

The Return to Aesthetics in Literary Studies

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Since the turn of the twenty-first century, interrelated movements for a “New Formalism” and a return to aesthetics have acquired significant influence in fields of literary study that seemed to have largely bidden farewell to these paradigms’ predecessors in the preceding decades.¹ The call for a panel stream on “Defenses of the Aesthetic” at the 2012 GSA conference references a broad range of prominent contributions in German Studies alone.² Often, this return to aesthetics has been articulated through the “repudiation of the concept of culture,” and in response to the “apparent exhaustion of cultural studies.”³ With different inflections, both critics and proponents of the aesthetic turn have explained the renewed interest in “broadly held human values,” beauty, pleasure, and the canon of “Western civilization”—specifically the Enlightenment, Romanticism and selected modernists like Theodor W. Adorno—with the legitimization crisis of the humanities in the neoliberal university or boredom with the “well-oiled machine of ideology critique.”⁴

What do—or should, or could—these turns, which have been brought forward “also as calls for renewed disciplinary clarity and coherence,”⁵ mean for the *German Studies Review*, as the outlet of an association closely associated with the preceding cultural turn, and programmatically committed to an interdisciplinary investigation of “things German”? My suggestion—developed here in necessarily rather abbreviated fashion—is that we engage both *with* and *within* these new, or renewed, paradigms. While a critical look at the politics of knowledge production entailed in their various articulations does seem in order, scholars committed to culture and transdisciplinarity do not have to reject the bid to revitalize the study of the arts wholesale. Rather, the heterogeneous field of contemporary aesthetics and neoformalism offers a range of productive impulses. In building on them without repudiating culture, we can develop complex paradigms that respond to growing frustrations with prefix fetishism (see Lutz Koepnick’s contribution to this volume), without sacrificing the critical reflexivity, and egalitarian ethos, of transdisciplinary culture studies.

A critique of the aesthetic turn (“engaging *with*”) can begin by situating it as part of what I have (not just polemically) called the twenty-first-century *episteme of affirmation*—notably a very transdisciplinary phenomenon.⁶ Various intertwined with the



renewed interest in aesthetics, the past fifteen years have also seen the proclamation of “affective,” “cognitive,” “ethical,” “evolutionary,” “neurological,” and “religious” turns. Although different in important respects, these twenty-first-century paradigms share orientations associated with the end of (capital T-) Theory.⁷ To be sure, they are no less theoretical—in the sense of speculative and generalizing—than the post-modern, linguistic, or cultural-studies paradigms they aim to replace. However, the new paradigms have variously challenged the forms of critical reflexivity that may have united the diverse branches of late twentieth-century Theory.⁸ Without simply ignoring the latter’s legacy, they have generally opted for countering deconstructive gestures and (re)affirming the positivities of experience, feeling, nature, art, or tradition despite all skepticism.

Affirmation is not necessarily to be understood here in the sense of political quietism. Affiliated with various political positions, the new approaches have, in fact, also facilitated new forms of radicalism, for example through the assumption—more or less implicitly underlying much work in affect studies—that affect is somehow “always already sutured into a progressive or liberatory politics.”⁹ These attempts at politicizing affirmation, though, have been haunted by characteristic ambivalences.¹⁰ Crucially, the various twenty-first-century turns have articulated welcome challenges to the sometimes stifling negativity of postmodernist approaches, and opened up intriguing new avenues of investigation. However, their productivity has been hampered by the proliferation of oppositional gestures that pit affect against signification, good feelings against bad ones, or affirmation and appreciation against critique. While Eve Sedgwick had a point in challenging the prevailing “paranoid” “hermeneutics of suspicion” a decade ago,¹¹ a “healthy” dose of skepticism may still be required for understanding the continued weight of sociosymbolic regimes of difference and inequality that block universalist solidarity, and the ways in which our feelings bind us to “compromised conditions of possibility.”¹²

A more detailed look at the new formalist and aesthetic paradigms allows identifying conceptual points of allegiance, along with critical “breaking points,” for the kind of cultural aesthetics I advocate here (“engaging *within*”). Whereas “normative” formalism, as Marjorie Levinson distinguishes in her overview, wants to reinstate a “sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature,” alternative articulations have argued for restoring a “focus on form” to historical reading practices.¹³ Thus a return to literature does not have to imply a turn against theory or cultural studies, and “text” does not have to be played against “context.” In fact, attention to form—or textual “surface”—does not even have to imply that we move “slowly . . . from text to context,”¹⁴ certainly not insofar as that prescription implies that we could ever clearly separate text and context, and ought always to prioritize the former. Perhaps, it could just mean *returning* to the surface of the text repeatedly, and developing “close reading as a way into history”¹⁵ through a methodologically

controlled interplay with the interpreter's knowledge of the text's historical context as well as her own guiding preconceptions.¹⁶

This repeated return to text's surface, which facilitates the kind of "imaginative close reading" that Sedgwick envisioned, can enact an ethical stance of exposure to the art work—another *leitmotif* of the current debates.¹⁷ Crucially, such a gesture of opening up, which endows the interpreter's "object" with the power to challenge her preconceptions, does not have to be articulated in the language of theology or Prussian authoritarianism. I can give, or restore, agency to the text, and the "capacity to bite back,"¹⁸ without declaring it sovereign; I can "commit" and "dedicate" myself (to serious involvement) without "devotion."¹⁹

In rhetorical narratology, the procedure has been described, more soberly, in terms of feedback loops between text, reader, and author.²⁰ Along with the categories of (post-)classical rhetoric, the old and new formalisms of narrative theory also provide tools—or, choose your gendered metaphor: sewing kits, etc.—for sharpening the interpreter's glance and descriptive capacities. While the wealth of small distinctions and competing categories can create suspicions of excessive ordering desires on behalf of many practitioners, acquiring a command over many of these terms does pay off: it enables flexible uses that sustain said feedback loop between text and reader, by not attempting to fit all works into the same systematic grid, but choosing—and adapting—specific categories for enhanced descriptions of individual works. In line with the above discussion of text-context interplay, I advocate such description as an important process element rather than an ultimate goal. The repeated return to the text surface does not preclude consideration also of its nonexplicit layers, and a neopositivist move of playing description against critique seems neither epistemologically sound nor politically promising.²¹

A focus on form also does not have to imply renewed disciplinary ghettoization. While the logic and the production and reception histories of individual media demand attention, many tools of formal analysis can be translated from literary into filmic or performance contexts, and vice versa. (Also, while emphases may differ, overlapping social science and humanities projects can draw on various combinations of close reading and qualitative and quantitative analysis.) The goal of facilitating intermedial explorations is, in my view, an important argument for favoring the notion of "aesthetics" over those of "formalism" or "poetics," with their literary connotations.

A second argument, of course, is that the history of the term emphasizes those experiential and affective dimensions of the encounter with artistic works that do deserve to be reclaimed against (post-)modernist coolness and skepticism. As long as we do not try to separate these dimensions artificially from those of history and signification, but pay attention to how affective orientations are shaped by established associations,²² and aesthetic experiences mediated by hegemonic "distribution[s] of the sensible,"²³ the renewed attention to affect may in fact be the most promising

facet of the new paradigms so far. If never immediate, affective response—with empathy, irritation, pleasure, excitement, or disgust—is nonetheless real. Crucially, the interpreter can explicitly engage her own emotional involvement, without making it the only valid reference point, by intertwining the “first person perspective” of phenomenology with the “third person” mode of historical analysis.²⁴ Thus engaging affect can further the democratic expansion of scholarly objects towards the genres of immersion²⁵ and the languages of “common knowledge”²⁶ as easily as retreats into high-cultural canons.

Instead of the paradoxical Kantian rhetoric of disinterestedness that has accompanied normative reclamations of aesthetics, the cultural aesthetics I advocate explores an “expanded understanding of ‘use’” that underlines the “varied, complex and often unpredictable” nature of art’s pragmatic dimensions.²⁷ With its sophisticated tools for analyzing how the imaginative genres of film, literature, or performance participate in a society’s ongoing processes of world making, cultural aesthetics thoroughly refutes those advocates of twenty-first-century moves “beyond the cultural turn” who—along with too many deans—have claimed that “the handiest concepts” for contemporary inquiry are “products of mathematics or the sciences.”²⁸ On the contrary, the humanities have tremendous contributions to make to ongoing dialogues in ever more porous transdisciplinary cultures of knowledge production. Linked together, the paradigms of culture and aesthetics allow us to explore this strength through complex takes, which do not preclude the simultaneous development of clear-cut political and ethical commitments.

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Notes

1. See e.g. Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–69; Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 4.
2. The call was authored by May Mergenthaler. The authors cited included, e.g., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Christoph Menke, and Werner Hamacher.
3. Hegeman, *Cultural Return*, 7, 3.
4. Hegeman, *Cultural Return*, 4, 5, 7 (with reference to Jameson); Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 1–2; see also Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?”
5. Hegeman, *Cultural Return*, 4.
6. See first (in a different context) my “Christian Universalism? Racism and Collective Identity in 21st-Century Immigration Discourses,” in *Migration and Religion: Christian Transatlantic Missions, Islamic Migration to Germany*, ed. Barbara Becker-Cantarino (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 155–73.
7. See *Theory after ‘Theory,’* ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 2011).
8. Jonathan Culler makes this reflexivity into a crucial part of his definition of theory, in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
9. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.
10. As noticed, e.g., by Ben Anderson, “Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of ‘Total War,’” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Seigworth and Gregg, 162.



11. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 124; with reference to Paul Ricoeur.
12. Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth, 94.
13. Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," 559.
14. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): quote 10 (with reference to Otter).
15. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xvii.
16. In many respects, Gadamer already had this right, but we might want to keep disentangling his interpretative methodology from his Heideggerian concept of tradition (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* [4th edition, Tübingen: Mohr, 1975]).
17. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 145; see Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 3.
18. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 7.
19. See Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," 561. For a differentiated take on object agency see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), e.g. 72.
20. James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 4.
21. This is in dialogue with Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading."
22. See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), first 7.
23. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, transl. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.
24. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 17, 19.
25. See Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
26. See Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 13.
27. See Hegeman, *Cultural Return*, 5; Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 7–8.
28. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.

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