Forms, Literary and Social

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ABSTRACT: Levine starts with a definition of "form" that is much broader than its usual usage in literary studies. What if we understood all shapes and patterns as forms, from bridges to gender hierarchies to class schedules? How might that change our analysis of the relations between literary works and social worlds, and how might it reshape our analysis of power? This essay, a brief account of a longer work, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, sets out the contours of a formalist method that reads forms across aesthetic and social contexts.

FOR MANY SCHOLARS OF LITERATURE, the word "form" will immediately call up the realm of aesthetics. Some critics have argued that it is important to recognize how forms emerge out of specific social and political conditions, while others take up formalist readings to celebrate the beauty and pleasure of human-fashioned objects. Either way, form has typically registered the artfulness of art.

In my own recent book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), I make the case that artfully crafted shapes and patterns are as much the stuff of the sociopolitical world as they are of art.[1] A bridge, a weekly schedule, a segregated school, a network of railways—these are all ways of arranging bodies and goods. They are constructed; they are artificial; they organize materials. They too are *forms.* In other words, I start with a definition of "form" that is much broader than its ordinary usage in literary or cultural studies. I define "form" as *any arrangement of elements—any ordering, patterning, or shaping.*

Rather than reading literary forms as responses to political conditions, then, I seek to export the skills that literary critics have developed to read the world as form.

I came to this method in part through Michel Foucault, who argued that mundane organizing principles like enclosed spaces, timetables, and minutely graded hierarchies were essential

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[1] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

to the making of modern subjects. But I diverge from Foucault in one crucial way. At the end of *Discipline and Punish*, he issues the strong warning that the many different orders he identifies are increasingly converging, working together in more and more coordinated ways, to create a regime of power that is terrifyingly all-encompassing. "The great carceral system," as he calls it, "operates at every level of the social body," from prisons to schools to workplaces.[2]

My own literary critical training prompts a deep skepticism about this claim. I am used to reading the multiple overlaid forms of literary texts, and I know that perfect convergence among forms that impose different kinds of order is, at best, unlikely. As readers, we might find some resonance between rhyming couplets and a first-person perspective and a narrative arc, for example, but these are very different modes of arrangement. How could they converge? That is, how coordinated can forms be if each one follows a discrete logic—a separate kind of orderliness? And if multiple forms are working on us all at the same time, what models, other than convergence, might we use to understand our formal world?

What I have come to argue, in articulating my own formal readings of social experience, is that encounters between forms can actually produce strange and unpredictable consequences. For example, in lots of places around the world, one simple, stark, binary form—the gender hierarchy—overlaps with a rather-different arrangement—the bounded enclosure of the home. Women, lower in the gender hierarchy, have frequently been associated with domestic spaces and have all too often been quite literally contained within them. What happens, then, when a man enters the home? Does his presence *raise* the value of the home by associating it with masculinity, or does it lower him—the fact that he is inside the home bringing him down in the gender hierarchy? Drawing examples from different places and times, I came to the conclusion that the answer could genuinely go either way: the encounter of these two forms—one a hierarchy, the other an enclosed space—is unpredictable, aleatory.

While it is true that sometimes forms can and do work together, at times powerfully converging to oppressive ends, I want to suggest that there is promise and value in noticing that they may also collide, disrupting and rerouting each other.

In order to understand what happens when forms overlap and collide, as they are doing all the time, I borrow the term "affordance" from design studies. The affordances of materials are the kinds of uses or actions that are latent in them—their capabilities. Diamonds afford hardness and durability, as well as sparkling light. Wood affords durable structures, as well as the making and stoking of fires. Specific designs, which organize these materials and others, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. A rubber ball affords rolling, kicking, and throwing. A glass jar affords the holding of both liquids and solid objects. A wooden chair affords sitting, as well as sociability when placed around a dinner table.

Both makers and users can put forms to use in unexpected ways that expand our general sense of that form's affordances. We may, for example, stand on a dining chair to change a light bulb and so expand its intended affordances beyond sitting at a table to increasing our own height and reach.

For literary critics, the concept of affordances can help us to understand the limitations and capabilities of aesthetic forms. There is only so much character development possible in the fourteen lines of a sonnet and only so much repetition possible in a plotted narrative before it gets mired in monotony. To be sure, imaginative writers can expand the affordances of a form in

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2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 303.

surprising ways: William Butler Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" pushes at the traditional constraints of the sonnet by gesturing to the whole sweep of the Trojan War within its narrow space. But it is useful to think about how some forms afford some kinds of thinking and knowing better than others. The novel has trouble expanding its number of richly rounded characters beyond a limited few, as Alex Woloch has argued in *The One vs. the Many*.[3] This limitation constrains its democratizing aspirations, its form requiring that we focus our attention on a single, special protagonist at the expense of the many. The novel does not readily afford collectivities.

Turning to affordances can also help us to make sense of the complex ways that aesthetic and social forms meet. It is my contention that forms, both literary and political, always afford portability. Precisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns can be picked up and moved to new contexts. A rhythm can impose its powerful order on laboring bodies as well as dancing ones. A bounded whole can describe a prison cell as well as a well-wrought urn. Thus, instead of assuming that social forms are the grounds or causes of literary ones, I suggest that both social and aesthetic forms have affordances and that they *carry these structuring capabilities with them across contexts*.

If we take detective fiction, for example, we will find multiple forms, both literary and social, structuring any given text. For example, we might find suspenseful narrative and the gender binary across the genre, from Conan Doyle to Chandler to *The Wire.* But crucially, both of these forms also preexist the genre and organize texts and other experiences beyond fiction. Both move from other sites into the literary texts, carrying their own ways of organizing experience with them. And so what is most interesting to me is not where or when these forms began or how the "reality" of the gender binary is incorporated into the "art" of the novel. Instead, I ask what happens when suspense encounters the gender binary, and the two begin to operate together. Here, suspense and gender emerge as two distinct structuring principles, each striving to impose its own order, both traveling from other places to the text in question, neither being automatically prior or dominant.

I am sometimes asked whether it is useful to expand the category of forms to include so much. Doesn't everything qualify as a form? Not quite. Literary and cultural studies scholars have in fact been very interested in ruptures and flows that are not forms for a long time: we have focused on gaps and interruptions, on subversions and collapsing binaries, on the impulses of force and affect and desire. None of these are forms. All of them matter profoundly. What I want to suggest, however, is that disruptions and flows happen within contexts in which multiple forms are also operating powerfully, and if we focus too much attention on the breaking and disruption of forms, we may miss the ways that power operates. We may also miss opportunities for progressive or radical outcomes that depend on the deployment of forms. While it is tempting to focus on exciting moments of emancipation and rupture, it is difficult to imagine a society altogether without order. What, then, might we see as just forms? And what forms might we use to disrupt other, more oppressive formations?

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, I chose to focus on four major forms that cross back and forth between aesthetic and political domains—structural patterns as familiar to social theorists as to literary critics. By "whole," I mean any bounded space or enclosure, any unity or totality. The concept can refer to nation-states as well as poems. Since Aristotle, many

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[3] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

theorists of aesthetics have taken unity or totality to be the basic definition of all form: an aesthetic object has *a* form—a coherent wholeness, like a body. And yet, some formal elements do not conform to the model of a bounded unity. The second major form I explore in my book is a case in point: "rhythm" refers to the patterning of temporal experience, which may extend forward indefinitely, without closure. In my work I use the term to refer not only to poetic and musical tempos but also to social rhythms like labor and entertainment and natural rhythms like the breath and the heartbeat. I argue that periodization in literary studies is itself a patterning of time we could call a rhythm, and I propose a more messy, overlaid reading of the social, political, and aesthetic rhythms that organize and disorganize historical experience.

The third major form I take up in the book is for many the most disturbing: hierarchy. Here I include not only the painful hierarchies of class, race, sexuality, and gender but also the minutely graded hierarchies of bureaucracies and other institutions. Whereas many thinkers have understood hierarchies to be such powerful and stable ordering principles that they are nearly impossible to unsettle, I suggest that when hierarchies collide with other forms—and sometimes even with other hierarchies—they can run into trouble, their encounters generating destabilizing effects. I read Sophocles's *Antigone* as tracking what unfolds when a number of simple, clear hierarchies are set in motion together: masculine over feminine, king over subjects, friends over enemies, gods over humans. As these meet and intersect in the course of the dramatic action, a firm insistence on one hierarchy typically ends up reversing or subverting the logic of another, generating a political landscape of radical instability and unpredictability.

The final form I explore in the book is the network. Networks have rarely been understood by literary and cultural critics as forms. Sprawling and spreading, networks might seem precisely formless. But studies of networks in mathematics, physics, and sociology have shown how networks follow knowable patterns, surprisingly systematic ordering principles. We may find these principles across the webs of interconnection that crisscross our lives, linking bodies, texts, and objects, from transportation and communications to international finance and imperial administration. I investigate the overlapping of networks with wholes and other forms, such as the relations between international communications networks and the bounded enclosure of the nation. And I read Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* as a narrative that experiments with expanding the affordances of the novel to explore a heaping of separate but overlapping networks. This is a text that organizes its action around connections across and between networks, including the law, disease, economics, class, gossip, the family tree, city streets, rural roads, and even global print and philanthropic networks.

In the last chapter of my book, I read David Simon's remarkable television series *The Wire* as a text that helps us to understand the constantly interacting, overlapping work of social forms. There are numerous bounded wholes that matter in *The Wire*, including prison cells, stash houses, foster homes, administrative offices, and "Hamsterdam," three designated zones for legalized drugs. These are then affected and sometimes reshaped by conflicting temporal rhythms, from the social promotion of schoolchildren to election cycles to news stories. Hierarchies have effects on each other and on both bounded wholes and rhythms, and are affected in turn. Bunny Colvin temporarily reorganizes the drug trade, causing havoc in the police and mayoral administration right before an election, by borrowing strategies from his own experience of bureaucratic hierarchy, recognizing the illegal world of the drug trade and the official police force as uncannily similar hierarchical organizations. Networks are perhaps the most noteworthy of all *The Wire*'s

forms, as the name of the whole series suggests. There is the web of economic transactions, which links Barksdale drug money to downtown real estate and international terrorism. There are social networks organized by class, from the boys in the pit to political fund-raisers. There is the space of the city, which brings characters such as Jimmy McNulty and Stringer Bell into contact through the accident of sheer proximity. There is gossip, which cascades up and down the social ladder. There are small-scale social groups, including the boxing ring and the Narcotics Anonymous group, which often cross paths with the organized network of Baltimore churches. And there is kinship, from the Barksdale code of family loyalty to Wallace's grandmother down at the shore.

All these networks are structured according to different organizing principles, which run up against one another in unexpected and often-frustrating ways. But together they produce experience.

Beyond these four major forms, there are, to be sure, other forms that might well draw our attention. From omniscient narration to statistical charts to rhyming refrains, human-fashioned forms are everywhere shaping our understanding of experience. At the same time, our experience itself is being constantly shaped by powerful forms—from religious rituals to legal restrictions and from drug regimens to academic calendars—our day-to-day lives organized and disorganized by multiple, overlapping forms working at different scales and with different coercive and productive power. What we need now, I believe, is a set of methods to make sense of the ways that forms, both aesthetic and social, cross paths, making and remaking life as they move, and a willingness to imagine how forms might be used to progressive ends and which new, more just forms should take the place of those that dominate and oppress us now. Ⓐ