



Formal Collisions: Literary Form, Power, and Polysystems

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Recent debates on formalism have been shaped by growing skepticism toward the authority traditionally ascribed to close reading, alongside the rise in prominence of distant reading, post-critique, and surface reading as alternative methodological frameworks. According to Marjorie Levinson, twenty-first century new formalism “is better described as a movement than a theory or method” (2007, 558). This has led to the discipline being split between an “activist formalism,” defined as a “model of dynamic self-negation,” and a “normative formalism,” underwritten by a “stable, Aristotelian model” (Levinson 2007, 559). This reassessment of literary morphology extends beyond the limits of aesthetic immanence, an expanded ontology of form being proposed as an “arrangement of elements, any ordering, patterning, or shaping” (Levine 2016, 75). This strategic perspective mobilizes the concept of “affordances” (borrowed from design studies) to trace the “limitations and capabilities of aesthetic forms” (76) in their collision with sociopolitical structures (77). These dynamics ultimately converge on what W. J. T. Mitchell calls a “commitment to form” (2003). As Levinson puts it, “autonomous art does not ‘express’ commitment.” It is rather the case that, by reorganizing the laws of reality, the text “instantiates and effectuates commitment” (2007, 567; Mitchell 2003, 322). The rigor of formal analysis should be inextricably tied to “emancipatory, progressive political practices united with a scrupulous attention to ethical means” (Mitchell 2003, 324).

Within the literary world-system, narrative forms migrate from the Greenwich meridian of culture (Casanova 1999) toward the semi-peripheries and peripheries, where they undergo a process of “allopatric speciation” (Moretti 2013, 148), a concept borrowed

from German-American evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr. Franco Moretti argues that literary evolution at the periphery is not organic but rather emerges from a “compromise between a Western formal influence and local materials” (50). This economic and political asymmetry generates a “morphology of underdevelopment” (Chirot 1976, xii), in which the local narrative voice attempts to assimilate exogenous structures, such as the plot architecture of the bourgeois novel, often producing hybrid forms that register the tension between forced modernization and indigenous social reality. However, this transfer, encapsulated in the concept of “productive untranslatability” (Avtonomova 2021, 747), further shows that “the boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into ‘our’ language” (Lotman 1990, 136-7). The resulting hybrid forms generate a “hybrid displacing space” that enables “estranging the sanctity and naturalness of one’s own literature by analyzing it in another language” (Tihanov 2004, 70). This circulation confirms Homi K. Bhabha’s thesis that “culture is both transnational and translational,” transforming literature into a space of continuous negotiation between the authority of the center and the resistance of local materials (2004 [1994], 247).

Not only does literature change its form as it moves between core and periphery, but theories themselves undergo shifts in their operational frameworks, with their conceptual tools and methods being adjusted to suit local contexts. Under Jan Mukařovský’s leadership, Prague structuralism moved beyond strict formalist immanence and reconceived artworks as dynamic systems of signs situated in a dialectical relation with social norms and aesthetic values (Wutsdorff 2023, 903-4). This entailed a negotiation between imported formal models and local intellectual materials, as aesthetics was integrated into a general theory of signs rather than treated as an autonomous domain (Mrugalski, Schahadat, 2023, 3-4). In Romania, structuralism took shape as an imported phenomenon, without an established local prehistory. It gained traction in classical linguistics, benefiting from the “dispensation” offered by Stalin’s 1950 articles, which removed language from the determinism of the economic base (Stan 2017, 40-1). Thus, Romanian structuralism functioned as a defensive “linguistic bastion,” offering researchers a scientific metalanguage perceived as “pure” and immune to political contamination (47). Unlike in France, where structuralism was subversive, in Romania it was “inflationary,” protecting the sacredness of the literary canon (27).

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This call for papers has two main aims. First, we seek to *rethink forms* outside the confines of canonical literary criticism and disciplinary literary studies, reconnecting literary analysis with social inquiry in order to elucidate the ways in which literature mediates, contests, or collides with history and its dominant modes of representation, whether institutional, mediatic, or otherwise. Second, we ask whether literary form can still articulate meaningful insights into possible alternatives to capitalism and to what extent aesthetic critique has been reconfigured in relation to civil society. With these goals in mind, we invite papers that interrogate the premises of the modern literary system as a negotiation between core and (semi-)periphery: how do authors appropriate and adjust inherited literary forms to reflect nationally specific empirical material? How viable, in this context, is Fredric Jameson’s 1986 thesis regarding “Third World” literatures as national allegories? Literary form (whether poetic, narrative, or dramatic) is not merely an aesthetic choice but performs a function that is inseparable from literature’s “regime of relevance” (Tihanov 2019) within

a given society at a particular historical moment. We welcome papers that examine the collision of literary forms emerging from East European or non-European contexts, with a view to foregrounding the hierarchies they encode and reproduce (class, race, gender, as well as bureaucratic and institutional structures), as well as their subordinated position within hegemonic cultural frameworks. This collision may be internal (arising from tensions between personal experience, social and institutional power relations, and literary convention), or transnational, taking the form of inter-semi-peripheral dialogue or core-periphery transmutations. Contributors are encouraged to consider how contemporary texts mobilize, repurpose, or exhaust the affordances of inherited formal structures under conditions of social instability, and how such formal collisions generate new possibilities for political intelligibility and collective life. Our proposed topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Marxist approaches to form after post-critique: social determination beyond suspicion;
- Reassessing close reading in the age of distant reading, surface reading, and data-driven criticism;
- Form as ontology: affordances, constraints, and collisions with social structures;
- Aesthetic critique and its relation to civil society;
- Formal experimentation as a site of emancipatory or prefigurative politics;
- Narrative as a condition of possibility for queerness;
- Literary techniques of queer literary articulations;
- Formal strategies that resist or reconfigure normative temporalities and identities;
- Migration and transformation of narrative forms across the literary world-system;
- Morphologies of underdevelopment and the politics of formal borrowing;
- Reconsidering national allegory in (semi-)peripheral and post-socialist contexts;
- Literary form and institutional power: canon, bureaucracy, and cultural authority;
- Internal collisions between lived experience, social power, and literary convention;
- Overdetermination of form under hegemonic cultural pressures;
- New forms of collectivity emerging from formal tension and contradiction.

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Language Accepted: English

Deadlines and Selection Procedure

- May 15, 2027 – deadline for paper proposals (abstract of 200 words, 7 keywords, minimum 5 theoretical references, author’s bio note of 150 words);
- June 1, 2027 – notification of acceptance;
- September 1, 2027 – submission of full articles; the required format for referencing can be found at:
<https://studia.reviste.ubbcluj.ro/index.php/subbphilologia/article/view/6341/6042>
- March 31, 2028 – publication of the special issue.

Proposals and completed articles should be sent to the following addresses:

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Double-blind peer review: All articles that pass the first screening will undergo anonymous evaluation by two external reviewers following the journal’s standard peer-review procedures.