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Conference Report on “Forms at Work: New Formalist Approaches in Literary Studies”

Justus Liebig University Giessen, International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, 19.-21. November 2018

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What is ‘new’ about ‘New Formalism’? Where and how are forms ‘at work’ in literary production? Why is close reading so valuable for their study? The affordances and constraints of literary form took center stage during the academic conference “Forms at Work: New Formalist Approaches in Literary Studies”, which was hosted at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) on November 19-21, 2018. Rather than attempting to reinstate old barriers between text and context, international scholars gathered here to explore the intersections of the socio-political and aesthetic dimensions of poetic, dramatic, and prosaic texts. To make this happen, the International PhD Programme (IPP) and the European PhD Network (PhDnet) compiled a dense and multifaceted three-day schedule, which attracted a high number of both active participants and guest listeners from within and outside the Justus-Liebig-University Giessen. While highlighting some illustrative impressions, the following report will outline the main proceedings of “Forms at Work”, including six thematically-grouped panels of conference papers, two keynote lectures, and an interactive and intensive workshop.

A central conceptual tension already manifested itself in the opening words given by the organizers ELIZABETH KOVACH (Giessen) and IMKE POLLAND (Giessen): On the one hand, New Formalist approaches such as Caroline Levine’s vouch for an interest in literary form for its own sake, which had subsided in the past decades’ critical traditions (*Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton/Oxford 2015). Scholars such as Derek Attridge, however, argue that this value of ‘forms’ must not be disconnected from the ethical, historical, and social dimensions of a literary work (*The Singularity of Literature*. London/New York 2004, S. 108-9). Yet, in the course of ‘Forms at Work’ it would soon become clear that these stances must not necessarily be opposed to one another. DANIELA HENKE (Freiburg) promptly opened the debate of form’s ethical dimensions in the first panel by pointing to what might be perceived as its very opposite – the absence of form. Her reading of deconstructive

Holocaust fiction revealed how the deconstruction of grammatical or generic forms can encourage readers to reconstruct the texts while reading. The thought that, as storytelling animals, humans can hardly not interpret also constituted an underlying principle in the following talks on musical forms in terms of rhythmic patterns (VERA HEROLD [Lisbon]), or on binary forms of decision-making in contemporary TV series (LEONIE SCHMIDT [Giessen]). Taking this to a more concrete level, panel two featured talks on empathy for fictional characters (ALEXANDRA EFFE [Giessen]) and on the nature of highly subjective literary forms such as diary writing (MAREIKE ZAPP [Giessen]). JULIA VAESSEN (Aachen), for example, examined how narrative structures affect fictional character formation and in what ways, in return, these forms can help us understand how we see the world, or challenge these ways of seeing. WOLFGANG HALLET'S (Giessen) keynote lecture on 'The Cultural and Epistemological Power of Forms in the Novel' complemented an insightful first conference day with an account of how culture, and especially narrative forms, imprint their meanings onto the social and vice versa in the 21st century.

Day two opened with a foregrounding of the political affordances of narrative forms through diverging examples. Talks of the third panel ranged from colliding generic forms in Jacobean revenge tragedies reflecting upon the politically unstable realities of early 17th-century England (CHRISTINE SCHWANECKE [Mannheim]) and literary representations of labor in three Soviet texts (ALENA HEINRITZ [Graz]) to the 2008 movie production of *Agathe Cléry* and its problematic depiction of racial politics presented by EWELINA PEPIAK (Giessen). Form can in fact work in unexpected ways, as especially IIDA TURPEINEN (Helsinki) examined in panel four in her talk on the scientific affordances of Christian Bök's poetry. How can the inclusion of molecular DNA structures within poetic texts work towards destabilizing the hegemony of science? KATHRIN BETHKE (Kiel/Berlin) examined how love sonnets can incorporate bookkeeping traditions in their poetics and ALEXANDER SCHERR (Giessen) how generic collisions of Victorianism and Romanticism can become productive. The lively discussions after each panel exemplified how all talks opened up room for debate, which the participants were able to make use of during the workshop on 'What Form Knows: The Literary Text as Framework, Model, and Experiment' moderated by WOLFGANG FUNK (Mainz). "Form is something that we see with rather than look at", was what many participants agreed upon during a collaborative brainstorming on the conference's overarching theme, which was followed by discussions of numerous textual examples visualizing how form can be 'at work'. The second keynote lecture given by DEREK ATTRIGE (York) on 'The Experience of Form in the Contemporary Novel' tied into the overall debate on the separation of form and meaning. He examined how literary form firstly managed to become 'autonomous' in the works written by James Joyce. According to Attridge, narrative forms affect the reading experience of a work, which means that it is crucial to understand *how* they do so, if one seeks to examine its political force.

In what ways this can work on a practical level became clearer on the third day in panels five and six of the conference. These last panels concluded the overall discussion by examining the work *material* forms or ‘things’ are capable of, as ROBERT WINKLER (Giessen) illustrated through his case study of the iconic log cabin and its evolution within U.S.-American cultural identity. PHILIPP KOHL (Munich) paid attention to the possibly most pervasive material narratives rely on: the book itself; and eventually, panel six concluded the conference with three insightful case studies on filmic and narrative aesthetics inspired by new media such as social networks or YouTube. MAX BERGMANN (Giessen) presented how YouTube aesthetics can be implemented in film-making, JULIA BOECKLING (Freiburg) examined novelistic manifestations of social media structures, and SARAH LINK (Freiburg) closed the panel by an analysis of the multi-modality at work in the graphic novel series *Fell*. After a few final remarks by the organizers, the event came to an end with a closing discussion. It was announced that the papers presented at ‘Forms at Work’ will be published in a conceptual volume within the next year, which will also reflect the interdisciplinary encounters and debates that were sparked throughout the three intense conference days.

Program

Opening Remarks

Ansgar Nünning (Giessen), Imke Polland (Giessen) and Elizabeth Kovach (Giessen)

Panel 1: Form’s Ethical Dimensions: Boundaries, Hierarchies, Breaks

Daniela Henke (Freiburg): “Unreadable Texts: What We Can Learn from Deconstructive Texts about Form and Ethics of Form”

Vera Herold (Lisbon): “Troubled Rhythms: Sacred Time, Poetic Time, Imperial Time and the End of Time”

Leonie Schmidt (Giessen): “The Either-Or Decision – Illustrating Binary Forms at Work by Means of the Patient’s Dilemma in Grey’s Anatomy”

Panel 2: “Formed Subjects, Subjective Form: Characters and Narrators”

Alexandra Effe (Giessen): “Forms at Work in Literary Testimony: Fictionality and Empathy”

Julia Vaessen (Aachen): "Cultural Models, Character Reception, and the Relevance of Form"

Mareike Glier (Giessen): "The Journals of Jim Elliot (1948-1955): Affordances and Constraints of the Modern Spiritual Diary"

Keynote Lecture: Wolfgang Hallet (Gießen): "The Cultural and Epistemological Power of Forms in the Novel"

Panel 3: "The Politics of Form: Narratives and Social Realities"

Christine Schwanecke (Mannheim): "When Genres Collide: The Political Work of Narrative Form in Jacobean Tragedy"

Alena Heinritz (Graz): "Forms of Work as Work of Form: The Poetics of Work and Labour in Texts by Tret'yakov, Platonov and Shalamov"

Ewelina Pepiak (Giessen): "The Interracial Love Story as a Narrative Vehicle in 21st-Century French Cinema"

Panel 4: "Cultural Forms in/of Negotiation: Clashes, Overlaps, Transitions"

Alexander Scherr (Giessen): "The Fragment at Work: Transcendental Philosophy and 'Victorian Romanticism' in Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus (1834)"

Iida Turpeinen (Helsinki): "Affordances of Scientific Forms in the Works of Christian Bök"

Kathrin Bethke (Kiel/Berlin): "Love's Accountants: Double-entry Bookkeeping and Literary Form in the Renaissance"

Workshop: Wolfgang Funk "What Form Knows: The Literary Text as Framework, Model, and Experiment"

Keynote Lecture: Derek Attridge (York): "It Don't Mean a Thing: The Experience of Form in the Contemporary Novel"

Panel 5: "New Formalisms of Things: Objects, Places, Perspectives"

Philipp Kohl (Munich): "What about Bibliomorphism?"

Robert A. Winkler (Giessen): "The Unabomber: The Politicization of the Form of the Log Cabin"

Panel 6: "Form and (New) Media Aesthetics: Images, Networks, Databases"

Max Bergmann (Giessen): "From Database Cinema to YouTube Aesthetics: Digital Network Structures and Filmic Form"

Julia Boeckling (Freiburg): "'Privacy Is Theft': Form and Social Media Engagement"

Sarah Link (Freiburg): "'The Camera Never Lies': Photography and Objectivity in Fell"

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