

Book Review

Tracing Genres through Organizations. A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design, Clay Spinuzzi, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003, 264 pp. ISBN 0-262-19491-0

Genre has been at the centre of academic interest in many disciplines: Rhetoric, literary criticism, linguistics, sociology etc. Although Spinuzzi is Professor of Rhetoric one should, however, not expect an exercise in classical rhetorical genre analysis. Spinuzzi starts from a rather different angle: Bakhtin's dialogic genre theory (which is based on Russian linguistics and literary criticism) is one of his vantage points, the other is (much more known to the readers of this journal) activity theory, as developed by Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Engeström, the latter being Spinuzzi's favourite reference.

Spinuzzi does not pursue the goal of developing or formulating a theory of genre. Rather, he has a much more pragmatic goal: to develop an innovative methodology of "genre tracing" which, of course, is based on genre theory. Yet instead of being theoretical, his approach is methodological and pragmatic in that it aims at improving systems design. Next to the discussion of genre theory, as one starting point, he places his study in the context of user-centered design. Instead of just adapting this approach, he criticizes its good natured "Robin Hood attitude" which regards the user as a victim so that the designer may then appear as the hero to save the poor user from the inhumanity of system-centered design. As opposed to this patriarchal stance Spinuzzi favours a more symmetrical way of acknowledging the competencies of users in the design and by the designers of systems. Users, he argues, do develop their own ways of getting around problems with systems, ways which deviate from standard solutions and thereby cause disorder – and thereby, sometimes, innovation. These ways, he claims, are to be addressed by the notion of genre, and the reconstruction of these ways he calls "genre tracing".

Turning to his notion of genre we confront a category which he, first, develops theoretically before he tries to apply it in his empirical investigation of traffic workers in the American state of Iowa who are using a database of traffic accidents. Thus, his analyses are based on the historical reconstruction and observation of their former and current ways of working. On the basis of a short sketch of activity theory which he adapts to his field and its various



were easier to handle, others included sticky notes. On the microscopic level, contradictions between the location of accidents in the system and its relation to the geographical location led to problems. All these innovations indicated that the official genres were no longer sufficient so that new technical developments were demanded which again changed the genre ecology.

Spinuzzi pragmatic interest becomes particularly obvious towards the end of his book. He does not conclude by generalising his findings (which he frequently summarises, so that his arguments become very clear; he also adds a number of reflections on his analytical categories). His conclusion, rather, consists in suggesting how design can be changed. This suggestion is labelled "open system". Its major impact is to enable end-users to programme, change programmes and include the range of the genre ecology in use by facilitating the access to macro-languages. In a number of examples, he illustrates the user empowering strategy. Thus, community-specific folklore, such as tips, tricks, and tacit procedures, may be included, the function of the "gardener" (the informal expert) may be picked up by the system, and the content of websites could be made accessible to users.

By using notions such as "utopian system", "reactionary" solutions (versus those that allow users to be proactive) or "subversive" interactions which generate innovations from below, Spinuzzi gives his methodology a slightly (micro) political tone which, in the end, does not seem very far from those "designer as hero"-tropes he criticises in the beginning. True, his approach is much more stressing the user's principle of subsidiarity: they should be able to help themselves. Yet, on empirical grounds, one might ask if it is really true that ethnographies of work, such as the Workplace Studies, did not take into account the problems and innovations of users. (This, of course, is but a rhetorical question.) Moreover the examples given by Spinuzzi for the "breakdowns", "contradictions", "discoordinations" are very few and not always convincing. (A problem partly due to the way he "coded" his data, and procedures which tend to conceal the features of that which is being coded.) Thus, one may ask if we would really define photocopies of a map as a genre? Would we call it a genre if a worker on traffic data discovers that, instead of clicking on fields on the screen, he may click on field labels which allow him to access selected items easier?

These questions lead to the problem which seems crucial to me: the notion of genre. To Spinuzzi, genre is both the "product" and the "mediator" of an activity" (p. 115), it may also be understood as social action (127), it is a tool of activities, and finally, it may be the activity itself. Even if these different aspects of genre are related to different levels of analysis, it is quite obvious that the notion of genre itself becomes blurred. It takes on so many aspects that it loses almost any interpretive or explanatory validity. In the end, we are left with question if we should consider genres as the artefacts which are constituted by activities (as some of his empirical examples suggest?) Or

