

编者按:作为跨文化沟通的桥梁,将国际上最新的学术研究成果介绍到国内,并引领国内学者参与国际学术交流,这是在我国哲学社会科学“走出去”战略中外语院校学刊必须承担的责任。本刊特此在本期发表丹麦哥本哈根大学 Sune Auken 博士的长文 *Understanding Genre*, 并邀请国内学者朱武汉对其述评,即《体裁理论研究概观——兼 *Understanding Genre* 一文述评》。这不仅能加深读者对于这篇文章的理解,了解国际上的体裁理论前沿研究成果,更重要的是让中西学者在同一领域进行直接对话交流,展现国内外学者对于体裁的理论和实践研究的异同,为重新认识“体裁”提供新的视角。

Understanding Genre

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Abstract: This article serves as an introduction to the state-of-the-art in contemporary genre research. It aims to mediate between genre research and scholars working with genre in other disciplines by laying out six basic tenets of genre research. The article thus describes 1) how genres are almost omnipresent in culture; 2) how they unite regulation and innovation; 3) how they combine to form larger patterns including other genres; 4) how genres are connected in time; 5) how interpretation through genre is tacit and rarely understood as generic interpretation; and finally 6) how our perception of genres tends to naturalize them, thus leading to the question whether teaching genre is a conservative measure whereby the teacher, knowingly or unknowingly, naturalizes existing ideologies and power structures to the students. Drawing on these insights, the second, and shorter, part of the article exemplifies the role of genre in a concrete social exchange between the author and the West Copenhagen police department. It shows how the participants in the exchange draw on extensive genre competencies without having to reflect upon them. The article closes by presenting some of the consequential and wide-reaching perspectives involved in genre research.

Key words: genre; rhetoric; cognition; ideology; communication

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1. Introduction

The last four decades have seen a radical development in the understanding of the character, role, and significance of genre which has, however, gone largely unnoticed by the academic community at large^①.

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An organized field of research has arisen in the wake of trailblazing texts from the eighties and early nineties, and today genre research has developed a nuanced terminology, a number of systematized methodical practices, and concrete studies moving across the Humanities and the Social Sciences and well into the STEM-field.

However, much remains to be done. Whereas genre as a phenomenon is well-nigh omnipresent in human culture, understanding and communication, genre research is not as prolific, despite its recent growth. It is a specific and highly specialized scholarly endeavour that may be extensively developed, but is not universally known or even well-known in academia. Thus, you may live, study, interact with, and even research genres throughout your life without ever giving a thought to the existence of a cohesive body of knowledge concerned with the subject. Consequently, not only do scholars often discuss questions of genre without knowing the state-of-the-art in genre research; they may make discoveries which have already been made in genre research and proclaim them as breakthroughs (bad), or make new discoveries relevant to the overall understanding of genre without news of these developments ever reaching genre research (worse).^②

Therefore, one important purpose of the present article is to contribute to the mediation between genre research and scholars from other fields who work with genre one way or another. Thus, the first part of the article delineates the state-of-the-art of current genre research, and the second and shorter part, is an extended example of the workings of genre in a concrete interchange between the author of the present article and the West Copenhagen police department (Københavns Vestegns Politi). The point in the choice of this private and anecdotal example rather than a more scholarly one is dual. First, it allows the focus of the article to stay on the generic principles involved in this kind of interchange, without needing to depend on the topic-specific research that will invariably be involved in the treatment of a more general or consequential example. Second, it demonstrates that even in a simple, private and, to some extent, random example of genre use, the general principles described and analysed in contemporary genre research have a crucial role to play.

2. Genre research

The defining moment in modern genre research is the publication of Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action" (Miller 1984). This article forms a watershed because, retrospectively, it marks the point when genre research moved from being a primarily literary and aesthetic to a rhetorical, linguistic, didactic, and, broadly speaking, interdisciplinary endeavour. Also, it gives a distinct character to the direction genre research has taken over the last thirty years. There are several theoretical positions formulated in contemporary genre research, none of them literary—the description presented by Sunny Hyon in 1996 still seems to hold (Hyon 1996; for more on the state of modern genre research see Bawarshi & Reiff 2010; Paré 2014; Auken 2015c; Smedegaard 2015)—but I am going to focus mainly on North American Rhetorical Genre Studies, or RGS. It is the most influential of the different positions, and also the one that traces its descentance most directly to Miller.

"Genre as Social Action" is central within genre research for presenting a rhetorical definition of

^② The most obvious examples of this are the manifold aesthetic genre studies on a variety of topics—literature, music, film etc.—which remain largely, or completely, oblivious to the existence of an organized field of genre research. But this situation is not limited to aesthetic studies and may be found in numerous other fields.

genre which has later become fundamental not just in the rhetorical field, but within genre research in general; its basic assumptions are rarely challenged. Later researchers have, however, applied, deepened, expanded, systematized, and clarified the basic tenets, adding knowledge and demonstrating just how powerful the original position was.^③

Miller's rhetorical understanding of genre has had its most fundamental impact on genre research on two points: Genres are seen as functional, and the de facto genres of everyday life have become the predominant subject. Today, the functional perspective on genre is so dominant that it not only heuristically determines the work done with genre in rhetorical studies, but is seen as defining for what genre is: The number of times Miller's definition of genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (1984: 159) is used in modern genre research is quite staggering. At the same time, the subject matter of genre research has shifted, and the analysis of the genres in use (everyday genres), has taken centre stage. The high rhetorical genres of oratory are pushed into the background, literary genres are all but gone, and with them also most of what was done in literary genre theory.

In hindsight, this development is unsurprising. It allows genre researchers a wider field of study, enables active interaction with other fields of research and with society at large, and in effect gives genre research a much more extensive impact than had hitherto been the case.

Genres arise to carry out certain social functions; they are typified answers to recurrent situations. Basically, you discover that in a given situation, acting in a particular way will achieve a particular social purpose, and so a pattern (genre) is established and then transmitted. If you need a job, you write an application; if you want soldiers to march, you give out an order etc. This means that the function determines the genre. Genres are ways to do things with typified words. They are social actions.

This interest in the social function of everyday genres allows genre research to track the impact and use of genre in our social life, in organisations, and in activity systems. It shows how our interactions form genres, how genres form our interactions, how we are socialized into generic patterns, and how we use genres to achieve our social purposes both on an individual and on an institutional level.^④ Almost everything of note that has happened in genre research in latter decades is centred on this social and functional perspective—even in those branches of genre scholarship that do not trace their origin as directly to Miller as does RGS.

Following Miller's study and other classic core texts, including but not limited to Jamieson (1975), Bakhtin (1986), Bazerman (1988), Swales (1990), Devitt (1991, 1993), Bhatia (1993), Berkenkotter & Huckin (1993), and Freedman & Medway (1994), genre research has evolved in many directions. A number of defining assumptions have emerged from this work, and thus in what follows I will sketch out six basic tenets that can be said to be shared across most of contemporary genre research.

First: Genres are almost omnipresent in culture. What is usually treated as genres in literary theory is, in fact, a very special case of genre practice. Even a very broad and vague genre category like "the literary work" is just one specialized version of a genre. Genres are not just found in literature; genres are

^③ Notable for raising some criticism are Askehave & Swales (2001), Devitt (2009b), and Freedman (2012, 2014).

^④ The available literature on genre use in institutions is quite overwhelming. A very modest selection could include Devitt (1991), Bhatia (1993, 2004), Bazerman (1994), Russel (1997), Winsor (2000), Artemeva (2008), and Andersen (2015a, b). In fact, this work is so dominant that one of the central research interests in Reiff & Bawarshi (2016) is the anthology's engagement with the less institutionally bound role of genres in the public sphere.

everywhere in culture. All our social interactions are guided by generic patterns (they are, so to speak, “genred” (Schryer 2002: 95)); our perception, categorization, and interpretation of cultural phenomena are informed by genres—and by our understanding of how genres work. Thus, every extended use of language, and even the overwhelming majority of brief uses, oral or written, will be structured by genre. Furthermore, genres are not limited to language. There are genres in film, painting, dance, architecture—and even for that matter in tea, food, and handbags (all examples encountered by this author). The naming of the genre will always be in language, of course, but you do not need to know the name or any definition of a genre in order to use and understand it.

Most studies at the core of genre research focus on textual genres (see for instance Winsor 2000; Bhatia 1993, 2004; Bawarshi 2003; Devitt 2004; Swales 2004; Paré *et al.* 2009), and there is a close connection between RGS and composition studies that merits closer attention.^⑤ Thus, within this field, there is an expansive research effort covering texts from a wide array of genres. Moreover, there is a detailed knowledge of the manifold different ways in which our communication and understanding is conditioned by genre. However, even when we move from the study of written genres into the study of other kinds of genres we will find rich research traditions—even if this scholarship rarely coordinates with general genre research.

Second: Genres owe a large part of their proliferation and strength in culture to an interaction of regulation and innovation. Genres form comprehensible patterns that can be carried over from situation to situation and from utterance to utterance, and that may, if needed, act normatively in new situations. At the same time, however, genres are extremely flexible. Every new usage of a genre adds to or subtracts from the genre, manipulates it, gives it a new meaning, a new focus, a new context, a new form, or a new content. This is true even for strongly normative genres like those of the juridical system: laws, directives, ministerial orders, sentences, etc. As the situation to be regulated by the law often varies from one instance to the next, the application of the genres of law have to be modified accordingly.^⑥

The point is that genres are so prolific in human culture because they are not monolithic, but simultaneously firm and flexible. They can frame and control any given situation, while also leaving room for creative actions and uptakes by individual genre users. The most famous description of this in contemporary genre studies is Schryer’s declaration that genres are stabilized for now, or stabilized enough to allow for understanding, action and coherent communication (1993: 208; see also Schryer 1994: 108). Against Schryer, Devitt has suggested that “genres are not even stabilized for now, as they live and breathe through individual instances and interactions across and within genres.” (2009a: 39) Devitt’s point is that each instance of genre use will always somehow modify the genre, and thus cannot be reduced to, or adequately described in terms of, the genre or genres involved. For the very same reason individual genres, too, cannot be put on a simple formula. So, their organizing and categorizing functions aside, genres both regulate and liberate users (Bawarshi 2003; Devitt 2004).^⑦

By consequence of this interaction between regulation and innovation, new genres do not emerge from

^⑤ Thus, a number of the central texts on genre have been developed and published through the so-called Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse (<http://wac.colostate.edu/index.cfm>). See also Bawarshi & Reiff (2010), Paré (2014) and Smedegaard (2015).

^⑥ Thus, one of the fundamental tenets of Danish legal practice is the principle that one must not “sætte skøn under regel” (bind the assessment with rules), the point being that the use of a reasoned assessment by the person making the ruling is not only allowed but required, and that the individual traits of any given situation must not be neglected when deciding how a given legal rule applies to it.

^⑦ The related question of subjectivity in genre use is lucidly discussed in Freadman (2014).

a generic vacuum (Jamieson 1975; Fowler 1982; Devitt 2004; Miller & Shepherd 2004; Miller & Kelly 2017). They will be based on and conditioned by the existing context of genres (Devitt 2004: 28) which both enables genres to emerge by offering models to build on, develop, modify, and twist for new purposes and new effects, and acts as rhetorical constraints (Jamieson 1975) on what can and cannot be done with a new genre.

Third: Genres do not exist in isolation, but form larger patterns including other genres. Current genre studies has developed a nuanced vocabulary describing different levels and forms of relationships between genres: “genre set” (Devitt 1991: 340), “genre system” (Bazerman 1994), “genre repertoire” (Orlikowski & Yates 1994: 541), and “genre ecology” (Spinuzzi & Zachry 2000: 169) to name but a few central ones. Charting out the interrelationship and the hierarchies between genres, these concepts allow us to see how, for instance, organisations get things done through patternings of genre, and through distributions of genre sets on different roles within the system.

Of these concepts two have risen to particular prominence: genre set and genre system. Devitt (1991) uses the term “genre set” to denote a group of genres that a particular group of people, in the case of the article: tax accountants, use to carry out their joint social purpose. Through samples of the writing produced by major tax accounting companies and interviews with accountants on many levels, Devitt establishes a cluster of 13 genres that, “form a set which reflects the professional activities and social relations of tax accountants” (1991: 339). The point of the genre set is, then, that it allows a particular group to carry out its specific function and achieve its specific social purpose. Genre sets are patterns of genres organized to carry out the social function of one particular group.

Devitt’s study was ground-breaking in identifying that genres form patterns, but the pattern actually described by her is limited, and so her study opened genre research to conceptions of broader patterns of genre. The term “genre system” was then coined by Bazerman (1994) to extend “the concept of genre set first presented in Devitt’s analysis of tax accountant’s work” (98). The genre set is limited to one group of genre users, even if it covers all of their professional activities; it is “only the work of one side of a multiple person interaction” (98). A genre system covers all the different genre sets involved in fulfilling this multi-person interaction. In the case of the tax accountants this would include the “full file of letters from and to the client, from and to the government, and from and to the accountant” (99), and possibly other involved genre sets as well. Only when all of these have been taken into consideration can one see the full social activity. As is obvious, the term genre system lifts the perspective to a more abstract level, as it aims at describing how institutions on a macro level carry out their purposes through a combination and interaction of genre sets distributed on groups and individuals throughout a genre system.

The patterning of genre is intrinsic to it as a phenomenon. Genres may move between contexts and they may demonstrate a greater or lesser degree of independence vis-à-vis their pattern, but they are never without a pattern.

Closely connected to this point is the *fourth*: Genres are connected temporally. Uses of genre lead to new uses of genre in more or less controlled processes. Genres follow upon one another, are conditioned by one another, and reply to and modify one another over time. Moreover, there is always a generic context ahead of any utterance. This understanding is, of course, closely connected to general theories of hermeneutics, discourse, and intertextuality; varied and manifold as these may be (I shall not even begin to reference this expansive, ambiguous and confusing field; the reader may enter at her own risk).

Within genre research, the core concept to denote the temporal interchange between genres, is “uptake”; established in the field by Anne Freadman (1994) who picks up the concept from the language philosopher J. L. Austin’s famous *How to Do Things With Words* (1962).^⑧ It can be seen as putting Miller’s concept of genre as social action into motion; uptake dynamizes social action. Miller describes how genres are used for actions in concrete situations, and sketches out some of the principles on a general level. Freadman creates a dynamic perspective, demonstrating how genres interact—and even to a certain extent: interlock—in a temporal exchange.

The point of the concept is that genres are seen as uptakes; reactions to other uses of genre. The use of a genre takes another genre use as “an invitation or a request” (Freadman 2002: 40), and answers it. In the words of Graham Smart (2003: 16), “the appearance of a text in one genre invites a responding text in the second genre.” This interchange is an uptake. In turn, the new use of a genre works as an invitation or request, too, and thus begets further uses of genre—in effect taking part in a social *perpetuum mobile*. This process itself defines the genre of the utterance in question, as texts “become identified as being of a certain genre in their interaction with other texts. When a text finds a respondent, the text’s generic identity can be confirmed, but it can also be modified.” (Thieme 2006: 280) So, our genre attributions are not singular; the genre of an utterance is not always fixed, and the utterer is not the sole proprietor of the genre of his or her utterance. Freadman emphasizes that uptake is “bidirectional;” it establishes a relationship between two uses of genre (2002: 43).

Given the creative element involved in genre use, it is unsurprising that the uptake intended (or at least invited) by the original genre user need not be the one actually taken. Utterances can be taken up as different genres than intended, for instance an attempt at giving “advice” can, in some instances justified, be taken up as an “insult.” There are multiple possible uptakes to most if not all users of genre, and inviting or requesting a certain kind of generic response is not the same as getting it. Some of the invitations made by a genre may not even be desired by the user, but inherent in the genre none the less. Thus, an “application” invites a “rejection” as well as an “acceptance.”

Related to uptake is Swales’ concept of the “genre chain” (2004: 18-20). He describes how genres are formed and, to a certain extent, formalized into chains in order for users to accomplish larger tasks. So, for instance, a part of the genre chain (or, more correctly, part of one of the genre chains) involved in arranging a scholarly conference is the one leading to the individual paper presentations. If successful, it may run approximately like this:^⑨

Call for papers
 Paper proposal
 Review meeting/interchange
 Letter of acceptance
 Paper draft from presenters
 Letter from arrangers to participants with paper draft
 Presentation
 Discussion

^⑧ For more on uptake see Roberts & Sarangi (2003), Thieme (2006), Emmons (2009), Tachino (2012), Bastian (2015), Regaignon (2015), and Reiff & Bawarshi (2016).

^⑨ This is an abbreviated version of a similar chain drawn up by Swales himself.

The central difference compared to the concept of uptake is that a genre chain is formalized. Each genre, of course, is an uptake on the former, but one must move through the whole sequence in order to present one's paper correctly. Some of the steps are structurally optional, not all conferences require paper drafts to be submitted, and some of the steps can be short-circuited: One can (for whatever reason) refuse to send one's paper draft for a conference which requires it, or one can talk for so long during the presentation that there is no room for discussion—or, alas, even longer if the session chair is unwilling to exert his or her mandate. But these short-circuits are shortcomings compared to the purpose of the genre chain. A successful fulfillment of the genre chain requires that each step is completely in order.

Both concepts, uptake and genre chain, describe how genres relate to one another in a dynamic process, and both are useful in order to describe the actual interchanges through genre. Seen from one perspective, a genre chain is a formalized series of uptakes. Genre chains are bound; they move in a particular order, and relate to one another in a particular hierarchy. Uptakes can be more creative; an uptake can easily follow a chain, but it can also deviate from, turn, or twist the purpose of the chain. Also, one may insert one or more new genres into the process in an attempt to achieve a desired purpose. One may, for instance, attempt to use the genres “bribery” or “seduction” in order to be allowed to give a conference paper instead of following the chain described above. Creative uptakes of genre chains may be effective, and sometimes they can even trump the chains,^⑩ but in many cases the given chain is by far the stronger, and creative uptakes of it are likely to fail.

Fifth: Most of our interpretation through genre is tacit and rarely understood as generic interpretation (Devitt 2004; Auken 2015b). Growing up in a cultural context, or getting socialized into one, we acquire an extensive tacit, even unacknowledged, understanding of a wide field of genres connected to that culture. This happens through a complex process which does not necessarily entail that the norms and forms of the genres are made explicit. Thus, Paré *et al.* describe how even highly experienced PhD supervisors are unable to explicate the generic norms of good scholarship they are trying to teach their PhD students: “much of the advice offered by supervisors comes from a deep discipline-specific, but inexpressible discourse knowledge. Although we are attempting to get colleagues to articulate the standards to which they hold their doctoral students, even the most experienced supervisors seem uncertain.” (2009: 187) They understand and master these norms, but they have acquired them through exposure to the practice of other genre users, and from practicing them themselves, not by way of explicit genre teaching. So, most of our understanding of genres is learned through practice, and is tacit, even unrecognised, as genre knowledge. We are able to perform highly complex interpretative moves through genres without realizing that we are interpreting—much less that we are interpreting through genre.

It is an interesting fact about this surprisingly advanced, tacit interpretation that even explicating the implied interpretations at play in any given use of genre is an independent analytical task. Consequently, generic interpretation may to a certain extent be considered a form of re-interpretation: A conscious charting of what is already assumed as knowledge. In a similar vein, one of the hardest things in dealing with genres from a different culture—be it foreign, historical, or both—is to understand that which is implied in any given genre use.

^⑩ Thus Bhatia notes that genres “are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purposes.” (1993: 13) But usually it takes an expert member and a very precise genre usage. See also Auken (2013, 2015a).

Sixth: Our perception of genres tends to naturalize them, probably because it depends on tacit knowledge and instantaneous recognition and understanding. Since genres are habitual, they acquire an “illusion of normalcy” (Paré 2002: 61); they are “naturalized or ‘just the way we do things around here’” (Schryer 2002: 76) and they may even lead to what has been called a “cultural reproduction of ignorance,” (Segal 2007: 4) as misconceptions inherent in a genre are carried over from person to person without reflection. In acquiring competency in a genre system, we also integrate ourselves into genre hierarchies that are both places of power relations and carriers of ideology. This is, for instance, demonstrated in Dorothy Winsor’s analysis of the work order in an engineering company (2000), in Anthony Paré’s work on the genre use of social workers (2002), and in Peter Seitel’s analysis of Haia folktales (2003).

This naturalization of genre begs the question whether teaching genre is a conservative measure whereby the teacher, knowingly or unknowingly, naturalizes existing ideologies and power structures to the students (Devitt 2009b). It may also act to preserve in other ways, as it may become a done thing: “The mere existence of an established genre may encourage its continued use.” (Devitt 1991: 340; see also Jamieson 1975) Thus, even when the practical effect of a genre has receded, the habit of using it may linger.

The implied power relations and ideologies of any given genre are not invisible in the genre; they are merely naturalized to the user. Analytically speaking, an interpretation of the ways in which any individual or group apply genre will reveal these implied structures and facilitate an understanding of what is considered to be given and what, by comparison, is subject to debate for the genre user(s). This point is similar to the implied knowledge discussed in point five above, but the fundamental difference is that whereas the tacit knowledge in a genre is, in fact, knowledge, the assumptions which are normalized in a genre can be both erroneous and oppressive—even self-oppressive to the genre user(s).

3. Habitant or burgler: complaint or evaluation

A few years back I almost got arrested for not breaking into my own home. This was somewhat surprising, as I was basically having tea and studying in my living room at the time. In order to understand what happened, you have to know the otherwise unimportant bit of trivia that my home is situated on the corner of two streets, Damhus Boulevard and Grambyvej, in a Copenhagen suburb, and that the address is 62 Damhus Boulevard, whereas the actual entrance is from Grambyvej.

Anyway, while having tea I suddenly heard strange noises and persistent shouting coming from just inside my back door. I went to check, and found a man standing there. I was shocked and fairly certain I was about to get robbed. He shouted at me, that he was from the police and that there was a break-in in progress in my house. I replied that there was no break-in, and asked him to identify himself. He waved a small plastic card that he wore in a string around his neck. Buckling down, I told him that I was unconvinced and could not see what was on the plastic card. He then proceeded to assail me and pressed me against the wall, twisting my arm. This was, if nothing else, bold as I am a quite big man, and he was rather a small one. But in actual life I never was much of a brawler, so the best I could do was to get myself away from him again.

At this point, two more men came charging in—this time through my front door. They also claimed to be from the police and, when asked to identify themselves, also waved their (still unreadable) plastic cards at me. Together they shouted at me that a break-in had been reported

at 62 Grambyvej, and demanded to know what I was doing here. I shouted back that this was 62 Damhus Boulevard, and that I lived here.

As such things were at a standstill. However, as I was obviously outnumbered, things also slowly started to calm down. Not being bound down and robbed just yet, I was by now fairly certain that I was actually in the company of plain-clothed police officers, and my surprisingly stalwart insistence on living in the house finally convinced them that it was in the interest of public safety to actually check the address 62 Grambyvej where the break-in had been reported.

Two of them ran to the correct address, including the gentleman I had been wrestling with, and the third one stayed to keep a watchful eye on me. I retrieved my tea, which despite the heated situation had gone quite cold, and respectfully asked the remaining police officer to ensure that his colleague returned, so we could talk more peacefully, when the matter had been cleared up. Finding 62 Grambyvej safely locked down, and not encountering any occupants to arrest I presume, the two police officers returned. My involuntary antagonist from earlier, however, was so riled up about the whole affair that he kept shouting at me. Therefore, I kept to simply shaking his hand and sending the three on their way again.

This, of course, was less fun to experience than it is to write about years later. It took some days before I recovered my composure and my arm stopped hurting. Friends and colleagues told me to file a complaint against the policemen. But I was quite convinced that this was an honest, if somewhat unfortunate, mistake; and also I did understand why a man my size would make a smallish policeman somewhat jittery. Moreover, I had a reasonably clear picture of how vexing complaint procedures are—being myself a longtime bureaucrat. So, I wanted an apology, of course, but I had no reason to want the officers subjected to any harsh penalties. Therefore, instead of filing a complaint I sent the police force an “evaluation,” based on the fact that the process had been, as I termed it at the time, “sub-optimal.” I described the incident, and I suggested that the department should think through its procedures in order to discover, whether steps could be taken to prevent further incidents like this.

A few weeks later, I received a somewhat puzzled phone call from a high ranked police officer, a superintendent of sorts, if memory serves. He asked whether I was quite certain that I was not going to file a complaint. As I confirmed this, saying, truthfully, that I understood the difficult situations his officers had to handle, he thanked me very much for my understanding, and gave me a heartfelt apology. Whether the three police officers ever got the scolding I still feel they very much deserved, honest mistake or not, I shall never know.

The incident demonstrates just how crucial our choice of genre is in everyday life. The actual text I sent to the police, could not vary much, as the incident itself was what it was. However, their implied ideologies, as well as the institutional roles they are set to play, make the framing provided by each genre very different, and thus in this case, the very same words invite very different uptakes.

Faced with the incident described, the obvious choice would have been to use the genre “complaint.” Not only was it the one suggested by my friends, it is also the genre put up by the Danish state as the given way to seek redress of grievances.^① The complaint as genre, however, has certain limitations.

^① In fact, if a ruling made by a public institution is against you, the institution in most cases has to provide you with a complaint guideline. As stated in the Public Administration Act (section 25, 1): “Written decisions which can be appealed against to another administrative authority shall be accompanied by written advice on the right to appeal indicating the appeals authority and the appeals procedure, including any time limit. This shall not apply if the decision is in every particular in favour of the party concerned.”

Structurally speaking it is an antagonistic genre. It puts one person in the role of the complainer, another person, or institution, in the role of the arbiter, and finally it identifies a potential transgressor, again person or institution, against whom the complaint is filed. Moreover, it is a strong genre in the sense that it opens up a formal procedure that may lead to harsh consequences for the institution, person, or persons against which it is made. Therefore, it initiates a distinct and highly organized genre chain with specific characteristics and demands. It has to be well-documented, it must pass through the correct formal channels, and it must be taken up in a new genre, a ruling, deciding whether the complaint was justified. If it is deemed justified it must then be determined what sanctions or compensations should be involved.

As this was, potentially, a case of police ill-treatment, the procedure involved would probably have been harder still. Just as we cannot have police mistreating citizens, we cannot either have police officers, who are legitimately entrusted to use force, punished for mistreatment without good reasons given and solid evidence provided—otherwise the police simply cannot work.

All of this made the complaint a difficult choice of genre for me. First of all, I had nothing in the manner of solid evidence. I could have visited my doctor right after the incident, I assume, but the most he could have found was probably a mild strain to my shoulder—and, anyway, I had not been to the doctor, as I was in no obvious need of medical attention. Other than that, all I had was my word against the words of three police officers. Even though I am, I hope, generally considered a respectable citizen, this was too much of a burden of proof for me. Moreover, I had no actual wish to see the police officers punished very harshly; anything beyond a scolding would be over the top. All I really wanted was an apology.

In that sense, the explicit practice and the implied ideology in the complaint could actually have been misleading in the situation. The complaint would most likely have led to either frustration, if it was rejected, or to consequences for the involved policemen that were too hard for my liking, if it was accepted.

My alternate genre choice, the evaluation, resolved the issue. This choice was innovative in so far as it took up the communication between a citizen (me) and the public institution (the police) concerning a problematic issue in a different genre than expected. However, it was also strongly dependent on the regulative force of the evaluation as genre. The evaluation is structurally collaborative. The parties involved come together to revisit an event or a series of events in order to improve upon future practices. An evaluation, thus, demands reflection on the situation evaluated, and some form of reasoned response, but it is not formally directed at anybody, and it does not require rulings or sanctions on the part of the addressed institution. For me, this also meant that I did not have to lift a burden of proof: Since all I asked for was a reflection on the situation, and since I did not formally demand more than this, then why should I choose to lie about it? Moreover, since my words were not meant to be the foundation of an official ruling, I could even be allowed some leeway of interpretation and some room for misunderstandings, without this being detrimental to the overall purpose of the evaluation.

Therefore, the choice of genre, insignificant as it was in the wording of the text, decided the interpretation and the subsequent events. Obviously, I cannot say what had gone through the head of the superintendent who called me. As stated, he seemed somewhat puzzled—I believe he had handled lots of complaints from citizens, and very few evaluations. However, as a fellow bureaucrat I have to admire how his actions displayed a precise understanding of the genres in play. His first question to me was, in fact, one of genre. This was absolutely crucial, as he had to be certain that we had the same understanding of

our exchange. Representing the institution, he needed to know that his word, spoken from the assumption that he was reacting to an evaluation, would not be taken up as the grounds I needed to make a complaint.

I strongly doubt that the superintendent had considered that he was interpreting my letter in light of his own competency in genre, or even that he was asking me a question about genre. But his handling of the genre displayed a well-developed practical understanding of the generic complexities involved; tacit genre knowledge is often wide ranging and nuanced. Once we agreed on the genre of my letter, he was free to react to the evaluation itself. As it would not adversely affect the police force to admit a mistake under these circumstances, he could both express gratitude for my understanding, and give me the apology I had not, strictly speaking, asked for but which was evidently appropriate. And thus he could ensure that what started out as an involuntary confrontation between the police and me, ended up in complete agreement.

That a sequence of events which started out as three policemen getting an address wrong ended up as a question of genre between a police department and a private citizen is hardly surprising, given that genres are everywhere in culture, in understanding, and in communication. In fact, as soon as I wanted to tell the police about the experience, I was bound to shape my contact in a genred form. This was not a question of choice on my part. Genre, being omnipresent in culture, was there already, in my mind, in my history, in society, and in the organization involved. I could, with certain restraints, choose which genre to use, but not to use genre was never an option. As a member of human society, using genre is not something I choose; it is, for better or worse, something I live.

4. Perspectives

The above example is one of little consequence. Everyone involved ended up unchanged and none the worse for wear. However, this is not the always the case. The stakes involved in the choice and handling of genres can be staggering for an individual person, for research, for an institution, or even for society at large. By consequence, the actual studies published in the field are often of a consequential and wide-reaching nature. Examples include, but are not limited to, information and new media studies (Bazerman 2002a; McNeill 2003; Miller & Shepherd 2004; Grafton & Maurer 2007; Andersen 2008, 2015 a, b; MacNeil 2012; Smart 2016; Miller & Kelly 2017), the role of genre in second language acquisition (Paltridge 2001; Lähdesmäki 2009; Hyland 2013), the genres of research (Bazerman 1988; Swales 1996, 2004), genres in feminism (Thieme 2006; Applegarth 2017), genre in aesthetics (Bazerman 2002b; Devitt 2000; Frow 2006, 2014; Swales 2009; Auken 2013), various medical genres (Segal 2002, 2007; Emmons 2009; Brown 2016; Ding 2017; Tembeck 2017), various legal genres (Devitt 1991; Fuzer & Barros 2009; Mozdzenski 2009; Devitt 2016), genres of the climate change debate (Bazerman 2010; Smart 2016), and Bible studies (Larsen 2015).

Given the prolific character and role of genre, even this expansive field is limited compared to the potential reach of research into genres. Understanding genre allows interpretation in minute details and on very large scales, it can track historical developments and diachronic relations, it opens up interrogations into rhetorical, sociologic, aesthetic, linguistic, and psychological topics, it moves across media platforms, and interacts dynamically with a manifold of differing methodological approaches and theoretical assumptions. Thus, genre research may be an extensive and well-developed field, but in one important way, it is only just getting started.

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