

## CHAPTER 9

# MEANINGS AND REPRESENTATIONS

A form in itself is a gesture toward a social interaction, but it contains little meaning in itself beyond the gesture. Occasionally that is enough, simply registering a social action, like saying hello, acknowledging receipt of a previous message, or signaling compliance with a request. But most social actions benefit from saying more, offering more meaning evoked through the contents. It is the contents that engage the mind of a reader, providing desired information or exciting the reader's thinking or evoking a shared perspective on the world or provoking outrage and action. This chapter provides some ways to think about the contents to select and how to represent them. The next chapter will provide some thoughts on how to bring these pieces together to create a total picture and a journey for the reader.

## A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

We know that if we are looking for specific kinds of information, we go to specific documents. If we want to know the ingredients for a dish, we check a recipe in a cookbook. If we seek information on voter preferences we check polls available in newspapers and political websites. If we want information about the most recent findings in microbiology, we go to the research articles of the field.

Each genre is associated with certain kinds of contents made available to or directed toward particular kinds of readers. As we write for each genre, we need to keep those expectations in mind, usually with the intention of fulfilling those expectations for those who will consult or read the documents. If we don't fulfill expectations we have some explaining to do or costs to pay. Some genres are highly restrictive. Any failure to include any of the required information in an application may lead to immediate rejection—and perhaps even a web application form will refuse to process it. Further, that information must be of the precise form expected, such as an address according to street, house and apartment number, city and state. A florid description of the charming house and how you might identify it by its distinguishing character would not work here, though it might be appropriate for the directions sent for a party.

Other genres may have more open expectations, but still some things in some forms would be clearly inappropriate. Information appropriate for an architectural proposal would not fit within a love letter, and the contents of neither would fit in a financial audit report. Each has its appropriate contents of interest and concern to its appropriate audience, a concept described by Bakhtin as a *chronotope* (1981)—the time and space each genre is placed in along with the appropriate scenery, actors, and actions. He uses the example of a Greek romance, but it is equally appropriate to a laboratory report that tells of several time places—the events carried out in the laboratory by the scientist through a method and apparatus, the story of what happens to the material placed under the experimental conditions, a framing story of what the discussion has been in the scientific literature and how this study intervenes in the discussion, and ultimately an emerging picture of what happens recurrently in the world as revealed by the findings of this and related studies. Each level of the story has its typical settings, time frames, actors, and events. Further, each level has a structured relation to each of the other levels of *chronotope* in the research report: the scientist's actions seek results relevant to the scientific discussion by designing an experiment which produces findings that contribute to a general picture of the operations of nature.

Sometimes seemingly inappropriate material can be brought into a genre, but it requires some specific warrant and some discursive work to legitimate its presence—diary material on the front page of a major newspaper would need to be justified as evidence in a serious political or financial scandal, unless the readers were to then decide this newspaper was turning into a tabloid scandal sheet. Perhaps a science writer could include a description of a flower-crowded garden at the beginning of a popular article on plant genetics, but only if the writer made clear connections to the article's exposition of its subject, such as connecting the varieties of flower colors, sizes, and shapes to genetic mechanisms determining such variety. But in a more professional research article in a scientific journal, a writer could probably not be able to justify such an aesthetic description no matter how hard the writer worked.

The genre chosen sets expectations of what needs to be included. Conversely, awareness of the kinds of information and ideas to be transmitted to particular audiences can suggest the appropriate genre to bring together and convey the message. Examining examples of genres you are considering can help you identify what the information expectations, the forms of representing the information, the level of detail and precision, and the uses made of the information—as well as the underlying need or justification for that information. Of course you must then look into the logic of what you are saying, and what particular needs your argument or task or subject calls for. At the intersection of your subject and the

expectations of the genre you may be able to identify what you need, what your readers will expect, and the quality of the information you should provide.

## WHERE AND HOW TO GET INFORMATION

But then there is still the question of where the information comes from and how to find it. Some genres carry specific expectations of procedures and standards for gathering and selecting the material, and may even require accounts of how the key material was collected. Research articles typically include explicit methodological narratives to provide warrant for and means of interpreting the information reported. Often, as well, they imply accounts of which concepts were selected and why, what articles were considered important to discuss, and which facts were important to consider.

In a typical school situation, the sources of information are often well defined by the textbook or assigned readings. If the teacher wants the students to seek additional materials from the library or from conducting a laboratory experiment, interviews, survey, or other research the teacher usually will be specific about the sources and procedures. Outside of school we may equally be expected to follow specific procedures for locating and selecting information, and then how we represent it in the text. Journalists, for example, are trained to gather facts from the courthouse, police briefings, interviews, informants, public records, and other accepted journalistic sources. Even in domains not shaped by such professional standards, writers are faced with the problem of which information to include and what are appropriate ways to get and confirm that information. If we are complaining to a seller about prices we have been billed, having the exact amount billed, the original invoice, the invoice number, its date, as well as the exact amount will make your case stronger, as will a cancelled check or credit card bill. If we are claiming a discrepancy with an advertised price, then having the details that appeared in the original and, along with the date and place of the advertisement, and even a photocopy of the ad will provide evidence for the claim. Some personal messages, of course, rely primarily on memories and feelings, but looking over photos of the past few days of vacation, or even the business cards of the restaurants visited, might help bring back a lot of strong feelings and specific memories that could give some force to a personal letter or a travel blog.

Awareness of the information typical of a genre and the procedures by which that information is accessed is important to help you know what to include, what should drive your choices, and where you can find what you need. It also lets you know the standards of the field or domain, to make sure the material you include is respected, trusted, and accepted by your readers. In certain fields evidence must

be collected by proper experimental procedures defined by the field, and for which you must be trained. Introduction of new evidence, unusual collection methods, or different reasoning from evidence to conclusions will require extra work to justify the novelty and persuade the readers of legitimacy of the procedure. If professional journalists are discovered to have deviated from the procedures of their profession, they are at risk of being deemed incompetent or unethical. If journalists make an alternate choice, as did the new journalists of the 1970s in the U.S.—such as Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer—or more recently political bloggers, they need to do work to justify that unusual choice and its validity, and run the risk of rejection. But that new form of work may also create new genres and evidentiary expectations.

## ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

The kinds of information appropriate to each genre establish the world to be considered by that genre. That information represents and points to objects and events in the world beyond the text, and thus indicates the ontology of the genre. What is represented in genres that circulate among a social group identifies what objects and events are valued and worth paying attention to by the group; conversely, those things not represented are not visible to the group's discussions, considerations, calculations, evaluations, or negotiation of accuracy. Any change in what can be made visible in the genres circulated in a social group or how it is made visible changes the group's ontology.

Further, expectations for the kind of information to be used to represent the objects and events and how that information is to be collected carry with them deeper considerations about how we can know and represent the world, what modes of knowing and representing are reliable and significant, and how our collections and representations index the world (that is, how they point to aspects of the world and what they tell us about the world). Generic expectations also define what methods of collection and representation are not allowable as faulty, misleading, imprecise, uncertain, or otherwise discrediting. Such considerations of how the text can come to represent knowledge of the world through the collection and representation of evidence operationally define the epistemology of the text and the group.

As a writer communicating with any social group, it is worth being aware of the readers' ontologies and epistemologies, whether or not you share their views. Often professional training in a discipline or profession is precisely an induction into the shared ontologies and epistemologies of the field. If there are explicit discussions about the ontologies and epistemologies of the field you are writing for, it may be of value to look into them, particularly if you are a

stranger to the field, but do remember that sometimes these discussions are written by philosophers outside the field seeking normative guidelines that do not necessarily reflect the actual ontologic and epistemic practices or orientations of insiders. On the other hand, many insider discussions about ontology and epistemology often go by other names. Often books for neophytes and students can be very enlightening about what the field attends to, what it considers the right way to learn about the world of interest, and how that evidence from the world should be best represented.

Many scientific fields have extensive methodological discussions of credible ways of gathering evidence and ways to evaluate the evidence so gathered. They have discussions about what objects are properly the concern of a field and what belong to other fields, as well as what appearances are not appropriate to the field and what common sense ways of looking are not really accurate by disciplinary standards. Fields also often discuss or contend over the appropriate way to represent information gathered about the world so as to enter into the reasoning and calculation of the field. Each domain has its appropriate forms of representation. For example, in ancient days, taxes were collected directly in kind from agricultural produce, so that one would have to offer every tenth bushel of wheat or every tenth cow to the authorities. Accounting of these taxes were in terms of the produce. But modern taxes are now accounted through the local currency in quantitative form, so that if you were paid through food and lodging, you would have to convert that into its cash equivalent to be reported on the tax forms. In some fields results need to be presented as quantitative data of the sort that can be manipulated and evaluated through various statistical procedures. Some fields favor theory-driven graphs of energy levels, aggregating many trials. Typically in historical fields, specific historical actors need to be identified and evidentiary documents need to be identified and discussed to establish specific actions, intentions, and beliefs. In some areas of ethnographic social science research, identities of people need to be kept hidden, although detailed accounts of their social circumstances may be elaborated. Over time fields also change their modes of representation as new theories become important and new data collection devices are used. These modes of representation make the data or evidence available for reasoning, evaluation, and calculation in the ways characteristic of the field. If the information is not represented in the proper form, the readers will have a hard time working and reasoning with it.

If you are writing as an insider, readers will expect you to have internalized and to adhere to the epistemologies and ontologies of the field (or at least one of the several that may exist within a more tolerant multi-perspectival field), and if you vary you will have to provide to your colleagues principled and persuasive reasons (themselves within the values of the field) to reconsider

their epistemologies and ontologies. Not only professions and research fields have such ontologies and epistemologies. Religious communities also teach its adherents to attend to certain emotional or spiritual experiences or certain texts that are core parts of epistemologies and ontologies. Sports fans also have things they agree are worth their attention, how those things should be properly known, and what is a distraction from or diminution of the sports experience.

As an outsider to any group, it is also important to attend to the ontologies and epistemologies of people you are communicating with—starting with which genres they are likely to attend to, but also as to what kinds of evidence is meaningful to them and how they would expect it to be gathered. Have you done the experiment or gathered the statistical evidence and done a cost-benefit analysis to argue to educational policy makers for the introduction of an education program? Have you had the appropriate spiritual experience and did you testify to it in a credible way to persuade a spiritual group that you understand their values? When you write about changes of media coverage of basketball, do you share in the excitement of the game?

If you cannot enter into the audience's world of objects and ways of knowing, how can you get them to turn attention to new evidence, attend to a different part of the world, and gather knowledge in a different way? Perhaps you can call on another role or identity that gets your audience to look in a different way, such as reminding the sports fans that they are also consumers in a very extensive market that is being manipulated by media corporations—and thus getting them to remember evidence and ways of knowing that are important to them in other times and places. Scientists are often directors of labs, and must attend to information and reasoning from the financial and legal domains.

Ontologies and epistemologies are not just philosophic abstractions; they are also practical matters of communication. To influence your audiences you need to know what they look at, what is important to them, and what they are likely to accept into their universe of attention. The more one enters into a field the more epistemology and ontology direct the reading and reception of audiences. Multidisciplinary or multi-group communications are likely to bring these issues to the fore, whether or not participants use philosophic terms to describe their differences of understanding.

## **INDEXING AND REPRESENTING OTHER TEXTS: INTERTEXTUALITY**

Texts are not isolated communications. As considered in Chapter 4, they exist in relation to prior discussions in other texts, which create a world

of facts or ideas which the readers are familiar with and which shape their knowledge, orientations, and concerns. To communicate with an audience you need to be aware of the texts that inform them. These texts can also serve as resources of shared ideas and information, topics of discussion, points of difference, or definitions of situations ripe for action. Behind and within the represented world is an intertext of similar and related texts which have previously represented that world and neighboring areas. The scientific report and the ethnographic account each is built on relevant literatures that have posed questions, brought a discussion to a certain point, produced related findings, identified appropriate methods, and set criteria for the current study to address. The current article must create a relation to this intertext and create a place for itself within a landscape it will change by its presence. Even the fairy tale rests on the memory and experienced pleasures of previous fairy tales.

The most explicit way texts rely on other texts is by quotation—a segment of another text is directly imported. Another author is allowed to speak for him or her self, to take over the voice the text for a moment. But of course the textual space is handed over to the other author with some cost—the gift is not a free will offering. The current author uses the words of the quoted author only for the quoter's own purposes, even if the purpose is to draw on the authority of the quoted author as an eloquent spokesperson for the quoter's cause. But the quoted may also be the drudge who has produced the facts and statistics that allows the quoter to weave fiery arguments, or the quoted may be the misguided holder of opinions to be the target of critique and derision.

This handing over the voice of the text is hardly a license for the quoted to say whatever he or she might desire. The quoter has control over which of the quoted words will be chosen—the quoter's only constraint is to transcribe the words accurately. The quoter also gets to introduce, discuss, and pass judgment on the words quoted. These words can be explicitly characterized as wrong, or silly, or misguided, or idealistic, or prescient. The judgment can be expressed subtly, with verb tense to indicate ideas of the past or present, ironies, juxtaposition with other quotations and statements, or placement in an unfolding logic—limited only by what the resources of language allow one to do. These characterizations bring us closer or make us more distant from the words we are getting filtered through the quoter's framing. While the quoted gets to speak, it is the quoter who gets to frame and construct the drama, and to tell us how engaged we ought to be in it, from what perspective we ought to view it. The constructed drama of multiple voices ultimately serves to set off the quoted's position, to carry off the writer's intentions

and advance the writer's own voice: at the head of the parade he or she is marshaling, as the humble servant of past wisdom, as the encompassing spirit who can synthesize and embrace multitudes, or as the shining light that cuts through the veil of misguided foolishness.

Paraphrase and summary of the original writer's words provide even greater transformation of the original voice of the person cited. This allows the further subordination of the original voice to the purposes of the writer, either being homogenized into the writer's voice, spoken in the tones that sound like the voice, or further characterized and perhaps stigmatized as something other—perhaps as a target or a foil or as an ally from great distance. The gist, rather than the words, becomes imported and heightened as a social force within the unfolding narrative but without a sharp picture of concrete other actor who asserts identity through his or her words.

As the distinctiveness of original words fade, it also becomes easier to detach their gists from any specific actor. Thus assertions can be subsumed into “opponents who claim . . .” or “common sense frequently tells us . . .” These hazy shadows can provide a context for the current circumstances while removing the author from direct confrontation with focused other social actors, identified and represented in their own words.

At its most subsumed but most common form, these socially received ideas and terms are simply taken as assumptions, a recognizable and recognized cultural and social landscape against which all new statements are made. Every discussion rests on the long history of discussions developing knowledge and terms and issues. Only sometimes, however, are readers reminded of long histories and commitments—“Freedom of speech, maintained only in the struggles of every generation, comes dearly—only by challenging the borders of the unspeakable in every generation can we fulfill the promise of growing enlightenment.” At other times prior texts may be treated blandly, relying on common unthinking assent, so as to bypass serious thought or emotion, keeping attention only on a small bit of current news added—“Police officer Smith, about to stop a pick-up truck for speeding, noticed that the vehicle seemed to be operated by a dog sitting upright in the driver's seat.” The typical text serves only as background to the variation that stands out for attention.

## **REPRESENTING THE MEANING OF THE INTERTEXT**

Through deployment of texts and voices ranging from the specifically memorable to the background murmurs of “what everybody knows,” writers are able to represent their chosen social context for their current utterance. By



attention to, selection among, and strategic representation of these voices—bringing them forward or hiding them in the background, with shrill sharpness or honeyed sweetness—the author can orchestrate a relevant social reality.

Of course other voices that the reader might remember or have access to and consider relevant limit the writer's ability to create this social reality, for the reader can always evaluate the writer's proposed intertext: "Ahhh—the writer is just following the party line, citing the party hacks, and relying on tired old party reports." "Hasn't this guy read any history, doesn't he know . . . ?" "Why isn't she paying attention to the Biblical injunction against . . . ?" The writer's representations of the prior intertexts and the positioning of the new statement in relation to the intertext must be credible and persuasive for the readers to accept the social reality, to accept the intertextual space the writer is creating, and then to consider the text as plausibly responding to the opportunities of that intertextual position.

Readers' memories or perceptions of relevant intertexts may be aided or hindered by the expectations of genre. Legal briefs are expected to be attentive to relevant law and precedent within the jurisdiction, and a judge may lose confidence in a brief that forgets the important case that every lawyer in the state ought to know. It is in fact a strategy of the opposing lawyers to remind the judge of all the other relevant law and precedent that make the case look entirely different. On the other hand, if the judge in reading the brief remembers some lines of poetry, those lines can at most serve as a stylistic flourish and not a germane fact or reason. Indeed poetic lines only rarely come to mind in the court as judges are much more likely to be preoccupied with the legal files in their brains and libraries as they read the brief. If indeed the brief writer wants to introduce the literary quote or a philosophic principle into a brief he or she needs to do some work to establish its relevance and to limit the amount of weight put on it. Its place is not self-evident and reliable within this genre within this activity system, and its presence is therefore unstable and potentially dangerous and destabilizing if given too much authority.

Similarly the genres of scientific articles in various fields suggest the literature that can and ought to be evoked, the standard and particulars of codified knowledge that need to be respected, and the usual degrees of play that individuals can use to construct a review of literature that paves the way for their new claim. Any person who wants to question the taken-as-accepted literature and codified knowledge, or bring to bear extra-disciplinary knowledge has rhetorical work to do to legitimate the construction of an unexpected intertext. In addition to defining the expected resources of relevant intertexts, genre expectations also constrain and direct the usual manners in which other voices are brought to bear—typical formulations, typical footnoting, typical

evaluative phrases and characterizing moves. While a political commentator may be allowed to characterize a speaker as duplicitous, preface a quotation as evasive, and then display a brief quotation for its outrageousness, a political historian has to create distance more carefully and choose the quotations on different criteria. This is more than a matter of bluntness and politeness, or seeming objectivity. This is a matter of bringing the outside resource into the domain of a new discourse and having it serve as a useful and meaningful utterance in the new context.

## **DISCIPLINARY AND PROFESSIONAL LITERATURES**

The regular explicit invocations of particular ranges of texts within particular kinds of articles identify professional literatures. These are the texts one is held accountable to knowing, drawing on, and placing one's current project in relation to. The texts that seem most salient for the current project are likely to be explicitly mentioned by the writer, particularly in an academic field with such practices, but it is fair game for readers to invoke any other of the texts that can be plausibly made to seem part of the relevant literatures—and the author is held liable then to address the difficulties or complexities arising from this invocation. On the other hand, texts from outside the professional literature of that domain can be generally assumed to be beyond the pale, leaving the writer free of responsibility for taking them into account.

The literature then comes to identify the knowledge within a field, and the work of academics can often be seen as contributing to a literature, expanding the boundaries of available statements for people interested in the kinds of things this specialty has to say. Thus in many scientific disciplines it is expected that in the introduction to research papers there is succinct statement of the prior relevant theory and research literature on which the current study relies and to which it seeks to contribute. If the article over time is accepted as reliable or true by other experts in the field and is used to help them carry forward new research, that helps confirm the interpretation of the literature in the article's review. Thus knowledge and the literature in a field gets codified (that is accepted and put in coherent relation) by an ongoing process of reuse, interpretation, and the emergence of a coherent story of what the many articles in the field add up to. Also freestanding reviews of literature, sometimes written by field leaders, bring together the literature of the field in a coherent way, adding up prior work and perhaps pointing to next stages of work needing to be done.

In these ways we can see each successful article, both new research contribution and literature review or commentary, as intervening in an ongoing

discussion, both affecting the ongoing trajectory of the discussion and creating new landmarks which change the landscape which all future articles need to attend to. However, not all articles successfully enter into the professional landscape of the literature, or part of the expected chronotope that should be paid attention to in future articles. They may be seen as trivial, adding no new important insights or findings, or inaccurate, or just otherwise not worth attention. They may never get cited or used by anyone, and are thus forgotten in the collective memory.

We can extend this view of development of collective knowledge in academic writing to the deployment of intertexts in all writings. By attempting to create social worlds in which their statements best have meaning and thrive, in reflecting the perspective the writers wish to project, the intertextual assumptions of each article attempt to influence the reader's basic point of view, basic assumptions about the world, or what one could call the discursive construction of the world. Thus people may start to identify their changing beliefs about various aspects of life by the authors they are currently reading or the people they are listening to. They may even say, "I was so persuaded by reading a particular writer, that I started to read all her works and all the writers that elaborate a similar point of view." Even outside academic circles, where people do not talk in such self-conscious ways about their reading, the same phenomenon occurs, as readers are drawn into the world of sports biographies or model railroad hobbyist magazines by a particular text that introduces them to that world.

Intertextual fields then become domains of meaning established and maintained by social groups and that one enters into by reading, participating in them, and contributing to them. These intertextual fields serve as traditions of symbols that flow in and around the group whether or not these symbols are still attached to particular authors or particular texts. They become climates of opinion, ways of thinking, and ways of seeing and representing experience. These traditions of meaning themselves are bound up in the genres by which they are enacted. By entering into literate activity systems and participating in the genres, one enters into the rooms where these intertextual traditions are gathered and speak, where they resonate in every word. Just as Homer's epics resonate in the later day epics of Milton, Wordsworth and Kenneth Koch, and the common law resonates throughout contemporary court cases, yesterday's news resonates through today's papers and old office memos of a corporation still faintly chime behind today's email directive.

The terrains of intertext which new texts constantly re-invoke and cast in new light are an ever-growing resource, creating new positions to speak from. Writing in the twenty-first century is a far more complex and varied thing than

it was five thousand years ago, or even one hundred years ago, in large part because of the expanding textual inventions and resources; the large numbers of text which one can echo, rely on, and set oneself against; and the complex social relations that have taken on institutional force through the sets of texts that define them. Thus, each new participant in recognizing that the law is the law, school is school, and Colgate-Palmolive is not RJR Nabisco, are also implicitly acknowledging the intertextual webs that support each and the way roles are intertwined with daily roles and relations.