

Genres, forms and status: a pharmacy for transmission

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Abstract

This paper addresses the notions of genre and form via a new reading of Derrida and shows that the ineffable nature of *pharmakon* throws light on how permanence, hybridation and metamorphosis are present in digital documents. The notion of context comes to the fore and problems of legibility and legitimation are understood to be a constant feature in the reception of documents.

Keywords

digital documents; legitimation; information literacy; web 2.0, reading

Introduction

The current research is part of work towards a doctoral thesis started a year ago on the role of documentary inscriptions in the transmission of knowledge. Our reflexion on the role of documents in transmission has led us to question the concepts of genre, form and status. We intend to communicate some of our thoughts on these matters in this paper. It is grounded in a comparative study within different fields: we will be quoting the observations of researchers in Psychology, Spanish, History and Computing. These¹ were collected during interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008. We do not intend to go into an in-depth discussion of the relationship between form and genre nor to participate in the many theoretical arguments it provokes, but rather to indicate a few difficulties arising in the context of the transmission of knowledge. This is why we have adopted

a dictionary definition (PETIT ROBERT, 1993) of the notions of form and genre.

Form: appearance, visible aspect. Set of contours (of an object or being) resulting from the structure of its components which render it visible

Genre: 1- general idea about a group of beings or objects with common characteristics. 2 – A category of works defined by tradition (according to tone, subject matter or style).

The ambivalence of the notions of genre, form and status as they appear in the statements made by lecturers has led us to a rereading of Derrida's analysis of Plato's *Pharmakon*. We intend to adopt some elements of this analysis to shed light on the how these notions work in a digital context. We will look at three levels of the *Pharmakon* that Derrida dealt with: its fundamental

ambivalence, how it partakes in mimesis, and the extent to which it is a game.

We will look at each of these in turn. Derrida defines the Pharmakon as being ambiguous: it is both the poison and its antidote. Genre and form regulate reading and free it by opening up a range of possibilities. The Pharmakon as poison or antidote is a supplement, and, as such, it raises the issues of imitation and reproduction. The Pharmakon participates in play, it allows us to question the current concepts of hybridation and metamorphosis in internet media. As one can see, this rereading of Plato's Pharmacy does not aim to reinterpret the ontological and metaphysical aspects that writing, knowledge and truth have in common, as has Yves Jeanneret (2000) in his global conception of the digital document. We intend in a more modest way to extract from the Pharmakon a few characteristics useful for understanding current transformations in documents and their transmission. Our work is framed in a socio-cultural and semiotic approach to digital documents.

Ambivalence

Identifying, classifying, naming: taxonomies and lures

The context of this study is a consideration of knowledge transmission, more particularly in a university setting; this implies a certain number of specific parameters that we will be identifying as we develop our analysis. University work participates in what we might call compulsory reading, that is to say reading in which aesthetic pleasure and gratuity (in the sense of purposeful without purpose) have little place. Most often this reading is imposed and is often a precondition for doing a written assignment. In this context, several specific requirements emerge: the first is of course the need to find the correct sources rapidly. Because form gives writing its presence (DERRIDA, 1972, p.188), it is at the centre of such *taxonomical* activities. Reading requires preparatory activities for the identification and the recognition of the genre. Reading a document implies setting the reading activity in a historical context characterized by typographical conventions, page layout, writing practices and other elements we could call the visual and verbal rhetorics of image and text. The reader calls on an *architext*² that is to say a series of distinctive features that allow him to classify texts while reading. The relative stability of the encyclopedia and dictionary forms, established gradually over several generations allows for efficient use of these tools. In this genre-form the reader expects to come across relatively short articles providing definitions and synthetic presentations of a notion. The observations gathered on the use of Wikipedia confirm these reading strategies:

SPAN4: but it's just to get the dates... rather than looking in a reference book on civilization that I might not have or in a dictionary that isn't recent enough (...)

PSY10: Well, I sometimes do it for lectures when I use certain definitions, could be when I have to introduce something, I look it up in Wikipedia

Similarly almost all the lecturers interviewed mention Wikipedia as a resource used to check dates, the odd bit of information, a detail or a starting point for more in-depth research. Wikipedia was constantly linked to the terminology of definition: « the odd item, some little thing », etc. The lecturers call the sections "articles or entries" placing Wikipedia clearly within the domain of the dictionary or the encyclopedia. When called upon to qualify it, they all replied: dictionary and/or encyclopedia. Awareness of genre, as shown in Genette's analysis (GENETTE, 1979, p.81-82) seems to have occurred correctly, allowing the identification and the classification of texts. Genre and form provide the desired framework (GENETTE, 1982, p.12) for expectations and trigger the appropriate style of reading. These observations seem to suggest that the reading process is indeed effective. However, when one takes a closer look at the answers given, the data becomes less clear cut. Significant incongruities appear, in the practice of denomination, all too often hesitant, or the multiple reading strategies the readers use. To the request "Give me a word to qualify Wikipedia" the lecturers do indeed agree on the term encyclopedia but this often follows a long pause to think it over and even then it come in the form of a concession: « HIS2: (*he thinks about it at length*) *encyclopedia; because that's what it defines itself as* ».

It is as if Wikipedia refuses to be locked into a category. Listing the uses to which Wikipedia is put is actually quite an enlightening experience! More than the traditional use of a reference book, it resembles rather one of Jacques Prevert's catalog poems: dictionary, cookbook, image database, do-it-yourself book, encyclopedia, atlas, tutorial, textbook. The list is by no means exhaustive! The luring of the reader can create contradictory hypotheses. This phenomenon has been discussed by Dominique Cotte (2004) and it emerges during subject's further reading of the Wikipedia project. An indication of this is the confusion of our interviewee when faced with a page of Wikibooks:

HIS3: no ... [he navigates to the Opium Wars] The thing is, I don't see the difference between ... Now, are we meant to be on Wikibooks!? It's somewhere between that or a normal article if I may say so. This isn't a book?! It isn't like on Googlebooks where you get the copy of a book. What is it? The screen version of a book?

Here the process of denomination does not single out any form nor does it identify a genre. The rules of reading are undermined by the lack of clear taxonomical boundaries, which impede the process of inferences necessary for apprehending the textual object.

Sorting and legitimizing: a hazardous activity

These identifying and classifying activities, so essential in University work, determine how selection and validating activities are conducted. These notions are particularly central in an institutional context given the importance of citational practice. We now come to our second major requirement in university research. The

reader, anticipating the expectations of the institution, acknowledges his sources according to how quotable they are. To choose a genre is implicitly to give credit to a source: by doing so one recognizes its legitimacy from within the values of a tradition or culture at whose core we find the functions of author and editor. In order to validate and judge the information that he comes across, our reader will use his past experience with the encyclopedia as well as with dictionaries and their editing and validating systems. Am I in a position to identify the author? What about the editor? The source is either legitimate or it is not. Let's take the example of the History lecturer who, while admitting the quality of an entry in Wikipedia on "André Dupin" says nonetheless:

HIS3: I will go and have a look at another site, the dictionary of Members of Parliament about which I know, that even if there might be some mistakes, I will get a slightly more scientific entry, or at least one that is better recognised. I would put a reference to the dictionary of MPs into a footnote without hesitation but I don't think I would give Wikipedia as a reference.

This rejection of unorthodox genre-forms is particularly apparent in the case of blogs:

COMPUT3: I remember a thesis I once had to deal with, not long ago, in which the person quoted a lot of blogs in his bibliography. I found it very annoying. I told him: "As far as I'm concerned there are reliable reference works that are published papers that have been read by referees (...) I'm not interested in the feelings an author expresses in his blog! If he has something interesting to tell the research community he publishes it and is judged on what he says. (...) I would even go so far as to say that as far as I'm concerned it shouldn't be quoted in a thesis.

A blog might well be consulted out of curiosity but in the end it will be rejected by the standards applied by the institution. Its editorial characteristics (absence of an editorial committee and self publication) and authorial characteristics (a large dose of subjective points of view) prevent it from being quotable. The observations we made afford us a range of indicators. With this in mind, to help students take their place in the academic world, one only needs to have them identify the new forms or genres that they will encounter in their studies. This analysis tends to prove that it would be enough, for instance, to have them identify what the genre-form "blog" is or genre-form "collaborative encyclopedia" or genre-form "vulgarising literature", genre-form "scientific article" and generally speaking all the forms specific to the field of study (archives, for instance in the case of the historian) and so on, in order for the student to be aware of what he should use and how he should go about it. A closer analysis of the observations we gathered shows that things are unfortunately not quite that simple.

Unlike the old system of validation by recognized authorities (editors, librarians, and other institutions), the production and publication activities available through Internet require the reader to be constantly on his guard, thus creating a level of uncertainty as to the status of the document he is consulting. A range of ex-

amples and practices are indicative of this phenomenon: from, on the one hand Wikipedia which may either be quoted as an equal to an encyclopedia edited by scientific committees or else simply ignored, depending on which documentary portal³ or university library portal you happen to consult. On the other hand, sites such as Youtube and Daily motion, despite being unanimously regarded as entertainment sites for use in the private sphere, are sometimes used as teaching aids. We see this for example in the viewing of news documentaries about traditional celebrations and customs even though the teacher is reluctant to quote them as bibliographic references:

SPAN5: *Well, I hesitated at first, I wasn't sure if I should give the link to Youtube, but then I thought to myself that they are at university and they already have the means to sorting it out for themselves. I thought that doing so was also part of their work.*

The genre-form, subject to the law of overflow, and of contamination so dear to Derrida now can no longer be taken as the sign of pre-established legitimacy. From this standpoint the genre-form becomes an unending construction by the reader as he confronts new sources. Genre, like form can function as lure or trap. Both are subjected to the logic of participation without belonging as defined by Derrida (2003, p.243). The reader is caught in a double bind: he has to set up routines for efficient reading, to identify and evaluate the text he is reading and at the same time be on his toes. Indeed the internet user's very attempts to the apprehend a document can work against him, and can either cause him to pass by vital information by leading him to ignore sources that are in fact of interest to him, or can lead him to misinterpret the level of legitimacy of a source.. Both cases present a significant problem. Must one then, in such a situation, go along with the lecturer quoted below and choose not to avow one's sources: «*HIS2: in the end it is a source you cannot own up to*». Or rather should one attempt to meet the challenge and think in terms of integration?

Mimesis Recognition and repetition

Web 2.0 sites provoke strong reactions because they upset the codes, standards and values that researchers agree on in order to communicate with each other and transmit their knowledge. The ambivalence of the Pharmakon undermines this institutional consensus and so affects knowledge and the way it is produced and how it is represented. Derrida unfolds Plato's concept and places it against its philosophical and cultural background and thus shows that it is a supplement and that it belongs to mimesis and simulacrum which is the copy of a copy, or, in the case of the text, the copy of writing which is itself the repetition of inert memory. As mentioned above, we will touch upon this analysis and only go into the question of copy and simulacrum with a view to providing a functional clarification of current practices.

The statements made by lecturers show that knowing entails recognizing and that learning is a matter of remembering. When we asked the lecturers about the

criteria they used to evaluate their sources the answers were practically unanimous. One can judge only what one already knows and only when one is an expert in the field: « COMPUT3: *I can criticize when I know what I am talking about* ». The individual uses his previous knowledge to take in new information. He measures it against that yardstick and interprets it in that light. The modern repeats the repetition of the old. Legitimation produces mimesis.

Cut out, compare, paste, crossreference your sources: these tasks, what Antoine Compagnon (1979) calls second hand tasks, are made self evident by Internet. The same hand that outlines and elaborates thought by bringing excerpts together reminds us that quoting is central to the elaboration of thought. The much maligned copy and paste behaviour is not that far from the practices of page cutting and of assembling anthologies of quotations (BLAIR, 2003) our predecessors indulged in. Some lecturers were aware of this:

COMPUT2: (...) but I think they did the same thing with books before, as far as I'm concerned it comes to the same thing. The difference with Internet is that everyone cribbs from the same place and it becomes obvious in the end. If they had cribbed from a book we might not have realized it.

To affirm his identity within the university and within his or her discipline, the student has to assimilate citational practices and forms of expression that belong to a tradition hundreds of years old. The university experience of textual production is one of repetition, which therefore becomes a mode of appropriating information. To learn is always partly to copy, but to copy while shifting the meaning.

Simulacrum

The need to shift meaning is related to the very nature of imitation, which can only function if it designates itself as simulacrum. « *A perfect imitation is no longer an imitation* (DERRIDA, 1972, p.173)». The analysis of what lecturers read and how they appropriate what they read shows us that simulacrum is essential for understanding. The comparison between Googlebooks and Gallica on the one hand and the site of the Bielefeld Library⁴ on the other, exemplifies this process. All three sites offer the reader digitized works but one of them does so in a slightly different way, so that the simulacrum of consulting a book in a library is achieved with greater success. If we analyse how the reading interface (BÉGUIN, 2006) is set up we can make several observations: all three sites arrange the simulacrum by making the illusion manifest. They designate the interface in the same way, i.e. through a system of interlocking frames that isolate the subject and designate it as a reproduction. The reader can recognise the pages. However the interfaces used by Google books and Gallica standardize the presentation of the book, smoothing out the wrinkles and depriving it of most of its physical characteristics: all the books are presented in the same page format against a grey background. The only traces of the material aspect of

the book it once was are limited to a photo of the first page and the typeface. The Bielefeld site on the other hand restitutes the book as a material object by giving the reader a photograph, which provides him with the illusion of being able to touch it. The interface for the display and access to the work engages the reader in a process of appropriation whose aim is to reproduce the pleasure he would obtain from paging through a rare text. The Internet user could behave as if the work were placed there before him, as if he could open and unfold the printed maps of the original. The high quality reproduction faithfully conveying the colour and even the texture of the paper completes the illusion. The teacher naturally notices how good the reproduction is and lavishes praise:

HIS1: (...) These are wonderful! (...)

VT: and what's more, you can make a copy for yourself!

HIS1: Yes, in jpeg... And take look at that, you've even got a list of maps, you can go straight to the map you want. (...) And on top of that, when you get it you can keep the same level of definition, that's pretty unusual.

In this type of system we are in the presence of documentary permanence. Identification and validation can be made without difficulty. Imitation has done its job to perfection. It declares itself for what it is and, in so doing, allows the awareness of difference to emerge smoothly. The Bielefeld library as well as Gallica and Googlebooks can therefore allow access to their collections as a form of *permanence*, by allowing the reader to page through the books electronically as well as of *modernity* by also allowing him to retrieve, handle and gain direct access to the selected document. The teacher recognizes this and gives credit to this sort of source when he generalizes his judgment of the Bielefeld library portal: « HIS1: *Yes, anyway, when you want real information, you are better off with universities* ». The digital world weaves the present and the past together.

Play Hybridation

This difference as it is revealed from within permanence, points up the playful dimension of the pharmakon. These two aspects cannot be separated. The interplay between form and content defines the text and the document as a pharmakon (DERRIDA, 1972, p.158): «*The pharmakon is the movement, the place, and the play (the production) of difference*». The pharmakon is essentially intangible, and has no character of its own (DERRIDA, 1972, p.156). Then the problem for the reader is how to integrate this dimension while still abiding by the demands of the institution. The emergence of new forms has been the focus of many analyses (CROWSTON et al., 1997). In France these questions have for several years been centered upon the question of hybridation and metamorphosis. In the limited framework of the

present paper no attempt will be made to account for the extensive number of forms of hybridation and metamorphosis, but rather to bring to the fore a few of the characteristics which we consider as essential to the issue of transmission. Hybridation, defined as «*The natural or artificial cross between two varieties, two races of the same species, or between two species*» (PETIT ROBERT, 1993) » allows for the existence of new forms which entail the co-existence of heterogenous characteristics, undermining the perceived hierarchy between the original forms. This is what the lecturer described when he followed up on our question on the use of blogs in 'Plos One' which brings together the characteristics of a blog (presence of interactivity) and of traditional scientific publishing (presence of validating processes):

PSY9: Not for research, no way! (...) No, but it can be found on institutional websites! For instance there's a journal called Public Library of science: PLOS, which is a free on-line journal. They have developed something: 'PLOS one, it's quite well done. You can publish an article and people can reply. (...) At the moment it's just the beginning, but it will take the form of a scientific blog, which would suit us best. (...) You won't have just anybody giving his opinion about just anything. It is subject to referral. (...) Scientists ask the questions themselves, and the authors of the articles are the ones who reply. It stays on quite a worthwhile scientific level.

To justify its scientific credentials, this journal vaunts its scientific committee and the peer review so characteristic of this mode of publication as well as the impact factors⁵. The creation of a genre-form requires an effort at legitimizing and explaining unlike the simulacrum, which produces spontaneous validation. Hybridation has to justify itself, it provokes conflicts of representation and therefore of naming. Our lecturer calls the journal « that thing » and 'Plos one' feels the need to present itself under the slogan « *Publishing Science accelerating research* ».

Appropriation is therefore not always an obvious process. The creation of hybrid forms unsettles the reader who finds himself faced with genre-forms, which no longer indicate very much about their status and their credentials. The classifying and taxonomical activities identified above as essential for apprehending information become more and more complex. The experiments undertaken by The Library of Congress and the Toulouse⁶ library reflect another of these developments. Initially intended for sharing photos by private individuals and professionals the Flickr website has recently been put to use by both libraries as a basis for archival and consultation activities. Both cases highlight the paradox of hybridation, which can also obtain its credentials from popular use. It might well seem surprising that two libraries should shift the responsibility for exploiting the heritage collections inextricably associated with their prestige and identity as a library onto a website that has been largely recognized as a 'mass' media dedicated to the private sphere. Over and above economic considerations one can observe a tendency

common to other fields, whereby institutional space is blended into personal space, to the benefit of a specific tool or technology. The site allows several validation and accreditation systems to coexist with little in the way of explicit signs (logo or a more or less succinct fact-file). This phenomenon undermines the readability of on-line documents which assimilate social indexing⁷ (with the presence of tags) with professional indexing, putting the heritage collection of a library in the same category as holiday snapshots. Do we have here a case of institutions taking over unconventional genre-forms, or is it a case of conventional genre-forms evolving beyond the framework of institutions? The question of their meaning and of how the reader should read these sites remains unanswered.

Media metamorphoses

From this standpoint, metamorphosis would be the furthest evolved facette of hybridation as it ushers out the very form it issued from. In this case, the reader finds himself facing a new genre-form whose outward appearance is no longer recognizable or contains contradictory signs. The conflicts caused by this novel situation may reach the point where reading has to be put off until later as was the case with Wikibooks we mentioned above. The book may be shedding its skin to change into some other form that the plasticity of the new media now allows it to assume. This new genre-form places the act of writing in a temporal dimension leaving form and authorial intent open ended, and thus causing a break with expectations. Yet this change is unacceptable because it calls too dramatically into question the traditional communication link between addressee and emitter. One is reminded of the strong reaction our interviewee had when confronted with Wikibooks. His reaction was not uncommon:

VT: Have you heard of Wikibooks?

HIS4: No (She goes on-line and reads) (...) You can modify any old page of course! (...) Witch hunt: I might as well take something I know a little about. (She reads) It's a book written by several pens! How do they do it? (She looks). But then who is it designed for? For teachers?

The perfect similarity between wikibooks and wikipedia's interfaces sets off a series of questions and rejections. Our interviewees immediately categorize the documents as a page of an encyclopedia and reject it in terms of *form* as part of a book defined by its closed nature:

VT: *But as far as you're concerned, what is a book?*

HIS3: *It's an assembled object that has a beginning and an end. That is a material object and that is the position people adopt or at least the expression of one or several people on a subject. It's a closed body of knowledge that may be modified by the same authors in later editions, but the book is a finished object.*

Both characteristics mentioned above which fulfill the potential of Internet are perceived as direct threats

not only to the book form but also more generally to all forms of institutional writing because they undermine the very conditions for communication within the community. The phenomenon of de-authorisation we observed in the interviews and which is present in a variety of forms: lack of author, use of pseudonyms, self-proclaimed authors (BROUDOUX et al., 2005)... threatens the cohesion of thought and its very expression. These characteristics challenge the notion of “source of expression” (*“foyer d’expression”*) dear to Foucault (2001 p. 830), which guarantees the cohesion and order of discourse by situating it in its historical and intellectual context. Here we may well have reached a limit beyond which we might be in the domain of unreadable texts. The changes, which infiltrate even the most conventional forms of writing and reading we come across at university raises the question of *participation without belonging* which Derrida considers as *the law of the law of genre*. Standards are redefined and reassembled in the outer margins of the institution. Redefining the limits of form and genre, drawing a boundary around their spaces to prevent them from dissolving- such might be the issues for the digital document in the context of the transmission of knowledge. The fragmentation of the enunciative stance and the shift in writing and reading towards a state of flux has once and for all cast the university reference system into stormy waters.

Conclusion

The notion of the pharmakon seems to be particularly useful as much for understanding current change as for considering the appropriation of new forms by readers. If form and genre are seen as paradigms for teaching how to read on screen, they may provide a way out of the intellectual dead end of uninformed value judgments by revealing the inextricable links between social representation, practice, appropriation and material forms, which function together as a system. Effective transmission depends upon our awareness of this system.

Notes

1. There are twenty-four interviews: eight with lecturers of Spanish, eight with Psychology lecturers, four in History and four in Computer sciences. They were done using the comprehensive interviewing technique (KAUFMANN, 2006. p. 53 et 54) in order to leave the interviewees with as much freedom as possible in the expression of their judgements. The first series of interview were about general information processing practice, the second series was about Web 2.0 websites.

2. Definition : «The entire set of general or transcendent categories -types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres- from which emerges each singular». GENETTE, 1982, p. 7

3. <http://w3.uniroma1.it/vrd/risorse.aspx>

4. <http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/2005/lemaire/>
5. <http://www.plosone.org/static/information.action>
6. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bibliothequedetoulouse/>
7. <http://figoblog.org/node/1921>

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