

# The Resuscitation of Meaning

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## Part One: Genre and History

I recently went to a folk concert. An American folk concert: unplugged stringed instruments, their hallow bodies scarred from the blade of a pick or fingernail; intimate settings, a dimly lit tavern with hardwood floors, beaten in from the heavy stomps of excited feet; cold drinks, close friends, familiar words of confabulation sliding through the air. The band up on stage, a stage just big enough for the four of them—a humble group, draped in flannel, loose-fit blue jeans, boots, beards unkempt. And this band sang with grit, grinding lyrics rooted in the heart. The crowd danced, feet tapping. A man asks a woman to dance—he’s smiling yet focused, she’s jovial, a light frame being carried with the music. This, I think, is what it must have been like; the 1950’s in the rural Midwest, communities steeped deeply in the shared values of family, friends, hard work and a good time. This is what it must have been like, I think.

Why? How could I make assumptions about the values, understandings, communications, behaviors, and identifies of a community so detached from the present? Were these assumptions accurate, and if so, how accurate were they? Was I, in the year 2014, participating in a system of activity—in a network of meaning—that was in the peak of its stimulation some sixty years ago? If so, how was this resuscitation of meaning made possible, and what are its limits? Are the contexts of past communities as inaccessible as they may seem? Let’s plunge into some of these questions through Rhetorical Genre Studies and Semiology and see what we surface with. First, let’s see how our understanding of genre has evolved to the point that it can help us approach such abstract, historically driven questions.

## The Evolution of Genre Studies

An old conception of genre, thanks in large part to our affinity for formalist criticism and romanticism in general, has genre functioning as a static category into which certain texts fit; forms that are independent from their content, representing a distant dichotomy between form and text. This is the conception that we must avoid, for it robs genre of its generative, reproductive capacities.

In his 1968 article “The Rhetorical Situation,” Lloyd Bitzer describes the rhetorical situation as a “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced to the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (6). Bitzer’s definition marks an important shift from our conventional conceptions of genre: rather than seeing genres as containers made up of formal features, we instead see genres as responses to situations that recur over time. This definition, then, captures one of genres most important features: genres are reproduced, not replicated. Genres evolve with the social and cultural systems that they are apart of.

The major breakthrough in Rhetorical Genre Studies, however, came with Carolyn Miller’s 1984 article “Genre as Social Action.” Miller picks up on Bitzer’s notion of exigence and genre being grounded in the recurring rhetorical situation, but finds Bitzer’s rhetorical situation to be too based on reaction, causing the contextual exigence to seem like an external cause and situational reactions to be inevitable (28). This leads to Miller’s first important move: rejecting the rhetorical situation as material and objective, instead arguing that situation is a social construct, a semiotic structure (30). Miller’s second move is to describe exigence not as “an imperfection marked by urgency” (Bitzer, 6)—that is, a danger or defect, but as a form of social knowledge: “Exigence,” Miller writes, “must be seen neither as a cause of rhetorical action nor as intention, but as a social motive” (30). The result of these two departures from Bitzer is that genre becomes “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,” “an open class, with new members evolving, old members decaying” (25, 31). With this in mind, I ask: do those “old members” and the meaning they contain become lost to history, or can that meaning be brought back to life? If meaning is embedded within recurring rhetorical situations, then if the rhetorical situation is reconstructed, is the meaning reconstructed as well? We’ll return to some of these questions later on.

Since Miller’s article, there have been a number of developments in the Rhetorical Genre Studies field, with scholars contributing to the understanding of genres as social actions, cultural artifacts, and how genres participate in a particular culture’s understanding, communications, and actions. As a result, there have been various

concepts created to help emphasize genre and its connections to related communities. We will explore a few of them in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of genre and how it may function in the resuscitation of meaning.

A major contributor to the field of RGS has been Charles Bazerman, professor of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. While Bazerman's research stretches across multiple fields, his primary influence in genres studies has been his expansion on the work of Amy Devitt, giving us genre sets and genre systems. In Bazerman's words, a genre set is "the collection of types of texts someone in a particular role is likely to produce," and genre systems are "comprised of several genre sets of people working together in an organized way" (318). Genre systems are made up of various genre sets; the relations between them embody social roles, identities, and relationships in different contexts. Again, with these basic concepts in mind, we can return to our original inquiry: if the understanding, or meaning, that a particular culture functions by is located within the relations between genre systems and genre sets, then if we can identify to the best of our ability genre systems and genre sets from the *past*, perhaps we can resuscitate pulses of meaning—even if it's only a few—that have remained relatively unchanged throughout time.

Before we move on to applying some of the questions and concepts to concrete examples, it will help if we briefly turn to the work of Anne Freedman; in particular, her two important essays "Anyone for Tennis" and "Uptake." In her essays, Freedman likens genre to a game of tennis in an effort to describe how genres interact and take up each other within different contexts. Bahktin called these contexts "spheres of human activity" (*The Problem of Speech Genres*, 64); Freedman calls them "ceremonials" (46). While genres may make up the rules of the game, it is the ceremonials that make that game meaningful: ceremonials are "the rules for the setting of a game, for constituting participants as players in that game, for placing and timing it in relation with other places and times. They are the rules for playing of a game, but they are not the rules of the game" (Freedman, 46-47); Genres, then, are games that take place within ceremonials; genres make up the rules for the exchange of texts, or "shots" (Bawarshi, 84), and it is these shots that players exchange. Further, meta-genres—"atmospheres surrounding genres" (Giltrow, 195)—are what stabilize the exchanges of "shots." While all of the terms constituting Freedman's tennis analogy are important, what we want to keep in mind most as we move forward is her notion of "ceremonials"—the entire system of signs that gives value and meaning to the game. If ceremonials reiterate, as Bawarshi suggests, "the idea that genres situate and distribute cognition, frame social identities, organize spatial and temporal relations, and coordinate meaningful, consequential actions within contexts (Bawarshi 95), then identifying ceremonials is our first task in resuscitating meaning; genre sets, genre systems, their interactions, and all the meaning that is encapsulated within them are embodied, are located, within the ceremonial. If we can reconstitute even traces of a past ceremonial, then perhaps those traces can lend us insight into the cognition, social identities, relations, and actions of past historical contexts. Let's turn to some examples to help flesh out these speculations.

### Locales of Resuscitation

First, allow me to make clear what I do not mean by the resuscitation of meaning. I do not mean merely historical reenactment, "living history," as is seen in the American Renaissance Fairs, or amateur actors volunteering to take part in the reenactment of Gettysburg, for example. These, while entertaining, are just that: entertainment. These historical reenactments, perhaps, give a brief and superficial glimpse into a particular lifestyle, but they certainly do not lend insight into how and why those lifestyles were lived, at least not at the rhetorical and semiotic level—a level that, more than anything else, tells us most about the intricate wirings of a culture. Here is another important point: these historical reenactments treat contexts as a backdrop to which interaction takes place. As Anis Bawarshi demonstrates in his "Ecology of Genre," context and genre have a highly symbiotic relationship, both shaping and reinforcing one another throughout time. This is perhaps our hardest task: how to reconstruct, even in traces, a ceremonial that is in constant evolution in accordance with the genre sets and genre systems that it is giving meaning to and acquiring meaning from; a ceremonial that, it seems, is elusive to a distinct moment in time. This, indeed, is a major obstacle, and one that will be given attention to later. For the time being, let's turn to some examples.

**The Academic Seminar:** Different pedagogies have come in and gone out of popularity since Socrates and his elenctic method of inquiry. Still, the Socratic method is what heavily facilitates the seminar in contemporary academia. What is it about the seminar—this ancient form of instruction, discussion, and learning—that draws both professor and student into its educational realm? Might it be that pulses of meaning, understanding, and identity shaped by the first ceremonial—Plato's Academy—can still be felt by those communicants today who participate in the reconstruction of that ceremonial? If we carefully and attentively look for important signs, codes, genres, genre sets, genre systems—all part of the ceremonial—and align them, according to our best guess, with that of the

Platonic Academy, is there any meaning resuscitated? Are we in any way sharing, participating in a similar meaning-system as Plato and Aristotle? Has our window into a particular historical moment been made any clearer?

**Mock-Crucifixions:** For the past few decades, Catholic zealots in the Philippines have carried out mock-crucifixions every Easter, flagellating their backs and nailing themselves onto a cross. Men dressed as Roman soldiers hammer steel nails through the penitent's hands and feet. Thankfully, these fanatics are not left to die; they hang on the cross for several minutes, and are eventually taken down and rushed to a medical tent. As strange of behavior as this is, from the perspective of this current project and the questions that we're asking, we can perhaps approach understanding this grisly tradition. How is this different from the reenactment of historical moments that I repudiated before? Again, we turn to motive. I do not believe that those volunteering to be crucified were doing so for the sake of entertainment. Rather, because of deep-seeded belief that by reconstructing the network of meaning that was stimulated in the hours before Jesus' crucifixion, and then participating in that reconstruction, that they were in essence resuscitating the very understanding, perhaps even identity, of Jesus, if only in the faintest pulses. As misguided and vexing such an alignment of past ceremonials is, it would not be possible, I don't think, without the precise use of signs, codes, and rhetorical situations, intentional or not.

**Folk Concert:** Let's return to the example I began this paper with: a folk concert. This of course, is the most vague of the examples so far given, but the point can still be drawn. What signs, genres, genre sets, and genre systems are present in this ceremonial that invoke a feeling of nostalgia, a connection with a past moment in time, a notion of authenticity, a shared understanding of a particular community's system of meaning? How and why do I assume such an identity and set of behaviors? What signs and codes within this particular context might be stimulating lost pulses of meaning from a prior context?

Let's amp up the questions a little bit. Is there potential in the field of Rhetorical Genre Studies to piece together, using the remaining traces and pulses of a ceremonial that has been dead or dying, to resuscitate even just a breath of its pure, organic meaning, embedded within a complex and interconnected epistemological, axiological, and ontological system? Can the study of history be approached not through dates or facts, politics or economics, but through reconstructing rhetorical situations and social semiotics? What would it look like to study a particular historical context through Rhetorical Genre Studies and Semiology?

## Part Two : A Semiotic Analysis - Pockets of the Past

First, we might ask, isn't this just a different way of thinking about New Historicism—that method of literary criticism that emphasizes relating the content of a text to the configurations of power, society, or ideology of its time? It is, in the sense that the text's meaning should be interpreted on its terms, not ours. But I want to be more precise than a social scientific approach to history; perhaps we can make a social semiotic approach.

### Understanding Tradition and Semiology

In his essay "Tradition and Self in a Mediated World," British sociologist John B. Thompson enlightens us on the impact that mediated forms of communication has had on tradition and how we see the past. Thompson argues that prior to the development of the media, people's sense of the past was constrained to their local contexts, shaped by everyday, face-to-face communication; it was oral tradition that reproduced the texts of life (*The Collective Memory Reader*, 348). But as media develops—from letters, to the printing press, to the telephone and television, to the Internet—it allows information and "symbolic content" to reach people across space and time, and "therefore establishes social relations between individuals who do not share the same spatial-temporal context" (348-49). In sum, Thompson concludes that this process of media inflation "delocalizes" tradition. He goes on to argue that because the transmission of tradition becomes dependent on mediated forms of communication, it "becomes detached from the individuals with whom one interacts in day-to-day life—that is, it becomes depersonalized" (350). What this implies, then, that if tradition is uprooted from a particular locale and the transmission of tradition becomes dependent on media, then the ritual reenactment of that tradition to maintain its fundamental meaning declines as well; in Thompson's terms, again, tradition becomes "deritualized" (350). What does all of this have to do with our project at hand?

If Thompson is correct, then it goes without saying that we live in an age where tradition is highly "delocalized," "depersonalized," and "deritualized." Tradition and the particular core meaning it embodies become dispersed across space and time, particles of meaning that have strayed from the nucleus. Might it be, then, that when we gather for a folk concert in an age of digitally processed music, for example, that we are hoping to piece these original particles of meaning back together, to reconstruct, as best we can, the nucleus from which they have strayed? In other words, in an effort to reconstruct the ceremonial that shapes and receives its meaning from its

respective parts, are we trying to *relocalize*, *repersonalize*, and *re-ritualize* tradition? If so, can we approach our understanding of this reconstructive process through semiology?

A thorough, historical consideration of semiotics is beyond the scope of this paper, but a fundamental understanding of semiology—its concepts, applications, and implications—are necessary in order to move forward with our semiotic approach.

“Every cultural phenomenon can be studied as communication,” says Michael Caesar, author of *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, Semiotics, and the Work of Fiction* (55). Bold claim, but what does this mean? On the surface, language seems as though it is a reflection of an external thing-in-itself, our connection to an independent reality, and through language this reality gains its meaning; in other words, language records reality. As James Berlin writes, however, language is “instead a pluralistic and complex system of signification that constructs realities rather than simply presenting or reflecting them” (*Postmodernism in the Academy*, 61). Our socially constructed reality is a vast, interconnected system of signs embedded within our particular culture, gaining meaning from their relations to other signs. If signs, then, do not “just convey meanings, but produce them,” (Thwaites, et al., 11) then signs are the nexus of a particular culture’s understanding of the world, past or present.

In *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach*, Tony Thwaites writes, “By textualizing these various cultural areas and events—that is, by thinking of them as comprises choices of signs that are combined into larger groups of patterns—we can start to uncover the attitudes and beliefs that they motivate and can then go on to think about their effects” (79). In other words, we can think of the meaning-system of a culture—a ceremonial of an activity system, in particular—as comprised of specific signs that lend understanding to the communicants of that culture. M.A.K. Halliday precedes this speculation: “The construal of reality [social semiotic] is inseparable from the construal of the semantic system in which the reality is encoded. In this sense, language is shared meaning potential, at once a part of experience and an intersubjective interpretation of experience” (*Language as Social Semiotic*, 1-2). Bawarshi, more recently, echoes Halliday: “This semiotic system, which is social in nature, becomes cognitively internalized as a system of behavior when it is manifested in the semantic system, so that we internalize and enact culture as we learn and use language” (*The Genre Function*, 350). If we apply this understanding of a semantic system to past cultures, cultures that have been comatose for periods of time, then perhaps we can realign those signs to the best of our ability and invoke a content, even if only in traces, of the same meaning-system; we can, to stay with our metaphor, resuscitate pulses of lost meaning.

Here’s the problem: signs are not static; the meanings that a particular sign conveys evolves with the social structure that it participates in. Signs are reproduced, not replicated, as time moves forward. But as Thwaites notes, “Reproductions may be more or less exact. At one extreme, *the same signs can be used in the same order and elicit the same sort of interpretation or response from the readers*” (97; emphasis mine). It seems our starting point, then, is to identify those signs—those texts—that have, more or less, elicited the same meaning as they have been reproduced by generations of cultural systems. In other words, let’s start with the foundation, the pillars, of the ceremonials, those that have endured the erosion of time, and see where we can go from there. But first, we need to try and be as systematic as possible in our approach.

In Chapter Four of *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach*, the authors give a sample semiotic analysis of a cigarette advertisement and explain their analytical procedure in a series of five steps (82): 1. Locate the key signifiers in the text 2. Propose a range of possible signifieds for each of the signifiers 3. Identify the connotations and social codes to which signifieds were relating 4. Note which of these connotations seem to become naturalized, true meanings in the text, its denotations 5. Consider that these denotations might reinforce familiar social structures of thought; try to derive the larger system of cultural beliefs and attitudes that the text seems to present. This relatively systematic semiotic instruction can help us as we take these concepts and use them to see if we are resuscitating any pulses of meaning from dead or dying meaning-systems.

### Applying Semiotics to the Past

So, for our task at hand, we need see if key signifiers are also signifiers that seem to have stayed relatively unchanged in their reproduction throughout time; using knowledge of a historical context, let’s see if the range of possible signifieds are also more or less the same. If they are, we can make further assumptions about the connotations those signifieds might have in the structure of social thought; if not, we should refrain from making those assumptions. If we can go further, we can ask if these key signs that have stayed relatively unchanged and seem to be participating in a code or meaning system with other signs denote an obvious truth. If so, do these obvious truths, or denotations, seem to be reinforcing the understanding, communications, behaviors, and identities of those communicants in the particular context? If we’ve answered yes through all five questions, then perhaps we can infer that we have resuscitated meaning from an original context, an original meaning system, from a different point in history. If not, then we can refrain from making this conjecture until further analysis of the present and

historical situation has been done. As far as how much meaning we've resuscitated, what amount pulses are being revived, I leave that to a later project. For now, let's apply some of these concepts to an example: the academic seminar.

First, let's locate some key signifiers in our contemporary setting. Three come to mind: professor, student, and Academic institution. Using our knowledge of the historical context of Ancient Greece, we can approximate if these key signifiers have conveyed more or less the same signifieds over the course of its reproduction. Let's start with the professor and student. While we're dealing with limited evidence, it seems clear that the pedagogy of Plato's Academy involved Plato (or those who followed in his position) posing problems and questions for his students to solve—while lectures may have taken place, the more common form of inquiry was dialectic reasoning, or that of the Socratic dialogue (Dancy, 2). Professors and students, then, would have been on relatively equal ground, with the professors more in the role as the facilitator of discussion. This conveyance of the role or meaning of professor and student seems to be more or less in line with how we envision an academic seminar today: "a group of advanced students studying under a professor with each doing original research and all exchanging results through reports and discussions" (Webster's Dictionary). As for the academic institution, we know that Plato's Academy was not open to the public and was usually held in the local gymnasium: it was exclusive, and also made a distinction between junior and senior members (Barnes, 4). Within the university today, we know that attending a seminar is an exclusive process, usually reserved for junior or senior students, and, of course, it is not open to the public. The academic seminar signifies a place of exclusive, privileged learning, with students engaging with experts in a particular field; this, in a basic sense, could have been similar to the system of signification that went on at Plato's Academy.

Briefly, then, we have taken care of our first three steps: 1. The key signifiers of the contemporary academic seminar (remember: this is not to say the signifiers of teacher, student, and institution as a whole) are also signifiers that appear to have not gone under a dramatic shift in meaning since Plato's Academy 2. These signs more or less gain their meaning from their relation to a similar set of signs and 3. these signifieds are drawn from a similar range of possible signifieds: the setting signifies learning, teaching, discussion, exclusiveness, privilege, critical thinking, advancement in society (Plato's Academy produced many successful politicians in the ancient world (Guthrie, 23). Professor signifies intelligence, expertise, wisdom, teaching, research, debate; the student signifies ambition, pupil, contributor, inquisitive. For our fourth step, we need to ask do these key signifiers—that have stayed relatively unchanged and are participating in a code or meaning system with similar signs of the historical context—denote an obvious truth? Do they appear "normal" in both Plato's Academy and the current academic seminar? What, though, is normal? As Thwaites writes, "when signs and connotations appear normal, this is because the text presents itself as obviously truthful. Such connotations disguise the particular social influences that underlie the relevant codes" (82). It seems, and this is speculation, that in both settings—the Platonic and the current—the key signifiers gain meaning from their relation to similar sets of signifiers and both sets of signifieds appear to be "normal": the Academy was prevalent in Athens for over three hundred years; the seminar in academia is a common practice today as well. Finally, for our fifth step, do these "normal" practices appear to reinforce codes of social thought, beliefs, or larger cultural attitudes? As we know, education was highly valued in ancient Greece, as it is today. Those who "attended" the academy were thought to be "privileged"; a similar stigma revolves around those who attend the academic seminar. Those who attended the academy, as mentioned above, were setting themselves up for a potential career in politics; likewise, the student who attends the seminar is exposed to advanced learning of their particular subject, gaining an edge in a potential career. Finally, the Academy was exclusive, meant for only the best students and teachers; an effective academic seminar, likewise, should be reserved for only those professors and students who are seriously engaged and determined in their studies.

So, we have made it through all five of our steps; perhaps, then, we can conjecture that the academic seminar resuscitates some of the pulses of meaning, even if it's just a few, that were pumping during those rigorous debates at Plato's Academy. Perhaps, ever so shyly, we can say that a pulse, a trace, a faint reverberation of Aristotle is with us in that seminar room.

Now it is time for admission: this is an amateur, hasty semiotic analysis. It is imperfect in many regards, likely subject to counter-examples and objections from both historians and semioticians alike. But it was not meant to be perfect, or to prove that this rhetorical and semiotic approach to help us understand the resuscitation of meaning from historical moments is infallible. It was, however, meant to provoke, to wonder, to question. To ask the most humble question: if we look at pockets of historical meaning-systems, locales of past ceremonials in our present time, and look at them through a rhetorical and semiotic lens, what can it tell us about the historicity of that context? This, of course, is only a pilot essay—a manuscript, perhaps. But I wonder: do Rhetorical Genre Studies and Semiology contain within them the power to resuscitate meaning?

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