

Vančurová, Karolína; Vančurová, Karolina

[Levine, Caroline. Forms: whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network]

*Brno studies in English*. 2016, vol. 42, iss. 2, pp. [121]-124

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2016-2-10>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/136102>

Access Date: 04. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



## REVIEW

**Caroline Levine:** *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015, ISBN 978-0-691-16062-7, 173 pp.

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine, the nineteenth-century editor of *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, takes advantage of the broad scope the subject of world literature offers to take an impassive look at the formal mechanisms at work within the culture of the United States and Europe. Although she claims to be at odds with historicizing approaches to literature, her study is anchored in literary works singled out from the course of literary history precisely for their historical relevance for the two continents: foremost among them are Sophocles' *Antigone*, Dickens' *Bleak House*, and the television series *The Wire*. Levine uses four interdisciplinary categories describing form – whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network – to provide a conceptual grid that would reveal recurrent links between society and the material of humanities' curricula. The overarching context of forms' affordances across disciplines allows her to gather contemporary experience into the realm of tragedy, that is, a work of art, in Aristotle's terminology, designed to purify the society of spectators from accumulated emotion by leading them/us through to the tragic end. In the last chapter, focused on *The Wire*, she applies her method of analysis to the TV series as a social phenomenon and shows how political awareness of literature can be related to knowledge of man.

Schooled in Western Marxism during the nineties, "with a political urgency" ("Preface": x) attributed to historical methods, Levine says that for all her inclination toward social justice declaring itself in her youth form gradually came to represent the design which imposes order. This implies a rigidity keeping things in place. Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* (tr. 1977), a historical study of man's mind and body exposed to prison conditioning written with the context of the fifties' French Communist Party in mind, was the piece of information she needed to put institutional forms in contrast with forms invented for no purpose other than aesthetic. Levine describes how, in the American context, some of the fixed forms organizing democratic society afford (a key word borrowed from design theory) change if seen through the possibilities available to a literary studies' formalist, that is someone who studies on existing texts how the author manipulates formal possibilities opened by the process of writing. The resulting study is a risky walk on the wild side balancing precariously a fundamental consent to the present order of things against an assent to the distortion of reality represented by the endless cycle of organized crime captured in *The Wire*. Like many other contemporary literary critics, she responds to a recently reawakened interest in form. Few critics, however, succeed in showing how understanding form relates to applying its potential, wherein consists the universal attraction of the subject and its political dimension.

One of the central distinctions between the artistic and the politic bodies is fictitiousness. Levine succeeds in convincingly blending both within the fields of literary and cultural studies by real life examples from studies in sociology. Despite her subject being the political nature of forms, she

gracefully keeps out of the field of political sciences and their definitions of form within the context of the politic. Nevertheless, her work is hugely influenced by the thought of Jacques Rancière who criticizes philosophy for wanting to do away with the politic when only those moments when democracy becomes turbulent with politics (Levine refers to the case of Rosa Parks in Rancière's *Hatred of Democracy*, tr. 2006) allow a momentary reprieve from what he calls "police", the prevailing tendency of society to desire a fixed state of things. This unstated self-discipline on the part of the author has a strange consequence: while it firmly identifies the book as political, it is addressed to a community of readers difficult to imagine – at once capable to appreciate the artistic extension of the book and at once alert to the demands it places on the citizen to a political vigilance of a very specific kind. Political sciences, on the other hand, are concerned with the practical aspects of "forms", that is, what forms can be used to what ends in government. So throughout the book Levine avoids definitive judgment, focusing instead on the way multiple forms constantly overlap, provoking changes in one another within the realm of fiction and the fields of literary and cultural studies, and how these mechanisms can be read in the organization of present, European and American, society. Having presented a survey of previous formalist approaches, some of them works of painstakingly researched argument, Levine gives us a model that is undercut by her examples of social, artistic or literary forms taken out of context to serve as antidotes to abstraction in her otherwise heroically abstract model.

This is problematic, however. Though capable of a certain degree of abstraction and transport through time and space, these forms, as defined and illustrated on particular examples, depend on those who make them for interpretation or maintenance. The direct link between form and power is always a particular person in whom they meet, affording limits. For example, when Levine suggests that the alternative to breaking forms might be multiplying "bounded wholes" and introducing new ones, to "curtail the power of harmfully totalizing and unifying wholes" (46), it seems more like a description of the current state of affairs than a way to change them. Her account of the challenges of the seminar which allows students to develop critical faculties, on the other hand, manifests an intimate acquaintance with the way form can be used to "disrupt the controlling power of bounded shapes" (45). Such use of form has to do with forming the minds of young people; letting them form themselves. Is it in this context that Levine urges "to shift attention away from deep causes to a recognition of the many different shapes and patterns that constitute political, cultural, and social experience" (19), or is it in the context of understanding our own place in the complexity of "forms" which govern our lives or perhaps rather in the context of political systems at work in the world at large?

In these second and third contexts, her work offers several occasions for reflection. The first is in the chapter entitled "Rhythm" and brings institutions and social formations within the "affordances" of this aesthetic category primarily connected with music and its repetitive patterning in time. Using Michel Foucault's idea of surveillance and confinement, she gives several examples of the way forms preserved by specific institutions in the past can be used in different settings in the present, not exclusively as carceral mechanisms deployed rapidly across whole societies but also as bearers of the alternatives affording, through their different rhythms, collisions and what she calls the "rerouting" of established forms. She draws attention to the possibility to study the relation between "aesthetic tempos" that a trained eye can trace in literature and these occasions. The examples, however, show that only a deep and focused understanding of the mechanisms that govern society can lead to meaningful action, viz. the Brancusi case saved by Marcel Duchamp, though understanding forms can also promote meaningful inaction.

The chapter about hierarchy builds on another deeply engrained human mechanism, the conflict between family and society as portrayed by Sophocles in *Antigone*. While keeping the argument scrupulously clear, Levine calls for the acknowledgement of structures more complicated than the most common dialectical instrument of binaries allows. Some binaries, she observes, do not afford hierarchies, some hierarchies do not gradate from binaries, offering examples from astronomy and transnational corporations. Again, she takes a broad look at the affordances of such a work of art as *Antigone*. Among the sources she cites is Alexander Cooley's *Logics of Hierarchy: The Organiza-*

tion of Empire, States, and Military Occupations (2005), presumably to make a link between the situation portrayed by Sophocles in the fifth century BC and the United States today; between a piece of fiction preserving an image of a previous civilization and the reality faced by a present-day democracy.

Here she focuses on the vertical tendency of the social structure defined as hierarchy and explores what happens when two such structures collide. Examples from history, such as Marx's *Lumpenproletariat*, and art complicate simple accounts of the matter and allow Levine to pose the problem as "a conflict among contending forms that disorders their logic without ever resettling them" (92), foregrounding dramatic narrative form as the supreme instrument for formal experiment in political and philosophical thought. It allows her to cast an unsettling light on how hierarchy works in terms of gender and bureaucracy when these are understood as forms; the first is considered as a normative category and the second as a hierarchical form of organization in enterprises and institutions promoting certain kinds of behavior while suppressing others. Finally, contrasting her own formalist reading with several contemporary readings of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Levine shows how the contending hierarchies of value (priorities over privilege, international division of labor, political representativeness of the middle-class Non-European as go-between in the center/periphery division between Global North and South) unfold and collide.

The term "Network" is borrowed from sixteenth-century language of metallurgy and textiles, as Levine finds referring to Derrida, implying "interwoven strands moving in multiple directions rather than toward a single end" (113). Is it being critical or sharing in a reductive image of the tree as a theoretical concept that Levine refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of the rhizome "as a network that connects any point to any other" and their argument that it offers a "destabilizing answer to the more conventional unifying form of the tree, with its binary branches that all reach back to common root, fixing a single order" (112)? If we stick to the biological metaphor, this kind of approach mimics the development in science aided by the even faster evolution of technology. This does not prevent us, however, from enjoying the outcome of her methodological approach. Levine aims to follow the dynamic unfolding of multiple forms, networks or networks and wholes, networks and time, with specific attention to their differences. In the context of network, again a concept relevant for virtual as much as factual reality, Levine observes, juxtaposing Dickens' use of character in *Bleak House* with the situation of Emily Dickinson, how isolated individuals may become "the sites of the most substantial traffic" although not necessarily sources of either agency or authority themselves; simply as "unconscious bearers of connectability" (127). One must be alert to the fact that the essence of impersonality represented by this idea is founded on a rhizomic connection between a character in a work of fiction, the lowest of low, and a person whose lifetime had been given expression in her poems. The means of connectivity observed on the basis of fiction allows Levine to see their sometimes voluntary and at other times coercive nature; this applies to real life as well as technological as well as novelistic networks. Against the background of these interconnections, simple events of life unfold, Levine tells us, and we are located at the crossings of these multiple networks. Such outlook makes disease perhaps the most fascinating aspect of networking – it activates the imperative to make choices and accept their consequences. Levine, however, does not say this; she observes multiplicity and quotes Henry James' *Roderick Hudson* for comment: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere" (James: vii).

*The Wire* represents a kind of unifying platform where the intractable nature of the possibilities opened by the idea of forms' affordances finds a particular image of a "bounded whole". It is discussed in the light of other academic readings (by way of example – Anmol Chadha and William Julius Wilson, "Way down in the Hole: Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*"; Patrick Jagoda, "Wired") as a complex representation of conflicting forms at work within a single large city blessed with varied communities. Levine, in contrast to other more spectacular readings (e.g. Alessandra Stanley, "So Many Characters, Yet So Little Resolution"; Slavoj Žižek in *The Wire and Philosophy*; Jason Mittell, "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic") focuses on the degree to which individual "players" have been capable to grasp their own place within the game and understand the forces at work outside their limited scope.

## References

- Brontë, Charlotte as Currer Bell (1847) *Jane Eyre*. London: Smith, Elder & Co.
- Chadha, Anmol and Wilson, William Julius (2011) "Way down in the Hole: Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*". *Critical Inquiry* 1 (38), 164–188.
- Cooley, Alexander (2005) *The Logics of Hierarchy: Organization of Empire, States, and Military Occupations*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Dickens, Charles (1977) *Bleak House*. Edited by George Ford and Sylvère Monod. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Dickinson, Emily (1955) *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, Penguin.
- Jagoda, Patrick (2011) "Wired". *Critical Inquiry* 1 (38), 189–199.
- James, Henry (1917) *Roderick Hudson*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Puchner, Martin (ed.) (2012) *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Norton.
- Marx, Karl (1996) *Later Political Writings*. Edited by Terrell Carver. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mittel, Jason (2011) "All in the Game: The Wire, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic" *Electronic Book Review*, March 18. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/serial>.
- Rancière, Jacques (2006) *Hatred of Democracy*. Translated by Steve Corcoran. London and New York: Verso.
- Simon, David (2002–2008) *The Wire*.
- Sophocles (1996) *Antigone*. Translated by David Franklin and John Harrison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stanley, Alessandra (2008) "So Many Characters, Yet So Little Resolution" In: *New York Times*, March 10.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2013) "The Wire: What to do in Non-Evental Times" In: Bzdak, David, Joanna Crosby, and Seth Vannata (eds.) *The Wire and Philosophy*. Chicago: Court Press, e-book.

Karolina Vančurová

Address: Karolina Vančurová, Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, nám. Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha 1, Czech Republic. [vancurovak@yahoo.com]