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Academic Forms: An Interview with Tim Lanzendörfer and Pierre-Héli Monot

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Abstract In this interview, Tim Lanzendörfer and Pierre-Héli Monot of the Academic Forms working group discuss the state of the art, and the future, of academic work and life.

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This is an interview with Tim Lanzendörfer and Pierre-Héli Monot for *New American Studies Journal* discussing the Academic Forms Group, their recent conference and future plans. I have been part of the group since its first meeting in 2023 and was fortunate enough to meet both Tim and Pierre at "The Forms of Academic Work: Practices, Taxonomies, Perspectives" conference hosted at LMU in October of 2024. I am very grateful that they took the time to participate in this interview in December 2024 and delighted to share more about the group with readers of NASJ. — Roslyn Joy Irving

Roslyn Joy Irving (RI): Thank you both for agreeing to take part in this interview which will be published online in 2025. Perhaps we could start with a brief history of the Academic Forms Group and how or why it was established?

Tim Lanzendörfer (TL): Why don't I start since I was one of the people who launched it in January of 2023. So, me and Fabio Durão (University of Campinas) started this group in the wake of discussing our anxieties and annoyances around existent academic forms. We wanted to talk to people about what we felt about academic forms and to find out whether that feeling was shared around the globe. We decided to invite a couple of people to join an e-mail group, and we'd meet once a month to discuss the question of form. It turned out to be pretty successful! We had quite a few people who were interested, through several rounds of calls for contributions and participation, and we ended up meeting regularly through 2023 and 2024. So, the Academic Forms Group came from a shared annoyance with discussions around academic forms as they exist.

Pierre-Héli Monot (PM): By the very nature of its theme and focus, it soon became clear that the group could be expanded. The high formality and, to some degree, artificiality of the forms we *must* necessarily use in academic labor appeared to be more than the pet peeve of a few scholars loosely connected to the group. We realized it was a widely shared critique and experience of the forms and formalism of academic life. Soon, we also realized that there were several subthemes that some had first identified individually, subthemes which were just as broadly shared as questions relating to formality, formalism, and formalization. Namely, the question of the formalization of social process themselves, or more precisely, the way we could think of the advent of stable, codified scholarly forms as part of a more general trend towards standardization since the Industrial Revolution. That opened the group to a number of more political questions and sociological approaches.

TL: Later in the process, after we had established what we wanted to talk about, that emerged as part of our larger concern. We quickly came to the conclusion that forms were embedded in larger systems that were well worth interrogating as part of the project.

RI: Do you see this as a hopeful process?

TL: Yeah, that's a good question. I do see this as a hopeful process. One of the unspoken goals Fabio and I had was to come up with new ideas for forms, and new ways of thinking about how forms and different forms of outreach

interrelate. Audiences are spoken to in particular forms—what would change if we changed the forms being used, and could we reach different people with our work. So, there is definitely an element of hopefulness for a reshaped discipline, in my case, American studies, or literary studies.

PM: The question we have begun paying more attention to in recent months is whether changing these forms or at least arguing in favor of loosening their formal grip on scholarship is at all possible and desirable in the first place. That is a question that has become more and more important to us, and we have evolved towards a more prosaic cartography and historical analysis of how forms coexist in academic practices. Hence, the question of hope is displaced: we are not oriented towards the loosening of forms, but rather towards a more useful understanding of their function and historical development.

TL: That's an important correction. It's not just about changing, it's also about understanding and finding the good sides of the forms we have, as it were. Which is also part of the hopefulness of this group.

RI: I would argue that exploration can be a hopeful activity. I think we all joined academia for various reasons—likely, in part, because we enjoy its forms. I wonder if you could expand on what type of critique it is you see the group performing, and in whose interests?

TL: This group is not supposed to be a fundamental take down of all academic forms. It is genuinely a probing endeavor, in which we take seriously the establishment of taxonomy and the validation of some forms. One of the questions Fabio and I started out with was: Why have we been writing 8000-word essays for 70 years? One of the answers to that question is simply that they work *well*. They really do the kind of work we *want* them to do. This is not a straitjacket we've been put into and need to get out of. As to whose interest is the formal study of academia, I genuinely think that, if this works out as a project, it's really enlightening across disciplines, especially in the humanities, because it is the kind of work that fundamentally wants to think about how we do what we do and why. It's not restricted to English studies, even though an interest in form comes from literary studies.

RI: If there was a form that has stood out to you over the course of your thinking through academic forms, is there one that you particularly enjoy, or think is important to conserve or explore in more detail?

TL: Oh, I would say that I am strongly wedded to the monograph. I really enjoy the form and find it's an important way of making a coherent long, long argument. One realizes, I think, that there are more and more problems placing monographs and an increasing interest in shorter monographs. This is based on a belief that students especially, but also, we [scholars] don't have the time or inclination to read long arguments. I really like monographs when they are thoroughly argued through, and I've not yet written one of those—I don't think—but in the future I will, and that'll be a happy day for me.

PM: Beyond the question of specific formats, genres, and textual forms, we need to understand how formalization enabled literary studies to become a properly historical and critical discipline, if not a "science" in the somewhat austere sense of the term. The appearance of footnotes, the standardization of citations, the emergence of the abstract, the codification of bibliographical metadata that is now part of most publications all made it possible for literary critical discourse to be subjected to processes of critique, comparison and evaluation in the context of ever greater professional and epistemic stakes. The formalization of literary studies as a discipline is not trivial. By subjecting itself to formalization, literary studies attempted to meet scientific standards that were first established elsewhere, in other disciplines, and for other uses. It failed. Yet few people write essays in the style of the 1920s or 1940s, from Vernon Parrington to Cyril Connolly, and to some degree it is a great relief. That has made the discipline more presentable, if not more robust or interesting.

If I had to plead for a form, I would agree that the monograph is precious, but precisely because it has remained somewhat less formal than other forms, partly because its standard length is more elastic or flexible. This has perhaps something to do with the difficulty of quantifying and standardizing the time needed to write a monograph, a task which is usually understood to be more processual and less teleological than writing an article. The form of the monograph is hence not quite as formalizable as others — yet. That has been changing in recent years, with publishers making desired word-counts explicit and voicing increasingly brash editorial suggestions. Funding insti-

tutions have also begun quantifying "monographs" and equating them with so many "articles," and vice versa. But the monograph remains a slightly more anarchistic form than others, and that is a precious affordance, whatever the value of this term.

RI: The term "affordance" comes up often in discussions of form. It might be attributed to Levine's *Forms: Whole*, *Rhythm*, *Hierarchy*, *Network*. To what extent do you see the new formalist tradition as originating in the US academic context?

TL: When we say "affordance," we very much refer back to Levine; maybe more for convenience than because we think it's a good usage. I say *we*, but *I* have problems with Levine's use of affordance, as it is not very accurate as far as the origins of the term go, but as a concept, it's really useful. What "affordance" names is a relational potentiality, where certain ways of being used are available to certain users but not others. The example from design theory is that a branch does afford sitting on, but to a bird, not an elephant. The affordances that forms provide are very much of that kind; there's certain things you can do with some with specific forms, but there are also things you cannot do. They are relational insofar as you have to say some people can do some things with forms that other people cannot. The example I would go to is: Fredric Jameson could write an essay for *New Left Review* without a single footnote in sight; I can't. "Affordance" highlights the play in the things that forms can do—that is a concept we draw from Levine.

Secondly, one of the things I discovered at the first conference organized by this group in Munich in October 2024, was that our American guests felt that Levine's *Forms* is not really received there at all, and that this has been more of a European phenomenon in American studies. In American studies in Europe, and specifically, Germany, Levine's work has been widely received, so there's an interesting gap between how "forms" have been understood to be a very important intervention in German American studies and less so, apparently, by American scholars.

PM: Thinking historically, it's interesting to note that among the seminal works in American studies, Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* is the most frequently overlooked. It is nowhere near as present in the canon as F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* or Leo Marx's *The Machine in the*

Garden, to name just two venerable dinosaurs, but it deals with processes of standardization, Taylorization, scientific management, and normalization in ways that are relevant again today. It is one of *the* foundational, but less well-trodden paths that American studies could have taken. There is hence an atavism or antiqueness to the theme of forms and formalization. For an Americanist, the question of forms is perhaps always a little more open to social history than it is, or has been, for British scholars or French scholars, to say nothing of the classical literary formalists, of course. There is an inherent tension in the fate of American studies, in the sense that it proposed an interesting notion of forms at its inception, but which it almost immediately discarded—even though *Technics and Civilizations* was a magnificent book.

TL: If I may, one of the things that American studies specifically does, is have a broader sense of what we can look at as far as culture is concerned. It's not a literary discipline, but very much a broad field encompassing all kinds of social questions and media. That is basically what Levine's book does: It expands New Formalism from the narrow literary-oriented field to the social field. This may explain why German American studies has really taken it up, and why literary scholars working on American literature in English Departments in the United States feel less inclined to adopt it wholesale because they might say, "we know the formalist bits already and all the social bits aren't really our thing."

RI: Having been based in Germany for a couple of years now, it seems to me that there are a lot of form-related research groups, such as the DFG funded project Forms in Dialogue. I wondered to what extent you see the Academic Forms Group as overlapping with those other research projects?

TL: Irmtraud Huber, Natalie Roxburgh, and Wolfgang Funk are the main organizers of the Forms in Dialogue group. We have talked to them, so we know what they are doing. There is an overlap through the discussion of the valence of form—the question of what counts as form, how it counts as form, or what it does. However, they have a different task because they are interested in transhistorical discussions of literary form, and we are basically arguing that the question of form is important in a field where it's been under-discussed, namely scholarship itself.

One of the things that people have been talking about a lot recently is practices of academic work. Some interesting insights come from Steffen Martus and Carlos Spoerhase's book *Geistesarbeit: Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften*, and John Guillory's *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, which are very much geared towards what is it that we do day in, day out, and why. One of the things that's been under discussed, I think, in this context is what form does academic work take concretely—not just we sit down and write, but what do we write and how does it impinge on how we write. The Academic Forms Group fills in a gap very specific to academic work, not itself critical work, but there are a lot of theoretical overlaps, and a lot of interest on our part in staying in touch with those groups.

PM: I think the difference is maybe even more marked than one could assume, simply because once you decide to look at forms in a praxiological framework—meaning once you look at standardized forms as standardized ways of doing standardized things one is *expected* to do, or one feels expected to do—then you open a number of questions pertaining to the institutional existence of these forms. This is something that is decidedly not transhistorical but marked by highly contingent institutional, professional, and epistemic needs. And that relates to extremely complex processes of evaluation, critique, rejection, cataloging and, occasionally, canonization. These are interesting processes that are usually well understood in themselves, but not as a set of mutually interrelated processes. So, standardization involved a very high degree of fuzziness and uncertainty for the user or scholar, even though they are paradoxically expected to use formal devices which are oriented towards clarity, order, and quantification.

RI: Do you see the group in some ways divided in two directions: those interested in the structural or institutional forms, and those interested in how the individual works through academia?

TL: Interesting, I had not thought about it that like that, simply because I feel like it's always *both*. You cannot really think structurally without also looking at individual expression, as it were. One of the things we did for the conference was to collect instances of individual forms, and the discussion of individual forms very frequently invites a discussion of how the individual performs these forms. I think all of us know at the very least that it's difficult to think of these forms outside the very restrictive social and professional con-

texts in which they operate. It is *not* about how you work with a form, but always about how you work with a form that also works on you.

PM: I think this opposition is to some degree artificial. Though it certainly exists at the level of individual curiosities, proclivities, and perhaps previously published work. In a sense, we have also come to realize that these forms are never really observable — and never really interesting — outside of the context in which they have evolved or in which they must be used.

RI: At the conference, there were a lot of guests from the US, but also from the UK. How do you see the reach of the group and are there distinct research directions that seem to be more apparent in certain institutional contexts like the UK, the US, Germany?

TL: That was very interesting, because we had talked online as a group but had never had opportunity to socialize and organically work out what kinds of things we would find interesting or concern us in day-to-day practice. The conference demonstrated a very distinct set of concerns that American and British academics bring to the table compared to German academics, which are bound up in the systems under which we labor. For example, the REF system in the UK—the research excellence framework—means that academics are asked what does your work look like and what can be put into a concrete form for evaluation. It spells out what your work has been. Bound up in that formality is the fact that some work will not be recognized as an academic form because it is worthless to the REF. That restricts the kind of work you can do. If we compare that to Germany, it's probably a bit simpler as our outputs are not usually checked up on, and we can just put whatever we like onto our CV. On the other hand, we also have different sorts of things that we would probably agree are not genuine forms of academic work, such as outreach at a school. You can put that on your CV, but nobody's going to care. The formalities of these contexts are genuinely important, and this is one of the more eye-opening areas of our group's work.

As far as the question of our reach is concerned, we would like to have a much broader spread than we do, and we are working on it. We're very much a literary studies group: English and American studies, but we do have a few sociologists on board. It is interesting that there seems to be a pretty strong connection between thinking about form and literary studies. We would like

to be a little bit more global, although we've already got people who are from Brazil, Oman, and India joining the online group. This is meant to be a broad church; everybody is welcome to bring in their perspectives—presumably from the humanities. I'm not sure we can easily work with mathematical forms, although we might try!

PM: At the conference, I found it intriguing that many expressed the longing for less academic, less standardized forms. In practice, however, few have turned to more explicitly literary essays, hybrid digital forms, and conversational pieces like this one. This is a contradiction that should be taken seriously, as there is both a discomfort with the high standardization of academic work and a very high conformity to contextual expectations which discourages scholars to actually use forms they claim would be more conductive to what they have to say.

RI: Do you think that this will be a process where you're always chasing forms and therefore the work of the Academic Forms Group will never end because there's presumably always a new type of form to pursue?

PM: Maybe! The question I keep asking myself is whether we can at all distinguish between standardized forms and mere mannerisms. On the one hand, there are indeed codified forms, in the sense of formal demands that are usually made explicit in submission guidelines, CV formats, formalized lists of publications, standardized citation formats, etc. On the other hand, there are equally recurrent, equally normalized stylistic ticks that are present in what appears to be a majority of essays and monographs, but which are never formulated or requested explicitly by institutional actors. I am for instance interested in the very high prevalence of the colon in academic titles. This is not only the sole punctuation mark that is tolerated in titles (you rarely see an exclamation point or a question mark in article titles anymore), but it is also the punctuation mark that seems to be implicitly expected by reviewers and editors. I've been working on a piece called "Cute Words, Colon, Big Words," in other words a title structure which has become the logical and aesthetic skeleton of the academic title for journal publications. Title, colon, subtitle. Cute words, colon, big words. The colon seems to link hypergenerality (the cute words, often a trivial quote or a gerund phrasal verb) and hyperspecificity (the big words, often a string of sonorous technical terms coupled to a name or date) to strike a balance between adaptability

and specialization. It seems to me such mannerisms are particularly suited to averting professional risks. They are a rational strategy in high-competition and high-stakes professional contexts: the colon increases the attractiveness of academics in a professional field that demands both specialization and generality from applicants. The question, however, is whether the colon functions in the same way as a more general textual form or format does. Let us not forget that many of the 2 million academic journal articles published each year are never read by anyone other than their authors, reviewers, and editors. This situation places a disproportionate burden on the titles of journal articles: in CVs, publication titles function as metonymies for unread academic work. So, I would be a proponent of answering your question with a resounding yes. We will probably be facing both directions: The minutiae of academic styles and overarching processes of standardization.

TL: There are two answers. Do we keep this going indefinitely? Realistically, no, because we are going to be dead at some point, and that's the very last point where I'm assuming this group will fall apart, as I'm not sure it is an intergenerational project.

PM: There is life after death, Tim. It is called being an Emeritus. People just tend to get the chronological order wrong.

TL: Yes, or maybe I'll be uploaded to some kind of digital database, and I can just keep on doing what I'm doing anyway!

So, obviously and objectively, yes, it'll end at some point. But as a concern I don't think it will end. One of the things we're designing and planning as a concrete artifact this group can produce is what we've been calling a *Living Encyclopedia of Academic Forms*. The "living" part is important in order to work continuously on academic forms even as the forms change. If there's an entry on say the "Monograph," somebody in 10 years' time could say "there's been developments in the monograph we need to talk about" and just add to this to the encyclopedia. So that's one of the planned outputs, as an endpoint for the group's interests, but at the same time a gesture towards the indefinite future where we will hopefully still be talking about the benefits of forms.

RI: So, I think this is the perfect opportunity for me to ask what is next for the Academic Forms Group?

TL: Bunches of things! I mean, I don't want to give away too much because all of it is uncertain, but different sets of people are working on projects that are related to the forms group. We will be at the *MLA* conference in January, or we will have been, as I'm assuming this interview will come out afterward. We also hope to be going to a Brazilian conference in June 2025. We're writing several applications for funding from German and British agencies that would in different ways propel the work of the group forward. Certainly, the work on the proposed *Living Encyclopedia* has a high priority and needs funding. We would also like to run another conference to meet as a group again to continue what we did in Munich and get some more concrete work done. We'll of course resume monthly online meetings in 2025 and beyond. So, if any of the people reading this interview would like to join us, they should send me an e-mail and I'll add you to the mailing list.

PM: This project is inevitably open, as we are working at a time when important social and infrastructural transformations are taking place. Higher education is changing. Reading habits are changing. Quantitative expectations placed upon scholars are changing. Computing power is increasing. Generative technologies have recently been made available to the public. One of our interests is to think about the perceived permanence of scholarly forms against the backdrop of accelerating infrastructural and cultural changes. I think we, as a profession, are aware of a disconnect between what forms have so successfully performed for decades, and the way they are inserted into the social and technical landscape. The question of academic forms has gained new urgency because we have lost the belief in their permanence. Perhaps I am wrong, but I think this is an interesting dramatic tension that the group needs to think about.

TL: Yeah! Very good.

PM: It adds some "rizz" to the discussion.

TL: If you want to hang out with the cool kids, why not join us? "Rizz" is probably 1920s slang, or something.

PM: It is Gen Z slang for "charisma."

RI: The question of slang is not usually something discussed in academic discourse, or rather, we are more likely to address its avoidance in favor of a continuity of discursive practices and standards. But perhaps the inclusion of slang into even informal "academic" conversations and publications like this raises a pertinent concern around shifts in institutional environments which often accompany changing vocabularies.

PM: Epistemic transformations, new research directions, new scholarly styles, and generational turnovers are sometimes demonstrated formally. There are formal breaks that are staged and made ostentatiously public by seminal figures, either renegades or opportunists — but of course in many cases they are both at the same time, thankfully! So, there is not only a functional value attributed to forms in the sense of what they perform within a given context, but there is also a high symbolic value attached to them. Generational, epistemic, and formal breaks in disciplines also seems to be a necessary rite of passage, which adds a nicely ambiguous dimension to our project. And to return to “rizz,” to “charisma,” which is one of the very early themes in Weberian sociology, there is a highly charismatic dimension to those academics who are not only in the position to ostentatiously disregard formal norms, but also to do so successfully in the sense that their formal transgressions become the norm. This is something that is not attainable for the vast majority of academics, and those who are in a position to enforce formal breaks seem to gain from it what they already had anyway, namely institutional power — and rizz.

RI: Thank you both for taking the time to share more about the Academic Forms group with readers of NASJ. For those readers interested in joining the group, information can be found at https://keyforms.bham.ac.uk/about/. To join the mailing list please send a message to Tim here: tlanzend@em.uni-frankfurt.de.

About the authors

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