



The Issue of Genre in Digital Memory: What Literary Studies Can Offer to Internet and Memory Culture Research

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Abstract: This paper addresses the differing impacts of interactive online genres on the construction of historical memories. It explores various communication genres of the internet (social media, blogs such as *LiveJournal*, comments on *YouTube* or news portals), especially the form of communication they require, the way this form of communication interferes with memory culture and how it influences its various representations. The main focus is on the trifecta of technology, interactive genre and memory.

I argue that generic aspects, as outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin and further developed in a pragmatist key by Carolyn Miller and others, can contribute considerable insight to Digital Memory Studies. Only an integrated approach to genre, which encompasses technical conditions as well as rhetorical rules and cultural particularities, can help us understand how memory emerges and changes online.

Keywords: online genres; digitally born genres; speech genres; Bakhtin; interactivity; memory; genre memory; blogs; temporality; cultural relativity

In 2004, John M. Swales, one of the canonical authors of genre studies, acknowledged: “[...] technological effects on genre – and genreification – are simultaneously overt and insidious.” (Swales 2004: 6). Inverting the logical order of Swales’ argument, I argue in this paper that the notion of genre is critical to the study of digital memory.¹

¹ This paper takes inspiration from two research seminars. The first was conducted jointly by the Universities of Munich (Philipp Bürger, Martin Schulze Wessel) and Passau (myself) in 2011/12. The participants, PhD students and postgraduates from the Honours Master’s Programme in East European Studies (Elitestudiengang ‘Osteuropastudien’), explored competing memories of communism in selected Eastern European and Eurasian internet communities (Bürger et al. 2013). The second was the Spring School *Digital Mnemonics in Slavonic Studies* (Etkind et al. 2013; see also the editorial and the other contributions to this special issue of *Digital Icons*). The present article is intended as a specific kind of methodological introduction to the following case studies.

The argumentation begins with a double introduction: in the first part my point of departure will be Bakhtin's proto-theory of genre memory, while in the second part, I will move from offline genre theory to online genres.

The rationale for the double introduction is my observation that the triangle of genre, internet and memory has not yet been comprehensively addressed. The existing research falls into two separate research discourses, one devoted to digital genres, the other to digital memory. There has been very little research, however, on online *genres* of memory, at least when it comes to memory elements in the macro-genre of interactive hypertext,² including research in East European Studies.³

Investigating the triangle of genre, internet and memory demands an interdisciplinary approach from three fields – 1) Literary Studies (genre theory), 2) Media Studies (Internet Studies) and 3) history (memory culture). I will arrive at a non-comprehensive list of ten dimensions that ought to be taken into account when exploring the relevance of online genres in shaping memory content, in particular with regard to East European online memory cultures.

Genres of/as memory

I take Mikhail Bakhtin's proto-theories of genre memory and speech genres as the point of departure for my exploration of online genres of memory because Bakhtin – in an offline context – tied together genre and memory more radically than any other twentieth-century literary theorist. The *locus classicus* for the discussion of genre *as* (an institution of) *memory* is the chapter 'Characteristics of Genre and Composition in Dostoevsky's Works',⁴ added to the second edition of Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky in 1963 (Bakhtin 2002: 115-202, 1984: 101-180). Bakhtin ascribes to genre its own 'memory': 'A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development.'⁵ (Bakhtin 2002: 120, 1984: 106, emphasis in the original).

Since the criterion for the selection of online genres of memory is interactivity, Bakhtin's key concept of dialogism inevitably offers support for this research angle: 'Genres are the central mechanisms of dialogue.' (Olick 1999: 384). Relying on dialogicity, Bakhtin's works on genre are also seminal for the inclusion of low-brow genres of everyday communication in this research agenda.

² The volume of research devoted to memory-related types of sites is growing rapidly: Sumner 2004; Meyer and Leggewie 2004; Dornik 2004; Zierold 2006; Meyer 2009; Schmidt 2011; Bothe 2012.

³ A microscopic focus, rather than a macro-generic approach, also applies to the outcomes of the seminal *Web Wars* project, with its focus on Eastern Europe (see the contributions to Rutten, Fedor and Zvereva 2013); to Trubina's exploration of 'Past Wars in the Russian Blogosphere' (2010), to Zvereva's reading of *Vkontakte* groups devoted to Soviet history (2011) and to Strukov and Howanitz's investigation of historical imaginations in online games (both from 2012).

⁴ 'Zhanrovye i suzhetno-kompozitsionnye osobennosti proizvedenii Dostoevskogo'.

⁵ 'Zhanr zhivet nastoiashchim, no vseгда pomnit svoe proshloe, svoe nachalo. Zhanr – predstavitel' tvorcheskoi pamiati v protsesse literaturnogo razvitiia.'

The pragmatic keyword *vyskazyvanie* [utterance] is the basis for Bakhtin's late essay 'Speech Genres' [Problema rechevykh zhanrov] from *The Aesthetics of Verbal Art* [Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva, 1979]. The category of utterance is not only central to the various 'generic subcategories of speech'⁶ (Bakhtin 1996: 162; 1986: 63), but also ties together the 'single-word everyday rejoinder and the multivolume novel'⁷ (Bakhtin 1996: 160, 1986: 61). Spontaneous oral and artistically arranged scriptural communications can therefore be addressed from the standpoint of having been formed by 'primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres'⁸ (Bakhtin 1996: 161, 1986: 61). According to Bakhtin, the latter 'absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres'⁹ (Bakhtin 1996: 161, 1986: 62). In the context of the internet, the mechanism of the absorption and embedding of other genres is laid bare via hyperlinks.

Bakhtin's attempts at a theory of genre anticipated the pragmatic turn in genre studies of the 1980s and 1990s. Under the pseudonym Pavel Medvedev, in *Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* [Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedenii, 1928], he voted for a 'sociology of genre'¹⁰ (Medvedev 1928: 183, 1985: 135). Genres provide human beings with instruments for performative action in a social context: 'Every significant genre is a complex system of means and methods for the conscious control and finalization of reality.'¹¹ (Medvedev 1928: 181, 1985: 133). Bakhtin demands acknowledgement of the 'conditions of performance and perception'¹² (Medvedev 1928: 177, 1985: 131) not only in highbrow literature, but also in

[...] the whole range of everyday uses of language. [...] The primary 'small everyday genres' are the speaking styles determined by social situations. [...] Bakhtin thus breaks down a barrier between public and private (or between political and non-political) genres. (Thompson 1984: 36)

The observation of the generic nature of everyday communication, which is determined by 'social situations', will obviously be even more relevant for the "'de facto" genres' (Miller 1984: 155) of online communication, with their semi-oral, semi-scriptural nature.

Bakhtin scholars from the field of literary theory have argued that Bakhtin was more interested in 'transformation' and the 'renewal of genre' (Thompson 1984: 32, 35), whereas sociologists of memory such as Jeffrey K. Olick state that, according to Bakhtin, 'images of the past are path-dependent' (Olick 1999: 382). For Olick, acts of commemoration recall previous acts of commemoration and thus enter into a dialogical relationship with them. He writes that certain 'kinds' of utterances experience 'historical accretions' through '[...] 'genre contact' – the sharing of a common 'way of seeing' between texts' (Olick 1999: 383, cf. Ivanov 1974: 315). Olick's extension of Bakhtin's definition of genre memory reads as fol-

⁶ 'zhanrov[y]e raznovidnost[i] rechi'.

⁷ 'odnoslovnnye bytovye repliki i mnogotomnyi khudozhestvennyi roman'.

⁸ 'pervichny[e] (prostye) i vtorichny[e] (slozhny[e]) rechevy[e] zhanr[y]'.

⁹ '[...] vbiraiut v sebja i pererabatyvaiut razlichnye pervichnye (prostye) zhanry.'

¹⁰ 'sotsiologi[ia] zhanra'.

¹¹ 'Kazhdyi zhanr, esli eto deistvitel'no khudozhestvennyi zhanr, est' slozhnaia sistema sredstv i sposobov ponimaiushchego ovladeniia i zaversheniia deistvitel'nosti.'

¹² 'opredelennye usloviia ispolneniia i vospriiatiiia'.

lows: ‘I extend Bakhtin’s ‘genre’ concept to identify historically accrued ‘types’ of utterances of a somewhat different order: patterns of speaking structured as a set of conventions against which or within which those utterances are produced and read.’ (Olick 1999: 384).

When discussing the mnemonic conservatism of genre on the one hand, and the transformation of genres on the other, scholars implicitly address the classical philosophical problem of man’s freedom or determination. Are genres made by man’s action, or do genres predetermine his/her actions? Bakhtin clearly sees the necessity of the subordination of man to his communicative means: ‘The artist must learn to see reality with the eyes of the genre.’¹³ (Medvedev 1928: 182, 1985: 134). There is no way to escape from genre: ‘We speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable *typical forms of construction of the whole*.’¹⁴ (Bakhtin 1996: 180, 1986: 78, emphasis in the original). The inevitable subordination to genre rules is due to the preponderance of cultural heritage for every newborn human being: ‘We are given these speech genres in almost the same way that we are given our native language.’¹⁵ (Bakhtin 1996: 181, 1986: 78). Bakhtin’s strongest claim concerns the internal rules of a chosen genre: ‘The chosen genre predetermines [*podskazyvaet*] for us their type and their compositional links.’¹⁶ (Bakhtin 1996: 184, 1986: 81). Genres do not, of course, actively repress human freedom. They only function as mandatory through an individual’s adjustment to social norms: ‘Therefore, genre is the aggregate of the means of collective orientation in reality, with the orientation towards finalization.’¹⁷ (Medvedev 1928: 183, 1985: 135).

This last quote hints at the problematic category of totality that Bakhtin attaches to his genre concept in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*: ‘Genre is the typical totality of the artistic utterance, and a vital totality, a finished and resolved whole. The problem of finalization [*zavershenie*] is one of the most important problems of genre theory (Medvedev 1928: 175, 1985: 129).¹⁸ This finalisation, however, is not all-encompassing, but rather relative to each particular genre (Medvedev 1928: 176, 1985: 130). Even if Bakhtin clarifies that ‘[f]inalization should not be confused with ending’¹⁹ (Medvedev 1928: 176, 1985: 130), his claim of finalisability is at odds with the factual openness of many online genres (see below): chat threads are virtually infinite, and what others earlier regarded as final, the administrator of a thread can refine or even remove later.

Despite his outdated predilection for ‘finalisation’, Bakhtin acknowledges the possibility of genre change. It is ‘generally possible to re-accentuate genres’²⁰ (Bakhtin 1996: 182, 1986: 79) and to change the ‘entire repertoire’: ‘The wealth and diversity of speech genres

¹³ ‘Khudozhnik dolzhen nauchit’sia videt’ deistvitel’nost’ glazami zhanra.’

¹⁴ ‘My govorim tol’ko opredelennymi rechevymi zhanrami, to est’ vse nashi vyskazyvaniia obladauiut opredelennymi i otnostitel’no ustoichivymi tipicheskimi formami postroeniia tselogo.’

¹⁵ ‘Eti rechevye zhanry dany nam pochti tak zhe, kak nam dan rodnoi iazyk, [...]’

¹⁶ ‘Izbrannyi zhanr podskazyvaet nam ikh tipy i ikh kompozitsionnye sviazi.’

¹⁷ ‘Zhanr, takim obrazom, est’ sovokupnost’ sposobov kollektivnoi orientatsii v deistvitel’nosti, s ustanovkoi na zavershenie.’

¹⁸ ‘Zhanr est’ tipicheskoe tseloe khudozhestvennogo vyskazyvaniia, pritom sushchestvennoe tseloe, tseloe zavershennoe i razreshennoe. Problema zaversheniia – odna iz sushchestvennykh problem teorii zhanra.’

¹⁹ ‘Zavershenie voobshche nel’zia putat’ s okonchaniem.’

²⁰ ‘pereaktsentuatsiia zhanrov’.

are boundless because [...] each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex.’ (Bakhtin 1996: 159, 1986: 60).²¹

Again, memory is part of the process: no new genre can emerge from nothing: ‘A new genre is made from genres at hand; with every genre a regrouping of already prepared elements takes place.’²² (Medvedev 1928: 190, 1985: 140). This observation will be most relevant for the description of ‘emergent cybergenres’ (Shepherd and Watters 1998: 3), which develop from older offline genres.

Digital genre theory

What is the justification for investigating a novel phenomenon such as online memories, drawing on the rather traditional notion of genre, apart from the compatibility of Bakhtin’s proto-theory of the memory of speech genres with online communication? Why is it worth re-opening the Pandora’s box of hundreds of years of genre theory in order to describe indisputably new phenomena such as Social Network Sites, community blogs, chat rooms etc., as proposed in recent edited volumes by Giltrow and Stein (2009), Mehler et al. (2010) and Neiger et al. (2011) – from a technological perspective – and by Nünning et al. (2011) – with regard to narrative genres?

This question is far from trivial, since alternative terms such as *form*, *style*, *discourse*, *medium*, *platform* and *technology* are to be found in research literature. Whereas the broadest of these six notions, *form* (Schröter 2004: 397), lacks the prescriptive dimension inherent in genre, the notoriously vague concept of *style* (Paech 1998: 18) is confined to the linguistic dimension and thus only one part of genre (cf. Giltrow and Stein 2009: 3). *Style* also presupposes a rather monologic mode of communication, while new internet genres are characterised by interaction. *Discourse* (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 23) pays tribute to the dialogical nature of online interaction but neglects technology; at the other end of the spectrum, the use of *medium* (Schmidt 2012: 315; Rutten et al. 2013: passim), *technology* (Miller and Shepherd 2009: 283; Puschmann 2010: 51) or *platform* for a particular sort of communication on the internet is too exclusively material (Crowston and Williams 1997: 1) and ignores the multimedia nature of this technical innovation, which allows traditional media to converge (Jenkins 2006) in a ‘transmedia world’ (Perryman 2008: 37).

All the aforementioned terms are relevant as well, but focusing on what I call genre is important because it allows for a certain perspective on the rhetorical *rules* implicitly adopted by users of media platforms. Jill Walker Rettberg proposed a similar Solomonic solution by distinguishing different perspectives when it comes to the web genre of blogs:

²¹ ‘Bogatstvo i raznoobrazie rechevykh zhanrov neobozrимо, potomu chto neischerpaemy vozmozhnosti raznoobraznoi chelovecheskoi deiatel’nosti i potomu chto v kazhdoi sfere deiatel’nosti vyrabatyvaetsia tselyi repertuar rechevykh zhanrov, differentsiruiushchiisia i rastushchii po mere razvitiia i uslozhneniia dannoi sfery.’

²² ‘Novyi zhanr sostavliaetsia iz nalichnykh zhanrov; vnutri kazhdogo zhanra zavershaiutsia peregruppirovki gotovykh elementov.’

If we see blogs as a medium, then the formal definitions are sufficient. These are the material limitations [the technological infrastructure] of blogs. [...] However, if we see blogs as a genre [...], then our definition should include mention of the typical style and content that lets us at a glance say ‘that’s not a blog’ when we see an online newspaper. (Walker Rettberg 2008: 20-21)

The term *genre* is obviously burdened with a long prehistory and suffers from an outdated universalistic understanding of genres as ‘natural forms’²³ (Goethe; cf. Hempfer 1973: 30), generic archetypes (Frye 1973: 246) or “‘eternal’ tendencies”²⁴ (which Bakhtin [2002: 120, 1984: 106], with good reason, places within quotation marks). Electronic media are clearly not an ‘eternal’ human capacity but a new, historically contingent invention. The universalistic approach to genre neglects the materiality of media and is therefore incapable of clarifying the peculiar features of online communication.

The universalistic approach was countered by nominalists in genre theory (Beneditto Croce and others), who denied any kind of general regularities beyond the singular phenomenon. This epistemological scepticism might be fruitful when interpreting ‘great’ works of literature, but it leads to apophaticism if applied to the ‘big data’ resources of the internet. With the internet, we face the challenge of combining qualitative analysis with new dimensions of quantity.

If Literary Studies are to contribute to Internet Studies in the field of genre theory, an intermediate epistemological foundation is indispensable. This can be found in conceptualism and constructivism, which ascribe a social reality to general terms that they comprehend as abstractions *post res*. In my view the most promising option is a pragmatist approach to genres that differentiates between genres according to the applied speech situation(s), in the sense of Bakhtin and also of Austin and Searle (see Hempfer 1973: 160-164). Carolyn Miller’s pragmatist definition from 1984 has become something of a research consensus (Giltrow and Stein 2009, 4): she proposed defining ‘genre as social action’ (Miller 1984: 164), stressing the ‘connection between genre and recurrent situation’ (Miller 1984: 151). This gave rise to a pragmatic approach towards genre that Erickson called ‘situated genre theory’ (Erickson 2000). In my view, approaching genres as means of social actions in no way precludes the productivity of various philological concepts as well. Literary studies can, demonstrated here, both contribute its expertise to Internet Studies and profit from expanding into the growing domain of computer-mediated communication, among other ways, by offering the notion of genre.

Another helpful contribution of Literary Studies can be correcting two not unproblematic assumptions in situated genre theory: function and intention. Whereas it is indisputable that genres must be socially accepted in order to have an impact (Crowston and Williams 1997: 3), the concrete social function ascribed to a genre can either be determined only in very general terms (such as ‘connectivity’, Pogačar 2009: 25; Hoskins 2011: 272), or one must acknowledge that they vary not only between individuals and cultures but also depending on content (consider, for example, community blogs on cuisine and genocide). Miller is certain-

²³ ‘Naturformen’.

²⁴ “‘vekovechnye” tendentsii’.

ly right that genre provides ‘a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence’ (Miller 1984: 163), but the sender’s actual intention, reincorporated into genre theory by Swales (Swales 1999: 43-58), remains out of the reach of any textual analysis, just as it was out of reach for offline Literary Studies.

Even if situated genre theory tries to rehabilitate some of the most conventional terms of literary theory, it does not even remotely hark back to Aristotle or Lomonosov, whose genre typologies were rooted in totally different social contexts. This suppression of the theoretical tradition does not preclude my observation that not only digitised formerly offline writing, but also a large proportion of originally online writing, displays strong features of conventional offline genres (easily discernible, for example, when texts are too long for a screen page). Similar ‘reproduced genres’, which ‘moved intact to the Web’ (Crowston and Williams 1997: 1-2), are not the topic of my investigation. In terms of Shepherd and Watters’ typology, I am interested only in ‘emergent cybergenres’ and digitally born ‘spontaneous cybergenres’²⁵ which, for this purpose, I define as genuine online genres, for which the existence of a back channel and interactivity are the *conditio sine qua non*. Given this precondition, I see no need to make a terminological decision for just one of the existing synonyms: *digital genres*, *cybergenres*, *online genres*, *web genres* etc. (cf. Santini et al. 2010: 6). What this article does not aim to do is ultimately solve the prevalent lack of agreement in research literature on an unanimous definition of digital genre.

The limitation to interactive genres is important, however, because it has major consequences for the communicative relationship between sender and receiver: if the receiver can easily and immediately engage in a discussion with the sender, his active role goes beyond what Reader-Response Criticism, from Roman Ingarden to Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss, attributed to the reader. Not only does a sender anticipate his receivers’ reactions, a multitude of prosumers co-author a cybergeneric product. The term *prosumer*, coined by Toffler in the context of pre- and post-modern economics (Toffler 1980: 53-61, 282-305), serves as a foundation stone for theories of computer-mediated communication (Knieper et al. 2011: 51).

The conversational and collective nature of online production, achieved by a multitude of prosumers, calls into question the conventional tacit presuppositions of high quality in print literature. As Pogačar argues, digital memory studies theory must react to the collective authorship with a ‘connectivity turn’ which pays tribute to what he calls the communicative ‘re-tribalisation’ (Pogačar 2009: 25) of society.

From the perspective of Literary Studies, this implies a re-folklorisation that takes place through genres of online interaction. On the other hand, aspects that have attracted the attention of Literary Studies for centuries, such as dialogicity, explicit and implicit genre rules, pseudo- and anonymity or censorship, return under new circumstances in predesigned and moderated online genres. Here the genuinely literary topic of genre analysis meets with the recent adoption of the notion of genre in the social sciences (Chamberlain and Thompson 1998: 1) and media studies (Askehave and Nielsen 2005: 120).

²⁵ ‘Novel cybergenres [...] may be completely new genres, not based on any genre existing previously in another medium, or they may be based on genres originally replicated in the new medium but which have evolved so far from the original that they are classed as being new genres.’ (Shepherd and Watters 1998: 3).

When importing the double focus on regulatory rules and social interaction into media studies, genre theory can help to bridge the extreme positions of media determinism or media marginality and provide a more nuanced response to McLuhan's canonical assertion that 'The medium is the message' (McLuhan 1995: 7). Patrick Rössler may well be right when he observes that this dictum appears to be attractive to research when a medium is still new:

They [the objects of research] concern the form of online communication rather than its content, and it is reasonable that, in the early stages of the social development of certain modes of communication, such aspects seem interesting. [...] Such descriptive goals of research recede into the background when a media offer is no longer new. Then the medium is no longer the message. The reconstruction of practices of communication is less relevant than the reconstruction of the meaning of the communicated content, in which its media character is often secondary.²⁶ (Rössler 2010: 36)

This opinion comes from a scholar of Communication Studies, not a representative of Literary Studies. As a literary scholar I cannot subscribe to either the secondary nature of form or in any clear-cut distinction between form and content. There is an astonishingly broad consensus in Literary Studies about the interrelation of content and form: for example, summing up the findings of Russian Formalism in 1925, Boris Eikhenbaum spoke of the 'content-ness of form'.²⁷

The Formalists [...] freed themselves from the traditional correlation of form and content and from the traditional idea of form as an envelope, a vessel into which one pours a liquid [the content]. [...] The notion of form here acquires a new meaning; it is no longer an envelope but a complete thing, something concrete, dynamic, self-contained, and without a correlative of any kind.²⁸ (Eikhenbaum 1927: 125, 2005: 872-873)

This understanding of formed content is shared even by Bakhtin, whose criticism of formalism could otherwise hardly have been more severe: 'There is no formless content and there is not contentless form.'²⁹ (Medvedev 1928: 190, 1985: 140). An Austrian student of Russian Formalism, Aage Hansen-Löve, took a step further when he defined "'form" as an active and transformative principle'³⁰ (Hansen-Löve 1977: 189-190). Going down a different path, Amy

²⁶ 'Sie [die Untersuchungsgegenstände] beziehen sich eher auf die Form von Online-Kommunikation als auf deren Inhalt, und es ist nachvollziehbar, dass solche Aspekte in einer frühen Phase der gesellschaftlichen Etablierung von Kommunikationsmodi interessant scheinen. [...] Solche deskriptiven Untersuchungsziele treten, sobald ein Medienangebot nicht mehr "neu" ist, eher in den Hintergrund: Das Medium ist dann eben nicht mehr die Botschaft. Es geht weniger um die Rekonstruktion von Kommunikationspraxen, sondern vielmehr um die Rekonstruktion von Sinn- und Bedeutungsgehalten der Kommunikate, für die deren medialer Charakter häufig sekundär ist.'

²⁷ 'soderzhatel'nost' formy'.

²⁸ '[...] formalisty osvobodzhdali sebja ot traditsionnoi sootnositel'nosti "forma – sodержanie" i ot ponimaniia formy kak obolochki – kak sosuda, v kotoryi nalivaetsia zhidkost' (soderzhanie). [...] Poniatie "formy" iavilos' v novom znachenii – ne kak obolochka, a kak polnota, kak nechto konkretno-dinamicheskoe, sodержatel'noe samo po sebe, vne vsiakikh sootnositel'nostei.'

²⁹ 'Net neofornlennogo sodержaniia i net bessoderzhatel'noi formy.'

³⁰ "'Form" als aktiv-transformierendes Prinzip'.

Devitt, a theoretician of internet genres, arrived at a comparable understanding of genre form as dynamically shaping ‘content’ (cf. Devitt 2009: 34).

This integration of (syntactic) form and (semantic) content may pave the way for the incorporation of a third dimension – the (material) medium. In 2005, Askehave and Nielsen conceded the ‘controversial’ status of their ‘claim [...] that it may be necessary to incorporate the notion of “medium” into the notion of “genre”’ (Askehave and Nielsen 2005: 121). And indeed, their own adoption of Swales’ ‘three-level genre model’:

- (1) *communicative purpose*; realised by
- (2) *move structure*; realised by
- (3) *rhetorical strategies* (Askehave and Nielsen 2005: 122),

betrays the belated inclusion of the electronic medium. The authors admit that the ‘conventionalised internal structure’ of genre is in no way autonomous from the technical infrastructure, whose ‘media properties influence both the purpose and form of web-mediated genres and should therefore be included in the genre identification’ (Askehave and Nielsen 2005: 122, 128). Even if I subscribe to their general postulate, I do not agree with Askehave and Nielsen when they assert that an additional media dimension can simply be mechanically added by distinguishing between two modes of action for the recipient, a ‘reading mode’ and a ‘navigating mode’ (Askehave and Nielsen 2005: 127) of ‘hyper-reading’ (Sosnoski 1999: 135-136). In my view, hyper-using is the only mode both of production and reception for digitally-born genres, and from the very beginning, it was shaped by the technical structure of the particular internet genre. The ‘third-party to interaction: the technological design of forms, formats and functions’ (Giltrow and Stein 2009: 22), shapes the purposes that can be realised by its users. Thus medium and genre cannot be divided under the present electronic ‘discourse network 2000’ [‘Aufschreibesystem 2000’] (Nünning and Rupp 2012: 11). The technical preconditions ‘both enable and limit’ (Devitt 2009: 45) internet genres.

In conclusion, individual purposes and the predefined trajectories that guide a user through the medium are also both shaped by the technical possibilities and by the rhetorical genre rules for disposition and elocution (forming the content). My proposal of an amended scheme therefore comprises four levels, with feedback between all levels:

- (1) *technical infrastructure*; enabling and shaped by
- (2) *communicative purpose*; enabling and shaped by
- (3) *move structure*; enabling and shaped by
- (4) *rhetorical strategies*.

All four levels – with some limitations concerning level (1) – are joint products of the prosumers, who realise and adapt their expectations in the course of their prosumption performance (cf. Dillon and Gushrowski 2000). Thomas Erickson’s definition from 2000 provides the most convincing formulation so far to describe the aforementioned interconnected dimensions:

A genre is a patterning of communication created by a combination of the individual, social and technical forces implicit in a recurring communicative situation. A genre structures communication by creating shared expectations about the form and content of the interaction, thus easing the burden of production and interpretation. (Erickson 2000, emphasis in the original)

This general definition is not very precise on the level of rhetoric and syntax, so I will have to refine it from a Literary Studies perspective and formulate a host of specific tasks for genre-based analysis in the CMC context. I see five such tasks:

- (1) to determine the moment at which a novel model of online communication becomes accepted, implicitly prescriptive and thus generic;
- (2) to establish a (necessarily non-comprehensive) ‘genre repertoire’ (Orlikowski and Yates 1994) both of ‘emergent’ and ‘spontaneous’ genres of online interaction;
- (3) to track the way in which technology and recurrent forms of communicative usage co-produce formed content in a particular genre;
- (4) to describe the rhetorical rules for communicative behaviour in an online genre, both through tacit ‘implicit structuring’ (Yates et al. 1999: 98-100) and (less often in informal internet communities) through explicit meta-genre discussions;³¹ and
- (5) to conceptualise accepted sequences of continuous communications³² in a genre and of links to other genres (Swales’ ‘genre chain’³³).

The crucial question, which can be answered only after these five tasks have been addressed, is: do the interconnected restrictions and rules on the level of technology, explicit social control and implicit structuring of communicative form amount to ‘genre effects’ (Olick 1999: 384) that determine content?

Message types favoured by online genres of memory

All these questions concern genres of online communication in general and are not confined to genres of online memory. The narrower problem, which I will investigate further, is: do genres of online memory carry their own memory in Bakhtin’s sense, partially determining the way they are used? Or, to formulate this question more defensively: do certain online genres favour specific forms of memory content? This cannot be answered *in toto* but only with regard to certain dimensions that we can deduct from technical infrastructure, implicit rhetoric rules and actual dynamics of usage. I propose a tentative, non-comprehensive list of features of online genres of memory:

³¹ For user-centred empirical research on web genre terms, see Crowston et al. 2010.

³² Cf. Niklas Luhmann’s ‘Anschlusskommunikationen’ and: ‘[...] recognizing that a communication is of a particular genre may suggest the form expected for the reply.’ (Crowston 2010: 6).

³³ Cf. Swales 2004: 18-20.

a. *Conversational nature*: Memory purposes are not so easy to detect in the genre ecology of the internet, because there are not many specific, exclusive genres or sub-genres of memory. Memory topics and memory associations tend instead to be found in various multi-content genres of online communication. This implies both a quantitative challenge, because of the potential ubiquity and sheer mass that Andrew Hoskins describes as the ‘post-scarcity memorial-media boom’ (Hoskins 2011: 270), and a qualitative one that the researcher faces according to Merrin:

Traditional media studies studied broadcast content. This was material produced for mass, public consumption, being created for particular reasons, being designed for mass comprehensibility and meaning and possessing prestige and potential cultural significance as an expression of a major productive outlet and its creative staff. In contrast much of our personal, user or peer-produced content is often intended for private or limited consumption, having different modes of meaning, comprehensibility and relevance. [...] This is a challenge for contemporary media studies: how do you study the ordinariness, incomprehensibility, banality or offensiveness of personal media production. (Merrin 2010)

As argued earlier, omitting non-internet specific genres that do not or only barely imply interactivity and hypertextuality may be justified, but conversational triviality is not a reason for exclusion because ‘[...] the CMC system may be viewed as an ecology of conversational genres’ (Erickson 2000), defined by the availability of the back channel and – more traditionally speaking – dialogue or polylogue (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 19). This means a limitation on the scope of research into genuinely dialogic genres such as SNS, chat rooms, forums and a subtype of blogs that, even if it starts with a monologue, receives a dialogical appendix by allowing comments.³⁴ The latter subtype makes it clear that technical infrastructure and genre are two different things: depending on the usage of (the same) *LiveJournal* infrastructure for monologic j-blogs or, alternatively, for community blogs, two different genres emerge.³⁵

The original conversational purpose of much online memory poses an additional practical problem for research – the problem of the accessibility of material intended solely for a group of like-minded members of an SNS. The degree of any material’s accessibility is, however, also relevant to correctly evaluating such material, once the researcher has obtained access to it. Content is shaped according to the audience. For whom was the material originally designed? Can registered members contribute themselves or is the material read-only? Can non-members read or even contribute in some form?

³⁴ This tension was described by Laurie McNeill: ‘This pairing of genre and medium, [...] seems troubling, if not paradoxical: after all, the diary is a centuries-old practice associated with the spiritual, the therapeutic, and the strictly private, while the Internet, home of the “New Media,” has been celebrated for its publicity and accessibility.’ (McNeill 2005: 1).

³⁵ A different meaning of ‘memory blog’ can be found in Herring et al. 2004: 10, where it is defined as a blog ‘in which the author keeps track of information for later use’, another dominant focus of digital memory studies, but one which is devoted to future memorisation, not to the past (cf. also the chapter ‘Meme Genres’ in Shifman 2014: 99-118).

b. *Embeddedness*: What struck scholars trained in offline genre theory was the multifunctionality (Miller and Shepherd 2009), ‘the low degree of conventionalization of form-function relationships’ (Giltrow and Stein 2009: 11) and the openness of online genres to other generic elements (Devitt speaks of ‘computer-mediated inter-genre-ality’, 2009: 45). Blogs, the favourite of digital genre theorists, have been seen as a ‘bridge’ between multimedia documents and text-based communication (Herring et al. 2004: 2). But ‘embedded genres’ (Crowston and Williams 1997: 8) have spread to other genres such as video websites, where the interactive hypertext also appears as a dialogic appendix. In some cases there are limitations to the accepted quantity of external links – the limits concerning the size of uploaded pictures, videos or audio files. Both excessive and insufficient use of external links can be regarded as a violation of the implicit rules of a web genre (Santini et al. 2010: 12).

The inverse setting is embedment not of some other material *in* the message but *of* the message in the technical infrastructure of the platform used. Researchers must explore whether the user’s individual messages are supported by additional semi-verbal, pre-designed ‘messages’ such as ‘my current mood’, ‘my interests’ or *Facebook*’s ‘like’ function. As José van Dijck points out, the weblog architecture for social connection lifts the social dimension onto the level of infrastructure. The same can be said about genre and the technical infrastructure that sends semantically standardised ‘messages’ (van Dijck 2007: 66).

This observation makes clear that an in-depth analysis of a web genre must look into subgenres. I deliberately mix the terminological register proposed by Santini’s et al. (macro- and microgenres; 2010: 12) and Lindemann and Littig’s (‘super-genre level’; 2012: 218) when speaking of the *macro-genre* of interactive hypertext, *genres* such as blogs and *subgenres* such as community blogs. This choice is made in order to avoid the undesirable axiological implications of *super* and to clarify that the ‘sub-type’ (Grieve et al. 2010: 304) *subgenre* must in no way be small in size, as is suggested by the prefix *micro*.

c. *Topicality or occasionality of memory content*: Due to the dynamic development of the internet, it is impossible to definitely and exhaustively systematise all generic and sub-generic combinations and sorts of embedment of interactivity, hypertextuality and multimediality which can contain memory elements. A gradual distinction, however, can be made on the basis of content: I propose to distinguish between (the less frequent) topicalised memory sites (for example *Facebook* groups devoted to historical figures such as Iosif Stalin or Mikhail Gorbachev or historical events such as Chernobyl’ or the Holodomor) and (the infinite number of) sites with occasional memory appendices.³⁶ The latter category has recently been fostered by the technological structure of ‘[n]etwork-driven genres (e.g., social network sites, microblogging) [...] because people follow the conversations in the context of individuals, not topical threads’ (boyd et al. 2010: 1).

To what degree occasional memory elements (cf. Zvereva 2011: 4-5) are tolerated is again partially determined by the ‘hard facts’ behind digital genres: are we dealing with an open genre, or is registration or even personal invitation needed in order to access a site and/or to have writing rights? Are the users required to appear with their real names or are

³⁶ Where a historical political leader might be mentioned just once in a contemporary sports context, which thus accidentally serves as a ‘potential occasion of memory’ [‘potenzieller Erinnerungsanlass’] (Zierold 2006: 161).

they allowed to hide their identity behind nicknames and avatars? Anonymity and virtual personality transformation (cf. Nünning and Rupp 2012: 12) are clearly of key importance for the observation of political correctness, on the one hand, or the inclusion of hate speech in online interaction, on the other. If Knieper, Wolf and Tonndorf are right to assume that, with the co-authorship of prosumers, ‘subjective factors such as emotions, opinions, everyday rationality and foreknowledge play a role’³⁷ (Knieper et al. 2011: 51-52), the topicality and/or emotionality of discussions in a cybergenre are a dimension that should be explored when studying ‘memory-making from below’ (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 6). What is novel in the context of computer-mediated communication is the opportunity to easily access the non-professional memory discourse of ordinary users, which comfortably outweighs academic historiography on the Web (Zvereva 2011: 2).

d. *Length of communicative acts*: Distinctions can also be made when it comes to the syntax that explicitly or implicitly structures memory-related communications in a web genre. The length of a communicative act online can be strictly limited, as is the case with *Twitter*, or virtually unlimited. Excessive graphomania, however, is likely to be punished either by the moderator of a website or the community. Rather, short interjections are the most likely form of occasional memory elements in web genres. As Vera Zvereva emphasises: ‘[...] “completeness” is not the ideal of community members [of *Vkontakte*]. [...] Fragmentation turns into the main mode of presentation of facts, thoughts and emotions’ (Zvereva 2011: 5).

e. *(Self-)censorship*: The majority of forums, chats and comments do not produce a single, discrete, polished and finished text. In the case of instant messaging, the use of the correction opportunity in one’s own contributions (see van Dijck 2007: 64-65) is less relevant than the role of the administrator or moderator, who can censor entries or refrain from doing so. Censorship that takes place retrospectively is the strongest interference in a conversation’s continuity, posing a challenge for researchers’ close reading because the intervention is not always marked and traceable.

f. *Temporal discontinuity within genres*: This leads us to what one might regard as the major difference between offline and online genres: temporal discontinuity and temporality in general. *Discussions of online genres must be sensitive to the factor of the time over which a computer-mediated interaction evolves*. Even without interference from censorship, online conversations may be highly discontinuous. Focused discussions of a memory topic are often short and interrupted, or even ended by digressions from the topic (Kulyk 2013). An interruption can either remain without consequences when ignored by the other participants, destroy a discussion by making others fall silent, or kidnap the thread by transforming a hitherto topicalised thread into a flame-war (Moor et al. 2010). This transformation, however, can also be punished by the moderator taking down the thread, or can end up in a hostile takeover.

³⁷ ‘Der Prosument wird nicht von klassischen Rollenbildern und Auswahlkriterien bestimmt, die in professionalisierten Medienunternehmen etabliert sind. Vielmehr spielen subjektive Faktoren wie Emotionen, Meinungen, Alltagsrationalität oder Vorwissen eine Rolle.’

What interests me in the context of genre analysis is whether digressions and interruptions of semantic lines are capable of changing the genre. In order to answer this question I propose to refine Swales' term 'genre chain' by adding the concept of *sub-genre chain*. Whereas many interactive genres are constituted by genre chains, such as news to comments or video to comments, here the communicative dynamics *within* one particular genre such as a comment thread alters the sub-genre. This is the case, for example, if an occasional memory blog discussion is 'hitch-hiked' by flammers or even 'kidnapped' by a flame-war.

Further research is needed in order to describe flaming (or in the Russian context *kholivar* [холивaр]³⁸) as a sub-genre and to conceptualise the 'hinge' between two sub-genres, such as topicalised discussion and flame-war. We cannot stick to the agnosticism advocated by Sosnoski ('Unlike the print environment where the structure of an essay or a speech would be expected to follow a particular pattern, Web pages bear only some resemblances to each other.'; Sosnoski 1990: 140), but must instead tackle the task of describing patterns of sub-genre changes, including the time vector into online genre theory.

g. *Temporal discontinuity between genres*: On the macro-level, discontinuities not only in sub-genres but also in genres must be reflected. As was the case with older offline genres, web genres can 'expire' after a certain time. Santini et al. argue that new web genres tend to (partially) replace older ones. If they are to be believed, the older genre of the personal home page, the first favourite of online genre theorists (Dillen and Gushrowski 2000), is already threatened by SNS in its very existence (Santini et al. 2010: 13).

This even more drastically affects former offline genres, which were transferred to the internet, or some of their features, such as narrative schemes. Several structures of offline narratives seem to be preserved in emergent cybergenres. According to Andrew Hoskins, implicit structuring on a literary level is in operation in the application of narrative schemes (Hoskins 2009b: 36-38), which lends plausibility to an online memory discourse as well. It is, however, an open question whether traditional literary schemes will over time be repressed either by the 'media templates' of media such as TV or radio, or if these will be altered once again by less professional bottom-up schemes (Hoskins 2009b: 40-41). The genre ecology of the internet is undergoing a continuous transition.

h. *Opinion dynamics*: Apart from accelerated progress in technical infrastructure, the creative potential from below is of key importance for genre change. With these bottom-up processes, canonical problems of Communication and Journalism Studies are addressed, for example when it comes to explorations of opinion dynamics. Amy Devitt's 'inter-genre-ality' is at stake when explorations of online memory draw on findings concerning the news cycle, which, according to Jure Leskovec, Lars Backstrom and Jon Kleinberg, implies certain temporal regularities in the relationship between different online genres such as news and blogs: '[...] a typical lag of 2.5 hours between the peaks of attention to a phrase in the news media

³⁸ I owe thanks to Lisa Gaufman, whose question on this subject, posed in Freising in March 2013, led me to reflect on the problem of whether *kholivar* is a separate genre. See the 'New Cold War' article in this special issue.

and in blogs respectively, with divergent behaviour around the overall peak and a ‘heartbeat’-like pattern in the handoff between news and blogs’ (Leskovec et al. 2009: 209).

In the case of many online genres (for example the comment threads on *YouTube* or *Flickr*), consensus is not a goal at all, in stark contrast to Jürgen Habermas’ normative discourse ethics (Habermas 1995). The absence of this normative goal supports the philosopher’s doubts concerning the capacity of the internet to integrate (Habermas 2008). There are, however, examples of the successful use of the *genus deliberativum* online (such as *Wikipedia*). Moreover, Habermas’ fragmentation hypothesis must also be corrected with regard to ‘local’ homogenisation effects, which create an ‘illusion of privacy’³⁹ (Howanitz 2014):

Due to the fragmented public sphere on the web, people often turn to specific platforms of communication which represent and publish one-sided opinions. The users regard this opinion as the only correct one because it is shared by all the others in the community. Other opinions are uttered only rarely or are confronted with flames and bullying. [...] The distribution of opinions appears differently to each sub-audience. There is not one single public sphere in the web anymore, but many parallel partial public spheres.⁴⁰ (Knieper et al. 2011: 53)

According to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s ‘Schweigenspirale’ [spiral of silence] (Noelle-Neumann 1980: 18), opinions that do not please the particular ‘sub-audience’ will, over time, vanish in the ‘Darwinian ecology of digital memory’ (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 9). But Noelle-Neumann’s findings, made in a West German offline context in the 1970s, are not directly applicable to the media ecology of certain internet communities (cf. Neill 2009: 36). Volodymyr Kulyk, for example, observed the coexistence of conflicting threads in Ukrainian web communities with a memory focus (Kulyk 2013). Even more fundamental is Zvereva’s observation concerning the ‘confrontational character’ of *Vkontakte* groups devoted to Soviet history:

All discussions are pragmatic within the online groups: an event does not exist and is not formulated by itself but only in opposition to those who hold different opinions. Documents surface when they can be used to defeat an adversary. Memories are collected when it is necessary to prove one’s case. In other words, any given historical event presented in “V Kontakte” usually implies its opposition; all statements imply opponents and memories – a figure of contraposition. (Zvereva 2011: 2-3)

³⁹ ‘Illusion von Privatheit’.

⁴⁰ ‘Durch die fragmentierte Netzöffentlichkeit wenden sich Menschen häufig spezifischen Kommunikationsplattformen zu, welche einseitige Meinungen vertreten und veröffentlichen. Den Nutzern erscheint diese Meinung als einzig richtige, da sie von allen anderen in der Community geteilt wird. Andere Meinungen werden nur selten geäußert oder mit Flames und Bullying beantwortet. [...] Meinungsverteilungen erscheinen in jedem Subpublikum anders. Es gibt im Netz nicht mehr die eine Öffentlichkeit, sondern mehrere parallel existierende Teilöffentlichkeiten.’

Bruce Etling, Karina Aleksanian, John Kelly, Robert Faris, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser confirm this when maintaining that ‘ideological homophilia’⁴¹ (Etling et al. 2010: 24) is rather untypical for Russian blog sites:

Within the central core, Russian bloggers are less isolated in ‘echo chambers’, in the circle of equally-minded bloggers, than is usually the case in some of the other blogospheres which we investigated.⁴² (Etling et al. 2010: 23)

This intercultural difference makes it clear that none of the culturally confined observations can be generalised. The only factor that introduces certain predictability is whether ‘[...] administrators limit the membership in their groups to prevent abuse by ideologically hostile or simply irresponsible people’ (Kulyk 2013: 77). Apart from this, the divergent patterns in opinion dynamics illustrate the need for an international turn in Internet Studies (Goggin and McLelland 2008).

i. *Cultural relativity*: Theorists of offline genres have on many occasions stressed the cultural and historical relativity of genres in general (Gymnich and Neumann 2007: 38-45). Analogous research for online genres is still nascent. Elena Trubina demonstrated that certain genres, such as community blogs, are especially popular in some cultures, such as the Runet culture (Trubina 2010: 64). The Cyrillic online cultures also seem to be much more conducive to community or group blogs, which, if one is to believe Jack Grieve, Douglas Biber, Erig Friginal and Tatiana Nekrasova, are ‘relatively rare’ (Grieve et al. 2010: 305). This diagnosis must obviously be limited to Western Internet cultures. In contrast, in the post-Soviet space ‘hybrids of social networks’⁴³ (Etling et al. 2010: 17) are more popular.

With regard to more subtly differing genre ecologies in various internet cultures, one must, however, acknowledge the fact that the impact of culture on technology is rather indirect: it goes through modes of generic actualisation of technical infrastructures. We can, therefore, say that genre is the decisive mediator in what Mizuko Ito calls the ‘heterogeneous co-constitution of technology across a transnational stage’ (Ito 2005: 7) and Jill Walker Rettberg the ‘*co-construction*, [...] the mutual dependencies between technology and culture’ (Walker Rettberg 2008: 53, emphasis in the original). *It is genre as a mediator between technology and culture that justifies the vital necessity of a Cultural Studies expertise for interdisciplinary Internet Studies.*

j. *Genre tolerance*: Cultural relativism should, however, not be exaggerated. The world-wide use of globalised platforms produces certain homogenisation effects. The differences between varieties of the same genre in distant internet cultures are arguably smaller than those between distinct genres in the same culture. Regardless of a particular culture, rude conversa-

⁴¹ ‘ideologicheskaja gomofilija’.

⁴² ‘V ramkakh etogo tsentral’nogo iadra russkoiazыchnye bloggery menee izolivorany vnutri “echo kamer”, v krugu svoikh edinomyshlennikov-bloggerov, kak eto obychno proiskhodit v nekotorykh drugikh blogosferakh, kotorye my izuchali.’

⁴³ ‘gibridy sotsial’nykh setei’.

tion and emotionality are significantly more likely on *YouTube* than on *Wikipedia* or news sites. Different genres also have different sub-genre chains, which means that the likelihood of topicalised discussions being ‘kidnapped’ by flammers can vary.

This statistical observation, on the other hand, leads us to the limits of genre theory: whether a memory topic will develop in a conflict-prone or a homogenising direction cannot be predicted by genre determination and can be only partially predicted by cultural background knowledge.

Conclusions

Summing up, one can say that generic aspects, as outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin and further developed in a pragmatist key by Carolyn Miller and others, can contribute considerable insight to Digital Memory Studies. Only an integrated approach to genre, which encompasses technical conditions as well as rhetorical rules and cultural particularities, can help us to understand how memory emerges and changes online. Memory content on the internet is therefore certainly neither medium- nor genre-determined, but is rather co-shaped by different online genres that function as *mediators* in what Hoskins calls ‘a “co-evolution” of memory and technology’ (Hoskins 2009a: 96).

This study could only provide the general theoretical framework for future detailed research into particular genres and genres cultures, and could not include four desiderata: 1) We have not analysed meta-genre discussions encapsulated in memory websites (see McNeill 2009: 149); 2) We have not had the capacity to conduct experimental research into non-linear hyper-reading, where we could have observed which links a user follows and how this singular hyper-reading path shapes the memory content ‘prosumed’ by a particular user; 3) We could not devote attention to the growing importance of visual content and transmodality in online genres. We must therefore leave it for further research to explore the mnemonic implications of the intermedial constellations between visual and scriptural elements; 4) Within the limits of this article, we have obviously not even superficially outlined what should eventually emerge as a new, more comprehensive discipline of Internet Studies, which draws on the wide range of both philological and technological competences: Digital Rhetoric. This paradigm deserves and demands joint research effort in the future.

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