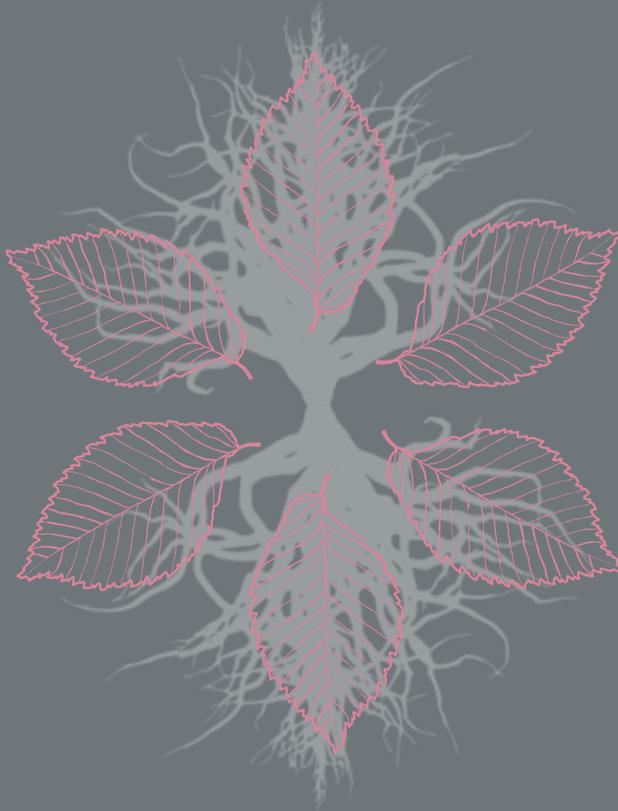


GENRE AND ...

Copenhagen Studies in Genre 2



Ekbatana

Ed. Sune Auken,
Palle Schantz Lauridsen, &
Anders Juhl Rasmussen

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& Anders Juhl Rasmussen

FORLAGET EKBÁTANA

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Copenhagen Studies in Genre 2

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Edited by Sune Auken, Palle Schantz Lauridsen,
& Anders Juhl Rasmussen

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**APPROACHES
THROUGH THEORY**

GENRE AND RHETORIC

Christel Sunesen

RHETORIC IS PRESENT in every text, from the political speech to the research article to the sonnet. The rhetorical dimension of a given text reflects the pragmatic effect the text is designed to have. Naturally, such goals or intentions are more explicit in manifestly persuasive genres, whose very function is “to achieve some purpose within a social situation.” (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 2). This is not to say that such purposes are absent in other discourses, but that they are articulated and functionalized differently there.

For this reason, textual purpose is regarded as *the* constitutive element of genre in rhetorical genre theory. Unlike aesthetic and linguistic genre theory, which for the most part treat genres as constituted by various constellations of both intratextual and extratextual elements, rhetorical genre theory regards formal organization and thematic content as derivatives of textual purpose, and so the extratextual level—more specifically, the *recurrent rhetorical situation*—becomes the focal point. Genres arise because the action that they perform has repeatedly emerged as a fitting response to similar situations, and so they have developed, over time, certain typified formal and substantive characteristics. When a given situation is no longer interpreted as requiring a response or action, the relevant genre will fade away; when a given situation comes to be interpreted as requiring a different response or action, the relevant genre will change; and when new situations are interpreted as requiring a response, new genres will evolve from existing ones. Genres are, therefore—to use a formulation that recurs frequently within rhetorical genre theory—“typified rhetorical ac-

tions based in recurrent situations,” as Miller puts it in the classic article “Genre as Social Action” (1984, p. 159).

Rhetorical genre theory is accordingly *contextualist* and *pragmatic* inasmuch as it takes genres to be products of regularity in human activities, that is, of various forms of typified actions performed within a community. As a result, the study of genre also becomes a path to understanding more deeply the ways in which different historical and cultural epochs perceive and comprehend the world. Moreover, it is specifically such “de facto” or everyday genres as the patent application, the job application, the first-year assignment, the tax report, the memo and the research article that have attracted scholarly attention, since it is precisely studies of these genres that “take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves.” (Miller, 1984, p. 155).

Such phrases make clear that the range of rhetorical genre theory extends beyond the zone of manifestly persuasive forms of writing. Because rhetorical genre theory undertakes an ontological analysis of genres as artifacts of purposive, rule-bound human activity, it can also offer perspectives on genres within such discourses as literature, film, the visual arts, music, architecture, design, etc. Here potential exchanges between rhetorical and literary genre theory are of special interest. Although these theories are united both by a shared concern with texts and discourses and by a common commitment to a dynamic and contextual understanding of genre, exchanges between the two theories are vanishingly few. The rare exceptions often involve somewhat distorted versions of the other theory’s perspective, supported by radicalized interpretations or reference to genre outliers, rather than to more canonical works.¹ It is also typical of rhetori-

1 See, e.g., Miller’s interpretation (1984, p. 155) of Frow (1980) as exclusively formalistic, and Devitt’s (2000) primary references to less well-known literary genre theorists such as Rosmarin (1985), Cohen (1986), and Fishelov (1993). Meanwhile, in literary genre theory we find only seldom references to the landscape of rhetorical genre studies; exceptions include Sinding (2005) and Frow (2006).

cal genre analysis that it has largely failed to move beyond its primary subject area, which “incidentally tends to concentrate on non-literary texts.” (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 1).² The crucial question is whether this indeed is “incidentally,” or whether the limits of the traditional subject area are in fact relevant to rhetorical genre theory’s theoretical and analytical approach.

Accordingly, this article is divided into two parts. Whereas the first part provides an introduction to rhetorical genre theory, its analytical implications for the study of rhetorical texts, and its possibilities and limitations, the second part focuses on how these understandings can be applied to other discourses, especially within the study of literature. This paves the way for an accounting of points at which rhetorical genre theory can expand and better ground our understanding of genres—and also of places where rhetorical genre theory is *not* translatable or applicable to other fields of interest.

RHETORICAL GENRE THEORY

Ever since Aristotle, rhetorical criticism has been occupied, like other disciplines, with the classification of texts according to genre. Until the mid-20th century, this was largely done on the basis of the three branches of rhetoric set forth in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: the deliberative, the epideictic, and the judicial, with varying additions, such as the addition by Melanchthon (ca. 1529) of the didactic, instructive genre [*didaskalikon*], e.g., the sermon (Aristotle, 1984, p. 2159 (1358b); Melanchthon, 2001, p. 33). We continue to find the Aristotelian genre division holding sway as late as in Jamieson & Campbell (1982), whose study of generic hybrids analyzes these as varying intermixtures of Aristotle’s three genres of speech. All the same, this very study indicated that genres cannot be regarded as clearly

2 On the application of rhetorical genre theory within the realm of aesthetics, see, e.g., White (1980), Devitt (2000), and Klejver (2001).

delineated entities, but must be viewed in relation to their context: “Genres are not only dynamic responses to circumstances; each is a *dynamis*—a potential fusion of elements that may be energized or actualized as a strategic response to a situation.” (p. 146).

With the rise of so-called Neo-Aristotelian Criticism, which was particularly dominant in the first half of the 20th century, genre aspects were deemphasized, since Neo-Aristotelianism “treats rhetorical discourses as discrete communications in specific contexts, designed for specific purposes.” (Black, 1978, p. 35). The focus thus lay on individual texts—and most frequently those by “The Great Whites,” i.e. powerful white men, such as presidents. This method can provide great insight into a particular text’s formulation and effect in a particular situation, but is of little help in connecting these to other speeches and situations. In a typical neo-Aristotelian analysis, a speech’s effect in its given setting is assessed by comparing its formulation to the classical Aristotelian persuasive techniques. As Black points out in his seminal critique, the neo-Aristotelian method is more accurately a “distortion of the sound that is its source” than a genuinely Aristotelian approach (p. 92). Interestingly, however, the neo-rhetorical reconceptualization of Aristotelian genre theory has laid the foundation for the modern understanding of genre.

Black’s call for new methods of rhetorical criticism ushered in a steady stream of proposed approaches. These included “fantasy theme” analysis, dramatic analysis, and (most important in this context) various forms of genre analysis. Here Bitzer’s interpretation of the rhetorical situation proved essential for the development of genre theory, inasmuch as Bitzer—without even mentioning the concept of genre—detected the recurrent nature of rhetorical situations: “From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established.” (1968, p. 13). This recognition was crucial for the development of a rhetorically valid understanding of genre, since context—or,

more specifically, the rhetorical situation—is one of the core concepts of rhetorical analysis. Thus the fundamental difference between the neo-Aristotelian and the so-called neo-rhetorical accounts is to be found in a shift of focus from what is unique and singular in rhetorical situations to their recurrent, and thereby *generic*, nature.

Beyond its emphasis on recurrent situations as constitutive of genres, neo-rhetorical genre theory regards genres as intimately tied to the activity or action that they are used to perform, particularly in everyday life. This expansion of the rhetorical sphere from such standard genres as the political speech, the eulogy, the sermon, etc., to include everyday genres has been dubbed “the rhetorical turn,” but can more appropriately be called a *practical* turn of sorts, since it focuses on the particular action that is performed (e.g. Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 3). And it is precisely here that the Aristotelian account of genre takes the stage one more time, albeit in a new and more fitting costume. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguishes the three genres of speech according to the goal [*telos*] of each genre: the political speech’s goal is to exhort or to dissuade; the courtroom speech’s goal is to accuse or to defend; and the eulogy’s goal is to praise or to blame (Aristotle, 1984, p. 2159, 1358b). Thus each genre is constituted by the action it performs in a recurrent situation. With this the foundations are laid for a genuinely rhetorical genre theory that takes as its starting-point not formal or thematic similarities, i.e. text-internal relations, but situational similarities in everything from the user’s manual, the memo, or the first-year assignment to the presidential inaugural address, the apologia, and the sermon.

GENRE AS SOCIAL ACTION

In order for rhetorical genre theory to be useful, it must offer explanations of why genres are rhetorical and how genres represent repetitions. While at first glance this may seem quite obvious, it is precisely this starting-point that has had crucial implications for the design of rhetorical genre theory.

To say that genre theory must be rhetorically grounded means that it must understand genre as something that “functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world.” (Bitzer, 1968, pp. 3-4). In other words, genres must be constituted by purposes—and not merely by individual purposes, but rather by recurrent purposes, since what is characteristic of genre is precisely recurrence: the constitutive similarities among different texts that allow us to understand them as participating in the same genre. Whereas aesthetic and linguistic genre theory primarily localized these repetitions in various constellations of rhetoric, formal organization, and thematic content, rhetorical genre theory isolates the situation as the single constituting element of recurrence, and hence also of each genre. More precisely, this is *the rhetorical situation*, which takes account of both purpose and recurrence:

Thus, inaugurals, eulogies, courtroom speeches, and the like have conventional forms because they arise in situations with similar structures and elements and because rhetors respond in similar way, having learned from precedent what is appropriate and what effects their actions are likely to have on other people. (Miller, 1984, p. 152)

In Bitzer’s interpretation, the rhetorical situation is composed of three elements: exigence, audience, and constraints. Briefly, exigence is the problem to be solved; audience is the people who have an opportunity to act on it; and constraints are the facts by which the situation is characterized. Yet this account faces two obstacles on the path to a sustainable genre theory. One of these is Bitzer’s materialist view of rhetorical situations as “objective, publicly observable, and historic (...), real or genuine,” (1968, p. 11) since objective situations cannot repeat themselves—by these lights, every situation will be unique—and so will not be able to serve as a basis for a genre theory. Secondly, Bitzer’s materialist interpretation of situations implies that they are determinative of the rhetor’s response, and so exclude

his “act of creativity,” as Vatz puts it in his seminal critique (1973, p. 157). Yet Vatz’s view does not offer fertile ground for a genre theory either. His emphasis on the individual’s self-creating role leaves no room for recurrence, since the perception of a given situation will also always be unique.

Miller’s particular merit is that she offers a solution to these challenges by reconceptualizing situations as social constructions built on our shared human interpretations and definitions. That these are not as arbitrary as private interpretations, but do share similarities, is due to the fact that the basic human activity of categorizing events, experiences, understandings, etc. into types—or what the sociologist Schutz characterizes as our various “stocks of knowledge”—is a fusion of types used in the past with the historical-cultural context we find ourselves in now (Luckmann & Schutz, 1974, pp. 9). These stocks of knowledge are used to make new and immediately unique situations understandable and recognizable by embedding them in previously-known types. New types arise from a transformation of existing types, when these do not suffice to address the present situation.

It is quite tempting to replace the word “types” with “genres,” and thereby to link genre to stocks of knowledge, as several sociological-oriented genre theorists have done, e.g., Luckmann (1992) and Mayes (2003). Devitt (2004) in fact derives this connection from Miller’s own interpretation: “If stocks of knowledge and types equals genre, then Miller is arguing, as would I, that people construct the recurring situation through their knowledge and use of genre.” (p. 20). That Miller herself does not take this step is because (among other things) it would involve a relatively static sense of genre, since “most of our stock of knowledge is quite stable.” (1984, p. 157). More important, however, is the fact that Miller does indeed represent a socio-rhetorical approach to genre, on which situations are the products of social constructions, but the essence of *rhetorical* situations (and thus of genres as well) is the action that they are used to perform.

This action localizes Miller in the rhetorical situation's core concept, namely, exigence. Whereas Bitzer merely explains exigence as an "imperfection (...), a defect," Miller offers a more extensive account of the rhetorical situation, on which exigence can be understood not as an expression for material circumstances or private intentions—both of which (as mentioned earlier) are unique—but rather as "an objectified social need," or, in Burke's terms, a social motive (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6; Miller, 1984, p. 157; Burke, 1969, p. 201). "Social motive" should be understood as a community's shared interpretation of the need to act in a recurrent situation, e.g., the need to do something at a birth or a death. Social motives are thus the very things that motivate us to act. If a company, for example, has the desire to brand itself as a humanitarian business, that private intention can be realized in a socially recognizable fashion by buying an expensive painting at a charity auction. In this example, the social action at stake is still to provide financial assistance to the needy; but the private intention is self-promotion and, ultimately, increased profits.

Genres therefore have a double function. To individuals, they provide a means by which private intentions can be made socially recognizable. To analysts, they offer access to the underlying horizons of understanding that may be at work in a given society. Accordingly, the rhetorical account of genre understanding can be applied both within a didactic discourse, where an introduction to genres can facilitate understanding how one can participate in a society's actions, and within a discourse of ideological criticism, in which underlying patterns are disclosed through genre analyses—"for thus can the tyranny of genre be overthrown and the 'utterly dismal' study of organization become the utterly fascinating, liberating, and empowering rhetoric of form and genre." (Coe, 1994, p. 187).

THE CONSTITUENT OF GENRES

One result of the above is that it is the everyday genres—or the "de facto" genres, as Miller calls them—that have especially attracted analytic atten-

tion. These genres are distinguished by being significantly more rigid forms than, say, the eulogy, the presidential speech, or literary rhetoric in all its varieties. One can perfectly well imagine, for example, a well-functioning eulogy that condemns the deceased instead of praising him. By contrast, it is practically impossible to imagine that a job application could have any positive effect if it focuses on why the applicant does *not* want the job.³ Similarly, a eulogy can be designed as a speech, a poem, a narrative, etc., and its style may vary from grandiloquent to quite earthy, depending on the situation. Here again, such variations in form will seldom yield anything useful in a job application, which plays a role precisely in more stable situations and is therefore much more typified. As Bazerman notes, this also means that the analyst's "task is simplified and stabilized when we look to behaviors in highly regularized or institutional settings." (1994, p. 88).

Obviously individual texts will always display some distinctiveness, no matter how rigid the genre is (e.g., the tax return), but on a scale from static to dynamic there is no doubt that many everyday genres, especially institutional ones, are closer to static than (for example) literary genres. Because genres are responses to social needs in recurrent situations, it is often obvious that they have also developed specially typified forms that meet these needs as best as possible; to borrow a phrase from Bitzer, they constitute "fitting responses." (1968, p. 10). A recurrent rhetorical situation thus invites a special formal and thematic configuration; and the responses that develop over time into a genre are those that best meet the needs of the recurrent situation. By virtue of the fact that the formal and substantive elements are often relatively stable within this range, it becomes possible to see that these are not constitutive of genres, but simply appear as prod-

3 An example is John Cleese's 1989 eulogy for Graham Chapman, where because both were members of the British comedy group Monty Python, it was regarded as appropriate to "roast" the deceased.

ucts of the social exigence, which is why they can only help to “trace but (...) not constitute a genre.”⁴

This does not mean that the text-internal layer is disregarded in rhetorical genre theory. On the contrary, the text-internal level takes part in fulfilling a genre’s overarching action, so that “the various smaller speech acts within the larger document contribute to the macro-speech act of the text.” (Bazerman, 1994, p. 89). In its interpretation of the significance that form and content have in relation to the action that a text or genre performs, rhetorical genre theory thus draws on the theory of speech acts: words acquire meaning in sentences, sentences in speech acts, speech acts in texts, and texts in genres. In this manner, form and substance function, at one level, to execute an action that takes place at the higher level of the situation. In relation to genres, the recurrent situation occupies a higher hierarchical level, where “the combination of form and substance at one level becomes an action (has meaning) at a higher level when that combination itself acquires form.” (Miller, 1984, p. 160). A thank-you speech, for example, is a combination of a form and a content that performs one specific action in one recurrent situation, such as an awards ceremony, and another special action in another recurrent situation, such as a wedding. In isolation from its context, we would surely be able to recognize such a speech as either an award acceptance speech or a wedding thank-you speech because of its formal and thematic characteristics. But it would be “hard to understand, hard to attribute intention to, hard to see as effective acts, without the frame of the macro-act.” (Bazerman, 1994, p. 89).

Rhetorical genre theory assumes, then, that there will be one constitutive act per genre, much the same as the constitutive act for a hammer is to

4 Miller uses the terms “form” and “substance,” derived from Burke (1969), where form corresponds, at different levels, to a language, grammar, illocutionary force, etc., while “substance” corresponds to an experience, lexicon, proposition, speech act, etc. (Miller, 1984, p. 160; cf. Devitt, 1993, p. 575).

pound in nails. This does not mean that a hammer cannot also be used for other purposes, e.g., as a murder weapon, an ornament, or a mallet. But the hammer is defined by its function as a “nail-pounder.” This, then, is a teleological understanding of genre, which means that one must either operate with a relatively particularized concept of genre—since the letter, for example, can perform many actions—or reduce the various actions that a genre performs to one overarching action, which will risk yielding general and abstract statements that say little about the particular genre, let alone the individual text. This means that one must either define genres quite narrowly, or accept that their social actions will not be determined in a way that covers all instantiations equally.

THE RHETORICAL CHALLENGE

In its response to this challenge, rhetorical genre theory can be said to have moved in both directions. Generally speaking, there seems to be a tendency to define genres more narrowly. Yet Miller and Shepherd’s analysis of the blog is an example of a broader approach, in which social exigence is viewed quite generally as “some widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self; furthermore, in these particular times, we must locate that need at the intersection of the private and public realms.” (2004, np).⁵ Still, the fundamental fact is that rhetorical genre theory does propose to define genres with more particularity. It distinguishes them by virtue of “a relatively complete shift in rhetorical situation,” (Miller, 1984, p. 159), i.e., as soon as a given community detects significant changes in the recurrent situation, e.g., by virtue of a different audience.

The timing of this shift in rhetorical situation depends on the particular society or community. Yet genres are often recognizable by “a common name within a given context or community.” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004,

⁵ That social exigence is defined so broadly here is also due to the fact that the blog qua genre borders on literature, and so does not necessarily exhibit a clear, univocal function.

np). For example, one can understand the set of all thank-you speeches, all award acceptance speeches, or even—to put a fine point on it—all “Best Actress” award acceptance speeches as *one* recurrent situation across various historical and cultural periods and in different communities. Beyond using the genre’s name as a guiding thread, we can also consider users’ own understandings of how a situation can be described as recurrent. This is an ethnomethodological approach that allows metatexts, articles about the genre, instructions, and dictionary definitions to be incorporated into the genre determination. Thus Miller’s genre analysis of the blog, for example, proceeds from consideration of “how bloggers talk about blogs (...), the criteria they use to evaluate blogs and the ways that blog portals organize and present blogs.” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004, np).

Because the recurrent situation is not a matter of private perceptions or material circumstances, but rather of a society or community’s perception of situations as being alike, the primary challenge is how to understand and define such a society or community. In rhetorical genre analysis, it is typical to investigate genres used by small communities, such as biologists, accountants, social workers, students, or bank employees.⁶ This situational and more particularized genre understanding is also expressed in, for example, Schryer’s frequently cited definition of genres as “stabilized-for-now” or “stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action.” (1993, p. 200). Taken to its logical conclusion, this particularized approach implies that even a genre like the newsletter, which most likely is found in all of the communities listed above, must be regarded as a separate genre within each discourse, since the audience—and so the rhetorical situation—vary.⁷ Berkenkotter and Huckin have problematized this bluntly

6 See, respectively, Myers (1990), Devitt (1991), Paré (1991), Freedman (1990), Smart (1992), and Smart (1993).

7 It could be argued that they all belong to the same genre, whose audience can be defined more generally as employees. But this would often clash with the actual experiences of newsletter users, and so would not be a genuinely ethnomethodological approach.

by claiming that, according to these standards, “a letter from a Utah bank promoting a new savings program” would be the only letter that manifests the genre (1995, p. 14). While this example is extreme and unrepresentative of rhetorical genre theory, it does make the point that by defining genres in terms of a (small) community’s perception of the existence of a recurrent situation, we run the risk of making genres so localized and situation-dependent that it would make more sense simply to speak of texts.

THE LITERARY RECURRENT SITUATION

This set of problems becomes still more acute where literary genres are concerned. What is especially distinctive about literature—and what is characteristic of aesthetic works more generally—is that they possess the ability to transcend the situation in which they are written. Literary works are read hundreds of years after their initial “situation,” and by a very large and disparate audience. Hence it would seem difficult to adduce the recurrent rhetorical situation as the constituting element of literary genres.

This difference between rhetorical and literary texts stems largely from the following fact. It is rarely possible to determine the *primary action* that a literary text is designed to undertake without either resorting to abstract phrases about literature’s function *per se*, or subsuming the individual genre under some overarching exigence that does not manage to capture the many actions that the immanent text unfolds. As Fowler points out, most literary genres have “no discernible occasion or function. (...) Much of the interest of epics, as of novels, lies precisely in our sense of their non-functional, ‘unexplained’ character.” (1982, p. 152).

Despite this, there are in fact a number of literary genres that connect themselves more closely to the extratextual context and to the rhetorical situation. In these cases, rhetorical genre analysis can provide a useful and insightful approach to deciphering the interplay between the text, on the one hand, and the situation that the text is designed to interpret or respond to, on the other. This is the case especially in different forms of occasional

literature, such as the funerary poem, the coronation poem, the birthday poem, etc., where the perception of the recurrent situation can help to define the genre. That there is “a relatively complete shift in rhetorical situation” between the death poem and the coronation poem is obvious enough; but the same can also be said, for example, about the relation between a funerary poem for an unknown person and a funerary poem for a known person, where the crucial difference in rhetorical situation is the extent of the reader’s knowledge of the person depicted, which in turn yields (lesser) formal, thematic, and rhetorical differences (Miller, 1984, p. 159). The same is true of hymns, for example, which are mainly written to be sung by a congregation: through the hymn, the congregation is given words to express their faith communally. For this reason, hymns also evolve in keeping with changes in religious conception over different historical-cultural periods. Just as with the rhetorical genres, some of these occasional genres do naturally pass away, or are reshaped, when the situation that they are designed to respond to comes to an end or loses its social significance—as we find, for example, with the coronation poem after the fall of the absolute monarchy.

Incorporating the recurrent rhetorical situation into literary generic analysis would also be quite valuable in relation to what one might call “literary paratextual genres,” i.e., the genres that surround a literary work such as the preface, the epithet, the epilogue, etc. One constitutive feature of literary paratextual genres has always been that these are situated in a predominantly real universe, whereas the novel, collection of poems, or dramatic work that follows is primarily situated in some sort of fictive world. This is obviously a claim subject to modifications, inasmuch as several works, among them Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726/1899), Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749/1974) and Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (1843/2004), experiment with levels of narration by weaving such genres, primarily the preface, into the discourse of the main text. Nevertheless, this does not change the basic fact that the reader *ex-*

pects to encounter a real universe by virtue of these texts' embedment in the paratext. What becomes evident in the study of the preface, for example, is that there is continual exchange between the predominantly factual preface and the fictional work that follows, such that the preface helps to shape the reader's expectations, and takes active part in the work's generic structure.

From a rhetorical perspective, the preface can serve as an illustrative example of how changes in a recurrent rhetorical situation affect the configuration of the corresponding genre. The design of the individual preface will of course vary depending on the authorship, the author, and the subsequent work—and so on the particular rhetorical situation. It will therefore both fulfill certain constitutive generic characteristics (e.g., the text's placement and sender-receiver relationship) and reshape others (e.g., its thematic content and formal structure) according to the situation. In addition, the preface will vary in expression according to the historical-cultural context, i.e., the recurrent rhetorical situation. This is why, for example, the preface's function as paean to the ruling monarch (who was then the arbiter of publication permits and the allocation of funds to authors) dissipated once the rulers no longer served as a supervisory body regulating the art world. Similarly, the preface as a whole virtually disappeared *qua* genre in the wake of romanticism's emphasis on the autonomy of the artwork, since this came in direct opposition to the preface's primary function, namely, to "*ensure that the text is read properly,*" i.e., to offer reading instructions of sorts from the author to the reader (Genette, 1997, p. 197). When that social motive disappeared, the preface changed from being an indispensable part of an aesthetic work to being a quite rare occurrence.

In different historical-cultural periods, different particular genres will attach themselves to specific recurrent rhetorical situations. At the risk of oversimplification, one may say the following: it has often been the case that a genre that had originally served as a response to some extratextual condition changed when, over time, the latter condition subsided to the

point where it no longer served as a constraint on the genre. This seems to have occurred especially because “changes in the social function of literature (...) made occasion less important” (Fowler, 1982, p. 67). For example, the sonnet was originally an outgrowth of the minstrel tradition, in which the speaker confesses his infatuation with, and unrequited love for, a distant and unattainable woman. Over time, however, the association with this initial situation was more or less wiped out, which is why the sonnet came to be amenable to a wide variety of different themes, and why the sonnet’s most important constitutive element came to be its structural form. Nevertheless, an essential task for genre analysis in the study of the sonnet remains to investigate how and why this relation to the genre’s original rhetorical situation has more or less been abolished.

There is a final case in which the rhetorical situation can be integrated profitably into literary genre analysis. This concerns genres that employ everyday genres—such as the letter, the diary, the travelogue, the scientific report, etc.—*within* a fictional frame. Although the de facto genres at issue are “altered and assume a special character when they enter complex ones,” (Bakhtin, 1952-1953/1986, p. 62) some crucial elements of the primary genre are maintained. This not only allows us to recognize the genre in its transformed shape, but is also the reason for its embedment in fiction. In this embedding process, some of the original genre’s elements are maintained, others are discarded, and still others are reshaped, all according to what the fiction as a whole demands. Similarities and differences between the initial primary genre, e.g. the letter, and the secondary genre, e.g. the epistolary novel, can only be decoded through an in-depth understanding of both elements and the joint genre they form. It is here that rhetorical genre analysis offers a valuable tool for analyzing the letter’s function *qua* genre and its expressions in various historical-cultural periods, such as nineteenth-century Germany, where the epistolary novel became one of the dominant genres. Similarly, the epistolary novel as a genre changed its expression—and its degree of dissemination—in relation to the actual his-

torical-cultural function of the letter. This is why, in recent years, we have seen other forms of epistolary novel increasingly emerge, such as the email novel and the text-message novel. In interpreting both individual works and the embedding of everyday genres within other genres, rhetorical genre theory can deepen and support our understanding of how and why such embedding is done differently in different periods.

Take, for example, Beaumont's *E* (2000), the first email novel.⁸ It is composed of email correspondence between employees at an advertising agency and their business partners, and exclusively uses the work email as a genre. The email messages' paratextual elements are all reproduced, including the header, subject, date, etc.; individual messages appear in chronological order; and attached documents are generally included as well. Yet despite these immediate similarities to the email *qua* genre, *E* differs in one important respect: as readers, we gain access not to a single person's correspondence but to an entire office's internal communications, all the way from the temp worker to the director, so that the novel presents a catalogue of the workplace's use of various email genres. As a result, we gain insight into a community's perception of different recurring rhetorical situations. By applying a rhetorical genre approach to this novel's use of the email genre, we will be able to provide a more empirically grounded interpretation of how this novel's particular transformation of the genre is carried out.

Similarly, such an approach could also contribute to diachronic studies of literary genres that make use of embedded primary or de facto genres, inasmuch as an account of these genres' function and use within the fictional can be linked to changes in the social sphere of action. This is, of course, already an aspect of the approach to genre analysis found in literary history, particularly within the historical-contextual understanding represented by Vera Nünning (2004), among others. But rhetorical genre

8 For use of rhetorical genres in fiction, see Auken (2013).

theory can offer a methodology which, by virtue of its joint study of texts and discourses, is quite closely related to that of literary theory.

THE LITERARY CHALLENGE

Notwithstanding the many useful angles and methods that rhetorical genre theory can offer to the study of literary texts, it cannot serve as the sole mode of approach. There is a wide range of literary texts and genres that are simply not exclusively constituted by their association with a recurrent rhetorical situation. At the level of the text, we certainly do find various recurrent situations to which characters relate and react—indeed often rhetorically, e.g. by making a speech, composing a mocking song, writing a letter, etc.—or at an even more basic level of the fiction, as when the authorial I attempts to reach knowledge and understanding of an event precisely through the writing process, as we often find in diary novels and testimonial literature. Even though these confusingly resemble the situations we encounter outside the fictional context, they are nonetheless, as Bitzer puts it, “not real, not grounded in history; neither the fictive situation nor the discourse generated by it is rhetorical” (1968, p. 11). The same point may be derived from Cohn’s definition of fiction as “literary nonreferential narratives,” (1999, pp. 12) which does not mean that fiction is detached from its extratextual context, but simply that the references to this context that it makes via names, places, historical events, etc., do not consist entirely of referentiality, and do not require accuracy, either. What is performed by the work of fiction, then, is a kind of pseudo-action that does not give rise to rhetorical consequences outside the fictional context. This does not mean that the fictional discourse is unable to gain power as rhetorical action outside the fiction, “if there is a real situation for which the discourse is a rhetorical response” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 11). One very well-known example of this is the 1989 fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie after the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

Because it is difficult—and often not especially stimulating—to determine a literary genre’s social exigence and audience, it is questionable whether the recurrent situation can be regarded as *the* constituting element of literary genres. On the other hand, the recurrent situation can undoubtedly be seen as a text-external *partial* constituent of literary genres, on a par with their complex text-internal structures. The question is whether these same relations apply when one turns from rhetorical genre *theory* to rhetorical genre *analysis*. Certainly it is characteristic of rhetorical analyses that they treat formal organization and thematic content as on a par with social action. This could be taken as an indication that, in relation to analytic work, it is at the very least unprofitable simply to establish one constituent for these genres.

This is, at any rate, one of the most important discoveries in literary genre theory. After innumerable attempts to do otherwise, it has now sunk in that one must instead regard genres as “complex structures that must be defined in terms of all three of these dimensions: the formal, the rhetorical, and the thematic” (Frow, 2006, p. 76). These three elements have appeared in various formulations throughout the history of modern literary theory. We find them in Fowler’s (1982) “complex of substantive and formal features that always include a distinctive (though not usually unique) external structure” (p. 74); “thematic content, style and compositional structure (...) inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60); and Wellek and Warren’s “outer form (specific metre or structure) and also (...) inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely subject and audience)” (1966, p. 231). Different genres will naturally emphasize different elements—for example, the haiku emphasizes form, the psalm rhetoric, and the mystery novel content—but for every genre, all of these elements play a co-constituting role. Thus the mystery’s thematic throughline of a committed crime to be solved, for example, implies the formal structure of a longer narrative, which, viewed rhetorically, permits certain essential facts to be revealed only late in the course of the narrative, which is in turn

why the reader becomes a participant in the characters' attempts to solve the crime. If even one of these elements changes—e.g., the crime turns out not to have occurred, the story is told in verse, or the culprit is revealed on the first page—then we are dealing with a kind of genre-parodic work, a sub-genre like the mystery poem, or an entirely different genre.

Beyond these text-internal elements, the mystery novel is also influenced by the historical-cultural context—or the rhetorical situation. Modern “femicrime” is an obvious example of this: in the era of gender equality, the male figure is naturally complemented by a female counterpart. Although the literary approach has generally taken note of genres' contextual nature, it has only been moderately successful in developing an analytical lens capable of putting this understanding into practice. And here rhetorical genre theory offers an obvious method for analyzing the historical-cultural situation within which a genre or single work makes its appearance.

FROM GENRE TO TEXT

Literary genre theory is marked especially by its ability to deal both with genres and with individual texts' unique realizations of their generic affiliations. At first glance, this double capability might seem like an obvious goal for a genre theory. In the case of rhetorical genre theory, however, it has emerged that the study of the individual text has largely been curtailed in favor of the study of multiple texts:

In general, however, rhetorical genre theorists have usually treated particular rhetorical works as examples of generic expectations rather than as individual texts with individual qualities. Typically, multiple samples of a genre are examined in order to understand the generic conventions, to trace generic change, or to discern the ideological underpinnings of a genre. (Devitt, 2000, p. 711)

There has thus been a kind of reverse neo-Aristotelian movement focusing on multiple texts (most commonly by “the mass”). This can provide great insight into a genre’s expression and function, but will fail to capture the particular text’s particular expression and effect in a particular situation. This means, first of all, that rhetorical genre theory often tends to underestimate the individual text’s unique expressions and connections to multiple genres. This is of course less pernicious when it comes to the questionnaire and the tax return than when it comes to the autobiography or the presidential speech. Whereas rhetorical genre theory has primarily directed its attention to stable everyday genres, where each text is (roughly speaking) just a subset of the genre as a whole, literary genre theory is premised, by virtue of the literary text’s immanent nature, on the notion that a generic approach should be capable of taking account of each individual text’s unique materialization. As a result, literary genre theory embraces a basic understanding that every literary work exhibits a manifold of genre connections, and so all texts must be understood in some sense as hybrids. This contrasts sharply with the approach of rhetorical genre theory, where Jamieson and Campbell’s study of generic hybrids (1982), for example, indicates a basic view of the generic hybrid as the exception that proves the rule. This is undoubtedly caused by rhetorical genre theory’s primary focus on more static genres. It also means that rhetorical genre theory is significantly more powerful when dealing with everyday genres than with the great rhetorical genres, in which the individual text draws attention to itself to a far greater degree.

Second of all, this means that rhetorical genre theory often does not account for the fact that certain types of texts are not merely responses to one particular situation, but have the ability to transcend the situation in and for which they are written. This is obvious in both literary and philosophical works, but applies equally to a number of archirhetorical genres, such as the scientific text, the law, and the presidential speech. Genres such as these perform a set of complex actions that cannot be reduced to

any one constituent without committing an affront against both texts and genres.

In order to address and incorporate these challenges, rhetorical genre analysis must make room for a more text-based approach, one that takes account of each text's particular realization of its generic affiliations as well as of genres' complex and manifold actions. Here a literarily inspired approach will undoubtedly prove fruitful. This would allow rhetorical genre analysis to expand its repertoire beyond the everyday genres, in order to embrace not only the generic study of the individual text, but also the classical rhetorical genres.

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NOTES ON AUTHORS

Beata Agrell, b. 1944, Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, Gothenburg University, Sweden. Selected publications: (1982) *Frihet och fakticitet. Om oordning och ordning i Sven Delblancs roman Prästkappan* (Freedom and Facticity: On Order and Disorder i Sven Delblanc's Novel The Clergyman's Gown), (1993) *Romanen som forskningsresa/ Forskningsresan som roman* (The Novel as Expedition/The Expedition as Novel), (2003, editor with Ingela Nilsson) *Genrer och genre-problem: teoretiska och historiska perspektiv* (Genres and Their Problems: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives), (2011) "Aesthetic Experience as Offence in Early Swedish Working-Class Narrative", in: Ed. S. Wenerscheid, *Sentimentalitet und Grausamkeit. Emotion und ästhetische Erfahrung in der skandinavischen und deutschen Literatur der Moderne*, (2014) "Criminality or Class Struggle. An issue of Early Swedish Working-Class Prose" in: Eds. I. Orehovs et al., *Literatūra un likums/ Literature and Law. Papers from the 29th Study Conference of the IASS (The International Association for Scandinavian Studies)*, in Riga and Daugavpils.

Nina Møller Andersen, b. 1951, Associate Professor, Ph.D. in Danish language and linguistics, at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2003) "Fra marxisme til pragmatisme: grundrids af den danske Bachtin-reception" (From Marxism to Pragmatism: an Outline of the Danish Bakhtin Reception), in: *Smuthuller* (Loopholes), ed. N.M. Andersen & J. Lundquist, (2007) "Bachtin og det polyfone" (Bakhtin and Polyphony), in: *Sproglig Polyfoni. Tekster om Bachtin og ScaPoLine* (Linguistic Polyphony. Texts on Bakhtin and ScaPoLine), ed. R. Therkelsen, N.M. Andersen & H. Nølke, (2009) annotated translation (from Russian into Danish, w. A. Fryszman) of Bakhtin's Speech Genres in: *Genre* (ed. J.D. Johansen & M.L. Klujeff), (2013) "Jeg har din bog": Noget om

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Sune Auken, b. 1970, Dr. habil., Head of PhD School, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2005) *Sagas spejl. Mytologi, historie og kristendom hos N.F.S. Grundtvig* (Saga's Mirror. Mythology, History, and Christianity in N.F.S. Grundtvig), (2011) “Not Another Adult Movie. Some Platitudes on Genericity and the Use of Literary Studies”, (2014) “Genre as Fictional Action”, (2015) “Utterance and Function in Genre Studies. A Literary Perspective” in: J. Andersen (Ed.), *Genre Theory in Information Studies*.

Frans Gregersen, b. 1949, Professor of Danish language, dr. phil., and Director of the Danish National Research Foundation’s LANCHART Centre, University of Copenhagen 2005-2015. He has contributed to the study of sociolinguistic variation in Danish by editing volume 41 of the journal *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* in 2009, including a presentation of the data and design of the LANCHART study, and is currently working on the history of Danish linguistics concentrating on the early periods of the 19th century, cf.: Gregersen 2013 (introduction to the new edition of Niels Ege’s translation of Rasmus Rask’s prize essay “On the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language 1814”), and Gregersen 2014 (on the first professor of Nordic N.M. Petersen (in Danish)).

Bo Jørgensen, b. 1966, MA, External Lecturer, the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2013) “Skyggens sprog—sprogets skygge. Om sprogbrugere og

sprogbrug i H.C. Andersens eventyr” (The Language of the Shadow—the Shadow of Language. On Language Users and the Use of Language in The Fairy Tales of H.C. Andersen), in: D. Duncker et al. (ed.) *Betydning og forståelse* (Meaning and Understanding), (2014) “At jonglere med sand. Dekonstruktion” (Juggling with Sand. Deconstruction) in: G. Larsen & R. Rasmussen (ed.) *Blink. Litterær analyse og metode* (Wink. Literary Analysis and Method).

Gorm Larsen, b. 1963, Ph.D, Associate Professor at Department of Communication, Aalborg University Copenhagen. He has for years studied and written on narratology and especially the act of narration in fiction in light of Bakhtin. Recently he has co-edited (2014) *Blink. Litterær analyse og metode* (Wink. Literary Analysis and Method). Currently he is doing research into shame and guilt in media and literature from a philosophical and social psychological point of view.

Palle Schantz Lauridsen, b. 1955, Ph.D., Associate Professor in Media Studies at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2014) *Sherlock Holmes i Danmark* (Sherlock Holmes in Denmark), (2013) “Verdens største show: Farver, formater og forstæder” (The World’s Greatest Show: Colour, Format, and Suburbia), in: A. Halskov et al. (ed.) *Guldfeber* (Gold fever), (2011) “Welcome to fucking Deadwood—fortælling, sprog og krop i verdens vildeste western” (Narrative, Language, and Body in the World’s Wildest Western), in: A. Halskov et al. (ed.) *Fjernsyn for viderekomne* (Advanced Viewers’ Television).

Anders Juhl Rasmussen, b. 1979, Postdoc, Ph.D., in Danish literature at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2010) “Arenamodernisme. Udvidelser af romanens genrefelt” (Arena-modernism. Transformations of

the Novel), in: *Kritik 196* (Critique), (2012) Ph.D. thesis, *Arena-modernisme. En position i dansk litteratur* (Arena-modernism. A Position in Danish Literature), (2013) “Den produktive modsætning. Friedrich Nietzsche som opdrager for Peter Seeberg” (The Productive Contradiction. Friedrich Nietzsche as Educator of Peter Seeberg), in: *Edda 2*.

René Rasmussen, b. 1954, Associate Professor, Ph.D., in Danish literature at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2000) *Bjelke lige i øjet—om Henrik Bjelkes forfatterskab* (Bjelke Bull’s-eye—on the Authorship of Henrik Bjelke), (2004) *Litteratur og repræsentation* (Literature and Representation), (2004), *Kognition—en liberalistisk ideologi* (Cognition—A Liberalistic Ideology), (2007) *Moderne litteraturteori 1-2* (Modern Theory of Literature 1-2), (2009) *Lacan, sprog og seksualitet* (Lacan, Language and Sexuality), (2010) *Psykoanalyse—et videnskabsteoretisk perspektiv* (Psychoanalysis—An Epistemological Perspective), (2012) *Angst hos Lacan og Kierkegaard og i kognitiv terapi* (Anxiety in Lacan and Kierkegaard and in Cognitive Therapy).

Anne Smedegaard, b. 1977, MA in Danish and Philosophy, Ph.D. fellow at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2013) “Hvem sagde hvorfor? Skolelærers situationelle og kognitive forankring” (Who Said Why? Situated and Cognitive Embedded School Genres), in: *Viden om læsning 13* (Knowledge on Reading). (In progress) “Student and Teacher Constructions of the ‘Generic Contract’ in Upper Secondary School Essays”.

Christel Sunesen, b. 1981, BA in Rhetoric, MA in Danish at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2008) “Fortalens retorik—fra Arrebo til Oehlen-

schläger” (The Rhetoric of the Preface—from Arrebo to Oehlenschläger), in: *Danske Studier* (Danish Studies), (2014, editor) *OEHL #1—Antologi for ny dansk litteratur* (OEHL #1—Anthology of New Danish Literature), (2014) “Grundtvig og rimbrevet” (Grundtvig and the Verse Epistle) in: *Ved lejlighed. Grundtvig og genrerne* (co-editor with Sune Auken).

Erik Svendsen, b. 1954, Associate Professor at the Department of Culture and Identity, Roskilde University (RUC). Selected publications: (1996) *Kieslowskis kunst* (The Art of Kieslowski), (1998) *Det Nye. Sonderinger i dansk litterær modernisme* (The New. Exploring Danish Literary Modernism), (1999, editor) *Detaljen. Tekstanalysen og dens grænser* (The Detail. Textual Analysis and its Limits), (2000, editor) *Ud af det moderne. Den kritiske tanke anno 2000* (Beyond of the Modern. Critical Thinking Around the Year 2000), (2007) contribution to *Dansk Litteraturs Historie. 1960-2000* (Danish Literary History. 1960-2000), (2011, editor) *Litterære livliner. Kanon, klassiker, litteraturbrug* (Literary Lifelines. Canon, Classic, and the Use of Literature), (2015) *Kampe om virkeligheden. Tendenser i dansk prosa 1990-2010* (Fights on Reality. Tendencies in Danish Prose 1990-2010), (2015, co-editor) *Radioverdener* (Radio Worlds).

Ib Ulbæk, b. 1955, Associate Professor, Ph.D., in Danish language at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (1989) Ph.D. thesis, *Evolution, sprog og kognition* (Evolution, Language, and Cognition), (2001) “Pipelines and Pipelining: a Theoretical Discussion of a Concept to Explain Coherence Between Paragraphs”, in: L. Degand (ed.) *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Discourse*, (2005) *Sproglig tekstanalyse: Introduktion til pragmatisk tekstanalyse* (Linguistic Text Analysis: An Introduction to Pragmatic Text Analysis).

RESEARCH GROUP FOR GENRE STUDIES (RGGS)



The Research Group for Genre Studies moves at the forefront of existing genre research, with a wide international network, a developing interdisciplinary research profile in both English and Danish, and extensive teaching activities at all levels, including a strong profile in research education.

RGGS embraces the highly developed research in current Genre Studies. At the core of this research is the advanced, remarkably cohesive, and extensive body of knowledge established in Rhetorical Genre Studies, in English for Specific Purposes, and in Systemic Functional Linguistics. The field now spans important work within Rhetoric, Composition, Linguistics, Sociology, Ethnography, Business Communication, Composition and Information Studies.

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