TEXT(S), GENRE(S), CONTEXT(S): THE SOCIOCOGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract*:The focal point of my paper is genre, a concept relevant for all discoursive knowledge and practice. Highly praised in some aesthetic mentalities and equally repudiated in others, genre is one of the first conditioned reflexes when we utter the word literature; the archeology of this concept prove the cultural resistance of the tripartite system, dislocated only in the XX*th *century and replaced with a more flexible and appropriate taxonomy (i.e. narrative / descriptive / argumentative / dialogal / explicative etc.). Nowadays theorists agree that genres play a decisive role in the intricate ceremonial of presupposing, organizing and managing all discoursive activities, not only when making literary artefacts. Scientific articles or gossip, TV news or medical anamnesis, they all are governed by generic laws. Genres give identity to human discourses, affirm their duration, institute the enunciative contract, build expectations, schedule semiosis, adjust the comprehension process, condition memorization etc. Based on these premises, my sociocognitive approach aims to examine, on one hand, (1) the (multimodal) mental models involved in the production and comprehension of the socially shared discourse and how these mental models are "translated" into linguistic procedures, strategies and techniques and, on the other hand, (2) the relation between knowledge, ideologies, norms, values and the apprehension of genres in different epistemic communities.*

Keywords*: genre; sociocognitivism; mental model.*

Preamble

The recent case of Charlie Hebdo and the huge turmoil around it the confront us - in the most insufferable way - with the sad reality that, after centuries of metacritical reflection and thousands of erudite tomes, we still have to clarify our ideas upon the nature and the function of the fictional artefacts, if our common aim is a successful cultural negotiation. We deal with fictionality and factuality for ages; yet, old questions about their semiotic quality – some with plethoric answers – seem to become urgent matters on intellectual agendas. How do we circumscribe the territories of fiction? Does the populations living within their borders speak a language understood by others? If not, where does the short circuits occur? And, the most important, can we find better solutions for the societal malfunctions derived from these ruptures?

Another problem is the visibility and the intelligibility of the answers formulated by theorists and cultural data analysts. Fiction is problematized in elitist cercles, but what about the less gifted, the profane minds? Common sense and epistemology tell us that we should open old theoretical survival kits, find tools, melt and remould them in a multidisciplinary crucible. One such reliable tool is genre.

The (re)constitution of a concept: *genre*. From Russian Formalism to sociocognitivism

The semantic extension of a concept so resistant and diachronically stratified as *genre* test our metacritical competences. In its diachronical zig-zag route, *genre* crossed

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cultural and literary events, borrowed meaning from them and collected so many pragmasemantic traits, that its reconstitution cannot be perceived now at a first glance. If we fly over its territory, we cannot distinguish the landforms. If we zoom in, focusing specific objects, we lose the integral contour. As every other concept, its internal structure is not a simple sum of its parts, but a co-incidence, the accumulation of multiplicities: "(t)he concept is (...), at the same time, absolute and relative; relative to its own components, to other concepts, to the plane which it is delimited from, to the problems they are trying to solve; but absolute by the condensation it operates, by the place it occupies at this level, by the conditions associated to the problem." (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980: 49)

Its archeological structure comes with many complications. Genre is indeed on of the oldest taxonomies in humanities – constantly invoked or equally repudiated. By virtue of traditions, some researchers and (old) school teachers praise it and place it in the head of their critical interpretations. Others treat it with scepticism or contempt, considering it an atavism. Somehow both parties take genre for granted; we *seem* to know instinctively the genre of a given text, but if we are asked to convert instinct to reason and explain our choice, the arguments are too often fallible. It is also true that when we are taught literature, we are induced the (false) impression that genres are recipes, lists of ingredients in variable quantities; the more we read, the more we understand that authors (many of them canonized) have the bad habit of disregarding the recipe. Bottom line, it is not easy to discuss the genre in other terms than those of reified definitions, as it is equally not easy to efface or get rid of it.

It is important to revisit the genre even if we only consider it a zero degree of intelligibility when opening the investigation process of a text. An elementary theoretical exigency tells us to articulate the genre with the concepts belonging to the same plan, to which it interacts dialogically. The word *genre* convokes other contiguous words: literature, text, discourse etc.; their relations are ambivalent, a love/hate dispute with no previsible end. It would be of course futile, if not hilarious, to construe the word / the idea of *literature*; we appeal to the more appropiate Jakobsonian term, *literarity* (i.e. the capacity of a discursive sequence to be understood as literature under specified circumstances) in order to analyze the semantic substance of genre.

Basically, literarity can be understood in two ways (Genette, 1991: 134). The first way is the *essentialist* one, which claims that certain texts have a sort of literary aura that accompanies them in all circumstances, for all ages and communities of readers. This type of thinking gives birth to a work of art / literature as an object cut off from nature (framed apart), with the function of not having any function at all, perceived by disinterest and detachment. These works that become legitimized through an essentialist criterion distill the common language and enter the territory of literature by cancelling the usual functions of language based on a paradoxical agreement of mutual irresponsibility (the famous *willing suspension of disbelief*), on whose behalf speakers accept that statements that change are neither true nor false, or rather they are both true and false at the same time. These sublimations of discourse are intransitive, separated from the world and anchored in a pseudo-reference or a denotation without denotate. In this perspective, genre is a poor coat – thin and even transparent for this altère autarchic worlds. If fiction is at stake (and not diction), genre is a mode of representation, a register, noble or vulgar. For centuries, genres - from Aristotle,

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Horace, Diomede[1], continuing with the Renaissance poets, Boileau and Abbot Batteux to the German Romantics - meant a number of representative prescriptions written as part of the intricate ceremony of literary investiture.

The second way to define literarity is the *conditionalist* one, which is dominated by formal criteria (or *rematic*, a term that Genette finds more appropriate). Becoming a sign prevails over the laws of imagination. It is the merit of the 20th century to break away with the resistant Aristotelian tradition whereby the nature of literary was equated with sets of themes and privileged images for centuries, all wrapped in transparent language. From this perspective, genre is equated with diction. The conditionalist works are those literary entities which assert their existence *in/as* discourse. After sixty years of formalism, structuralism, semiotics, discourse analysis and numberless avatars, the genre earned not only its syntactic dimension, but also remoulded its pragmasemantic quality. At present, the conditionalist approaches outnumber the essentialists ones. Maybe the formal definitions are more confortable, because they are fed by the substance of linguistics and seem to have a guaranteed rationality. For instance, Russian formalists consider genres as a kind of building blocks, linguistic prefabricated patterns which can lead to (or better said, can counterfeit) a literary object. Their ideas were sublimated in structuralism (narratology, in particular) and semiotics, which also exalted the constructive processes. Their models are extremely useful today to the teaching practice, but should be taken *cum grano salis*, as they suffer from an obvious mechanistic pattern and many times fail to judge the aesthetic value.

Somewhere along the formalist triumphant route, unfortunately for the illusions of conditionalist theories, theorists began to say it louder and louder that no method specifically builds literarity; in other words, there is no necessary connection between the choice of strategies, techniques, representation methods and the quality of being literary / fictional[2]. This aporetic moment is solved by resizing the concept of genre in the vast field of discourse. For Mikhail Bakhtin (that Bakhtin separated from formalism), literary genres are only a particular secondary case of *discourse genres*, caught in the network of *interdiscourse*, a dialogic space regulated by norms. The idea that the text is produced under a system of rules which build the unity of a whole enunciation sociolinguistically circumscribed, first asserted by Bakhtin, comes to us today mainly via Foucault. The Bakhtin solution is perpetuated in the 1970s[3] and it is

[1] At the end of the 4th century, Diomede rebooted 'genre' (*genera*) the three Plato modes: *genus imitativum* (dramatic), *genus ennarativum* (narrative), *genus commune* (mixt). This is the model that has brought some benefits, but also has unbearable side effects , which persisted, sometimes without any remedy, until early 20th century. This triad epic / lyric / dramatic manages, to ascend to the 20th century, with some obstinacy worthy of a better cause, even if it resulted from an erroneous interpretation and misuse extension of the 'modal' categories identified by Aristotle, or in intellectual laziness (Genette, 1991: 79).

[2] For example, in the very the case of narrative which seemed the best 'tamed, Gérard Genette has shown that there is no exclusively narrative content, because the only specificity of narrative is its unique mode of organization (identifiable, it is well known, in representation exogenous to literature).

[3] Thus, Todorov, who reads the formalists and Bakhtin, and launches them on the French market of ideas, distinguishes between the 'genre model' and the 'empiric genre'. Subsequently, generations of theoreticians such as K. Viëtor, K. W. Hempfer, A. Fowler, A. Kibédi Varga, J. M. Schaeffer, J. Fontanille, J.M. Adam, F. Rastier, D. Maingueneau, P. Meijer, J.-M. Caluwe, A. Petitjean *et alii* illuminate the different nuances of the concept of genre. Thus, A. Kibédi Varga

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the solid ground of the sociocognitive approach. Guided by the same premises, the linguists of text - J.-M. Adam, F. Rastier or D. Maingueneau - replaced the label *genre* with *textual type*. For them, *types* are forms of global and abstract textual organization, therefore stable, unchanging and reccurent, grounded on some cognitive universals, and manifested in variable ways, in different historical and cultural scenographies. J.-M. Adam *inter alii* identifies five textual types: narrative, descriptive, argumentative, dialogic, explicative.

After 1980, the genre made a paradigmatic leap, redefining itself in the terms of cognitivism. When revisiting Darwin, the cognitivists also reread Brunètiere and Wittgenstein, from the latter retaining the idea of *family resemblance*. They keep the presumption of the living in imagining the relationships that a text has with a genre, with the difference that they rewrite them under the form of the ratio between genotype and phenotype. *L'air de la famille* or the shared DNA means, in their own form, the identification of some general-anthropological structures that update typology such as lyric, epic, dramatic, fantastic, etc. Texts resemble one another; some glorify their kinship, others behave like irreverent children or even kill their genitors. For the cognitivists, genre is a cognitive architecture that groups sets of procedures; the genre 'falls' into a text as a structure of intentions organized in hierarchies depending on the importance, or in other words, like the steps of an algorithm or a list of tasks. Each procedure becomes self-representational, autopoietic, which means that it carries in itself its own instructions for deciphering and use, and it is an intelligent agent, because it carries over cultural beliefs.

For classical philologist, the cognitivist formulations, though pertinent, are still exotic. Which are the active cognitive processes while reading a text? Can we attach different conceptual maps to different types of texts? Can these cartographies contain semantic layers - like, let's say, Google Maps? etc.)

The sociocognitive approach of genre is possibly the most integrative theory, a sort of Theory of Everything. In this true inter/multidisciplinary endeavour, concepts coming from other scientific fields (psychology, sociology etc.) collaborate and coalesce with the linguistic notions, being spared of the accusations of local border traffic addressed to many such exchanges. Teun Van Dijk, the guru of this approach, speaks about *discursive genres*; they function the same as their correlates (or should we say, subordinates), literary genres. In school we are taught to deconstruct a novel, to decant the narrative parts from descriptive or dialogal passages. It is truly amazing that few people realize that the similar process is always active in the background of our mind[1]. We understand the structures and the categories of a discursive situation, we

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suggests that we should speak of *generic categories* - provisions of the human spirit itself, then of *actual genres* – the short story, the novel, the novella, etc. and of *subgenres*, presented as historical and thematic subdivisions: the Italian or the English sonnet etc. J. M. Schaeffer talks about *genre schemes*, required both by the authorial voice and by the reader alike. Returning to Aristotle, Genette proposes to distinguish *modes*, pragmatic transhistorical and relatively constant categories, three in number: fictional (the Aristotle diegesis), the dramatic mode (mimesis), and the lyric or poetic mode. The concept of *genre* is reserved to empirical categories of texts, set after observing historical data according to certain criteria. The relations with the modes are complex, but cannot be reduced to a simple inclusion / as to subgenres, they from the thematic or historical specifications of genres.

[1] Other prominent scholars, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, focus on what they call conceptual blending, a mental process with a decisive role in the way we live and think. Almost invisibly to consciousness, conceptual blending choreographs vast networks of meaning, framing

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identify participants, ascribe roles, measure the variations of style and register because our private (yet discrete) encyclopedias contain the genre rules and conventions.

For Teun van Dijk, the missing link in understanding the genre is *context*. Our ability to discern discursive genres are mediated by contexts, which act as *mental models*. In his studies, he limits the term *context* to those properties of the communicative situation that are *relevant* for discourse. Let me remind that *relevant* means subjective, not objective – those relevant properties of the social situations are a subjective selection: ”(c)ontexts are not objective, but subjective. They are not a relevant selection of “objective” social properties of the situation, but a subjective definition of such a situation. This is perfectly compatible with the notion of relevance, because this notion is also inherently relative: something is (ir)relevant *for someone*. In other words, a context is what is defined to be relevant in the social situation by the participants themselves.”(Van Dijk, 2009: 15)

Yet again, *contexts / mental models / situational models* (or whatever their name may be) do not influence discourse in a direct way. The theorist warns us against a widespread determinist phallacy: people assume that gender, race, age, status etc. influence the way they/we speak. This does not happen (not in a *direct* way), simply because the social properties of a situation are not cognitive phenomena; they are phenomena of different kind, of different levels of analysis and description. For a better understanding of this idea, Van Dijk uses an argument *per contrario*: if such a direct influence between social situations and discourse were to exist, all people in the same social situation would probably speak in the same way, which they obviously don’t.

It is also true that contexts do not entirely contain personal elements. Due to socialization, language users acquire various kinds of shared knowledge and beliefs, they are *vectors of their cultural models*: ”Models constitute the unique interface that combines the personal and the unique, on the one hand, with the social and the shared, on the other hand. And what is true for mental models is also true for the discourses that are controlled by them: both are unique and personal, as well as social and intersubjective.” (Van Dijk, 2009: 17)

Instead of conclusions

Genres are – we learn from the sociocognitive perspective – part of the hidden codes of the programs run silently by our minds. Genres manage and organize *all our discourse activities*, give them identity, affirm their duration, institute the enunciative contract, build expectations, schedule semiosis, adjust the comprehension process, condition memorization and, essentially, help us collaborate culturally.

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our worlds. The two neuroscientists underline that this is an unnoticed, “silent” phenomenon in present-day life. It might seem strange that the systematicity and intricacy of some of our most basic and common mental abilities could go unrecognized for so long. Perhaps the forming of these important mechanisms early in life makes them invisible to consciousness. Even more interestingly, it may be apart of the evolutionary adaptiveness of these mechanisms that they should be invisible to consciousness, just as the backstage labor involved in putting on a play works best if it is unnoticed. (Fauconnier, Turner: 2002)

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