

## Where is the subject? Rhetorical genre theory and the question of the writer

Anne Freadman

*School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, Australia*

Email: [freadman@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:freadman@unimelb.edu.au)

(Received 15 July, 2013; Published online 6 September, 2014)

The question in my title arises from the tension between two positions currently held in genre theory: On the one hand, purpose is attributed to the genre, whereas on the other, it is attributed to the subject, whether or not dispersed across participation in a variety of conversations. This difficulty raises an urgent question in the conception we hold of the learner.

My paper surveys some recent contributions to the literature on genre and teaching in which this issue is raised. The objective of the paper is to explore the nature and the stakes of the question raised; it will not claim to answer it.

**Key words:** genre theory, subject, intersubjectivity, writing, addressivity, uptake, noise.

In framing this topic, I had originally asked “Who, or what, is the subject of a genre?”, but this question was ill-formed. It presupposed an ontological answer concerning the very nature of the subject, and to provide that is beyond my powers. On the other hand, when I ask “Where is the subject?”, I can set aside the ontological question, instead scrutinising sites of emergence of whatever it is we call “the subject”. What I want to do first is to take a critical stance towards recent work applying North American rhetorical genre theory to writing pedagogy: this work locates the subject in the genre; and secondly, I shall locate the subject in a piece of writing. I shall call these two parts “chapters”. They correspond to two key moments in my argument: the subject is not in the genre, I shall say; it is in the discursive event. In my work, ‘the discursive event’ is no mere instantiation of the genre; nor is it the utterance, as if it stood alone.<sup>1</sup> The discursive event includes its uptake.

When speakers and writers – academic or not – use the expression ‘what I want to do’ as I have just done, that is their subjectivity speaking, owning an intention. It is always useful to notice such moments. When I formulated my topic – when I ‘chose’ it – my intention, my motivation, my objective, and even my desire was to pursue the implications of some previous work I had done (Freadman, 2012). The invitation to speak to the “Key thinkers – Key Theories” conference gave me the opportunity to do so. I am very grateful for it. Speaking is always “occasioned”, but if we think about the temporalities of our speaking, the continuities between one occasion and another are just as important as the newness and particularity of each. That connection between occasions – the continuity of ourselves as speakers – is also an important dimension of subjectivity: it consists broadly of memory, or experience, and desire. But the occasion is a matter of audience. I spoke as I did at the conference, saying what I chose to say, largely because the conference provided the moment. Equally, as I repeat myself here, changing

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bakhtin (1986).

my deictic anchors as I do, the publication of the papers from the conference provides a second moment to enact my intentions, addressing them to a 'you' beyond.

## Chapter 1

In the article I have just mentioned, I started to interrogate one of the key assumptions of rhetorical genre theory. Now as some of you will know, my sympathies in genre theory lie with the new rhetorical approach, and many of the key exponents of that approach have honoured me with the use they have made of my work. So when I critique it, that critique should not lead to any conclusion that I have turned my coat, or that I wish to disempower a body of work that I find very valuable. On the contrary: a lesson I have learned with my reading of the early pragmatists – William James and Charles Peirce, notably – is that our answers, our theories, are not the end of the road of enquiry; as James writes, they are not stopping points but resting places, points where we take stock of where we are in order to see what new questions might arise there. So here is the assumption that many of us have rested with for nearly three decades. It holds that “genre is social action”. It was formulated as the conclusion to an intricate and persuasive argument by Carolyn Miller (1994):

Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse based in large scale typification of rhetorical action; *as action*, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose. (p. 37)

The title of Miller's article is “genre as social action”, and the grammar of that title reinforces the assumption that concerns me. My first concern is this: if it were the case, that genre ‘is’ social action, the consequences and effects of that action would always be predictable from the generalised characteristics of the genre and would always be the same; it would be a deterministic theory. I have argued against this determinism. I have tried to demonstrate that it is the discursive event itself that has effects and consequences. My second concern is that talk of the ‘action of a genre’ implies that the motives and intentions of the action would also be located in the genre. The radical construal of this position would then result in a serious reduction of the power to act of real social agents. Subjectivity, in other words, would be subsumed by genre.

Now I hasten to assure you that nobody I know actually adopts this radical construal as a working premise. Nevertheless, the risk of taking this position is incurred by a move in the history of composition teaching. It is widely recognised that the genre turn in writing research was taken in reaction to the process writing movement:

... process-based research and pedagogy in composition studies have privileged the writer as the primary agent of invention. [...]. [work in this paradigm] imagines the writer as the point of departure for writing [... or...] an originating consciousness. (Bawarshi, 2003, pp. 50-51; 55)

This has been described as a ‘romantically individualistic’ conception of writing. Accordingly, genre based writing pedagogies and their related research developed as a corrective. I accept the need for the corrective, but I discern a risk: it lies in a swing of the pendulum to the radically opposing view; this risk emerges sometimes in the formulations adopted. Thus we read in Carolyn Miller (1994), for instance, that

... what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. *We learn...what ends we may have.* (p. 37)

The problem here is that “the ends we may have” are located in a specific single genre. This problem is mitigated in Charles Bazerman's (2002) formulation: here we read that

Genres and the activity systems they are part of ... shape intentions, motives, expectations, attention, perception, affect, and interpretive frame. (pp. 14-15)

But note again that the appurtenances of subjectivity are located in systems of genres. We will find that this is attenuated by Anis Bawarshi; nevertheless, he starts from the same troubling premise as Miller: each genre and sub-genre has

...its own attachments, relations, subjectivities, and consequences.  
(Bawarshi, 2003, p. 109)

and he even suggests that “desires” are embedded in genres (Bawarshi, 2003, p.146).

The difficulties attending any such radical construal should be clear. As Kimberley Emmons puts it, the cost may be the failure to “attend to individual, embodied subjectivities” (Emmons, 2009, p. 136); she is worried that attention may be focussed on

... the social and interactional consequences of individual acts, without full consideration of the subjectivities constituted by the processes...Genres as social actions are powerful only when they direct or forestall human interaction. (p. 137)

I do not believe that genres have the power to erase the human embodied subject, as Emmons fears. But I do believe that our theories of genre are inclined to do so.

Now as I have said, nobody is prepared to adopt or to argue for this radical construal of “genre as social action”. Miller herself is circumspect in her original article, and has written extensively on rhetorical agency since then. However, Bazerman (1994, p. 79) appears to take the radical position when he discusses “social intentions.” “Genres are the levers of the machine”, he writes; yet even he shows in his syntax that there must be something else:

Genres embody the range of social intentions towards which *one* may orient *one’s* energies”. (Bazerman, 1994, p. 82; emphases added)

and

Genres and the activity systems they are part of provide the forms of life within which *we make our lives*. (Bazerman, 2002, p. 15; emphases added)

“One”, “we”: the referents of these pronouns are evidently not ‘in’ the genres to start with, though that is where they end up. Where is the subject before it “orients its energies” or “makes its life”?

The issue of the subject of writing is usually dealt with in rhetorical theories of genre by some elaboration of what Miller calls the ‘mediation’ of private intentions and the social dimension in which they are played out:

A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent. (Miller 1994, p.37)

As in the case of Bazerman’s pronouns, we must wonder what status these “private intentions” have.<sup>2</sup> At the very least they contradict Miller’s assertion that genres tell us “what ends we may have”. This is the dilemma: either genres mediate between private intentions and social exigence, or genres are responsible for our intentions. If the latter is the case, there is nothing for them to mediate between. Except, perhaps, in the case of certain pathologies, there is no such thing as a subject outside of, or prior to, genre

OK, so I’m stating it too baldly. After all, Miller says “private” intentions, so we must ask if the private is a domain vacant of genre? Surely not; it’s just the domain of more or less private, or personal, genres. We learned, with the early linguists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that there is no speaker unless and until that speaker is (always already) a speaker of a language; equally, I suggest, a major part of cognitive development and of informal as well as formal education is a process of learning to participate in an ever-increasing range of genres. Mother-baby talk is a genre, just as surely as talking about tasks and activities with a pre-school teacher and other children. The genres we need become more public as the familiarity of one’s interlocutors decreases.

Once it becomes clear that the two terms of the mediation are not opposites, then the very idea of mediation collapses. Nevertheless, instead of allowing this outcome, Anis Bawarshi’s (2003)

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. also Fuller and Lee (2002, p. 213): “Crucial; questions have to be asked concerning...the ontological status of ‘private intentions’ of a subject that precedes a rhetorical event ...”

book, *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* maintains the two distinct terms, then construes 'mediation' through a dialectic. In true Hegelian fashion, this dialectic manipulates two opposite theoretical positions, then subsumes them in a synthesis. It has a historical, and a kind of psychological dimension.

**(a) the history**

(1)

<b>Thesis</b>	<b>Antithesis</b>	<b>Synthesis</b>
Formalism	process methods	
text as product	Writer originating consciousness	(partial view of writer)

A more complete view of the writer is achieved by moving to the second iteration of the dialectic.

(2)

Process movement	(critique from sociology)	genre movement (complete view)
------------------	---------------------------	-----------------------------------

Here the thesis is the process method, which views the writer as a creative individual source of ideas; its antithesis is a sociological critique, which views society and ideological formations as the source of ideas. Then genre pedagogies provide the synthesis, so that the writer is a "double agent...both agent of his or her desires and actions and an agent on behalf of already existing desires and actions" (Bawarshi, 2002, p. 50).

<b>Thesis</b>	<b>Antithesis</b>	<b>Synthesis</b>
Process movement	(critique from sociology)	genre movement
invention as individual act	invention as social act	
what writers do when they write	what happens to writers to make them do what they do	the writer as double agent

The dialectic resolved:

Invention does not so much begin in the writer or even in the abstract social collective as it begins when a writer locates *himself or herself* within the *discursive and ideological formation* of a genre and its system of related genres. (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 72)

Notice, however, that we still have the same two terms, an 'individual' and 'society'. Here, they "intersect":

Invention occurs at the intersection of this dialectic between the social and the individual...the relation between libidinal attachments and ideological structures. (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 50)

Accordingly, the subject of writing is neither the private individual, if there is such a thing, nor is it reduced to the speaking position offered by the genre. It is the creature of the mediation. Yet exactly the same conceptual framework presides over this formulation as over Miller's. I am certain that we do not need a private individual anywhere in our account of what it is to be a subject of writing, for no other reason, perhaps, than that writing by definition is a public medium, devised to address readers in other places and at other times.

I think the irrelevance of the notion of the private individual is demonstrated in the extension of Bawarshi's account of the elaboration of generic competence by the adult learner. If, as he writes, "writers are interpellated by the genre into the subject position it offers", it is nonetheless the case that "writers do not occupy only one position" (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 98). They work within generic systems, and they write not only 'within' but 'between' genres (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 142). Since "students are already rhetorically perceptive and adjust with ease from one discursive [...] context to the next" (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 165), teachers must do two things: they must help them to "reposition themselves", and they must teach them "critical genre awareness", or "metageneric understanding", so they can "read their world rhetorically" (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 166). Note that this kind of critical reading is itself a genre. The task of the student is to add progressively to her repertoire, learning as she does so what to do with it and how to do it. The more extensive the repertoire, the greater the range of choices open to the writer, and with this comes the power to adapt a genre to new circumstances, to subvert it by appropriating conflicting genres, or to mix genres for creative or tactical purposes.

Well, that's the theory, but we all know that our teaching does not always succeed. I recall a student in French many years ago, fronting an oral exam. He was having some trouble getting started, so we asked him a leading question: would he like to comment on some elementary topic in the course? His answer was a monosyllabic "no". The failure of connection occurs at many levels: in the genre of the exam, of course, but also in relation to the course as a whole, its topics, and the language he ostensibly wanted to acquire. He was not himself, and therefore could not speak. Something of this order must happen when a student fails to learn how to participate in a genre or a generic system. That subject is not 'in' the genre, and sometimes asserts her identity in contradistinction to it.

A remarkable case of separation between the learning subject and the genre is analysed by Gillian Fuller and Alison Lee in one of the most illuminating articles on the topic of the subject in the field of genre studies to date (Fuller & Lee, 2002). In this case, the student had demonstrated considerable competence in the genre she was learning, but she took little pleasure in her success. As Fuller and Lee explain it, successful learning depends on the "willing collusion" of the student with the machinery of power deployed in a given pedagogical regime. While the student they study did collude, that collusion was temporary, and the subject asserted her separateness as soon as she was able without, as in the case of my student, endangering her result. She felt constrained by the guidelines of the assignment, and expressed her frustration with the work she had undertaken as a mismatch between her imagination of the subject matter and the exercise. Fuller and Lee (2002) explain that "Genres must be seen as part of an apparatus of power/desire that produces subjects" (p. 212); the student performed the genre, but was not identified with or by it. In both examples I have adduced, the operations of power are brought into relief by the students' resistance to them. As Fuller and Lee (2002, p. 215) conclude, the subject is the product of an assemblage: "[it is] the point of convergence of a range of possible subject positions". If we ask my question, now, the answer to "where is the subject?" must be "at the site of this convergence". That convergence occurs at the site of utterance; it is neither a necessary outcome of the learning process, nor a permanent one.

Allow me to extrapolate to my overall concerns in genre theory. First: when the convergence fails, it does not leave us with a "private individual" at odds with a "society" or a system; simply, it is a divergence, or a mismatch, or a conflict, between at least two discursive or generic positions. The only way to be outside, or to speak about, a genre is to speak from another one. Second: the site of convergence is the point of utterance, but if so, we do not find the subject 'in' the genre, but 'in' the utterance. Perhaps all we have in a genre is a subject position, and I'm not at all convinced that desires, intentions, motivations and so on should be attributed to it. Indeed, I fear, there is a great deal of anthropomorphic mystification going on in genre theory at the moment. The apparatus of power and desire act on the subject, that is true; it commands us to speak, and the genre gives us a position to occupy. If we do not occupy it, then the genre does not act. The genre does not speak, or write; we do. The genre provides us with strategies for doing so.

My conclusion here is that it is misleading to speak of “genre as social action”. The action is accomplished by the use of the genre, but that use is never merely an instantiation of general rules or conventions or forms. This is broadly the conclusion of my work on uptake. If action there be, it occurs in a specific, occasioned, discursive event, and that event includes its effects and consequences. The audience or addressee is crucial in this process. Carolyn Miller has argued that this is the very point of rhetoric, and that subjectivity is an effect of intersubjectivity. It is to this aspect of the issue that I now turn.

## Chapter 2

A genre offers us a speaking position. That speaking position is delineated by the first person in relation with its addressee, the second person, and their relationship is mediated by some subject matter and some occasion. Genre is just this complexus of subject matter, occasion, and addressivity. The term ‘addressivity’ comes from Bakhtin; not only is it a crucial dimension of any genre, it is also central to the importance of ‘utterance’ in his account (Bakhtin, 1986). In this second chapter, I want to leave aside the issue of subject formation, leaving aside also the very grand claims that are being made in genre theory. The kind of genre theory I like is far more modest. It locates the subject at the site of utterance, and investigates subject position as a matter of addressivity. I turn to my example, to discover how addressivity might work.

This text is an essay by Helen Garner, a response to the rape and murder of Jill Meagher (Garner, 2012; reproduced in the Appendix). This event shocked and preoccupied Melbourne towards the end of October 2012. Note that I am using the term ‘essay’ in the literary sense of that genre, which has nothing to do with the student exercise that also goes by that name. I will come back to this issue briefly later. Paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 set the scene for a conversation; paragraph 4 recounts that conversation; paragraph 5 sets the scene for a second conversation, which is recounted in 6, 7, 8, while paragraph 9 completes it and brings the piece to a close. So we have two parts, with considerable parallelism between them.

Addressivity is thematised for both conversations. In part 1, I note:

- My friend and I (meeting for a Friday night drink) (occasion)
- We found a spot (place)
- Each of us was secretly longing to talk about (shared desire)
- There is an impediment, that takes the form of ‘social noise’, other people’s conversations
- It is overcome by: “to converse, we had to shape our hands into trumpets, and yell straight into one another’s faces.”

There are times when we do not share a place or an occasion: those times are broadly defined as the conditions of writing. There are also times when we do not share desire, in which case the utterance or the text has to seduce the addressee into paying it attention (Chambers, 1991). Let me leave both those issues for later and move on to the issue of social noise and its overcoming.

“Noise” is a term from communications technology. We speak of “noise” in a system, static for example, when what we think of as unwanted sounds interfere with the clarity of the transmission. But another way of thinking about noise is that it is evidence of the medium of communication itself (Chambers, 1991). No message can be sent or received without it, and noise is exactly what requires that we attend to or take cognizance of the material conditions of communication. This is important, because it prevents us from taking those conditions for granted, or pretending they aren’t there. It is the beginning, if you will, of a deconstruction of certain magical accounts of communication in which messages are passed between disembodied minds. Such magical accounts lead us to suppose that the addressee does nothing but receive passively the meanings that the addresser has sent. But we know this is not true. This extends from the technology of communication to all the conditions of discursive interaction. There is noise, for instance, in the very fact that we use language, noise in the places and occasions within which we speak. In the case of language, just as in the case of acoustical interference, noise makes us notice these things; it requires us to interpret, not only the meaning of the words, but the relation between the message and its conditions. Crucially, too, it makes us notice

language itself, in which far more is going on than the transmission of an intended message. That is to say that we notice, we 'read', the rhetoric of the text, the tactics it employs for commanding our attention.

The conditions under which the two women friends have their conversation are those provided by a crowded and very noisy bar on a Friday evening in spring: "the rooftop bar was buzzing". They are having this conversation in a public place, not in the intimacy of a home, and "before they can get to" the topic they are longing to discuss, "five youngish blokes began to roar and bellow". These facts point to something more significant than the mere "occasion" of the conversation: it is a women's conversation, trying to "find a spot" beside a group of men, to make itself heard beneath, or above, a male bellow. The women start their conversation apparently off-topic, but only apparently: they are talking about a news item, just as, when they get on to Jill Meagher, they are talking about "the" news item of the week. They are also talking about a victim, an asylum seeker, who behaves in ways not unlike the way the women behave in response to the rape and murder. Howling, tripping over things, bumping into walls – grief and outrage (end para 4) – are not unlike "chucking a mental in a detention centre" (para 2). Talking about the asylum seeker, the friend "glanced at the men's table". Can a women's conversation about grief and outrage take place in safety in this environment? Will what they say come under attack too?

The two women overcome the noise in the system by adjusting their channel of communication: they too trumpet and yell, mimicking the decibels around them and thus blending into the atmosphere of the bar. There is none of the secret confidential whispering of women in this exchange that would make them or their conversation vulnerable. Even though, at the end, they "give up on the bar with its thundering men" and part, they have had their conversation, said what they needed to say, shared the gossip about the policing, and given vent to their emotions. They have overcome the noise and in fact used it to their advantage. I would suggest, then, that this part of the narrative represents metaphorically the fact that Garner has published this piece. The conversation itself has entirely displaced the "sonic level" of the men, who are now silenced, firmly in the background. So in the story, the noise is neither an interference nor a mere material condition to be bracketed out unnoticed. This noise is the very condition under which the message is interpretable, not just as what the women say to one another, but as why it is important that women's stories be heard above the din of men's talk.

The genre in part 1 is, then, not just a conversation in a bar, but a women's conversation in a public place, and its means are a mimicry and a displacing of the means of men's talk to serve another purpose. Let me now turn to part 2 of the story, which tells of a different conversation, again in a public place. It is a train station; the two participants are sitting on a bench side by side, not at a table. It is not a space devised for conversation, though occasional exchanges can take place there. Again we have a man sitting down beside a woman, and she leans away to avoid contact. In the context of the Jill Meagher story, we understand that she feels menaced, but he insists. The noise in this situation is the inappropriateness of starting a conversation under these circumstances: yet again, it is these circumstances that make the conversation possible – the train station, the interval of waiting, the bench, the proximity of the bodies. I should say, too, that the "glance" of paragraph 5 is the same as the glance of paragraph 3. Both are intended to shore up a boundary.

The man's approach is courteous, he uses a *captatio benevolentiae* that disarms her: "I hope you don't mind." Then he asks to "share" his story with her, and she becomes his addressee. The extent to which this becomes a shared desire is clear in the reciprocation of thanks (para 8). She does not quote him, but, using the indirect mode, she recounts the story, thus taking it up to share it with us. Note the use of "we" in this recounting, the tears both interlocutors shed, the laughter, the temporary but intense friendship that lasts the length of the journey.

In the stories told in the two parts of the essay, a number of points are parallel, but the one I want to stress is the issue of the audience. In the first, in order for the conversation to take place, an unwanted audience must be excluded; in the second, the new father needs an audience and must seduce his listener. For this, he has to ensure that all possible interpretations of him – all possible imputable subject positions – a strange unkempt man on a railway station – be

precluded by the photograph and the story. We may note the contrast between his “cupped hands” and the hands formed into trumpets in paragraph 3. “Cupping” is a caring gesture, but like the trumpets, its function is to enhance the means of communication. The stranger shows his addressee something that was not intended for her, as she shows us through her writing the two conversations of which we were not participants. In both cases, writing and the mobile phone camera, the technology works at a distance, and it is this that makes it possible for the addressivity to disperse, expanding in space and time beyond the small circle of familiars.

Addressivity depends on the technical apparatus of deixis, which was elaborated in the French linguistic tradition by Émile Benveniste (Benveniste, 1971). Deixis is the organisation of the space-time nexus that is the *sine qua non* of all utterance: ‘I’ is defined by the saying of ‘I’ in the place and at the time of its saying. Or we can put this another way: ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’ are in a relation of mutual implication: none of them can be defined without the others. We can think of this as the discursive anchor, without which no use of tense, no spatial orientation, no reference can occur. I refer to Benveniste, rather than to some of the theorists of this issue in the anglo-american tradition because it is through Benveniste that it has been most fully developed into an account of discourse. In the French tradition, we speak of the ‘énonciation’, with its complementary term, the ‘énoncé’: the uttering – the act as it is registered discursively – and what it refers to; the ‘saying’ and the ‘said’. This is particularly important for distinguishing a first person responsible for the utterance, which I will call the ‘deictic I’, from a first person subject of a story, and explains how the first person singular can be the subject of a verb in the past or the future. This first person is an actor in the story. The deictic ‘I’ manipulates the whole referential apparatus.

This technical matter has a bearing on the question of discursive subjectivity. In genres that require the erasure of the first person, the deictic I is all that remains. This is one of the crucial differences between the essay as a literary genre and the essay as a pedagogical exercise. It therefore has a bearing on the addressivity of each of these genres.

It follows from the theory of enunciation that there is no addressee without the deictic I, but what of the addressee? Insofar as we accept to occupy that role, or that position, we accept the deictic anchor as ours. This goes far beyond face-to-face interaction. Bakhtin again:

Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker. [...] In most cases, genres of complex cultural communication are intended ... for ... actively responsive understanding with delayed action. Everything we have said here also pertains to written and read speech, with the appropriate adjustments and additions. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68-69)

Face-to-face interaction is what we see at work in the first conversation: the two participants swap roles, and the conditions for co-reference are maximised. It is not important for reading this text to discover which participant says what. Indeed, it is clear that the subject position is shared, though I stress that this does not mean that the two participants share subjectivity, or even, necessarily, a point of view. We also see how uptake works. As Bakhtin puts it,

... when the listener perceives and understands the meaning ... of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude towards it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68)

The second conversation also demonstrates that the two participants occupy the same subject position, even though it is reported largely in indirect discourse. In this case it is clear who tells the story (the new father) and who responds to it, yet we must note the use of the pronoun ‘we’, coupled with the shared emotions and the reciprocated thanks. While there is a ‘we’ to start with in the first conversation, this is achieved by the talk itself in the second, by its material as well as by its discursive means.

Let me return to the essay itself, the piece of writing that brings these two conversations together and gives them to us, its readers. Its deictic ‘I’ is nowhere stated, yet everywhere in evidence. Nor does it lexicalise its addressee. Yet the subject position we share with the writing



is clarified by the issue of co-reference. As addressees, we have accepted to occupy the point of deictic anchoring. On this basis, we know already (in the case of Jill Meagher), and we can come to know (in the case of the new father), who is being referred to. Furthermore, the object of reference to many places, events, and things are shared by Melbourne readers, and readers from elsewhere may not need to know the geography of greater Melbourne more precisely than to understand that the story starts in the CBD and ends in the suburbs. So deixis both guarantees the minimal conditions for co-reference, and establishes the conditions necessary for a shared frame of reference. A reader is then in the same space and time as the utterance or text, but if this specifies the subject position of any utterance, it does not yet do anything to specify the addressivity of the genre.

Part of being a reader for Helen Garner's piece is a certain competence with the staging of literary essays, which is associative and often implicit. It does not proceed from a problem to its solution, it does not go through stages detailing data, methods of analysis, and conclusion, its connections are not made by the rules of deduction or induction. Rather, a literary essay proceeds in somewhat the same way as a casual conversation. It ranges around a more or less heterogeneous set of concerns, and it asks us to make connections amongst them: in practice, we use each to provide a context within which to read the next. This means that in order to prepare ourselves to read a particular essay, we need to free ourselves from the presuppositions imposed, say, by the pedagogical genre. We will not get it by asking it to shout or by requiring that it leave out what may seem at first sight its irrelevances. Like the gesture around the screen of the mobile phone, we must do the equivalent of "cupping our hands" to clarify the image. We must "bow our heads" over the story-telling itself. We must pay it intense attention.

What makes this essay intriguing, puzzling, not quite clear, is noise, which at this level takes the form of several different stories jostling together: the bellowing men, the asylum seeker, the Frenchwoman on the train talking about Princess Di, Evie, and then the newborn child. How do we make a context for all these threads? Relationships with strangers in an urban environment would be one thread, and another would be the contrast between safe heterosexual encounters and unsafe ones. There are contrasts: a story about rape and murder, another about birth; a story about immoderate grief, and a story about joy. You may feel you shared in the intensity of conversations about Jill Meagher, the feminist concerns, the potential cynicism concerning the public response, and the happy ending the conversation in the train provides. Or you may feel that the ending stands in for the radical erasure of joyful birth, urban safety, and *a fortiori* happy endings from stories about rape.

But I must conclude. My talk purports to be about genre and about where the subject is in an essay such as this. It is about the practice of particular essays as telling us far more about 'the essay' than any generalisation. The writing subject of this essay is all over the place, listening to the noise of the world, selecting from its diversity and yet representing that diversity, connecting threads for the fragments to make sense of one another. The noise of the world is Garner's subject matter, and she invites us, too, to listen, to select, and to connect. As we do, not only do we become her readers; we also see what she understands as the role of the writer.

## Acknowledgements

Appendix material published with permission of the author.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). The problem of speech genres. In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Eds.), *Speech genres and other late essays* (pp. 60-102). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bawarshi, A. (2003). *Genre and the invention of the writer*. Logan: Utah State University Press
- Bazerman, C. (1994). Systems of genres and the enactment of social intentions. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (pp. 67-86). London: Taylor & Francis.

- Bazerman, C. (2002). Genre and identity: Citizenship in the age of the Internet and the age of global capitalism. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko, (Eds.), *The rhetoric and ideology of genre* (pp. 13-38). Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Benveniste, E. (1971). *Problems in general linguistics*. (M. E. Meek, C. Gables, Trans.). Florida: University of Miami Press.
- Chambers, R. (1991). *Room for maneuver: Reading oppositional Narrative*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Emmons, K. (2009). Uptake and the bio-medical subject. In C. Bazerman, A. Bonini, & D. Figueiredo (Eds.), *Genre in a changing world* (pp. 134-157). Lafayette: Parlor Press.
- Freadman, A. (2012). The traps and trappings of genre theory. *Applied Linguistics*, 33(5), 544-563. doi:10.1093/applin/ams050
- Fuller, G. & Lee, A. (2002). Assembling a generic subject. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko, (Eds.), *The rhetoric and ideology of genre* (pp. 207-224). Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Garner, H. (2012, November). Death in Brunswick. *The Monthly*, p. 44.
- Miller, C. (1994). Genre as social action. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (pp. 20-36). London: Taylor and Francis. (Original work published 1984 in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-67).

## Appendix



### HELEN GARNER

The rooftop bar was buzzing, late on a warm Friday afternoon. My friend and I found a spot under an umbrella and ordered up. Each of us was secretly longing to talk about the fact that the cops had charged a man with the rape and murder of Jill Meagher, but before we could get to it, five youngish blokes strode into the bar, disposed themselves grandly around the next table, and began to roar and bellow. People turned to them, brows creasing but faces carefully blank. The men were throwing back lurid cocktails. The sonic level soared. My friend and I moved closer together.

"Did you see that Burmese asylum seeker on the news last night," I shouted, "chucking a mental in a detention centre?" "Laying about him with a pool cue!" cried my friend. "TV sets exploded! Computers!" She glanced at the men's table.

To converse we had to shape our hands into trumpets, and yell straight into each other's faces. How did the cops find the Brunswick guy? That hoodie was an unusual colour. I bet someone dobbed him in. What was he doing, wandering around at that hour? Thank God they had CCTV in that bridal shop. Did you go to the march? I was worried that it would be too peaceful, not enough about how women aren't safe to walk home alone. I was more worried that people would start screeching about civil rights violations. How can the streets ever be made safe? There's evil in the world. The place where she was dumped is out near Vanessa's. Would you go there? No way. It looked beautiful on TV. Soft. Long grass blowing in the wind. And in the foreground you could see a disturbed patch. Imagine being a cop and walking towards that shallow grave. It was shallow. He must have just scraped some dirt over her and bolted. Do you think he thought it was worth it? Does a bloke like that *think*? Would he have been trying for years to keep a grip? Did you hear that on the CCTV tape he puts out his hand as if to touch her cheek? And she rears back? I heard that another woman came forward with a story from a year ago. Some guy had tried to persuade her to get into his car. She got away. But she said he had a pitch. A pitch? What's that mean? It's when they sound plausible enough to make pause in your stride and pay attention

long enough for them to gain a psychological advantage. I nearly went down to the court. But I thought it would be too horrible. In the police car, when he was doubled over with his hands clasped behind his neck, you could see he was wearing a wedding ring. No, he had a ring on every finger. What about the poor guy, her workmate, who offered to walk her home? And she said no, she'd be all right? I feel terrible for him. All the women he's ever known would be feminists. He would have learnt not to patronise them with his protectiveness.

God, how many times have I walked home feeling invincible. In the '60s Evie used to stroll across Fawkner Park at midnight. She said she was never scared. Yeah, but she was tall. So? I wish I'd gone to the march. Do you think the flowers and candles in Sydney Road were a bit melodramatic? I saw some women crossing themselves. As if it was a shrine. Well, it was, and at least the flowers were fresh, and not wrapped in horrible plastic like the ones people left in London for Princess Di. It's spring, I suppose, flowers everywhere. Princess Di happened in summer. I was on a train in France a few days after the crash. A Frenchwoman saw me reading about it in the paper. She said, "Can you explain to me this immoderate mourning?" Do you think the Jill Meagher march was immoderate? That idea kept coming to me, but I scotched it - I hated the way it made me feel cynical and ironic. In the *Age* someone said the march was at noon on Saturday. I stuck some rosemary in my buttonhole and drove up to the corner of Moreland Road. I thought there'd be 50 or 100 people but there was nobody. Only a few women in headscarves doing their shopping. There was a cold wind. Everything was grey and

gone on Facebook, idiot. I don't know how to - I'm stuck in a pre-Facebook world.

Some people are saying the whole thing was a social media phenomenon. Who cares? I was sad. I wanted to be around other people who were sad. Actually I howled. Me too. I've been sick about it all week. My guts were in a knot. I kept tripping over things and bumping into walls.

We gave up on the bar with its thundering men and parted on Bourke Street. On the platform at Parliament Station I read while I waited. A man sat down beside me. I glanced up. He was in his 30s, dark-jawed, emitting a faint whiff of alcohol. Holding out his iPhone in cupped hands, he shuffled his bum along the bench until our sides touched. I leant away.

"Excuse me," he said. His face was shining. "I hope you don't mind. I've come from the hospital. My wife's just had our first child, a few hours ago. Can I share it with you?"

She had rung him at work. Come home! Quick! She was going into labour! He jumped into the car and floored it from Glenroy to Broadmeadows. He was nearly home when a paramedic called. The ambulance was stationary on the corner of Camp Road and the highway. She was about to give birth. He burst into the back of the ambulance just in time to see the baby crowning. It was a girl. Her name was Poppy.

He thrust the phone into my hand and we bowed our heads over the screen. There she was, in the hospital with her white-toothed mother: a stunned scrap of creamy brown in a jaunty cotton cap. I had to pull out my hanky. He was wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. We both started laughing. Thank you for telling me! Thank you for listening!

The Craigieburn train slid in. For three stations, heading out of the city, we hunched over his photos and talked wildly about parents and children and migration, and marriage and work and houses. When the train reached my stop we shook hands, and kissed each other on both cheeks. I stepped out into the spring dusk, and away he went, a stranger whose life had just been blown wide open, going to look for his car where he'd left it on the side of the road, way out north in Broadie.