

Polythesis. Filologia, interpretazione e teoria della letteratura
DARE FORMA – GIVING FORM – DONNER FORME

Call for papers / Appel à contributions

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(English version)

In *Vie des formes*, the art historian Henri Focillon writes that “human consciousness always tends towards a language and even a style. To become conscious is to take form”. For Focillon, the mind is engaged in a constant operation of self-description; “it is a drawing that is made and unmade, and its activity is, in this sense, an artistic activity”. The psyche provides the materials that the mind, like an artist, constantly reworks to give them form.

Existence is a matter of forms: forms that are created, forms that assemble, collide, collapse, and arise. But what does it mean to give form to an object, to life, or to oneself? To what extent does Aristotelian hylomorphism, with its close connection – not free of hierarchy – between form and matter, still influence our way of conceiving artistic forms, forms of life, and forms of the self? In *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, the anthropologist Tim Ingold has attempted to deconstruct the primacy of form that is supposedly inherent in hylomorphism. It is no longer a matter of thinking of making as the result of a structuring principle applied to inert material, but of conceiving creation as a closer, collaborative, and non-hierarchical relationship between the creator and the materials.

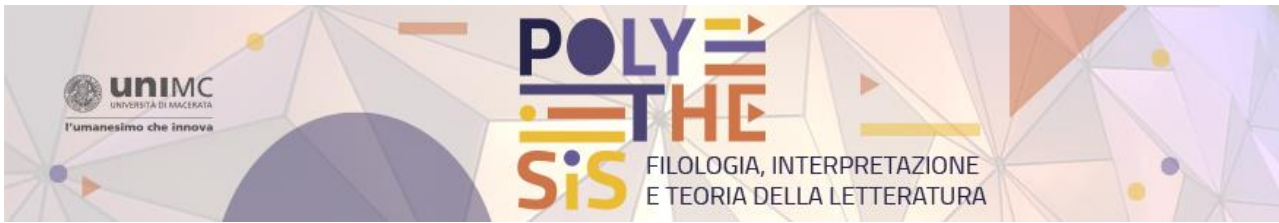
The interdisciplinary perspective proves essential in attempting to challenge the assumption that meaning can only emerge from the form that is given to matter. With this thematic session of *Polythesis*, we would like to bring together, starting from literature and in dialogue with the other human sciences, multiple discourses on the possible reconfigurations of the relationship of form and matter. To this end, we indicate some lines of inquiry in this non-binding list.

1. The legacy of hylomorphism

Aristotelian hylomorphism and its numerous related debates posit the notions of form and matter from the perspective of their inseparability. At the same time, they establish a hierarchical order, calling for other conceptual dichotomies such as perfection and fall, immanence and transcendence, and real and spiritual. The ontological and methodological issues arising around hylomorphism call for a review. It will be fruitful to see how these issues intersect with questions of literary theory.

2. Incarnation and literature

The aim is to investigate how literature has explored the process by which a form is embodied in a body/object. Literature is a privileged place for reflection on the difficult compromise between reality and its shaping. Regarding the issue of love in particular, literature offers countless examples of a constantly renewed negotiation between love’s experience and its linguistic form. From courtly love to modern poetry, literature explores the possibilities of love’s embodiment. We find a trace of this in a paradigmatic formula by Baudelaire, a line that Eric Auerbach considered “superb and very surprising”: “His spiritual flesh



all spirit has the fragrance of Angels” (“What will you say tonight, poor solitary soul?”). The parallelism of the two hemistiches maintains the oxymoronic association of the corporeal – the flesh and its perfume – and the spiritual represented by the angels, who are by nature bodiless. By shifting from the idea to its embodiment, the poem attempts to match the inexpressible essence of love with the body of the beloved. The dialectic of the spiritual and its incarnation, of transcendence and immanence, notoriously runs through Grail literature, which by far enacts a poetics of incarnation. Grail literature may be analyzed both through close readings of singular texts and from a comparative and trans-historical perspective. From a more purely theoretical point of view, the notion of incarnation could constitute the axis around which a dialogue between phenomenology and literature (or between phenomenology and literary criticism) could be established.

3. Tradition as *mise-en-forme*

The humanities and the social sciences alike are called upon to reflect on the relationship between form and matter, as they all appear to be haunted by it. On the one hand, the issue is tracing the history of this relationship, and on the other asking to what extent the tradition itself, whether accepted or contested, can be traced back to the act of formalizing or putting knowledge into form. The way in which we shape knowledge cannot but influence its interpretation. The problem of the formal relations that unite and separate is at the heart of academic concerns in the humanities. It is therefore from the point of view of the constitution of knowledge that criticism must consider the way in which tradition is formed—the ways in which we form it, and the ways in which it informs us.

4. The material dimension of literary practices

Can and should we still think about the primacy of form in literary practice? Numerous recent works on the material dimension of literature (genetics, book history, digital studies, and media-specific analysis) invite us to investigate through an interdisciplinary prism the very notion of the material in literary studies, and thus to envisage its valorization at the expense of an idealistic attachment to form.

5. Aesthetics, embodied simulation, singularization

By questioning art understood as experience from the point of view of this very experience, aesthetics and neuroscientific studies on embodied simulation invite us to think about the notion of form in a new way. The torment of form is no longer the prerogative of the artistic domain, but runs through and shapes the practices of singularization that are established in the lives of individuals, paving the way for an aesthetic anthropology.

6. The body in literature: Other forms, forms of the other

From the portrait of the character to the presence of the author, the literary text cannot help but embody a performance, raising the question of the relationship between body and language, and thus body and the creation of forms. Literary texts could, after all, be read as the traces of an exposure of the body to the gaze of the other and, therefore, as the place par excellence of attention to the life of others as the possibility of being in other bodies and other forms.

(See below for bibliographical indications)

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