2. Only a Matter of Form?
On Caroline Levine's *Forms* (2015)

Ulla Haselstein

When Caroline Levine's book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* came out in 2015, it clearly hit a nerve. The preface indicates one reason why: it presents a condensed version of the author's CV, which may be regarded as typical for the generation of scholars who received their doctoral training in the 1990s.[1] Levine professes her enthusiasm for deconstruction in her undergraduate years, and remembers how she encountered Marxism in graduate school at Birkbeck College, University of London. Implicitly, she thus introduces her formalist approach as inspired by these camps of criticism.

Levine celebrates deconstruction for its aesthetic exuberance, characterizing it as a "kind of intellectual pyrotechnics" that creates "dazzling readings" built on "tracking subtle arrangements of words and images interwoven through literary texts" (ix).[2] In a later chapter she summarizes the aim of deconstructive readings as demonstrating how a text presents and performs meaning, but simultaneously questions and challenges it. For Levine as for many other critics before her, this insight has political consequences, as literary texts can make their readers aware that the stability of linguistic meaning is an illusion, and the reference to the real is mediated by ideology. Her discussion of Marxism or Marxist criticism is much less concrete, perhaps because of the scope of critical positions in this field.[3] In the preface, she describes her

---

1   For a more extensive discussion of Levine's intellectual biography, see Langdon Hammer, "Fantastic Forms," *PMLA* 14, no. 5 (2017): 1200–1205.

2   All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

3   For comparisons of Levine's approach with Marxism see Marijeta Bozovich, "Whose Forms? Missing Russians in Caroline Levine's *Forms*," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1181–1186; with cultural studies see Angus Connell Brown, "Cultural Studies and Close Reading," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1187–1193.

growing awareness as a student of certain political processes of *longue durée* (primary accumulation and colonialism are her examples), and of the complex and even contradictory relation of art and literature to the social and political realities engendered by these processes. In the course of the book, she argues against ideology critique as the best way to account for this relation, and proposes her own formalist readings instead.

In contrast to traditional conceptualizations of literary form, Levine treats it neither as the embodiment of the idea of freedom nor as the shaping of language into a unique verbal composition nor as a symbolic resolution to social contradictions.[4] Nor does she understand literary form as the result of a history of breaking generic traditions and conventions as the Russian formalists did, even though—as I will argue below—she is strongly indebted to them. Instead, she uses a concept of form said to fit literary texts and social phenomena, material objects and concepts equally well: following design theory, forms are defined as configurations of elements whose materiality varies with their function. With this definition, forms can be found everywhere, adding up "to a complex environment composed of multiple and conflicting modes of organization" (16). The literary text is conceptualized as such an environment; everyday life, or institutions are other examples. Levine is not interested in aesthetic form per se, but in complexity, and argues that formalist close readings are better able to analyze it than the methods of other disciplines.[5]

In her contribution to Susan Wolfson's well-known collection of essays *Reading for Form*, Ellen Rooney lamented the "attenuation of the category of form," i.e., "the reduction of every text to its ideological or historical context," and the erosion of the ability of cultural and literary studies "to read every genre of text": "The cost is a loss of power for the politicized readings we eagerly seek to project beyond the boundaries of mere texts or disciplines, including cultural forms that are not in any sense literary or (narrowly) lin-

---

4   See Susan J. Wolfson, "Introduction: Reading for Form," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 3–24. The collection first appeared in 2000, with a slightly different set-up of contributions.

5   David E. Wellbery has distinguished between three different concepts of aesthetic form: the eidetic (in antiquity), the endogenous (in the nineteenth century) and the constructivist (in modernism): "Form und Idee. Skizze eines Begriffsfelds um 1800," in *Morphologie und Moderne. Goethes 'anschauliches Denken' in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften seit 1800*, ed. Jonas Maatsch (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 17–42.

guistic, such as race, the market, the immune system, democracy, virtuality."[6] It is this desire, this ambition that Levine addresses and seeks to satisfy. But instead of developing formal categories specific to different theoretical objects and assessing the relations between the respective form and the historical and political context, she proposes a generalized and abstract concept of form to fit the theoretical objects of different disciplines. As a consequence, she claims, the "troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves" (2). Form vs. content, literary text vs. social and historical context: these notoriously problematic oppositions need no longer vex the literary critic, because the content and the context of a literary form can now be identified as other forms. The literary critic need not borrow a critical vocabulary from anthropology, sociology, or historical materialism to account for the cultural embeddedness of a literary text; what is required instead is a close reading of literary forms (or other social phenomena and material objects) in their interaction with other forms.

In the preface to *Forms*, the New Historicism is given short shrift as "laborious," but is also recognized for its ethical agency in addressing "power and injustice" (ix). Later in the book, Levine takes issue with the New Historicist notion of culture (116). Indeed, the New Historicist dictionary of critical terms, such as "culture," "representation," "exchange," "mediation," or "practice," is missing from *Forms*; Levine's approach entirely rests on one term only, namely "form." Angela Leighton has pointed out that "form" has at least three different opposites: form and matter, form and content, form and formlessness.[7] Matter is treated by Levine as dependent on the affordance and the function of the respective form. Content is defined as what is shaped and given identity by a specific form, namely that of a container; poems or prison cells have a content, the gender binary or the network do not. Formlessness would presumably be treated by Levine as non-existent in social reality; as for aesthetic formlessness, she would conceive of it as a particularly conflictive interaction between aesthetic and social forms.

In a review written a few years before Levine's book came out, Marjorie Levinson discussed the New Formalism as a scholarly movement of literary criticism which she described as divided by its view of "the conception, role,

---

6   Ellen Rooney, "Form and Contentment," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 25–48, here 34 and 35.

7   Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

and importance of form in new historicism."[8] Identifying a call to reinstate close reading and a notion of textual complexity as common features, Levinson distinguished two camps: "a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism."[9] She also noted that in the reviewed books and articles from both camps there was no effort to retheorize form.[10] Levine addresses this conspicuous lack by expanding the concept of form beyond the aesthetic and also elaborates on the notion of complexity. Most significantly, she positions her arguments as an alternative to the New Historicism of the 1980s and 1990s, which had put the study of the relations between text and social context at the center of critical practice.

The New Historicist conceptual apparatus which according to Stephen Greenblatt's well-known formula pivots on the "circulation of social energy" that produces and sustains the multiple *exchanges* between literary texts, social discourses and projected subjectivities, is replaced by Levine with a collaborative or competitive *interaction* of forms—be they political, social, religious, or aesthetic (see xi). The New Historicist term *exchange* refers to the interwovenness of the various subsystems of culture: as some semiotic material is selected for citation, combined with other semiotic material and cast into different forms of texts according to different codes, the use of this material in hegemonic discourses may be confirmed, interrogated, challenged, or subverted. Levine's term *interaction* refers to self-identical forms with different materialities and functions; brought together in a literary text, or in everyday life, or in politics, their interaction may either be resolved by the accommodation of one form to the other form, or amount to a clash of forms. These different outcomes may also occur simultaneously, since a literary text frequently consists of several literary forms which interact with several social forms. This is Levine's formula of complexity.

Obviously, there is a formal likeness between these conceptualizations. To assess its range and limits, I will begin by briefly considering the relations between literary text (not "form") and social context as put forward by New Historicists. I will rely on H. Aram Veeser's reader *The New Historicism* (1989), which collected some early programmatic essays together with critical comments.

---

8   Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–569, here 559.

9   Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," 559.

10   Levinson, 561.

1.   Remembering the New Historicism

In his seminal essay "Towards a Poetics of Culture," Stephen Greenblatt made a similar if less anecdotal inaugural move as Levine would many years later. Citing Foucault as his most important inspiration and singling out *Discipline and Punish*, he turned against both Jameson's critique of capitalism as separating the fields of the social and political from the fields of art and literature in *The Political Unconscious*, and against Lyotard's idea of capitalism as an agent of "monological totalization" that collapses all distinctions between the fields.[11] With a nod to Derrida, Greenblatt proposed the term "circulation" to account for the dialectic between differentiation and totalization in American everyday life, in which political decisions, social institutions and aesthetic forms are inextricably intertwined. He quoted Michael Baxandall, who argued for a modification of the unhomologous categories of art and society so that they match, but also demanded to keep note of the modification deemed necessary as part of the information.[12] Greenblatt's modifications consisted in the introduction of the concepts of "currency" and "negotiation." He argued that art and literature are not mimetic of the social and hence not secondary to it; rather, they must be conceived of as part and parcel of the social in their exchange with various other sites of social production, attesting to the possibilities of change as much as to the cultural forces that prevent or hinder it.

A different argument and terminology were put forward by Louis Montrose. In his once widely quoted essay "The Poetics and Politics of Culture," he emphasized the cultural work of the aesthetic by pointing to its involvement in the "social networks, within which individual subjectivities and collective structures are mutually and continuously shaped."[13] His central term was mediation. With his chiastic formula of the "historicity of texts and the textuality of history," Montrose alerted his readers to the complex and partly contradictory social processes of mediation which construct the archive filled with heterogeneous and fragmentary "documents," where "so many cultural codes

---

11   Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–14, here 6.

12   Greenblatt, "Towards," 11–12.

13   Louis Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 15–36, here 15.

converge and interact that ideological coherence and stability are scarcely possible."[14] He also drew attention to the historicity of the reader/critic as a subject inscribed in the social and political dynamics of her present when constructing the past. (Discussing American cultural politics of the late 1980s and pointing to an increasing sense of marginalization in the Humanities, Montrose's essay continues to speak to our present moment in the second decade of the twenty-first century.)

Like other cultural materialists, Vincent P. Pecora took a critical perspective on the New Historicism. He observed a methodological collapsing of the difference between the political and the aesthetic, engendered by a simplified notion of representation as the "performative function of cultural semiosis" and maintained that the distinction between social interaction and its interpretation—by the actors themselves, by observers, poets, or historians and anthropologists—remains crucial.[15] Pecora agreed with Greenblatt that contemporary everyday life is aestheticized to a historically unprecedented degree. But he argued for the necessity to retain a notion of mediation in order not to reconstruct political events and processes as determined by symbolic systems rather than by actors with interests and political agendas. Otherwise, he saw the risk that the same criticism that treats literature "as no more than a version of ubiquitous processes of cultural semiosis, must at the same time defend the literary both as a more revealing, and potentially as a more oppositional, version of cultural production."[16]

2.   Ordering, Patterning, Shaping

In Levine's reconstruction of the development of her scholarly work, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* figures as prominently as in Greenblatt's. Foucault's argument that political power is invested in the creation, circulation, and validation of discourses is translated into the institutionalization of discursive *forms* endowed with the power of normalization. "Politics is a matter of imposing order on the world," Levine writes (x): since all social forms order

---

14   Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance," 22.

15   Vincent P. Pecora, "The Limits of Local Knowledge," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 243–276, here 244.

16   Pecora, "Limits," 271.

an inchoate and chaotic social reality, making it intelligible, iterable, man-
ageable in the process, they are per se a matter of politics. The term "impose"
indicates that there are *forces* at work—in the *application* and *enforcement* of
forms, but arguably also in the *formation* of forms, since the resistances of the
material—be it the materialities of social life, ordinary language, or the bod-
ies and minds of unruly individuals—must be overcome. These forces are not
given any theoretical consideration by Levine however (though they implicitly
are of central importance for her argument, as I will show below). She focuses
on the *power* of forms, i.e., on their imposition of (social and cognitive) order.

   As the first step of her argument Levine offers some brief reflections on
the conceptual history of the term "form" as used by different practices of
knowledge. She does not attempt to distinguish between literary form and
ordinary language or other social discourses—as the Russian formalists and
the New Critics did[17]—but proposes a pared-down abstract definition of form
instead: "an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping"
(3). The force necessary to arrange and shape the material into elements of
a form goes unnoticed however. This is a major difference between Levine's
work and Franco Moretti's, which is quoted a number of times in *Forms* and
must be counted as one of its inspirations. "Deducing from the *form* of an
object the *forces* that have been at work: this is the most elegant definition
ever what a literary sociology should be," Moretti writes, and adds that these
forces are both internal and external.[18]

   With the second step of her argument, Levine reminds her readers that
literary studies scholarship has long discussed literary forms (such as genre,
rhyme, meter, plot etc.) and linked them to social structures, an implicit ref-
erence to Marxist or New Historicist efforts at historical and social contex-
tualization. She is also interested in this link, but takes a different path by
conceiving of various categories of social analysis, such as social structure,
social hierarchies, but also the binaries of gender and race, as *social forms*. This
relabeling is crucial, as she goes on to argue that social forms do not possess
ontological priority over other forms, which is why literary forms should not
be regarded as responses to social forms but as agents in their own right (16).
New Historicists would have agreed with the latter proposition. But while they

---

17   See Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction," in *Understanding Poetry*
     (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1960), 1–22.
18   Franco Moretti, "Maps," in *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History* (New
     York: Verso, 2005), 35–64, here 57 (emphasis in orig.).

conceived of aesthetic forms as relatively autonomous social forms of *representation*, Levine postulates the autonomy of aesthetic and social forms, which share the same basic operational principle—ordering, patterning, shaping. Social reality is conceptualized as produced by a welter of different forms which interact and supplement and reenforce each other, but also collide with each other and vie for primacy. As a consequence, there are numerous overdeterminations, but also contradictions and fissures in the social fabric.

Following Foucault, Levine maintains that the individuals' agency to select or discard social forms is very limited, as these forms are already in place and determine the individuals' living conditions, biographies, and political choices. What individuals do is work with or around the existing forms: they learn how to check and balance one form with another form, and eventually conceive of new forms.[19] Levine's model does not address such negotiations, improvisations, performances as categories of practice however, but treats them as variations of forms. She does not systematically consider the knowledge or the interests of social actors, nor does she take the institution of the law into account, as adjudicating the validity claims of different social forms. She only envisions collaborations or collisions between forms.

Referring to a remark by Hayden White who wrote in the preface to *The Content of the Form* that "narrative form teaches people to live in unreal, but meaningful relations to the social formations in which they are indentured," Levine argues that "literary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally *un*real in being artificial, contingent constraints" (14). The problem addressed by White is not an opposition between real social forms and unreal literary ones, however, but the interest of people and philosophers in the narrative form of historiography.[20] Causality, coherence, the characters and their motivation for action—for White, such features of narrative form in historiography address and reenforce "an imaginary relation" of the writers and readers of history "to their real conditions of

---

19   See Levine, "Three Unresolved Debates," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1239–1243, here 1242.

20   See White's programmatic statement: "Recent theories of discourse, however, dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extradiscursive entities that serve as their referents." Hayden White, "Preface," in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), ix–xi, here x. This passage occurs on the same page as the sentence quoted by Levine.

existence."[21] White's term "imaginary" is indebted to Lacanian psychoanalysis, and means driven by desire.[22] Levine misses several of White's points by reading his argument as an ideology critique that seeks "to reveal the reality suppressed by literary forms" (14). She in turn stresses the real effects of all forms in organizing material; why the constraints of form are described as "unreal" remains unclear. At any event, Levine wishes to do away with the concept that literary form is secondary to social form, an epiphenomenon. Literary form has its place in the social world, alongside with forms such as marriage, bureaucracy, or racism (14). "I do not imagine a special role for the aesthetic in a left political formalism," she declares in a response to a critical comment on her work.[23] That is, she regards aesthetic form neither as more revealing nor as more oppositional than any other form.[24]

To account for the functions a form can fulfill, Levine introduces the term "affordance" taken from design theory, where it refers to the constraints of its use, which in turn depend on the material of a form. A bounded whole—a container, an enclosure, a box, a body, a prison cell, a poem—invariably organizes inclusion and exclusion, she argues, but the specific function of the form determines the selection of the material. Prison cells are made from stone and steel, durable materials in order to keep the inmate in and other people out. But how does this logic work for poetry? What is the function of sonnets? The form and material of a sonnet can be described easily enough. Pointing to the compact form of the sonnet, Levine answers to the question what a sonnet contains (includes?) by quoting Dante Gabriel Rossetti: "a moment's monument" (6). But what does a sonnet exclude? Alexandrines? Prose? A plot? Scientific discourse?

To conceive of the form of a poem as a container may not be very illuminating, not least because it reintroduces and literalizes the opposition of form vs. content. But the salient point for Levine is that once the prison cell and the poem are recognized as "comparable patterns that operate on a common plane" (16), they can be constructed as reenforcing or disturbing each other's organizing power (17). At first, this argument appears consequently

---

21   White, "Preface," x.

22   See White, "Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form*, 1–25, here 10, 20, 24.

23   Caroline Levine, "Not Against Structure, but in Search of Better Structures: A Response to Winfried Fluck," *American Literary History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 255–259, here 259.

24   For a critical counterpoint, see Pecora, "Limits," as discussed above.

materialist, treating language as just another material like concrete or steel. But questions abound. Levine argues that the prison "activates other forms as well," (8) such as the temporal patterns of prison life, educational trajectories, the length of the prison term, legal issues such as a pardon, illegal networking of inmates, drug trafficking. Some of these forms "may disrupt the prison cell's containing power" (8). Levine also mentions the literary form of a story of remorse or redemption: "the arc of a narrative can pry open a cell's enclosing walls" (18). One might also construct more examples. A literary narrative about a successful flight may "disturb" a prison cell's capability of including/excluding by instigating an inmate to escape. Or a modernist poem may work against the prison cell by using line breaks, blank spaces or dashes for example. Or one might think of a poem which foregrounds its linguistic materiality and juxtaposes it to the materiality of the prison cell. But in all these cases, is this a matter of the "interaction" between the form of the poem and the form of a prison cell?

Levine observes how the poetic form fits or works against the poem's *referential content*, for instance the prison cell. What old-school formalists used to describe as the interplay of poetic form and meaning is thus translated into the interaction of forms with different functions and materialities. But in order to establish "a common plane" of a prison cell and a poem, wouldn't one have to consider legal and political discourses as a mediation? As language practices that build and fill prison cells due to their institutionalized forms of defining crimes and sentencing criminals, and are distinct from poetic language practices?

So what is the mutual imposition of forms that occurs in literary texts according to Levine? A literary form can be adapted to a social form and its affordances, effectively reenforcing the social form—or a literary form can work against a social form and its affordances in a way that the literary form with its affordances is foregrounded in its difference from the social form it incorporates. In other words: the two forms either fit each other or exist side by side, with contradictory programs of ordering and shaping. But wouldn't it be more convincing to consider *discourses* which create and maintain social forms as the *material* of literary form, which as any material *resists* form?

3.   Mutual Impositions

Levine replaces the Aristotelian notion of mimesis and the New Historicist terms of negotiation and exchange between text and context by the collaboration or collision of social and literary forms in the literary text. This central tenet of Levine's is a reformulation of arguments put forward by the Russian Formalists.[25] Shklovsky's terms were motivation and defamiliarization: the literary devices of a given text are typically selected to fit its thematic concerns; if they don't fit, the artificiality of the literary form is exposed, and the thematic concerns appear unfamiliar and are experienced in a new way. According to the Russian Formalists, this is the logic of literary evolution, and the reason for the formation of new genres over time.

Levine maintains that it is not only literary texts or art that may produce such a "strange effect" which points towards "unfamiliar opportunities *for action*" (18). I will discuss the notion of "action" below. Referring to the Brazilian legal theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger and the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, Levine goes on to argue that such effects and opportunities occur any time in everyday life as well, where numerous forms interact with each other, creating an overlay and a dense interwovenness of forms, but also some major or minor collisions and irritations. But such irritations go largely unnoticed, which is why Levine proposes to export the formalist method of close reading to sociology in order to account for such complexity and track such strange effects in everyday life or in institutions.

Let me construct an example to elucidate Levine's analytic perspective as I understand it. Narratives of adventure typically tell stories about masculinity, heroism, risk-taking, about testing one's physical strength, endurance and will-power in the face of adversity. Such stories have been told for ages; aesthetic forms "hang around" (12) and are available for re-use—for instance in nineteenth century colonialism, where the adventure novel imposed its order on colonialism as a political form, and colonialism in turn imposed its order on the adventure story. The adventure novel had affordances that shaped colonialism *as* a narrative of adventure, *as* a test of manhood etc., and colonialism in turn carried its affordances with it into the narrative of adventure by shaping the protagonists according to the hierarchized and racialized binary of colonizer and colonized, and the plot according to a teleological sense of history or evolution.

---

25   I disagree with Bozovitch here (see above, footnote 3).

What this approach will allow the literary critic to observe according to Levine (if the sample is large enough—there are references in *Forms* to Moretti's work based on statistics) is an "experimental" treatment of the forms of colonialism by way of their interaction and occasional collision with the form of the adventure story. The outcome of such mutual impositions will be a series of variations within the genre—many of them recurrent, some of them singular and new.[26] Trying to work around Foucault's argument that any challenge to political forms is enabled by the dominant discourses of knowledge and power and hence remains within the structural parameters established by them, Levine recuperates and extends the theories of Russian formalism. She translates the latter's concept of literary evolution into a process of social evolution as signified by literary texts where the collisions of literary and social forms result in "aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects" (7). Such effects are not themselves productive of social change—for that they would have to be linked to readers/social actors—but indicative of its latent possibility.

As already mentioned, for Levine, the interactions of literary and social forms constitute only one class of manifold interactions between various forms. The specificity of the interactions of literary form and social forms appears to be that both the operational logic of all forms—ordering, patterning, shaping—and the collaboration and competition of different forms can be more readily observed in literary texts than in the dense texture of everyday life for instance, where social forms and their interactions are naturalized and normalized in routinized performances (or rather, as Levine would have it, forms). If force were part of Levine's conceptual design, one might argue that a literary text can be studied in order to observe how the force of a given social form can be supported, impeded, or blocked by the force of another (social or literary) form, and how forms are shaped in this very process. James Dorson makes a similar point: "Levine first defines forms in terms of their affordances, their latent potentialities, and only then does she set them in motion to observe how they collide with other forms. Which is to say that Levine's theory of formal interaction assumes that forms exist prior to

---

26   See Moretti, "Graphs," in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 3–33.

their encounters with other forms. (…) Levine's account of form is essentially taxonomic." [27]

To return to my example, Levine's basic argument is familiar from the earlier New Historicist combination of deconstruction and Marxism: literary texts both affirm and challenge the social and political forms they cite and incorporate. What is new is Levine's insistence on an analysis of the interaction of different *forms* to account for nineteenth-century adventure novels which support colonialism and for those which call colonialism into question. Given her extensive conceptualization of social forms, some of her research questions might be: how does the binary form of gender interact with the binary of colonizer/colonized? How does military hierarchy fare, given the affordances of an adventure story, which tells of individual agency? What is the impact on the form of colonialism when the affordances of the adventure story are modified to include a psychological drama of guilt? With her conceptual framework, Levine may also think of the impact on colonialism if a hero is replaced by a heroine, or an English colonial officer by an Irish colonial officer, or if the colonized is given a voice.

In all these cases, the exchange of specific elements of literary form alters the interaction of literary and social form. But is this to be regarded as an *aleatory effect*? This appears to be a view indebted to the Russian formalist idea of literary evolution. In contrast, New Historicists would have linked such an exchange of elements to social contexts, for example to social movements. Levine's remarks on intersectionality show that she wishes to connect her approach with the politics of oppressed groups as well: as social forms of gender, race, and class collide with each other and with the countless small forms that organize everyday life, intersectionality produces opportunities for "unconventional strategies" (17), which can be detected and made public by close readings of everyday life interactions. Some of the "aleatory effects" may expose and delegitimize unjust forms of power. But Levine does not set her political hope only in the analyses of collisions of forms, in the breaking down of binaries, or the dissolution of form into formlessness, since by imposing order forms enable social life. She rather wishes to observe and analyze the complexity of social life in order to identify possible "local rearrangements."[28]

---

27   James Dorson, "Unformed Forms: Genre Theory and the Trouble with Caroline' Levine's *Forms*," in *The Genres of Genre: Forms, Formats and Cultural Formations*, ed. Cécile Heim, Boris Vejdovsky, and Benjamin Pickford (Tübingen: Narr, 2019), 23–41, here 29.

28   Levine, "Not Against Structures," 259.

Yet, the position of the reader/critic is undertheorized by Levine. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian have pointed to her tendency to "add a personal approval or disapproval to the recognition of a form in order to arrive at a political conclusion."[29] In her response to a number of critical essays dedicated to *Forms* which appeared in *PMLA* in 2017, Levine underlines the longevity and the power of social forms and the constraints they put on people's agency, and repeats her argument in *Forms* that the observation of the collision of a form by another form can be used strategically, presumably by creating new social forms that challenge the old ones. She implicitly relies on social actors, on their moral judgments, their political interests, their taking action—but without integrating them and their creativity into her conceptual design.[30] For this would amount to another version of ideology critique (or of cultural poetics): given the "aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects" of the interaction of forms, their accommodation and the confirmation of the social status quo appear to be the rule.

4.   An "Ecology" of Forms

Levine expresses her discomfort with ideology critique as the allegedly dominant mode of current literary criticism, and she is not alone in this. But in contrast to Rita Felski for example, who in re-articulating Susan Sontag's battle cry from the 1960s has called for a new inquiry into the affective response to literary texts, or to Amanda Anderson, for whom reading literature is an ethical practice of relating to characters and ruminating on different modes of thinking, Levine's readings are solely concerned with the interaction of forms.[31] The affective or ethical or cognitive impact of literary texts on readers are her personal, but not her analytic, concern.

---

29   Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 650–669, here 659.

30   See Caroline Levine, "Three Unresolved Debates," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1239–1243, here 1242.

31   For a comparison between Felski's and Levine's approaches see Winfried Fluck, "The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literacy Studies after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *American Literary History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 229–248. See also Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

A small selection of forms—whole, rhythm, hierarchy, and network—is analyzed in *Forms*, because these can be shown to "move across" different materials and to be operative both in society and in literature. Eva Geulen has pointed out that Levine does not distinguish between "whole" and "hierarchy" on the one hand, as forms that have long been regarded as repressive, and "network" on the other hand, whose form has been described as connective and democratic. Geulen reads this as a sign of the times: to conceive of the breaking up of holistic form in modernist art and literature as liberatory has become pointless in a globalized culture where the combination of heterogeneous elements is the rule in most practices of everyday life, while networks have lost their lure due to the recognition that, at least as far as labor is concerned, this type of organization raises the expected level of individual performance and erases the difference between work and leisure.[32]

That Levine consistently ignores the force operative in literary and other forms I've already pointed out. Wishing to demonstrate the new insights into the make-up of the social world to be gained from her approach, Levine works toward a reconstruction of everyday life by analyzing the interaction of a bounded spatial form (whole), a temporal form (rhythm), various hierarchical forms, and an egalitarian form of connectivity (network) in order to account for them as conjointly building up our contemporary social environment. To illustrate her point, she offers a close reading of the TV series *The Wire*, which she credits with *showing* the complexity of the interaction and overlay of multiple social forms. She takes for granted that the form of a TV series with its numerous aesthetic and commercial affordances (its cast of characters, plot structures, dialogue, management of suspense, camera shots and angles, editing, the predetermined length and sequence of episodes, etc.) reliably renders the interaction of social forms and their affordances—or perhaps compellingly, given the force of such presentations for our understanding of the social. In her effort to read like a sociologist (135) and claim social relevance for her formalist readings, she neglects the detailed description and analysis of the TV series in favor of the description and analysis of the complex and contradictory interactions of the represented social forms. She thus falls back on a mimetic understanding of the TV series.[33] Its aesthetic affor-

---

32   Eva Geulen, "Agonale Theorie: Adorno und die Rückkehr der Form," *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 13, no. 3 (2019): 5–19, here 6–7.

33   See Hammer, "Fantastic Forms," 1205; see also Fluck, "Limits of Critique," 244.

dances are not taken into account—and the affordances of the TV series as a commodity form are left out altogether.