

Noah Roderick: "**Breaking Symmetry: The Case for Exaptation in Genre Evolution**"

In the classical division between poetical and rhetorical genres, the former were seen as categories conforming to natural types of aesthetic experience, whereas the latter were shaped by stable, discrete convergences of setting and purpose. Led by scholars such as Miller (1984), Bazerman (1988), and Devitt (2004), the legacy of rhetorical genre studies in the late twentieth century has been to demonstrate the generative epistemic (as opposed to the normative) work that genres do. Here, the recurrent nature of rhetorical actions plays a vital role in selecting and even shaping knowledge of the situations to which those very actions are a response. But despite this revolution in thought, recurrent rhetorical actions (i.e. genres) are still understood to emerge and evolve out of (albeit shifting) convergences of rhetorical purpose and setting. The prevailing assumption, in other words, is that the evolution of genres is adaptive. The adaptation hypothesis presents a neat theoretical symmetry, since a genre-based understanding of rhetorical action holds that succeeding in one's rhetorical purpose is presupposed in part by successfully adapting to the genre that is mediating the rhetorical situation. A further benefit of this theoretical symmetry is that it provides ready-made historical and ethnographic methodologies for studying the evolution of generic content.

Without wholly displacing the role of adaption in genre evolution, this presentation makes a case for exaptation. Exaptation is a term borrowed from evolutionary developmental biology wherein mutations selected for one functional advantage may end up serving an entirely unrelated function. In my borrowing of the concept, I argue that when an agent imitatively adapts to the form of a genre for a given rhetorical purpose, she may be adapting to purposes undisclosed in the present situation. As such, this presentation attends to the phenomenology of recurrence and how invariant features of genres are intuited and then imitated so that genres can be described ontologically as metastable objects existing in phased space. Among other things, this requires a reexamination of aesthetic experience and form in rhetorical genre studies. While the exaptive view of genre evolution does not lend itself so easily to existing historical and ethnographic methodologies, I will show that it may have experimental value in other settings, such as in the problem of typified behavior in robot-human interaction.