

Elizabeth Kovach, Imke Polland, Ansgar Nünning (eds.)

## Forms at Work

New Formalist Approaches  
in the Study of Literature, Culture, and Media

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume engages with ongoing academic debates surrounding New Formalism, a movement in active formation. Its contributions aim to create more critical awareness of what literary scholars mean by form as they explore the potentialities of thinking about formal arrangements not just as they appear within literary and cultural texts but also as they function within social, political, and historical contexts. Over three sections, this volume moves from the early modern to Victorian to modern and contemporary literature as well as other media such as film and graphic novels. The contributions explore shared interests in the meaning and analysis of literary and cultural form and shed light on the cultural work of forms in various genres and contexts.

This volume emerged from an international conference held at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) based at Justus Liebig University, Giessen in November 2018. It was jointly organized by the European PhDnet Literary and Cultural Studies (PhDnet) and the International PhD Program “Literary and Cultural Studies” (IPP). At this conference, international PhD students, postdocs, and university professors gathered to explore what methods, concepts, and theoretical frameworks we as scholars of literary and cultural studies find productive and convincing within the contexts of our own formal analyses.

Transforming these discussions into a conceptual volume would not have been possible without the support of the IPP program, which funded the conference and publication, and the GCSC, which hosted the conference. We thank the IPP team, Silvia Casazza and David Susa as well as the PhDnet assistant Lucia Toman for their help with formal editing. We are grateful for the advice and help of the GCSC’s publications coordinator Max Bergmann and his assistant Franziska Eick. Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to the contributors to this volume, whose stimulating articles offer fresh angles from which to consider how to identify and analyze forms ‘at work’ in a variety of literary and cultural (con)texts.

Giessen, October 2020

Elizabeth Kovach, Imke Polland and Ansgar Nünning





# INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A NEW FORMALISM? CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL EXPLORATIONS

ELIZABETH KOVACH, IMKE POLLAND AND ANSGAR NÜNNING

## 1. The Call for New Formalism or ‘Renewed Formalism(s)’: Introducing the Topic and Aims of this Volume

Since the early decades of the 20th century, formalist approaches have had a long and venerable tradition in literary studies. Although attention to form, structure, and poetic language has often been associated with such approaches as the New Criticism, structuralism, and narratology, the real roots of formalism can be traced back to Russian scholars working in Moscow and Petrograd in the second decade of the 20th century. As the renowned American scholar Marjorie Perloff (2004: 8) emphasizes: “For real Formalist criticism in our time, we must look less to the New Critics than to the Russian Formalists, whose object was to define *poeticity* not in the individual poem but as a recurrent feature in poems across a wide spectrum.” Since an attempt to delineate the origin and genealogy of formalism would be beyond the scope of an introduction, it may suffice to quote from the entry on “Formalism, Russian” in one of the best encyclopedias of literary theory:

Formalism emerged as a distinctly independent school in Russian literary scholarship in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by focusing attention on the analysis of distinguishing features of literature, as opposed to the prevailing tradition of studying literature in conjunction with other disciplines such as history, sociology or psychology. (Kolesnikoff 1993: 53)

The article from which this quotation is taken provides a concise, but informative rundown of some of the key concepts of Russian Formalism, e.g. its emphasis on the autonomy of literary scholarship, its interest in the distinguishing features of literature or ‘literariness’ as opposed to ordinary or practical language, and the theory of defamiliarization. It also briefly delineates both the main phases of formalism and the impact it had on other approaches and schools, including the development of Anglo-American New Criticism and the structuralism of the Prague School. Anyone interested in the genealogies of the various formalisms and the great impact that they have had on other approaches and schools in literary criticism and theory, can take a closer look at volume 8 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, which is not for nothing entitled *From Formalism to Poststructuralism* (see Selden 1995). The chapters in that volume demonstrate both the plurality of formalisms that emerged in the 20th century and their influence on a host of other movements and schools. Moreover, even Russian Formalism itself “is not a literary-theoretical school in the ordinary sense”, but rather characterized by “its baffling heterogeneity” (Steiner 1995: 24) – and by the tremen-

dous impact it has had, and continues to have, on the development of the theory and practice of literary studies, ushering in as it did both a fully-fledged paradigm-shift in the discipline and a host of other approaches (see McCauley 1994):

Russian Formalism's debunking of earlier paradigms and its wealth of insights into the nature of the literary process provided fertile ground for new syntheses and new disciplinary matrices that began to appear the very moment of Formalism's demise in the late 1920s. One of these emerged in Prague under the label of Structuralism, and for the next forty years achieved an evergrowing worldwide influence. The other was Bakhtinian metasemiotics, forcibly suppressed for many decades, but since the 1970s enjoying an international reputation as a viable alternative to Structuralism. (Steiner 1995: 25)

Against this backdrop one may well wonder what is new about the recently proposed 'new formalism' and ask whether the call for such an approach may perhaps rather constitute a renaissance or renewal of earlier formalisms. In a perceptive essay, Marijeta Bozovic, for instance, emphasizes that she was "entirely convinced that the call for renewed formalism(s) is timely and important", but she is also right to argue that the failure to engage with the heritage of Russian Formalism can be seen as "symptomatic of fault lines and blind spots in contemporary critical discussions, which are weakened by a kind of Anglo-American academic insularity and a critical presentism" (2017: 1181–1182). Other critics also readily acknowledge that there "is much to celebrate in the resurgence of formalism in criticism" (Clune 2017: 1194), but some are not fully convinced by "the declarations of the newness" (Bozovic 2017: 1186) of the approach and method.

Rather than try to act as arbiters of such meta-critical debates, we should like to explore the new horizons and heuristic potential that recent formalist approaches have opened up, focusing on the ways in which the latter realign poetic and cultural concerns, and on the cultural work that forms can do. New formalist perspectives arguably offer intriguing analytical possibilities that move away from notions of formal features as mere textual phenomena. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine writes: "Forms are at work everywhere" (ibid.: 2). The title of this volume takes inspiration from her statement in order to widen the scope from strictly literary to broader cultural analyses that take cultural, social, and political formations into account. For Levine, form "always indicates *an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*" (ibid.: 3).<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the cultural or political 'work' undertaken by formal features exceeds the text itself and also functions to broaden the scope of analysis from textual features to a combination of con/textual relations.

An attention to social formations and organization, patterns of thought and expression, as well as ordering principles offers interesting entry points to literary and cultural analysis. That forms play an inherently decisive role in and for processes of (cultural) change has, of course, been an insight within Marxist and other schools of literary

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in the original. In this volume, only those emphases that are added by the authors are explicitly mentioned. If no remark is added, the emphasis is as placed in the original.