Toward the Power of Forming

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PHIL-Frames: book series and platform for transdisciplinary research on the arts, culture, and philosophy.

The first volume of the newly launched open access book series PHIL | Frames by Martina Sauer and Natalia Igl in collaboration with 15 experts from 10 countries, kicks off with an initial call for submissions. This first call from the series' editors addresses a transdisciplinary question relevant to the PHIL | Frames research platform: Toward the Power of Forming. The theme reflects our conviction that humanities and arts can gain new, and at times groundbreaking insights through transdisciplinary dialogue, and that their contributions to academic and societal debates will have a greater impact through interdisciplinary exchange and understanding

Against this backdrop, our first volume, Toward the Power of Forming, aims to provide an initial impetus for current research in the philosophy of media and culture. It focuses on the key question of how primary aspects of human expressive capacity function and are linked to secondary aspects that concern our ability to form and represent concepts (of values) – not only of individuals, but also of societies, and not only today, but also in earlier times. With regard to the research areas of inquiry, proposed contributions to the anthology may therefore investigate the complex processes of conceptualisation and framing involved in the forming, representation, historical change, and emotionally charged functionalisation of concepts (of values) to 'define' the self and the other, belonging, community, or nation. Looking at fields and objects such as art and design, photography, maps, architecture and cities, literary, music and dance, moving images, digital interfaces etc., our volume sets out to examine how forms organize bodies, identities, spaces, communities, and political imaginaries – and how the arts and individual artists may disrupt or transform inherited forms.
Against this backdrop, the key position of the volume lies in the idea that forming is not simply a vehicle for content but actively participates in meaning-making; processes of forming thus must be seen as crucial to how meaning is being produced, organized, and transformed. With this volume, we accordingly want to contribute to the inter- and transdisciplinary debate on questions such as: How and what do we form with our creative means, both as individuals and as societies? How do we perceive those forms and how do we respond to them? How does meaning emerge in this process, and what else does the meaning-making process depend on? How can these questions help us to find an answer to how (different) style(s) developed in the history of art, design, literature, language, dance, music, and adjoining fields?

Within philosophical and disciplinary research, these questions have been discussed since antiquity, for example by Plato. The philosopher Ernesto Grassi summarised one of the main contentious

issues regarding the expressive means of different artforms and media – of words and images – in the title of his book: The Power of the Image. The Powerlessness of Rational Language, 1969 (translation from the German by the authors). From the first third of the 19th century onwards, this conflict also manifested itself in the distinction between empirically oriented formal aesthetics and idealistic-speculative aesthetics. With regard to the power of forming, the question arises as to which came first: embodied principles or divine revelations. With the emergence of disciplinary differentiation in the second half of the 19th century, both empirical and disciplinary research in the arts began to focus on the power of forming through creative processes and their potential to convey meaning. The debate over which came first was 'won' by the embodied positions (see Sauer 2024 [2023]).

It was the cultural anthropological philosopher Ernst Cassirer who summarised this by speaking of "the perception of expression" as the first level upon which mythical, phenomenological (including the arts) and theoretical dimensions are built (1964 [1929]: 94). This human capacity forms the basis of the 'power of imagery and action' ('Bildkraft und Tatkraft') (Cassirer 1964 [1929]: 189-221, 212) and, as can be deduced, also underlies socially relevant decisions and actions (Sauer 2026). Subsequently, it is the philosopher Susanne K. Langer who further developed this approach. Based on the observation that the perception of forms in all arts is rooted in feelings, and, drawing on research on the biological foundations of this perception, she introduced the concept of a theory of "(image-)act" (1985 [1967]). In Langer's view, this conceptualisation is of central importance not only for non-discursive aspects of human society in a "communion" but also for communication (Langer 1972; applied to photography, see Sauer 2025).

The conclusions drawn by these two prominent cultural anthropologists are consistent with research conducted at the time in the life sciences, such as that of Ludwig Klages (1913) and Heinz Werner (1926). Their findings were confirmed by Daniel N. Stern's empirical research with infants (1985) and in the field of the performative arts (2010), as well as by the neuroscientific investigation of mirror neurons conducted by Giacomo Rizzolatti's research team since 1996. Furthermore, they have recently been successfully applied to the fine arts (Lombardi et al. 2023). These studies showed that the ability to express oneself through gestures and sounds, or through forms and colours (later aided by tools and techniques), and to imbue these means of expression with a specific direction of meaning through form, rhythm, and intensity, precedes linguistic and pictorial meaning. Against this research backdrop, the human capacity for form-giving can be described as a primary ability.
Within the broad field of research on various aesthetic formats and media, the question of the interplay of aesthetic expression and perception and its biological/embodied foundations has been discussed and examined extensively. Similar to the visual arts, the notion of form(giving) in literature is closely connected to the notion of style and approaches of stylistic analysis, as well as the concept of genre such as the novel, crime fiction, the romantic comedy, or the folktale. Current research in cognitive stylistics and poetics, for example, looks at rhythm as an embodied phenomenon and gestalt, utilised strategically in literary texts and other text-/language-based or audio-visual artifacts to involve the recipient in a multi-sensory process of affective-cognitive engagement and meaning-making (see Igl 2023).

In literary genre theory – just as in art history –, the terms form and genre are often used (almost) synonymously. While the dynamics of forming, recognising, affirming and innovating genres are

grounded in historical contexts and historical change, however, forms remain quite stable over time, as literary scholar Caroline Levine notes in her book Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network (2015): The “portability of forms” can be seen as crucial for their ability to link art and society and “migrate across contexts in a way that genres cannot” (Levine 2015: 13). Drawing on this approach, a conceptualisation of form not merely as “patternings, shapes, and arrangements” (Levine 2015: 13) but also as something that is grounded in basic principles of (sensory-perceptive, structural, material) organisation can be seen as crucial for understanding both formal tradition and creative stylistic innovation in literary texts and other narrative, dramatic, and poetic media.

Against this backdrop of different research traditions and common threads in looking at the perceptual and embodied foundation of forming, the volume also aims to address the key tension between the universal and the historical perspective – that is, the perspective on forming as a fundamental human capacity and that on forming as a historically and culturally specific practice. With this dual focus, the volume sets out to address the (evolutionary) biological/embodied prerequisites of human expressive capacity, and – from a cultural perspective – to examine the influence of the power of forming on socio-culturally relevant styles in art, design, literature, language, dance, music, technology etc.

Contributions from all related fields of research on the arts, literature, media, culture, etc., on philosophy and anthropology of culture, art, and perception, as well as from life sciences are welcome. Possible themes and areas of inquiry can be: form and affect; gesture and embodiment; rhythm and temporality; materiality and perception; style and social organization; political imagery; spatial and architectural forms; performance; technology; genre; and the migration or transformation of forms across media and cultures.

Please submit your proposed title and abstract of no more than 400 words by 1 March 2027, along with your short academic CV and contact information.

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