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10 Genre, Anthropogenic Climate Change, and the Need to Smell your Body Odor. A Personal Postscript

As I am writing this in late August 2019, the Amazon is burning, there has been a dramatic melt-off from the Greenland glaciers over the summer, Iceland has held a burial for one of its Jökuls, lost to anthropogenic climate change, and a petite Swedish teenager, catapulted into climate debate stardom for her school strike for the climate, is crossing the Atlantic in a solar driven sailboat; while middle-aged pundits pontificate at her lack of school attendance – or whatever other point they can find to criticize her, or the attention her presence in the climate debate has raised. In at least once instance, this rose to the level of a public death threat – with no visible consequences for the threatener, secure in his privilege, except for a smallish media hassle (Busby, 2019). They may break her, though she seems remarkably sturdy, but her central argument they shall never break.

None of these things could be predicted with any certainty when the chapters in this volume were first submitted to the editors in January 2018, but it is easily predictable that new extreme weather events connected to anthropogenic climate change will occur at an increasing rate. It is equally predictable that as the effects of climate change become more dramatic, so will the calls to action, and with them new genres will arise, and old genres will be deployed or repurposed to get the message across; like the burial of the Jökul mentioned above. The counter reaction is just as predictable. Even the most basic statements of the science involved will be obfuscated, and misdirection, disinformation, and attempts to dismay will be generously applied at every stage of the process.

It is known, because it has been so for decades; and information that was not only alarming but also fully actionable decades ago, has not been allowed to make an impact strong enough to fundamentally alter the situation. Change that is obvious and necessary has been fought tooth and nail every step of the way.

In the process, it has become clear that ACC is not just a challenge for the sciences. There is of course still much to be done, and even more, possibly, for the technical sciences as tech-based countermeasures will become increasingly necessary. However, the greatest conundrum may prove to be in the humanities and the social sciences. How is it even possible that highly exigent information for which overwhelming evidence exists does not make an immediate and strong impact on ideologies, policies, and life practices across the globe? Why is it still not made an overwhelming priority in the transport sector to lessen air travel? Why is meat production still heavily subsidized in many places? Why have fossil fuels not been downscaled dramatically at

least a decade ago? And why, oh why, are we now so desperately short on time when we knew of the problem well-nigh half a lifetime ago?

Our perception of the world is inevitably ideological. We cannot avoid it. The world, as it appear to us, is never just the world, it is always the world *as it appear to us*, and we are, for better or worse, never neutral observers. We always have an agenda, we always have values, and we always have interests. Nothing we do and nothing we say can change that.

For me as researcher whose professional topic is genre, the question of implied ideology is always close at hand. Our ideology is naturalized to us as we grow up and move through the education system. It is naturalized through the values represented in our upbringing, through our professional and private interactions, and through our language. All of these things are deeply enmeshed with genre. Being habitual, genre are “just the way we do things around here” (Schryer, 2002, 76). They may acquire an “illusion of normalcy” (Paré, 2002, 61) that might even lead to a “cultural reproduction of ignorance” (Segal, 2007, 4). As Kidd says: “Ideology is like B.O. [...] you never smell your own” (2013, 553; see also Paré, 2002, 60). From a genre perspective, if there is one thing the debate over ACC demonstrates, it is the inertia inherent in genre use. Patterns of understanding and interpretation once established seem to carry on even when they have long outlived their usefulness.

However, we are not without agency; we are not bound by fate to be victims of genre; in fact, uses of genre invariably have a genre user who, even in the most casual cases, is not an automaton. As reflective beings, we have the option to educate ourselves and to think critically about our implied values, even when these values are embedded in genres that are deeply habitual to us. We may never be fully independent or fully at a distance, but we can criticize genres through other genres, and language use through language use. In fact, genre provides us with many different means when we try to change some aspect of the world for the better, as Amy Devitt demonstrates in her chapter in this volume. Moreover, the kind of critical genre awareness, Devitt and others have argued for, may be one form of the “inoculation” against disinformation that Cook, Lewandowski, & Ecker (2017) argue is possible. By exposing people to the manifold ways genre can be used to disinform and manipulate in a controlled manner, you may teach them to recognize not only how they are made the objects of disinformation. From the point of view of genre pedagogy, this would also be a step towards teaching them how they themselves can tailor their use of genre to fit better purposes.

The chapters in the present volume can be taken as an attempt to establish the background knowledge needed for a broader awareness surrounding genre use in the debate over ACC. They demonstrate how genre is – among other things – a discursive battle ground in which actors maneuver to achieve their social purposes; not just on personal or organizational level, but even in large-scale attempts to influence the direction of society. The chapters move from minuscule genres like the tweet or the editorial cartoon to genres charged with doing the heavy lifting of societal action

like the petition or the congressional hearing. On each level, the genres appear as flexible and versatile cultural categories structuring human understanding and communication, but also as invitations to action, as individual actors take them up and maneuver to use them for their own purposes. The structuring that genre adds to our understanding may appear to be set in stone and steel, but proves to be malleable, as it adapts, or is made to adapt, to the shifting purposes of individual genre users. This is clearly the case with some of the manipulations described, the use of the congressional hearing system to suppress political recognition of the reality or severity of ACC, or the manipulative uptakes of climate science in denialist discourse communities preparing the ground for a broad swath of disinformation concerning ACC – uptakes, where knowledge and evidence is deliberately transformed into doubt and denial. However, it is also – and equally – the case, when humor is deployed to carry a message that horror has failed to get across, and which the usual news channels have not represented with sufficient clarity, or when scientists take to Twitter when their official communication channels are closed off by political decisions. In each of these cases, there is a complex interplay between established genre norms, and the uptakes of individual actors. Moreover, in all these cases the implied understandings and the implied ideology of the genres involved are in play. Sometimes this leads to conflict, when the control of the stasis in a congressional committee, which has its own legitimization and its own purposes, is used to block knowledge from actually getting through to the committee conclusions; or when the scientific drift towards stating fact meet the fast-paced exchanges in tweets. However, sometimes they align in surprising way, as when the aforementioned respect for facts in the genres of science, finds an unlikely ally in news satire's carnevalesque joy in mocking those disconnected from basic, observable reality.

Given that genres are well-nigh omnipresent in human communication and understanding, and also the central role genres play there, as evidenced not only by the chapters in the present volume, but also by a wide swath of previous research, it is fair to say that the chapters in the present volume, are only a starting point. They demonstrate how an understanding of the genres involved allows us to shed a new light on the way genre is used, and sometimes abused, in the debate over ACC. This is worth noticing not just because our failure to recognize manipulations through genre have led to widespread disinformation – and the slow pace of positive action to address ACC on a societal level – but also, and in a sense more importantly – because it points to the way genres can be used to create action and to move a debate forward.

In the postscript to a previous anthology on genre research, Ashley Rose Mehlenbacher remarked:

Attending to conversations across disciplines and national contexts will become increasingly important as genre continues its unabated tour of our scholarly homes. Understanding genre studies is then to understand an interdisciplinary conversation that propels this idea of genre

toward a complicated and likely contested idea of human communication in all its linguistic, social and cognitive capacities. (Mehlenbacher [then Kelly], 2017, 293)

The studies in the present volume continue the unabated tour into a context that clearly moves across disciplines and national contexts, but at the same time it takes it to new places on the intersection of research and politics and, by consequence, to the point where knowledge and societal action overlap. A major part of the potential, genre research has at this intersection springs from its systematic interest in genres as carriers and enablers of knowledge, action, and ideology. Because these genre structurations are always there, sometimes very much under the radar, but also always malleable and subject to the control of individual actors, an understanding of the roles genres play can help us see the patterns, that are sometimes deployed against us, sometimes work on us without our knowledge, and can sometimes be harnessed for positive action. This might, in turn, help us react more appropriately when ideologically charged think tanks deploy their divisionary uptakes to scientific evidence. We might even be able to see through the shtick when middle-aged pundits choose to fill the airwaves with divisionary op-eds, tweets or statements to direct the public attention away from the message of a teen girl deploying a well-known genre, the strike, in a surprising and surprisingly effective attempt to change the public debate over anthropogenic climate change.

References

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