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## Form. Perspectives on a Literary Theory

- Form. Perspektiven einer literaturwissenschaftlichen Theorie. Universität zu Köln, 28./29.03.2019

The Conference »Form. Perspektiven einer literaturwissenschaftlichen Theorie« took place at the University of Cologne, 28th and 29th of March and was hosted by Prof. Torsten Hahn and Prof. Nico Pethes (University of Cologne). Following recent publications that emphasized the social and political meaning of aesthetic forms, e.g. by Caroline Levine and Dirk Baecker, the conference asked for the relevance of theoretical notions of form for literary studies after the philosophical debates around the distinction of form and ›Gehalt‹ in the 19th and 20th century. The main focus was the question how system theory's abstract distinctions redundancy/variety and form/medium, as well as the notion of an ›inner ornament‹ can be applied to the analysis of specific literary texts, addressing both their semantic and aesthetic procedures as well as their material shape. The latter meaning of ›form‹ as the actual surface of a given text links literary form theory with notions of design; the first refers to current explorations of actor-network theory and the performative aspect of writing. The assumption is that form as a concept is not only relevant for the aesthetic debates in the 19th century but should be a vital part of analyzing contemporary literature and other art phenomena, such as pop literature. Form, and its dynamization within an ornament, is indissolubly linked both to the material and social environment of literary production and to the internal self-reflection of literature and thus to its intrinsic value.

The conference was divided into three sections, concerning different aspects and scopes of form theory: Theory and Media of Form, Aesthetics of Form and Literary History, and Cultural Artefacts and Forms of Surface.

### 1. Theory and Media of Form

In the first section, three speakers addressed the basic question of how the concept of form can be productively used in current literary studies. The different speakers presented very different approaches, thus opening a large spectrum for possible answers, reaching from abandoning the concept of form due to its potentially judgmental function to using form as a means of paying attention to new and innovative contexts, e.g. contrasting different material environments for literary or cultural environments for theoretical production.

In his speech »Form Inhalt Kanon« (Form Content Canon), Thomas Hecken (Siegen) presented the challenging assumption that the concept of form in literary debates is only motivated by the aim to exclude certain texts or certain statements about texts from the literary canon. The invitation to talk about the ›form‹ of certain literary texts serves to create a boundary between superficial and profound statements on texts. The process of canonizing is also organized along these lines, as ›good‹ texts tend to be those who invite profound statements by being inaccessible. Hecken also doubted that architectural or pictorial vocabulary that tends to be used when describing the formal qualities of literature can simply be attributed to literary texts. He suggested that instead of using the concept of ›form‹ as proof for the ›value‹ of a certain text, scholars should rather identify specific forms within texts and conversations about texts, without generalizing them under the abstract term ›form‹.

This provocative approach on the subject of form stimulated an intensive debate on the value of ›form‹ for literary analysis. It was argued that the distinction form/media can be used to compare literary artefacts and practices with other cultural phenomena. Concerning popular texts, the notion of form could be used to develop a different approach on the ›complexity‹ of a certain text, e.g. by including the specific context. This was then linked to the notion of form in early romanticism, where form is not thought of as stable and static but rather as dynamic and infinite.

Matthias Bickenbach (Köln) with his talk »Die Form des Buchs« (The Form of the Book) addressed the material surface of literature, more specifically the printed book as opposed to digital forms of reading. He presented the book as a two-sided-form, relating to Niklas Luhmann's concept of form and its transfer to book sciences by Georg Stanitzek. The printed book, according to Bickenbach, is the center of many scriptural practices like taking notes and underlining, the actual ›studium‹, browsing and randomly opening pages. The book is thus linked to our theoretical conception of language and our practices of doing science – this can be exemplified by Saussure's example of the tree, which is used to explain the double nature of a written sign and also refers back to the material quality of a book.

The discussion centered around the question of how the material format of literature and its form are interconnected. There were some open questions on how digital formats change the notion of literature, e.g. concerning the distinction of text and context, e.g. when comments are integrated into the actual text as it is technically possible with e-books.

Elena Beregow (Hamburg) presented a talk on »Die Oberflächen der Theorie. Von heißen und kalten Medien der Theoriebildung« (The Surfaces of Theory. About hot and cold Media of Theorizing). She referred to Levine's concept of form as an arrangement of elements to describe theories as social, political and aesthetic forms that always take place within and themselves create an atmosphere which can e.g. be described as either hot (Deleuze) or cold (Luhmann). Beregow proposed ›atmosphere‹ as a concept to describe this appeal and its sources, as it forms a link between form and medium, both actively shaping and simply passively surrounding its objects. She distinguished three dimensions of atmosphere: the text itself, its formulations and ›sound‹, the reception as interesting or irritating and the material and social spaces of theory, e.g. reading groups. Thus, the concept of atmosphere links the aesthetic appearance of theory with political and social contexts.

Beregow's introduction of the concept of atmosphere into form theory provoked a discussion about it being a concept between form and medium that might serve to elucidate the process of transforming one into the other. The discussion also focused the potential of viewing theory as a genre, which is also defined by aesthetic procedures and thus by formal aspects.

## **2. Aesthetics of Form and Literary History**

The second section presented explicit reflections on form in the history of philosophy and literature. The scope ranged from the 18th century with Baumgarten's aesthetics as well as early romanticism on to the 19th century with Stifter to the 20th century and poems by Francis Ponge and Ilse Aichinger. The talks presented both reconstructions of a specific notion of form within the aesthetic discourse, e.g. early romanticism or socialist art, as well as formal interpretations of specific literary texts.

Patrick Hohlweck (Köln) with his talk on the »Frühgeschichte der Form (Baumgarten)« (The Early History of Form) presented a reconstruction of a notion of form in Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* that navigates between a rhetorical concept of adequacy between sign and content and the possibility of expressing a multitude of meanings in one term and a sculptural concept of form as the shaping of a figure out of raw material by skimming it according to necessity. Baumgarten's attempt to combine these incompatible aspects results in an innovative approach towards form that can be related to and probably distinguished from both the modern concepts of system and of an autonomous artwork. Hohlweck identified three aspects of this new concept of form as selectivity, (spatial) simultaneity and (temporal) perfectibility.

The discussion focused the question of complexity and its relationship to the concept of form. For Baumgarten, the most beautiful form seems to be the sensually fullest – a monstrosity of form is not conceivable for him. Form thus has a quantitative index as a reservoir for as much potentiality as possible.

Anja Lemke (Köln) with »Philosophische Arabeske« (Philosophical Arabesque) read F. Schlegel's philosophical and literary work as an exploration into the possibilities of a formal observation of texts. She read the romantic ›arabesque‹ as the expression of both subjective self-reflection and the reflection of the work of art. The arabesque thus is a dynamic way of processing aporias that result of the universality of observing. Lemke presented both the so-called ›recension‹ of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister* as well as Schlegel's lectures *Transcendentalphilosophie* as two examples of the intertwining of self-reflection (›Bildung‹) and formal (even mathematical) reflection of other philosophical and literary texts under the banner of the arabesque. Lemke thus argued that the early romanticism's concept of form includes a perception of formlessness, both in the literary and philosophical field. Thus, early romanticism anticipates the distinction form/medium.

The discussion centered on the theory of the novel as the modern genre between chaos and form as well as on Schlegel's concept of form and the arabesque and how both of these notions are related to the idea of infinity. Here, Hegel's famous critique of a ›bad‹ infinity came up again, which Lemke opposed by insinuating on the dynamic and performative character of early romanticism's concepts of form and the arabesque.

Peter Neumann (Jena) presented his thoughts on »Entzeitlichung. Zur Temporalität der reinen ästhetischen Form« (Detemporalization. On the Temporality of Pure Aesthetic Form). Neumann detected an ambivalent attitude towards the temporality of form in early romanticism. On the one hand, the notion of form evokes temporality, as form always refers to the passing of time, on the other hand it defines something as stable and ideal and transcends the individual towards the absolute. Thus, Neumann characterizes the aesthetics of pure form as shaped by a double experience of ›Verzeitlichung‹ (temporalization) and ›Entzeitlichung‹ (de-temporalization). Neumann criticizes idealism's conception of form as basically de-temporalized and blind towards absolutely formless, chaotic states insofar as they are always trying to reintegrate them into formal relations.

The discussion posed several challenges of Neumann's depicting of early romanticism. Especially Hölderlin and Schlegel were pointed out as examples for conceptualizations of ruptures and dynamization. A remaining question was if early romanticism's concept of ›chaos‹ is really formless, or if it is just conceptualized in order to become form itself.

Nico Pethes (Köln) talked about »Aspekte ornamentaler Prosa bei Stifter« (Aspects of Ornamental Prose in Stifter). He argued that even realistic literature can be viewed as basically figurative and concerned with the arrangement of material. Form, here, is understood with the

Russian formalist Sklovskij as aesthetic procedure. As proof, he presented a reading of Stifter's novel *Witiko*. Several scenes within this novel present an astonishing amount of redundancy that reveal structural orders, both in a social and poetic sense. Instead of viewing these scenes as ›boring‹ or ›non-artistic‹, Pethes reads them as self-referentially posing questions of ordering and shaping both textual and social worlds. Thematic depletion thus leads to the visualization of formal patterns – a process that Pethes somewhat ironically calls ›pure prose‹.

In the discussion, the notion of procedure was stressed as a vital aspect of form, linking poetic and social practices. The distinction redundancy/variety was considered as prolific for different ways of analyzing texts and social structures, especially with a historical point of view. The notion of ›pure prose‹ was re-described as an oxymoron and thus only a threshold for aesthetic descriptions.

Armin Schäfer (Bochum) with »Prosagedicht und lyrische Prosa« (Prose Poetry and Lyrical Prose) proposed a form-oriented close reading of several poems by Ilse Aichinger and Francis Ponge as an innovative approach towards genre-definitions in the interstice between prose and poetry. Schäfer's model concentrates on how the generation of form is firmly tied to the (im)possibility of observing and its reflection within the text. Schäfer distinguished two genres: on the one hand the prose poem that links form to a grammatical – not personal – subject, a distinct and singular position for observation. On the other hand, he described lyrical prose that bears an autobiographical function, insofar as it generates form by means of negation and remembrance, two kinds of feedback circles. Subjectivity here becomes an effect that can be observed as well as other effects of form.

The discussion centered first on the relation between form and complexity. Complexity has to be reduced to become form but complexity also has to be found in the environment and reintroduced into the text. Another aspect was the relation between form, text and the speaking subject, that can be observed both as the powerful generator of form and as being subjected by the formal structure of language.

Jürgen Brokoff (Berlin) talked on »Literarische Form und Intervention« (Literary Form and Intervention). He critically analyzed the use of the term ›form‹ and its combination with the idea of ›work‹ in the aesthetic discourse of the 19th and 20th century. Brokoff pointed out that the question of form is always linked to the question of autonomy and heteronomy, as well as to the question of the (im)possibility of political art. He showed that the critique of form in the 1830s and 1930s levelled against the concept of work. Referring to Walter Benjamin's *Der Autor als Produzent*, Brokoff presented a concept of form that is not tied to the idea of an ideal and enclosed artwork and can thus be linked to more ›democratic‹ ideas of art and even to the idea of art as political and social intervention.

The discussion again emphasized the question of how a perspective on form can stress the political aspect of literature rather than separating it from society. The possibility of participation and democracy could then be viewed as a matter of form and aesthetic procedure. Another aspect was the connection of form and material media environments as being central to the social and also political function of art and art forms.

### **3. Cultural Artefacts and Forms of Surface**

The third and last section presented three different approaches towards the question of how form and material are connected and how one can theoretically conceive of this connection. One term that is widely used in this context is the notion of ›surface‹, which was critically

explored by the speakers. The cultural artefacts ranged from musical pieces over sculptures and shelves to, again, literary texts and their version of surface.

Torsten Hahn (Köln) spoke about »Pop und/als Oberfläche« (Pop and/as Surface). He proposed a concretization of the term ›form‹ by the concepts of reflection and ornament as the art work's own asymmetrization between art and non-art. Hahn presented a definition of pop as the de-contextualization of popular things where their pure surface creates the depth for ornamental self-reflection. In contrast to pop art, pop literature first has to transfer the materiality into signs. Hahn analyzed this transition from popular commodities into book covers and finally into text with the example of Rafael Horzon's *Das weiße Buch*. For pop literature, the book as a material object can be identified as the turning point between the form as material surface and the form of a written text.

The discussion centered around the specificity of literature in the pop ensemble, e.g. addressing the distinction between a novel and a simulation of a novel for Horzon's *Das weiße Buch*, and on the necessity of a new concept of literature in order to comprise the analyzed chains of translations. The relation between ornament and reflection was again stressed as vital for any formal analysis.

Bettina Schlüter (Bonn) gave a talk on »Musikalische Form – Ästhetische Regulative der Beobachtung« (Musical Form – Aesthetic Regulations of Observation). She explored the possibility of a temporal formal analysis of music drawing back on the writings of Ernst Curt in 1912. With Curt, she proposed a notion of musical form that is opposed to traditional musical morphology as it regards form as a relational opposite to sheer capacity. Form thus refers to the fight of managing the ungraspable movements of time and space, the constitutive tension between forming and form. With the example of the well-known Tristan chord, Schlüter shows how Curt's attempts of parametrizing different sensual effects of music can grasp the transition between musical and kinetic energy – music psychology here becomes the foundational research for questions of musical form.

The discussion stressed the urge of Curt's and other's formal analysis to grasp also the media environment of conventional concepts of form. This specific version of formal analysis was considered as originating in the late 18th and early 19th century, in early romanticism. Another aspect of discussion was the relationship between music and literature and other art forms and the question, if and how formal analysis can be a theory of art in general.

Heinz Drügh (Frankfurt) spoke about »*Pulchritudo vaga, pulchritudo adhaerens*. Überlegungen zum Begriff der Form zwischen Autonomie und Ware.« (Thoughts on the Notion of Form between Autonomy and Commodity). With the example of Ottessa Moshfeg's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, that presents itself as earmarked insofar as it was followed by a guidebook on how to write successful novels, he explored the possibility of an aesthetic re-entry of goal-bound forms as *pulchritudo adhaerens*, in contrast to the idea of an autonomous work of art always connected with the notion of form. This heteronomous concept of form can be described with Levine's notion of affordance, encompassing both the material and social realm and thus blurring the strictly separated spheres of *pulchritudo vaga* and *adhaerens*.

The discussion centered around Kant's distinction between *pulchritudo vaga* and *pulchritudo adhaerens* that remained a constant point of reference throughout the conference and proposed it to be a dialectical opposition.

The conference first of all showed that it is neither possible nor desirable to determine a certain concept of form as an operational definition for literary or aesthetic studies in general. The notion of form rather defines a nodal point, where different aesthetic, poetic and theoretical gestures can be identified, traced and compared. Two different approaches to the term ›form‹ however can be distinguished as having shaped all the contributions and discussions. On the one hand, form is conceived as the outer shape of some inner content or material, thus enclosing and defining an autonomous, perfect sphere. On the other hand, form is conceived as being itself the dynamic opposition between the static and the dynamic, thus encompassing both the form itself and the process of form generation. The impossibility of choosing one of these options as the right requires supplementary terms and ideas in order to analyze distinct aesthetic objects and texts according to their form. The different contributions and discussions proposed various terms that can help to concretize what is meant by form in any given case. On the one hand, there are oppositions and/or related concepts like atmosphere, medium, surface, material, that can serve to clarify what is meant by form. On the other hand, the notion of form can be processed along dynamic concepts like the ornament, the arabesque, reflection and procedure. Every formal analysis of specific artworks must further define its concept of form by drawing on these additional terms, and also situate its specific concept of form within the conceptual history. The turning point of form's conceptual history, as the conference has confirmed again, can be located around 1800, in early romanticism. Beside the restraints and challenges that are posed by the term ›form‹, the conference has shown how, by providing an overarching perspective that always has to be concretized, the term can provoke innovative approaches to specific texts, e.g. including their material, social and political environment, as well as to literary studies' basic concepts, like genre or epoch. Thus, it is not advisable to regard formal analysis only as a historical way of dealing with literature and art. Instead, the possibilities and challenges of formal analysis should and can be explored in every approach to a literary text.

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