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Interlude III: On Interpretation

Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt

The essays in Part III of this volume indicate to what extent critical theory draws on resources from beyond the realm of literary and cultural theory in the narrower sense, such as ecological thinking (Zapf), ethics (Attridge, Domsch, and Middeke), or complexity science (Walsh). While doing so, all contributions insisted on the particular cultural productivity of literature, which in turn inspires theoretical reflections. All contributions in Part III thus provide good examples for the ‘dispositional, as well as institutional, anchorage’ (Brubaker 216) of literary and cultural theory highlighted at the end of Interlude II. The medium for this particular cultural productivity of literature is, of course, the text, just as it is, albeit with different rules, the medium for the particular cultural productivity of literary and cultural theory itself. If there is a unique selling point for the expertise accumulated in the disciplines of literary and cultural studies, it should be just this: that there is a long and very sophisticated tradition of reflection on the role of texts in modern culture in terms of the features that can be described under the rubrics of philological comparison, rhetoric, form, or

M. Middeke (✉)
University of Augsburg, Germany

C. Reinfandt
University of Tübingen, Germany

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281

structure, in terms of the shapes and functions that texts can assume in different media environments (writing, print, electronic media), and in terms of the reading protocols that may be desirable (hermeneutics, hermeneutics of suspicion, deconstruction, analysis, ...). The essays in Part IV illuminate various aspects of this centrality. After introductory reflections on ‘The Fate of Texts under Changing Theory’ (Grabes), the remaining contributions address the potential residing in the isomorphism of literature and theory (Alworth), the role of the mediality and materiality of texts for reading processes (Reinfandt), and the long-standing relation between form and textuality (Chaudhuri).

What, then, is the current nexus of analysis and interpretation at the heart of literary and cultural studies as envisioned at the juncture of critical and textual theory? After years of emphasis on broader metatheoretical, cultural, and critical agendas in the wake of Fredric Jameson’s maxim ‘Always historicize!’ and the New Historicism, all of which seemed to sideline the dimension of textual theory to a certain extent (though it never really went away in the “applied” realm of teaching), there seems to have been a renewed appreciation of the value of minute analysis of textual features (along the lines of the New Critics’ close reading techniques but minus the ideological baggage) as essential to the identity and specific productivity of literary and cultural studies. Whether announced as ‘new formalism’ (Levinson), ‘historical formalism’ (Cohen), or ‘strategic formalism’ (Levine 2006), the upshot of these more recent formalisms was an uneasy relationship to recent developments in literary and cultural theory (cf. Theile and Tredennick). Accordingly, the close analysis of texts can form the basis for historicized hermeneutic readings (in the sense of *what* a text meant for certain readers at a given moment in time) as well as for suspicious readings (*why* a text offered certain meanings at a given moment of time). At the same time (and on a more general note), every text can be analysed with regard to *how* it worked in a given discourse and media environment. Analysis and interpretation are thus integrated into an approach which is both analytical and interpretive as well as formalist and historical, and the focal point in the theoretical modelling of this integrative framework is the quest for ‘form’s function’ (Alworth) both within the text and beyond it.

Interpretation, it seems—and this includes the interpretations of scholars in the field of literary and cultural studies—is based on features which readers observe in texts, and this truism becomes theoretically more productive once the various dimensions of reader observation are spelled out, from

materiality (paper quality, binding, cover design, ...) to mediality (writing vs print vs electronic media) to genre to narrative structure to semantic realms. It is in these various dimensions that every text provides affordances of medium and mode (cf. Kress) as well as form (cf. Levine 2015). While the first dimension only became visible once the universalizing sway of the Gutenberg Galaxy had been broken so that print lost its default position as degree zero mediality, it also took some effort (and the whole development from literary into cultural studies plus the theoretical turn) to wrench the formalist methodology from the ideologically charged aestheticizing grip of the immensely influential New Critical tradition in order to address the affordances of form inclusively and systematically on a functional basis. In design theory, affordance ‘is a term used to describe the potential uses of actions latent in materials and designs’ (Levine 2015, 6), and while Gunther Kress takes the leap from materials to medium and from designs to mode, Levine uses the concept to ‘think about form’ in an attempt to grasp ‘both the specificity and the generality of forms’ simultaneously (Levine 2015, 6): ‘If forms lay claim to a limited range of potentialities and constraints, if they afford the same limited range of actions wherever they travel, and if they are the stuff of politics, then attending to the affordances of form opens up *a generalizable understanding of political power*’, while on the other hand ‘specific contexts also matter’ because ‘[i]n any given circumstance, no form operates in isolation’ (Levine 2015, 7). It seems that an approach like this opens up opportunities for bridging the text–context divide without losing sight of the specific capacity of literary and cultural texts for simulating and employing constellations of second-order observation not unlike the ones which have proved to be most productive in literary and cultural theory and which can then be observed in turn.

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