

Reconsidering Formal Analysis

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Matt Zoller Seitz's claim that critics of television and film address plot, theme, and characterization at the expense of matters of style is indisputable. As an aesthete, I am sympathetic to his position, and I admire the force with which he argues it. But Seitz makes some missteps that prevent me from wholeheartedly endorsing his plea.

Seitz builds his case by way of a hard-and-fast, Aristotelian distinction between "form" and "content" that I find troubling. That is, despite the dialectical positioning of the two, form is nearly always subordinated to content: And Seitz implies as much: "form is the means by which content is expressed." Thus, to follow his logic, form is necessarily in service of and secondary to content.

This raises two problems. First, according to such a formulation, style always gets read back into content—in other words, interpreted. Seitz takes issue with critics' usage of such vague descriptors as "gritty" or "elegant" that are presented without any discussion of the specific stylistic elements that compel the designation. He counters this tendency with a concrete example of his own, the only one found in the essay: a crane shot from *12 Years a Slave* that aligns an enslaved Solomon Northrop with the U.S. Capitol in the distance. As Seitz puts it, this image is "*saying something*." But what of the images (and sounds) that can't be said to be saying anything, or at least nothing nearly so direct? For me, the standout moments in *12 Years a Slave* (and there are many) are the ones in which I come to sense the suffocating humidity of the cotton fields; or when I am unsettled by the omnipresent buzz of offscreen cicadas that makes claustrophobic the vast, rural landscapes; or when I recoil with each brutal crack of the whip. These instances are part of the cumulative, visceral impact of the film—they don't, per se, say anything, nor do they call out for interpretation. Nevertheless, they stick with me in a way that Seitz's privileged crane shot does not.

Secondly, in my own work, I tend to avoid the term "form"—just as I do with "text," "semiotics," "reading," and "coding" for reasons that will soon become apparent—in an effort to distance myself from the inevitable associations with "(neo)formalism," a distinct approach to audiovisual analysis that carries specific theoretical commitments and guiding epistemological assumptions. But formalism is but one approach, a part—albeit a large one—that has come to stand synecdochically for the whole of aesthetic inquiry in popular criticism and media studies. Formalism seeks to avoid the trappings of interpretation—as Kristin Thompson plainly states, "Neoformalists do not do 'readings'"—by analyzing instead the patterns, devices, and techniques present in a

movie or show and how they cue the spectator's mental activity. The problem, though, is that formalism, with its empiricist bent, imagines an entirely rational spectator. (This imagined, normative spectator, of course, emerges as a response to, and is an improvement upon, the ideological dupe assumed by 1970s apparatus theory, but I digress.) The Cognitivist thrust of the Formalist approach situates both the cinematic and televisual experience as a predominantly mental activity.

I therefore find the term "aesthetics," which is rooted in the Greek for "sense perception," preferable to "form" in its generic deployment. "Form" places the emphasis on the work, whereas "aesthetics" sides with the spectator, the beholder. My aim here is not to invalidate interpretive criticism or the formalist approach—indeed, I've published work that is avowedly formalist—so much as to suggest that that which falls outside its purview (i.e., the affective, the embodied, the precognitive) is a fundamental aspect of our experience of television and film, one that is difficult to grasp (or grasp solely) with the tools of formalism or "literary" interpretation.

50 years prior to Seitz's manifesto, Susan Sontag wrote one of her own—"Against Interpretation." In it, like Seitz, she decried the plot-first orientation of critics, but Sontag proposed an entirely different remedy for what she pointedly called "the extraordinary hegemony" of content. This roundtable's prompt asks if TV Studies has tended to overlook form. I'd say so, but with valid reasons: TV Studies, like film formalism, carries its own political and philosophical commitments, not the least of which is its focus on how and why audiences make meaning. This is a vitally important project. But with this in mind, I ask if "meaning" might here be a limiting term. What if what spectators experience and what audiences find in TV and film is not (always) "meaning," but something less defined but equally crucial nonetheless? What if instead of calling for one of every ten sentences be dedicated to form, as does Seitz, we—scholars and critics—take up the call that closed Sontag's now canonical essay from half a century ago: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."