



Genre – Text – Interpretation

Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond

Edited by Kaarina Koski and Frog with Ulla Savolainen

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Preface

“Genre” is a fundamental concept for many disciplines today, and has perhaps been nowhere so intensively discussed and analyzed as in the discipline of folklore studies. The handling of this key concept and attitudes toward it have been carried in different and sometimes inconsistent directions by the winds of time for more than two thousand years. Debate over its definition and use was ablaze from the 1960s into the 1980s; it formed a beacon that was difficult to ignore and was so hot that many thought it best to keep a distance from it. The heat of those discussions tempered critical views and perspectives on the concept, and it has gradually moved into the background of discourse as the flames of controversy died down. The embers continue to glow, yet rather than being abandoned, genre maintains a central position in many fields – implicitly if not explicitly. Questions of genre now flare up occasionally in individual works which disturb the coals of these earlier arguments, yet academic discussion has rather left it behind in the wake of insights, strategies and approaches that have made tremendous progress in other aspects of these fields across the last several decades. With the coming of a new century, multidisciplinary influences have offered new insights into “genre” as a concept and challenged earlier definitions. “Genre” is such a core concept especially to research on traditions, and so implicit in the ways that we, as researchers, think about those traditions, that it has become necessary to return to this fundamental term and concept in order to reassess it. This is vital within folklore studies, but also across the diverse and intersecting disciplines to which “genre” is central. It is necessary to consider the values and drawbacks of “genre” as a term and concept, as well as the impacts which this has on research, on research history and how these sorts of conditioning can be overcome. A multidisciplinary discussion on genre has become crucial – a necessity that has given rise to the present volume.

Genre – Text – Interpretation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond is the fruit of several years of labour. The concept for the volume arose from a discussion between Kaarina Koski and Frog in the wake of the seminar “Laji nykytutkimuksessa” [‘Genre in Current Research’]. The seminar was organized in 2010 in Helsinki, Finland, by the Department of Folklore Studies of the University of Helsinki. Kaarina Koski had been the driving force behind this event, which had been motivated by the fact that

a number of Finnish scholars had been wrestling quite aggressively with the concept of genre and how to theorize it in their research on an individual basis: the seminar aimed to bring their approaches into discussion. Rather than being oriented towards producing a publication, this event aimed to bring forward the topic of genre in a variety of research, much of which was ongoing, for the mutual benefit of participants. The result was a boom of excited discussion that resonated long after the event. Not only did this unveil the amount of work being done on the concept but also its diversity. In addition to advancing the concept on the platform of debates and perspectives within the discipline of folklore studies, researchers were developing and reinforcing their perspectives by combining these with perspectives and theoretical work done in a variety of other disciplines. There was clearly a general need to reevaluate the concept of genre in a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary way.

The idea on which the present volume is based is both to offer reevaluations of the concept of genre and also to offer a new platform for considering the diversity of perspectives associated with it as well as to discuss and illustrate their aspects and potential. Owing to the wide relevance to scholars globally, the publication was planned to be in English rather than in Finnish. The inter-connectedness of theorizing genre in folklore studies with theories and perspectives being developed in other disciplines also led the volume to be planned as multidisciplinary itself. Koski and Frog notified the participants of the 2010 seminar about this plan and invited them to contribute, but they also circulated a call for papers which invited scholars from various fields of research to offer their insights on genre. As a result, the book you have before you contains contributions primarily connected with folklore studies, but also contributions from the perspectives of linguistic anthropology, literature studies, philology, sociology, and so forth, as well as representing a variety of national scholarships from around the world. The process of the volume's development has been extended and the amount of work involved led to inviting Ulla Savolainen to join the editorial team in 2013. Individual articles have in many cases evolved significantly as part of that process. One or more of the editors has worked extensively with each contributor to both strengthen the individual articles and also to help ensure that the volume as a whole will be approachable for a multidisciplinary audience. The editors also organized blind peer-review by two reviewers for each contribution individually and the Finnish Literature Society subsequently organized blind peer-review by two reviewers of the whole volume. As articles developed, the editors also arranged for them to be seen by different contributors on a case by case basis followed later by the circulation of a version of the full manuscript, which has enabled the diverse articles found here to enter more directly into dialogue with one another through cross-referencing. The result is gratifying, and we hope that the perspectives of this volume will generate new discussions in the future.

The articles collected here offer theoretical views on different genre systems and on genre as a concept. They vary in their emphasis on theory, terminology and empirical data as they discuss several concerns related to the concept of genre. As a consequence, the views they offer are very

complementary as they address themes recurrent in this volume. These themes include questions of how a “genre” should be defined, and how different definitions hold to different kinds of texts, to different kinds of communications and representations, or to different contents of those communications and representations. Such themes also include how relationships between genres should be approached, to what degree it is possible to define a genre system, and how relationships between genres impact or construct understandings of texts in analysis and for those who use them. Most central, however, is how genre as an approach and research tool can contribute to – and have consequences for – the study of oral and written texts today.

Among the many points that come forward through the present volume is one that is not found in any single article but revealed through the collection as a whole. This is that the embers of the heated discussion and debates surrounding genre are far from cold. The Promethean fire of this topic has not been extinguished but rather carried in hundreds of directions, scattered among individual scholars who have wrestled with its flames in dozens of contexts. Each of the contributions to this collection can be taken individually on its own merits, but the true strength of the present volume is in bringing together this rich diversity of insights and perspectives that collectively underscore the fundamental significance of genre as a concept and tool while simultaneously unveiling that the debates are far from finished.

2nd February 2016

Frog, Kaarina Koski and Ulla Savolainen

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Introduction

This book presents current discussions on the concept of genre. It introduces innovative, multidisciplinary approaches to contemporary and historical genres, their roles in cultural discourse, how they change, and their relations to each other.

The reader is guided into the discussion surrounding this key concept and its history through a general introduction, followed by eighteen chapters that represent a variety of discursive practices as well as analytic methods from several scholarly traditions.

This volume will have wide appeal to several academic audiences within the humanities, both in Finland and abroad, and will especially be of interest to scholars of folklore, language and cultural expression.



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