

## Who's Afraid of Formalism? Sanford Kwinter

True formalism, we imagine, has been under seige for nearly as long as it has occupied – and mostly merited – the forefront of rigorous analysis in the arts and the inexact sciences. But in truth, this has not been the case. For in fact, it is only the poor or degenerate formalisms – the *merely* “formalistic” – that have drawn cogent challenge from so-called higher-minded, more ecumenical modes of analysis. “Poor formalisms” I would claim, are really just *unextended* formalisms: parodic analytical methods derived from the great and genuine aesthetic and epistemological innovations of modern, avant-gardist tradition, but which have simply forgotten that that is what they are. For the poverty of what is today collectively referred to by the misnomer “formalism,” is more than anything else the result of a sloppy conflation of the notion of “form” with that of “object.” The form problem, from the time of the pre-Socratics to the late twentieth century is, in fact, an almost unbroken concern with the mechanisms of *formation*, the processes by which discernable patterns come to dissociate themselves from a less finely-ordered field. Form, when seen from this perspective, is ordering *action*, a logic deployed, while the object is merely the latter’s sectional image, a manifest variation on an always somewhat distant theme. The form of the object (or the form of the expression) and the form of the theme (form of the content) are in truth in continual dynamic resonance, and, when grasped together by formalist analysis, open up onto a field of limitless communication and transmission. What I call true formalism refers to any method that diagrams the proliferation of fundamental resonances and

demonstrates how these accumulate into figures of order and shape. The very idea that the figure of a façade, the plan of a villa, or the marquetry of a given urban tissue might enfold within it a resonant, transmissible logic of internal control, one that can be at once dissociated from its material substrate *and* maintained in communicative tension with it, was once an assertion of great contentiousness. The moment of its rigorous demonstration became one of the watersheds, not only of modern aesthetics, but of modern science and philosophy as well.

Yet the configuration of the contemporary polemic is deeply misleading. It holds, among other things, that an enlightened science of “meaning,” of ideology, or of commitment can, and ought to, be mustered as a palliative and corrective to a sterile, abstract academicism that seizes only the visible but lifeless schemata of things, one that weaves its pallid array of skeletal elements into a fraudulently brilliant, self-fulfilling but world-denying view. Such a position might be partly valid – it could be seen as attacking the poor formalisms of the object – that is, if this latter were not in fact but the concoction of the former’s own flawed understanding. Indeed there is not, and never has been, any such thing as “meaning” or “ideology,” not, in any case, one separate from the physics of history and power, a physics, not incidentally, which is always a physics of *forms*: be it the form of an idea, the form of an epoch, or the form of a tool. True formalism holds out for us the real possibility both for a pragmatic description of historical emergence (why this object, institution or configuration here, in this place, at this time, and not that?), and the superseding of the tired and wooly metaphysics that continues to dog thought today, the metaphysics of the signifier.

Formalism demonstrates first and foremost that form is resonance and expression of embedded forces. The best local formalisms (those of Henri Focillon, Arnold Schoenberg, Michel Foucault, etc.) show that these embedded forces are themselves organized and have a pre-concrete, logical form of their own. The dynamic relation between these two levels of form is the space where indeterminacy or historical becoming unfolds. Extended or true formalisms are different only in that they also describe relations of resonance and expression *between* local forms or form systems. This is why most anti-formalists are essentially but poor formalists themselves; they see only the shell of object-forms and sad enclaves of inert matter, never the resonating *field* of wild, directed formation. The great formalists, on the other hand, have always been able to peer *into* the object toward its rules of formation and to see these two strata *together* as a mobile, open and oscillating system subject to a greater or lesser number of external pressures. The manifest form - that which appears - is the result of a computational interaction between internal rules and external (morphogenetic) pressures that, themselves, originate in other adjacent forms. The (pre-concrete) internal rules comprise, *in their activity*, an embedded form, what is today clearly understood and described by the term *algorithm*. Algorithmic formalism (the most dynamic, extendable kind) was an invention of Goethe's and remains the basis of all robust, generative formalisms (including those being used today in computational biology). Among other things, Goethe posited the concept of a "type" as an abstract formative principle to be acted upon by other primary transformative processes. This may well be the source of a disturbing misunderstanding today regarding the role of generative or "deep structural" elements in designed

systems and design processes. For the type concept is never a development of a supersensuous Platonic *eidōs* (one intuitively here the tendentious, reductive influence of Derrida), but is related rather to a dynamic inner intelligibility (the *eidōs* of the Physicians, linked to *dynamis* or power), or to actualization as in the formal causes of Aristotle (*eidōs* in its relation to the *entelechie*s or to *energeia*). Type is at least partly active, and it is on this active aspect that we need to concentrate if we wish to give place to new extended formalisms.

Ernst Cassirer once said of Goethe that his work completed the transition from the *generic* view to the *genetic* view of organic nature. He was referring to the break from the tabular space of the *genera* of the Linnaean classifications with their emphasis on what is constant and fixed to a *generative* space where the processes of coming-to-be are given shape. Goethe's formalism, like all rigorous and interesting ones, actually marks a turning away from the simple structure of end-products and toward the active, ever-changing processes that bring them into being. With any luck, twenty years from now, one will be able to make the same claim for certain architects that Cassirer made for Goethe's science. And should this in fact not come to be, it will be far more the fault of the one-dimensional semioticians and ideologists who propagate the cliché of the "social construction of meaning" than of second-rate poor formalists who merely trivialize a powerful method and inadvertently lend credence to the airless arguments of the former group.