The Matter with Media

Any theory of the periodical must recognize both the materiality of each individual printed object and the broader virtual structures that give it meaning. Periodicals, just like any other serial text, are established through the interplay of sameness and difference, where changing content is presented through a set of features that recur, issue after issue. No article is encountered in isolation, but sits alongside others on the page, in the issue, and in the issues that have appeared previously; equally, each issue reminds readers of those that have come before and promises more to follow. In my contribution to this panel, I want to foreground this interplay between what stays the same across a periodical and what differs to explore mediality more broadly. Reading is a practice, I argue, that depends upon contact with a material object in order to discard and forget those aspects deemed merely formal. Periodicals, which complement the necessary repetition that drives textual signification with both an explicitly-marked set of repetitive formal features (regular layout, typography, graphical features etc) and the repetition of seriality more broadly (the appearance of the next issue), remind us of the constitutive role of the repetitive and generic, even if that role is to be forgotten.

Repetition

Periodicals manifest the logic of repetition that defines the practice of print, and it is on these lines that we must think theoretically. Yet repetition can be frustratingly invisible. Those trained in literary studies are particularly susceptible to the seduction of exceptionality, the telling difference that establishes the importance of this text amongst all others. Historicist scholarship of various kinds is likewise attuned to the significant case study, especially if it

can be posited as a site of resistance to dominant cultural trends. Such approaches are a response to the problem of abundance: when there is too much to read, it is easier to focus on the exceptional and leave the recurring and predictable reassuringly undefined. Yet there have been a number of important recent moves to recognise repetition. The return to form in nineteenth-century studies, sometimes called cultural neo-formalism, offers an explicit recognition of both the meaning of form and, especially in recent work on meter, its connection with repetition.[1] Equally, disciplines such as book history and textual scholarship have long grappled with questions of continuity and how these are established across different textual objects. The embrace of distant reading in the digital humanities has directed attention to patterns that are only discernible across large textual corpora.[2]

Genre provides a way of conceptualising formal repetition while rooting it in cultural production. It is more than just typology: it is both situational and pragmatic, mediating between a specific utterance and the social situation in which it occurs. For writers, it provides a set of productive constraints, a repertoire of forms inherited from the past and already known to readers; for readers, genre tempers the novelty of new texts and connects them to existing social formations. For Bakhtin, it is the social aspect of genre that accounts for its transmission and its effect, arising from particular situations and delimiting possible meaning. Yet genre is not simply a phenomena of text, but describes a whole host of recurring forms that are embedded in the material fabric of the everyday.[3] Carolyn Miller's

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[1] See J.R. Rudy, 'On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad', *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), 590–596 and *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press, 2009).

[2] For some recent discussions of distant reading and the nineteenth-century press see Dallas Liddle, 'Reflections on 20,000 Victorian Newspapers: 'Distant Reading' *The Times* using *The Times Digital Archive*' and Robert Nicholson, 'Counting Culture; or, How to Read Victorian Newspapers from a Distance', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012): 230-7; 238-46.

[3] For genre and materiality, see John Frow, *Genre* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 12-15.

reformulation of genre as 'social action' foregrounds the pragmatic, extending genre beyond

a simple definition of textuality to encompass the recurring forms of social life.[4] Genre

makes things happen and it is in this pragmatic sense that it can help us understand seriality.

Genre operates in a number of ways for periodicals.[5] As miscellanies (and all periodicals are

in some way miscellaneous), they combine a number of different textual genres (leading

article, review, advertisement, news, literary genres such as fiction or verse). This

configuration of textual genres will situate a periodical within a periodical genre (journal,

review, magazine, miscellany), which will also be marked by a range of formal features

(paper size, typography, illustration, price).   The periodical itself is a type of print genre: a

serial, but distinct (more or less) from both the newspaper and the work issued in parts. All

these aspects of genre help define the periodical and allow it to serve a range of social

functions, circulating particular types of texts for particular configurations of readers.

However, just as genre enables social interaction, so the dynamic of seriality entails a sort of

contract: publishers attempted to anticipate the demands of their readers by giving them more

of what they had already demonstrated they wanted; readers repeatedly spent their money on

the understanding that they would not be disappointed. Each issue of a periodical responds to

a particular moment, orienting content towards the perceived interests of its readers, while

restating its underlying identity. In this way, the abstract identity of the periodical,

imperfectly manifested in each individual issue, is a negotiated, consensual structure into

which new content could be assimilated as a version of the familiar. Every new issue is

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[4] See Carolyn R. Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70 (1984), 151–167.
[5] Genre remains overlooked with regards to the periodical. The only book to engage extensively with genre in the nineteenth-century press is Dallas Liddle's *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

already attuned to this structure, and the repetition of (predominantly formal) features reaffirms its presence.

Periodicals, like all serials, foreground the repetitive structures that underpin all genres to assert their identity between individual issues. When we read periodicals from the past, we have to recreate the effect of repetition, comparing articles, issues, and volumes in order to discern the underlying structures. Although these are to an extent recoverable, what we can never experience is the effect of currentness, of the latest issue to be published. This always has a special status, its novelty tempered by the way it invokes all the issues that have preceded it. The presence of the current issue, which speaks to a moment that still unfolds, marks its predecessors as belonging to the past despite their respective connections to their moments of publication. Yet even this issue projects its structures into the future through its recapitulation of virtual form. The formal rhetoric of the current issue, just like its predecessors, asserts that the future is knowable, and can be reconciled with a virtual structure that is laid out in advance.

The virtual structures partially manifested in every issue assert a centripetal force to counter the tendency towards fragmentation inherent in miscellanies. The introduction of difference in these partial manifestations in turn re-write the virtual structures, allowing periodicals to shift their identity according to the vicissitudes of the market. Yet it is the effect of seriality that I want to stress here. The repetition of features that signal continuity enforce the difference between form and content, with form associated with what stays the same and content with whatever changes. Considered in this way, genre accounts for the way media mediate.

Digital Mediation

Reading sorts form from content; it delineates the contours of the mediating object and then marks it as supplementary. The repetition of generic forms helps the reader attribute signifiers to bibliographic and linguistic codes and then determine which constitute the material text and which can be discarded. This is textuality as both 'methodological field' (as defined by Barthes) and 'material event' (as defined by McGann), with reading the practice that produces the distinction between the forms that structure textual content and those belonging to the mediating object.[6] Attention tends to be focused on the production of meaning, but this means that the production of the accompanying mediating object is frequently overlooked. As N. Katherine Hayles has noted, no set of bibliographic codes can encompass the totality of the signifying object: instead, bibliographic codes permit certain aspects of materiality to manifest themselves, effectively producing a bounded, signifying object from the repository of unknowable materiality that Bill Brown has called 'a thing'.[7] It is what we do with objects that produces their material effects, and reading is a practice that delineates a set of structures in order to make them disappear.

The recent digitization of the nineteenth-century press has radically altered the terms under which we encounter the periodicals from the period. The reliance on OCR-generated textual transcripts asserts an identity between what a periodical means with whatever is written on the page. At the same time, the use of page images as a reading text (they hide any errors in the transcript) makes the appearance of nineteenth-century print much more accessible.

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[6] See Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (1971; London: Fontana, 1977), p. 157 and Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 21.
[7] Hayles, 'Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16 (2003), 263–290. Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1–22.

Because the transcripts are used as an index, there is an asymmetry here, with the verbal

information privileged over everything else. It is the verbal text – or rather, the

representation of the verbal text in the transcript – that organizes material and makes it

recoverable. As keyword searching is foregrounded in the interface, many of the mediating

structures of the printed periodical are elided as articles are returned according to the words

or phrases they contain. While the page images provide access to visual representations of

many of the bibliographic codes, the focus on the article as the constitutive unit of the

periodical makes it difficult to recover the repetitive structures that define this type of

publication. There are a set of repetitive features at article level – typography for instance, or

textual genre – and the article is, of course, an important unit within a periodical, but such

features only become meaningful with repetition, and this means resituating the article on the

page and within the section, issue, and volume. Most resources are based on two sets of

elisions: they encourage users to overlook the way they mediate (and so define) content,

offering themselves as transparent gateways rather than publications in their own right; and

they circumvent the various levels of structure that situate the article within the periodical.

These elisions are an encoded feature, a deliberate attempt to reproduce the effect of a

particular type of reading focused on the verbal information contained within articles.

However, different uses produce different objects, so by changing the way we interact with

the configurations of hardware and software that produce such effects, we can generate

different representations of the periodical.[8] By directing our attention to the material

properties of digital resources – routinely concealed in an attempt to offer an apparently

unmediated encounter with nineteenth-century text – we can make visible the elided

repetitive structures of the periodical. Rather than use processing power to differentiate

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[8] A good example of how different uses produce different objects focusing on nineteenth-century print is Leah Price's *How to do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

between articles in order to find the 'correct' one, we can use it to map the generic and the repetitive.

Our familiarity with Google's search engine blinds us to the significance of abundance. The reason there are so many hits is that the same word or phrase recurs multiple times. This might be the result of some significant event and, given that most resources are designed to help users find articles about something, such abundance is unproblematic: just like with Google's search, the user is usually happy with one or two hits, and can disregard the rest. Google routinely excludes hits that it thinks duplicate content (although you can, of course, opt to see them), but in doing so it masks the inter-connectedness that drives the web. Similarly, even a casual user of digital resources based on periodicals will find repetitions that result from the inter-connections that structured print culture. Periodicals mention, quote from, and articulate themselves against their rivals; they also directly republish content, whether deriving from beyond the publication (advertisements, news) or as part of the wider culture of reprinting. But there are also those repetitions that mark the recurrent features of a periodical. These include the repetition of titles, advertisements, particular types of article, notices, or any other repetitive textual features. Due to the asymmetry encoded into such resources, these analyses remain grounded in verbal information and analyses of non-verbal features usually rely on the addition of some sort of metadata. Yet it is only by turning our attention to the unrealised and frequently forgotten materiality of digital media – the way digital media mediate – that we can acknowledge and address the generic and repetitive aspects of periodical publication. The role of these features might be to be forgotten, but we cannot afford to do so if we are to understand what makes periodicals periodical.

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