



THE POLITICS OF FORM

Edited by
Sarah Copland and Greta Olson



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The Politics of Form

This volume enacts a project we term 'a politics of form', working to politicise the formal analysis of narrative in novels, life narratives, documentaries, dramas, short prose works and multimodal texts while retaining the form specificity that is distinctive of narratology. The introduction offers an overview of how to perform narrative analysis in conjunction with ideological critique, while the chapters unite the formal analysis of texts with readings that uncover how structures of social power are expressed in, as well as challenged by, aesthetic forms. The contributors address the need to develop sustained political analysis of aesthetic and narrative forms, and they articulate methods for performing such analysis while reflecting on the politics of the work they undertake. By establishing criteria to describe the politicised use of narrative forms, and by historicising narratological concepts, the volume bridges theoretical gaps between narratology, critical theory and cultural analysis, resulting in the refinement of existing narratological models.

This book was originally published as a special issue of the *European Journal of English Studies*.

Sarah Copland is Assistant Professor of English at MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada. She has published work on modernist narratives, prefaces, and poetry; the new modernist studies; rhetorical and cognitive approaches to narrative theory; the politics of form; and short stories and short story theory.

Greta Olson is Professor of English and American Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Giessen, Germany. She is also the general editor of the *European Journal of English Studies*, and co-founder of the European Network for Law and Literature Research. She works and wishes to facilitate projects on cultural approaches to law, the politics of narrative, critical media and American studies, and feminism and sexuality studies.

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Greta Olson and Sarah Copland

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Daniel Hartley

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Chapter 2

Liberal formalisms

Frederik Van Dam

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Chapter 3

The politics of fictionality in documentary form: The Act of Killing and The Ambassador

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A cast never on stage before: revolution, utopia and social critique in David Caute's

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Notes on Contributors

Jan Alber is Professor of English Literature and Cognitive Studies at RWTH Aachen University, Germany and President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative (ISSN). He is the author of *Narrating the Prison* (Cambria Press, 2007) and *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016). Alber received fellowships and research grants from the British Academy, the German Research Foundation, and the Humboldt Foundation. In 2013, the German Association of University Teachers of English awarded him the prize for the best *Habilitation* written between 2011 and 2013. From 2014 to 2016, he worked as a COFUND (Marie-Curie) Fellow at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Denmark.

Sarah Copland is Assistant Professor of English at MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada. She has published work on modernist narratives, prefaces, and poetry; the new modernist studies; rhetorical and cognitive approaches to narrative theory; the politics of form; and short stories and short story theory.

Daniel Hartley is a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Fellow in the Centre for World Literatures at the University of Leeds, UK. He is the author of *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (2017) and co-editor of two volumes: *Emergent Forms of Life in Anglophone Literature* (2015) and *Beyond Gender: An Advanced Introduction to Futures of Feminist and Sexuality Studies* (Routledge, 2017). He is on the Comité scientifique of the French online journal of Marxist theory, *Revue Période*.

Stefan Iversen is Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. He is head of the PhD school 'Summer Course in Narrative Studies', held annually. He is a member of the steering committee for the European Narratology Network.

Susan S. Lanser is Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature, English, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University, USA. She is the author of *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*; *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*; and the award-winning *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565–1830* as well as of articles on eighteenth-century European culture, gender, and narrative.

Greta Olson is Professor of English and American Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Giessen, Germany. She is also the general editor of the *European Journal of English Studies*, and co-founder of the European Network for Law and Literature Research. She works and wishes to facilitate projects on cultural approaches to law, the politics of narrative, critical media and American studies, and feminism and sexuality studies.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan is Professor Emerita of English and Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, and a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. She is the author of *The Concept of Ambiguity – The Example of James*; *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*; and *A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity* as well as numerous articles both on literary theory and on specific authors.

Henrik Skov Nielsen is Professor at the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. He is head of the Centre for Fictionality Studies, Aarhus University, and of the Narrative Research Lab, co-founder of the international research group Unnatural Narratology, and guest professor at Tampere University, Finland.

Corina Stan is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature in the English Department at Duke University, USA. She works at the intersection of twentieth- and twenty-first century European literature, moral philosophy and the sociology of intellectuals, with a special interest in questions of community, migration, and the 'end of Europe'.

Paul Stewart is Professor of Literature at the University of Nicosia, Cyprus. He is the author of two books on Beckett – *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Works* (2011) and *Zone of Evaporation: Samuel Beckett's Disjunctions* (2006) – and the series editor for 'Samuel Beckett in Company'.

Frederik Van Dam is Assistant Professor at Radboud University, The Netherlands, where he teaches literary theory and modern literature. He is also a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at KU Leuven, Belgium. He specialises in nineteenth-century British literature, with particular emphasis on the novels of Anthony Trollope.

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Towards a politics of form

Greta Olson and Sarah Copland

Chantal Mouffe has repeatedly argued that every artistic form has a political dimension. In one iteration of this argument (2013: 91), the political theorist writes that 'artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension'. Before her, Fredric Jameson (1981: 81) proposed to read 'the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext', that is, as a textual rendering of a given historical moment. For Jameson, aesthetic forms are inherently ideological, involving fantastical resolutions of current social contradictions as well as 'sedimented' forms of earlier such resolutions. Further, the usual protocols for interpreting a literary text represent sedimentations of 'its previous readings and its accumulated institutional interpretation' that function as 'forms of the conceptual legitimation of this society' (Jameson et al., 1982: 72–3). Jameson thus highlights the necessity of reading not only aesthetic forms but also modes of interpretation in politically acute ways. Before Jameson, Ian Watt (1957) located the expression and performance of middle-class bourgeois ideology in the narrative prose typical of the novel. Subsequently, and more in the spirit of Mouffe's constitution than Jameson's sedimentation, Joseph Slaughter (2007) has posited that the narrative form of the *Bildungsroman* has lent shape to human rights discourse and law, leading not only to calls for the recognition of individual and group rights but also to exclusions of those who are not incorporated into rights-lending sovereignties.

Building on this work on the sedimentation, constitution and maintenance of the political in the aesthetic, this special issue seeks to unite the formalist analysis of texts with readings that aim to uncover how structures of social power are expressed in and by, as well as challenged by, aesthetic forms. More broadly, the politics of form¹ begins to address the need for the development of a political analysis of aesthetic and narrative forms, to articulate specific models and methods for performing such analysis and to reflect on the politics of the work that is thereby undertaken.² Specifically, our desire is to politicise narratological and formal analysis while retaining the form specificity that has been a feature of narratology.

The attentive reader shall note that there has been no talk of 'literature' thus far or of the 'literary', but rather of narrative and aesthetic texts. 'Narrative' here is understood to exist along a continuum of texts and phenomena and to refer to those that more or less allow themselves to be narrativised, that is, to be cognitively processed as stories or as having story-like elements, or narrativity, that trigger the story-detecting processes in those who interact with them. Highly narrative texts tend to have more verbal elements, yet

mono-images may also be narrativised (Wolf, 2011). Accordingly, we understand form to go beyond the prose text types upon which so much narrative analysis was once based to include various types of narrative aesthetic texts and to do so with their generic and medial specificity in mind. In this vein, our contributors work with novels (Daniel Hartley, Frederik Van Dam, Jan Alber), life narratives (Jan Alber), historical novels (Corina Stan), documentary films (Stefan Iversen and Henrik Skov Nielsen), drama (Paul Stewart, Corina Stan), short prose works (Paul Stewart) and even multimodal texts, such as Susan Lanser and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's case study, *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine*, which includes narrative text and other narrative and non-narrative elements such as photographs, charts, maps, cartoons, and quotations from poems and folk songs.

The move away from a politics of the literary or of literature to a politics of form and the rich range of text types our contributors address bespeak several developments in literary studies to which we shall at least briefly gesture. The first pertains to the expansion of literary studies to include cinema, television, other visual and multimodal texts and cultural phenomena in gradual if sometimes contentiously occurring overlaps with media and cultural studies; the second relates to the notion that what was once referred to as 'the literary' may not just be located in intrinsic, linguistic textual features, but may also be signalled via a given text's framing as literary, aesthetic or fictional or its use of non-textual rhetorical strategies. As we see in Stefan Iversen and Henrik Skov Nielsen's case studies, for example, two documentary films highly invested in current political events employ experimental uses of fictional discourse to challenge the political and ideological commitments of their audiences.

All seven essays in this special issue illuminate the work their selected texts perform to challenge and, at times, reify dominant power structures, received histories, master narratives and ideological positions. They articulate a politics of form whose aim is to distinguish between instances in which forms are used innovatively to query or challenge dominant ideology and those in which they function to support it. To illustrate conjunctions between formal politics and content, one may turn to controversial texts such as the FOX television series *24* (2001–2010, 2014). *24* provides a good case in point for discussing some of the challenges of developing the type of politics of form at which this issue aims. In the first case, with its pro-torture, jingoistic and retributive politics – it was, after all, called 'the Jack Bauer torture hour' (Series/24) – the series was premised on the ubiquity of terrorist threats to the United States in the post-'9/11' era and the necessity that outlaw maverick characters like Bauer, the fictional head of the Counter Terrorist Unit, do 'whatever it takes' in order to combat the ceaseless danger of terrorist infiltration. *24*'s punitive and pro-Bush regime, War on Terror politics were much criticised by journalists, the Human Rights Watch and law professors at West Point, who insisted that the series was detrimental to the training of future military officers in Iraq as it suggested that torturing terrorist suspects was necessary (Mayer, 2007: n.p.). According to the series' twisted Utilitarian logic as performed in a ceaseless repetition of ticking-bomb scenarios, torture is a highly desirable security measure.

The form of the series successfully performed the United States' sense of perpetually heightened peril. Cohering with the panicked atmosphere caused by the imminent menace of an exploding bomb that might kill eight million people (Season 2), the series' aesthetics functioned to render the always-dangerous passage of time visible, audible and visceral. Every season represented a day, and every episode an actual hour with a visible digital clock ticking the seconds away in which the hidden bomb or other lurking threat might figuratively

– or even literally – ‘go nuclear’. Split-screen action allowed for multi-perspectivity and up to eight renderings of simultaneously occurring events, necessitating a high level of audience engagement to decipher various narrative strands. The ‘real time’ aesthetics produced by the screen time’s cohering with the time the events would actually take to occur – a quite unusual match between what narratologists call discourse and story time – the sound and image of a ticking clock at the centre of the screen and framing commercial breaks: all of these features contributed to the breathless adrenaline rush of 24’s effective formal aesthetics. And this is not to mention the series’ emphasis on visual securitisation techniques and surveillance technologies in the fictional Counter Terrorist Unit, all hallmarks of a new economy of hyper-visibility in the period that followed the events of 11 September 2001.

As 24 clearly demonstrates, formal aesthetic innovation by no means equates with political progressiveness, if we take political progressiveness in this case to equate with a stance critical of the so-called War on Terror; likewise, formal aesthetic conservatism does not necessarily bespeak political regression. As Brian Richardson (1994: 321; cf. also Cohn, 1995a; 1995b; Fludernik, 1996: 366) has repeatedly pointed out, ‘ideological stances are frequently enmeshed with practices of narration, but never in a way that can be reduced to an easy equation’. Indeed, as this series and the case studies examined by our contributors indicate, one of the guiding principles of our articulation of a politics of form is that a form–function homology cannot possibly capture the diverse relationships a single narrative text may occupy relative to the various ‘dominants’ by which it is shaped and with which it is in dialogue. In this respect, our issue aims to avoid the pitfalls that lead to the emptying of the two terms ‘politics’ and ‘form’. Although he is working with verse, as opposed to narrative form, Simon Jarvis’s (2010) call for a poetics of verse and his arguments about the ways in which the two terms ‘politics’ and ‘style’ in ‘the formula *politics of style*’ are typically emptied of meaning share two important features with our programme for a politics of form: the first is the aforementioned imperative to avoid ascriptions of form–function homology; the second is the necessity of operating on a level of much finer-grained analysis.

The effort to map out and articulate a politics of form in this issue interacts with two recent developments in literary and narrative criticism. The first of these is the rise of New Formalism, a renewed explicit attention to the formal elements of literary texts that may or may not be viewed as indicative of their material settings. New Formalism describes a resurgence in formalist approaches to literature that has occurred over the last decade, one that Frederik Van Dam describes in this special issue in relation to Victorian studies as part of an ideological commitment to liberalism and civic republicanism. In general, one may diagnose recurrent historical swings between more formalist and text-centred forms of literary and aesthetic criticism and more contextualist ones. In the former camp we might count Russian Formalism, New Criticism, classical narratology and New Formalism, and in the latter, Cultural Materialism, Foucauldian and New Historicist analysis, along with feminist, critical race, queer, postcolonial studies and other more cultural studies-oriented approaches. Many observers have detected a current retreat from more politically engaged literary and aesthetic criticism, particularly within North America, to a more text-centric practice. Amongst these observers, Marjorie Levinson (2007: 559) distinguishes between two main camps within the New Formalism: those who ‘want to restore to today’s reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form’ and those who ‘campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art’. Outstanding examples of New Formalism include Alex Woloch’s (2003) work on the ideological valence of literary character-systems, Franco Moretti’s theory

of the uneven and combined development of literary forms within the capitalist world-system in *Distant Reading* (2013) and Caroline Levine's (2006) 'strategic formalism'. This politically oriented formalism can be further sub-divided into those critics who see in form a reproduction of dominant political values – what Fredric Jameson (1981: 76) calls the 'ideology of form' – and those, like Levine (2006: 626) herself, who argue that 'literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them'.

Our own approach is to allow for a position that might lie somewhere between Jameson and Levine. This would acknowledge that narrative and other aesthetic forms develop out of what is inherited and thus constitute expressions of the dominant and the residual, yet they may also express aspects of subordinate or emergent cultural formations. Specific narrative and formal structures may function as historically situated bearers of dominant cultural values or as markers of critique that are aimed at uncovering structures that enforce domination and subordination; alternatively, they may express more negotiated and ambivalent standpoints, especially, as we see in many of this special issue's essays, where a single text responds in varying ways to different 'dominants', such as class, race and political power.

The second recent development with which this issue interacts concerns efforts within narratology – the science of narrative and narrative theory – to develop more contextualist and ideologically aware forms of analysis. This differs from classical narratological analysis, which sought to discover universal patterns of narrative texts and to isolate their minimal units and attendant functions. This universality allowed narratological models originally found to structure literary prose to be fruitfully applied to any manner of narrative instances, including literary genres other than prose, factual narratives and narratively constructed multimodal texts. More critical and contextual forms of narrative studies have subsequently challenged the universality of narrative categories as being in themselves historically embedded and hence reproductive of the social systems and forms of knowledge of which their moments of articulation partake. Within the pages of this issue we find a narratologist at the forefront of this type of criticism: Susan Lanser. As Lanser pointed out as early as 1981, specific narrative perspectives may be assumed for political reasons (100), and narrative situations may be used to express an explicit 'ideological stance' (1992: 53, 73) by employing formal variations that suggest a non-hegemonic standpoint. Since Western readers have been acculturated into assuming the masculinity, Whiteness and socially privileged status of the narrators who recount their stories, narrative stance has to be clearly demarcated as non-masculine, non-White, non-Western and non-materially privileged in order to designate difference; alternatively, paratextual signals such as cover images of protagonists may serve to denote non-majority positions.

Having made narratologists aware of their neglect of issues of gender and sexuality, also in relation to ideology, Lanser has subsequently moved on to address narratives of contemporary political events using narratological means, a topic to which we shall return. Thus *feminist narratology* altered narratology's understanding of narrative parameters altogether by demonstrating that supposedly universal narrational structures have to be examined with regard to their potential reinforcement of hierarchies of gender and heteronormativity (for an overview, see Shen, 2005). Lanser's work remains seminal not only for this branch of narratological research but also for other context-related work that focuses on how narrative categories alter according to the political commitments expressed in them, for instance in relation to race oppression (Foster, 1993) and to intersections of gender prejudice with other