

Genre Innovation – a Prologue

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The concept of ‘genre’ is an integral part of the everyday life of most scholars. It is present in reading, writing and conversation, or any other mode of communication and exchange. In the humanities, we study genre in different media and in a multitude of manners. Still, we experience few explorations of the ‘genre’ concept and its complexity between or beyond disciplinary divides or across media, including in the context of innovation. Rapid changes in infrastructures and material platforms fostered by digitalisation are constantly exposing and challenging the concepts of genres and genre theories. A general or transmedia approach to genre innovation and change is thus more pertinent than ever. Why such endeavors still remain to emerge continues to be a puzzle. It is our conviction that multimedia and multimodal advances towards increased genre understanding – theoretical and practical, critical and constructive, and across disciplines – have significant unrealised potential.

This is the focus of this special issue of the Journal of Media Innovations. Norwegian and international contributors take up a mix of issues in articles that have been developed over time as part of a wider research project into genre. The articles grew out of a research seminar and are part of an ongoing research collaboration between the guest editors, the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo and the Centre for Design Research at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design. This collaboration covers areas such as design and the digital humanities, research mediations, media and innovation, locative media, scholarly publishing and media design, to mention a few. Across and within these interests is a shared goal of investigating the roles of genre in mediated communication.

What though is genre innovation? Schumpeter made the important distinction between invention and innovation. Invention may be an original idea

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or a new device, while an innovation is an implementation of such inventions in socio-economic settings. In the context of genre, we may say that while Joseph Haydn may be seen to have invented the genre of compositions for the string quartet, it was the fact that other composers and musicians repeated and further developed his initial invention that secured the format as a genre innovation. Likewise, Edgar Allan Poe invented the early prototypes of the detective story, but it was with the adaptation of the same format of stable elements by other more successful authors, like Arthur Conan Doyle, that ensured its existence as a genre innovation. Edwin S. Porter is known to have invented cross-cutting in film editing that is so important to the genres of cinematic storytelling, but it is thanks to the later discoveries of other directors and further refinements of his techniques that these devices became defining elements of innovative and successful film genres.

In the following treatments of genre innovation we move from the general to the specific, from conceptual analysis and discussions to examples and their comparison and application, from changes caused by intrinsic conditions to external influences, from the theoretical to the practical and the pedagogical. Against this backdrop, it is important to recall that genre innovation is not an established academic field in its own right. Use of the notion is limited. Thus, this special issue must be seen as an early and indeed tentative attempt to map the field, and a charting that is in no way systematic. However, we see that the analyses on offer are each distinct and provide some of the key elements of defining more fully what genre innovation might be understood to be and some of the instantiations as to how it might be conducted. The five gathered contributions draw from a variety of theories, methods and media. As a preliminary venture, at this stage in building knowledge on genre innovation, these must be seen as loose couplings. However, this does not mean that they are unrelated or disconnected. To the contrary, we see these texts as deeply interrelated; further, they need to be read in interaction with each other so as to amplify their novelty and their situated inquiry most fully. We

hope that readers also will see, and be inspired through discovering, patterns that connect the various approaches and perspectives, their resemblances and differences, echoing the relationship between the genres themselves. Let us now turn to the contributions and their specific takes on genre innovation.

First of all, genre is a metaphor. In ‘Genre Innovation: Evolution, Emergence, or Something Else?’ Carolyn R. Miller explores the inclination in genre theorisation to rely uncritically on evolution and emergence as key explanatory concepts without examining or understanding their origin and use in the natural sciences. Miller’s investigation demonstrates the need to be cautious in conceptual adaptation across disciplines and that we learn to accept both differences and affinities between essences and relationships, abstractions and descents.

In Stian Grøgaard’s ‘Three Incidents at the Border of Genre’, genre is treated more concretely and comparatively, as well as from the outside, of both general and specific genre theory. Based on three independent but ‘generic’ genre examples – an early painting by Edvard Munch, Clint Eastwood’s final western and one of Bob Dylan’s most celebrated blues songs – we are shown a grammar of genre

and how genre incidents themselves may rise to a plane of self-reflection and present demonstrative conceptions of specific genres rather than just being examples of the same.

Synne Skjulstad and Andrew Morrison’s ‘Fashion Film and Genre Ecology’ moves to ongoing changes in the mediation of fashion, in particular how it is taking shape on evolving digital platforms. Through close analysis of three incidents of web-based fashion films, they identify the following defining qualities: commissioning, disarming and popularising. Together, these aspects and examples, and their relationships to various cross disciplinary approaches, constitute the suggested concept of ‘genre ecology’. This is presented as a productive framework for understanding genre innovation in emerging media.

Genre innovations in web-based media is further taken up in Cheryl E. Ball’s contribution ‘The Shifting Genres of Scholarly Multimedia: Webtexts as Innovation’. Ball explores problems related to understanding the fluctuations of innovations in academic webtexts as a phenomenon across media and genres, and particularly stresses the difficulty in identifying stable features due to rapid changes in technology and formatting. As a consequence,

she draws our attention to the importance of meta-data, and its neglect, and outlines a vocabulary for webtexts to improve the conditions for longitudinal studies of their historical and generic changes.

In the final contribution to this special issue, ‘Designing Communication Design’, Anders Sundnes Løvlie presents a practical and pedagogical take on genre and innovation. The author, himself a ‘genre inventor’ in location-based media, draws on his experiences in establishing a university course on media and communication design. As part of the course conception, he introduces several models, methods and techniques in advancing constructive competencies among students; these have proven productive in the process from initial invention to innovation and market uptake, indicating its relevance and importance.

We would have wished to have extended these analyses of genre innovation to include additional articles that combine criticism and construction with explicit focus on designing genre invention and innovation as part of a more systematic methodological conduct. We look forward to pursuing

this in future publications and with a wider group of media, design and innovation developers and scholars.

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