121-122).

This implies that a definition of genre most likely should be flexible enough to allow both for

extreme fixation (similarities) such as forms/formula as well as extreme openness overloaded

with new elements (differences) such as radical art (art that contests genre). Seeing genres as

related, say, as a set or network, actualises how they as a whole may relate to the idea of lifeworld

as communicative, an issue that will be touched upon in the last part.

A fourth issue is linguistics as problematic. In her concluding remarks Freadman (2020)

arrives at the core of two crucial issues: (i) what is a typified situation that can be said to call for

a genre? and (ii) what is the relation between a type and its occurrence? (Freadman, 2020, p. 127).

How she deals with question (i) will be inspected in the following, but not (ii), as this inquiry's

interest is what she does with constituents of utterance (and thus genre). She takes an explicit

general semiotic position but seems to dismiss both Halliday's and Morris' perceptions (Halliday,

1978; Morris, 1938, my references). In her view Halliday's usage refers to the social construction

of meaning. Freadman is also critical to Morris' idea that semiotics could be seen as the syntax,

semantics, and pragmatics combined. She characterises these aspects as linguistic. To me Morris

rather seems to try describe what the main branches of semiotics as a field *could* be: "'Syntactics' is not a term within syntactics, but a strictly semiotical term – and the same is true for semantics and pragmatics" (Morris, 1938, p. 52).

In Freadman's view Miller (1984, p. 159) falls into this trap by viewing the semantic values of a string of words and their syntactic relationships in a sentence as something acquiring meaning, and where "meaning" is construed as their "pragmatic value as action" (Freadman, 2020, p. 127). For her semiotic (rather than linguistic) refers to the whole range of signs, not exclusively linguistic signs. Other key aspects, for instance time (just as place), risk to slip between the fingers by this priority:

> Time, too, is organized semiotically, by clocks and various forms of institutional scheduling; importantly, like the space, the time of the performance is separated out from the time of other events from which it is reciprocally distinguished by the principle of difference. It is not clear to me, then, why the genre is distinct from the situation in which it takes place: for a semiotician, the genre just consists of all of these things. It is only by singling out language that *situation* seems to be made of a different kind of stuff (Freadman, 2020, p. 127).

Her claim that time, and even place, is semiotic is easy to agree on. Traditionally these two aspects have often been put in a generalised box called context (here situation). It is about time for these two aspects to move in and take place even within utterance and genre, not only around. Chronotopes might play a double role, both within utterances and related to perceptions of contexts of situation when uttering and/or interpreting. Unfortunately space for discussing this paradox-like view of genres as situations is too scarce.

A fifth, and last point concerns semiotic processes. Freadman argues that we need also to assume a mechanism such as infinite semiosis to account for the combination of inertia and instability observable in the practice of genres (Freadman, 2020, p. 128). In fact, in a very general sense there already exist concept-pairs such as production/reproduction or innovation/tradition of culture or of meaning. Also, at the utterance level we find pairs such as new/given or rheme/theme (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2013). As Freadman points to, a sign implies infinite semiosis, a restless, never-ending dynamics of a triadic relationship between a sign or representamen (a first), an object (a second), and an interpretant (a third). All the above notions are relevant to describe, not only continued uptake in a discursive chain, but even ongoing dialogical interplay as processes between utterances and genres. A key point is that genre theory could do with a better understanding of which major processes are at work between utterance and genre and their aspects and levels.

To conclude based on the above discussed points – while Freadman has not explicitly mentioned the triad, she has indeed contributed to a much-needed expansion of genre thinking.

## Genre fields 'going general'?

When asking "*The origin of genres/Where do genre come from*?" (Todorov, 1976; Altman, 1999; Miller, 2017) and "*What is (this thing called) genre?*" (Freadman & Mcdonald, 1992), one often arrives such general perspectives from specific genre fields, a challenge also commented by Auken (2020, p. 167). Interdisciplinary studies need to see sign, genre, and communication as overarching concepts. Freadman, who has worked with both genre theory and Peircean semiotics since the 1980s, claims that any semiotic theory of interpretation requires mobilising of both sign and genre. For her a sign is inadequate without an accompanying postulate of genre (Freadman, 2004, p. xxxviii). To combine sign and genres, is indeed to establish a general communicational semiotic epistemology, but does not necessarily imply primacy for, say pragmatics, a much-favoured choice in genre theory.

Both Miller and Freadman want to extend the scope of new rhetoric, both regarding the field's research(ed) objects and its analytical tools. Both therefore welcome semiotics, but while Miller seems to find an extension less problematic, Freadman points to restrictions within the field itself:

> Rhetorical Genre Studies, or their theory, restrict the scope of their inquiry to the field of rhetoric, conceived both as an account of the social action of discourse and as the art, or practice, of discourse to carry out such action. It is consistent with this restriction that they seek criteria that would differentiate between genres on the grounds of the actions they carry out, and the ways and means of that carrying out. These are *functional criteria* (Freadman, 2020, p. 106).

What Freadman seems to hint by underlining functional, is that RGS places itself within pragmatics. Auken asks what role Freadman's reflections would play if genre were seen as an independent topic of research and not "just" as a sub-topic of rhetoric (Auken, 2020, p. 167). A possible answer is that pragmatics rather could be placed within semiotics and communication, whereby act or action is only one of several aspects constituting genre, as this article try to demonstrate by seeing even form, content, time, and space as joined key aspects.

A related question is whether exigence is an adequate, relevant concept when discussing what genre in general is. A wide, 'careful', or open interpretation of exigence or exigency could be something that prompt a rhetor to act discursively, in other words coming close to purpose and/or intention, a reason for verbal action. In Miller's terms it could be said to provide rhetors with socially recognizable ways to make their intentions known, creating rhetorical situations (Miller, 2020). Vatz (1973) claims that exigence rather is socially constructed and that rhetoric itself generates an exigence or rhetorical situation ('*The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation*'). It is the choice to focus on the situation (as a situation) that creates the exigence (Nordquist, 2020). A

rhetor acts, and exigence is the act's motive. According to Freadman Miller's adaptation of exigence is intended explicitly to be applied to all genres (Freadman, 2020, p. 119). Purpose or intention is of course highly relevant for the use of any genre, but from a general semiotic perspective on utterances and genres it is questionable whether it should be seen as an aspect in genre as such. It perhaps seems more relevant to see different exigences as motives for choosing different particular genres when uttering.

## Communication simplex and/or communication complex?

A general problem with describing genres as communicative is what is meant by communication. Communication can crudely simplified be perceived roughly in two ways. Firstly generally and rather broadly as just uttering. Secondly, and more narrowly, communication could be understood in a Gricean sense, defined as/by maxims for cooperative communication (Grice, 1969) or communication as never-ending dialogues (Bakhtin, 1986). Starting with genre it is more likely ending up discussing Grice's maxims for joint communication (Frow, 2005, p. 77-80; Giltrow, 2020, p. 145; Østergaard & Bundgaard, 2014, p. 144). For the enterprise of this article, the simple, basic version, communication as uttering, seems sufficiently adequate, for the time being when the ambition is to clarify a general genre concept as communication, form, content, act, time, and space seem sufficient, in the first round.

However, to keep these two perspectives on communication both together and separate seems to be an unsolvable paradox or Gordian knot for semiotics, but the two versions do perhaps not necessary exclude one another. On the contrary a description of the complex version is dependent on a sound understanding of the simple version and vice versa. Since Grice's maxims to a high degree are related to language and to a lesser degree to general semiotics, the complex version has not been applied here. General semiotic genre theory has admittedly a long way to go before this philosophical nut is cracked, if ever (Moore, 2017).

## Level(s)?

So far focus has been on aspects and processes and the issue of genre studies/fields going general. What is missing is levels. Degree of delicacy within an aspect is about communicational levels (Halliday, 1994). Miller (1984) related aspects to levels. Her, and earlier, for example Kinneavy's and Pike's (separate) searches for a hierarchy is a necessary a move to obtain improved clarity of relations between levels. However, as she herself evaluates years later, the suggested list is problematic (Miller, 1994, p. 68; Kinneavy, 1971; Pike, 1967). If genre is considered to be a communicational phenomenon, consistency demands to leave out 'neighbour' phenomena, such

as behavioreme (Pike, 1967) and culture (Miller, 1984). Further, communicational levels are not necessarily the same across different semiotics. Nöth (1990, p. 419), in his Handbook of Semiotics, shows how different kinds of semiotics establish different kinds of aspect/level-systems. Pike (1967) suggested a hierarchy of linguistic levels. As mentioned Bakhtin refused to build on traditional linguistics, and talked about a translinguistics, what we today could term semiotics or communication. So, on which levels do we find communication?

Miller (1994) is rightly concerned with the epistemology of levels asking where genre might fit in a hierarchy. With departure in Bakhtin (1986) one can for instance start with two inevitable, tightly intertwined levels, namely utterance and genre. The process of apprehending utterances is dependent on genre. It is a resource that can help deciding, approximately what kind of communication an utterance might be. Accordingly, genre is both a process, a communicational force, and a new 'level'. Candidates for other levels could be sign and lifeworld. However, since signs here are seen as dependent elements within utterances, signs should not be seen as communication, but syntactically they are still on a different level. (Only if a sign works as a complete utterance a single sign could be said to function as communication and form a level.) There are different views of signs though. There are tensions between Bühler's, Peirce's, and Morris' views of the sign (Ongstad, 2019) among which Freadman prioritises Peirce.

Jumping directly to a conclusion, discussing genre in general, the many sub-aspects are seen as signs, and an aspect is not seen as a communicational level. Due to structural syntax perceptions an expectation could be that the level of utterance should be above the level of signs. To me it is of less importance whether a model is visualised top-down or bottom-up. Figure 1 shall primarily illustrate relationships between the levels utterance and genre.

Habermas (1981), Günthner & Knoblauch (1995), and Luckmann (2009) see lifeworld in a communicational perspective. Yet, lifeworld does not communicate. It could rather be thought of as a mental sphere or mind-context for making sense for uttering and interpreting. In other words as a basic mental platform for communicational 'meaning' and 'sense' that different kinds of utterances (genres) could have (Ongstad, 2019). The three life-world dimensions, self, world, and society are seen as inner spheres communicators are socialized by and in which a particular genre make sense. Their (individual) lifeworlds are very general (re-)sources for meaning. There is an interesting hint in Miller (2020, p. 137) that she may be open for such an idea. Admittedly theories of lifeworld do not explain well enough how to relate the aspects time and space to the three aspects that constitute lifeworlds. The two should nevertheless be added, as Freadman's outlines suggest.

# A framework of aspects, levels, and processes in semiotic communication

It is time for summing up and to integrate the four inquired issues. After digging in four 1980-sources and some new, two interrelated communication levels are suggested and described. Two other levels, sign and lifeworld are hinted, but not discussed in detail. Both utterance and genre are seen as constituted by five constituting, reciprocal aspects, form, content, act, time, and space. Aspects in utterances and their many sub-aspects are seen as made up by signs as *dependent* elements, as kinds of kinds of kinds etc. All genres that communicators are socialised to, and by, are seen integrated in their individual lifeworld. Interplay between levels is regulated by processes, for instance semiosis, given-new mechanisms, genrification, and cultural innovation, and possibly others (Ongstad, 2019). Processes on different levels are in practice intimately interrelated since change at one level may affect processes on other levels.

These outlines risk to be (mis-)interpreted as a move toward "grand" theory (Freadman, 2014, p. A-6; Auken, 2020). Just as well they can be seen as a strive in an opposite direction, as a search for a "greatest common divisor". What is suggested then is not a theory of how all things work, but a simplified conceptual framework consisting of the fewest necessary cornerstones within which interdisciplinary discussions on genre as a general communicational phenomenon can take place.

Three of the main issues in this article, aspects, levels, and processes can be collected and visualised in a more general 'model' of the relationship between utterance and genre. A top plane represents the utterance, which consists of five aspects, which again are made up by signs. Habermas' principle of simultaneity and Bakhtin's notion of wholeness are applied. The two concern and are therefore valid for the set of aspects as a whole. The lower part represents the level of genre, which consists of the same five aspects. This 'cut' pentagonal pyramid is seen as standing on a basis, representing a communicator's lifeworld, to which all genres are directly connected. Utterance is placed above, only to metaphorise what comes out, what has arrived on a surface, what is concrete and perceptible, while genre is seen as an inner, 'deeper', more abstract phenomenon, under the surface, in total much like an iceberg.

These views are mainly synchronic and can at the best be valid only when regarding genre as a general concept, what it is. It nevertheless implies that each of the five communicational aspects or their numerous sub-aspects (elements) in different semiotic modes they consist of, can occur as dominant aspects in concrete utterances and genres – when studied empirically.
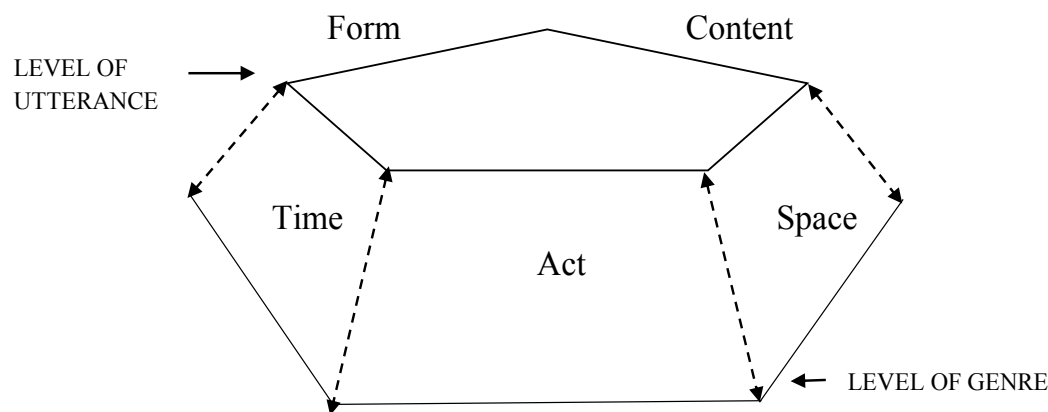
Figure 1. Five basic aspects constituting utterance and genre as communication. The pentagonal relationship between the five basic aspects applies for both levels. As a whole utterance and genre is modelled as a shortened or cut pentagonal pyramid with utterance as a concrete surface plane and genre as an underlying 'abstract' part, marked by lines on an imagined floor. The dotted lines with double-headed arrows between the two planes symbolise the dynamic, dialogical, reciprocal relationships between of utterance and genre. These processes work both in the moment of uttering and of interpreting (seen synchronically) and over time through communicational development of utterers/interpreters (seen diachronically). [© The Author.]

This framework can eventually be compared with Frow's conclusion about what could be a coherent account of interrelations between the dimensions. He argued that different genres give a different weight to the formal, rhetorical, or thematic dimensions of their structure, and have a characteristic configuration in each of the three areas:

> "But it is nevertheless central to my definition of genre that each of these three dimensions has a constitutive role, and that there is no genre whose properties are not codified in each of them. It is this that allows us to distinguish genre from organisations of discourse which are more general (for example, from mode, style, speech variety, or discursive formation) and less general (for example, speech acts) " Frow (2015, p. 84).

A conclusion is that Frow (2015) has hence landed on a balanced view, which means that in the outset no dimension is seen as dominant. Further, he seems to stick to a rhetorical term for the pragmatic aspect. Also, time and space are not included. Finally, his explicit point of departure is genre, not utterance, which makes clear that Frow's description above does not follow Halliday and Bakhtin, both operating with more than one level. He nevertheless makes clear that his own genre concept still is roughly equivalent to Halliday's register and that genre is a complex of the three dimensions in the quote above (Frow, 2015, p. 85).

## So what?

How to hit the track back to the (sub-)fields and practical studies from here? By accepting an even balance of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in chrono-topical time-space, as a starting point. And further by adopting Jakobson's (and Bühler's?) idea of the dominant (Jakobson, 1935/1971)

keeping in mind that each main aspect can occur as a prioritised dominant aspect for different kinds of utterances, genres, and communication in concrete cases. In empirical (re-)search one will come across genres dominated by form, by content, by act, by time, by place, or by any combinations thereof. (See for instance Ongstad (2005) studying writing, Ongstad (2020) for analysing L1 curricula, and Ongstad (2014 and 2021) for problematising methodology and 'content'.)

To study concrete occurrences is primarily an empirical endeavor within or across the many different genre fields (Reiff & Bavarshi, 2010). The complexity for utterers and interpreters, students, and researchers of relating to the many aspects of communication, simplified in the framework's aspects, levels, and processes has led to the concept positioning(s), an intermediate methodological simplifying (Ongstad, 2007). Empirically study of positionings, in different versions and to different degrees, have been applied in research on writing (Krogh and Jakobsen, 2019; Ongstad, 1999, 2002a, 2005; Smidt, 2002, 2009) and in several master and Ph.D. theses in Scandinavia, further in critical curricular studies of L1 as a school subject (Krogh 2020; Ongstad, 2010, 2020; Smidt 2011), and even in research on mathematics education.

If focusing methodology the framework should move communicators' (included analysts') attention from genre or from utterance (text) as such to dynamics between them (Bakhtin, 1986). The same holds for dynamics between key aspects and the many sub-aspects belonging to each of the 'five'. Increased awareness might help reducing the blindness of focusing, a main methodological challenge when validating communicational research from sub-fields, such as genre and discourse analysis (Ongstad, 2014). A (friendly) critique of such possible imbalances of Habermas' triadic thinking is found in Ongstad (2009).

A self-/critical pinpointed summary of advantages and challenges applying the framework and methodologies of positioning is found in Ongstad (2014, pp. 13-14) under the heading *A brief bullet-point evaluation of a double triadic framework*. Here I would just say that a general framework does not solve any problem. It rather creates new challenges forcing analysts to validate more specifically and more broadly: any work with or study of genres needs to balance relevance and validity based on its purpose. It is for instance a wide span between (rather safe) descriptions of structural form of simple utterances to the risky business of catching complex genres as 'wholes'. Meticulous studies of form may be scientifically precise, but educationally irrelevant, just as an intriguing framework of genre and utterance may be theoretically 'interesting' but as such do not necessary help any student to write. On the other hand have complexities of multimodal communication led to an increased need for educational authorities around the world to have both a broader and a more specific understanding of the many fields when prioritising curricular goals (Berge et al., 2016; Sedgwick, 2011).

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