Call for Papers: DFG Symposium “Complexity and Simplicity”

An international literary studies symposium on “Complexity and Simplicity” will take place at the Villa Vigoni from September 22-25, 2015 with the support of the German Research Foundation (DFG). It conforms to the organizational template of the DFG German Studies symposia since the 1970s. The conference languages are English and German, though all participants should be capable of reading the papers and following the discussion in both languages.

Complexity is a ubiquitous topic. Yet in literary studies—as opposed to cybernetics and the social sciences, where the complexity of systems is measured by the number of relations compared with the number of elements—this concept has gained only a small degree of terminological precision. It can be measured by structural criteria, can indicate a high degree of ambiguity of meaning, or can denote a rupture with aesthetic or cognitive schema and conventions. Moreover, it is not typically used in a purely technical way but is instead bound up with an implicit valuation. Professional readers of literary texts tend to regard higher complexity, however defined in specific cases, as more fertile in knowledge and therefore more desirable. Aesthetic simplicity, on the other hand, has a more difficult status, especially since it often remains unresolved whether it constitutes the pre-complex starting point for an increasing (self)-reflexivity of art or the result of a complex reduction of complexity. It should not be overlooked that this normative preference for the complex over the simple is not based in the aesthetic objects themselves but arises from an institutional effect: insofar as it guarantees the interminability of the interpretative process, it puts the academic interpretation business on a permanent career path and subjects it to a dynamic of permanent one-upmanship. This can in fact lead to a narrowing of the literary canon, as certain authors invite an accumulation of interpretation that subsequently increases the complexity of further readings. This process is promoted by philology's relative distance from decision-making in contrast with other text-based disciplines, especially jurisprudence, which is forced at times into a brutal reduction of complexity by the necessity of making judgments.

The implications attendant upon the notion of complexity should be reconsidered from other perspectives as well. This notion often enters into alliance with a conception of modern societies, based in a particular philosophy of history, by which they attest to be more complexly composed than pre-modern cultures, whereas the latter are often characterized by simplicity. Rather than placing the dichotomy “complexity-simplicity” in the service of such overarching narratives, the symposium seeks to explain how, in all societies and cultural spheres, processes of increase and reduction of complexity coexist and bring coevolutionary interrelations and interdependencies into play. In regard to literary complexity in particular, what are the conditions in which the density of references within texts is increased and incisions into the (inter)textual web of meaning, interruptions, ignorance, rifts in traditions, and new approaches are introduced?

Four dimensions of this problematic deserve particular attention: 1) the cultural persistence of practices of reduction and their social and discursive implications; 2) the social, cognitive, and aesthetic organization of complexity through formgiving; 3) the role of genre rules and Gestalt principles and their poeetological reflection; 4) the meaning of the factor of time, above all with respect to processes of historicization. According to this heuristic, the symposium is loosely divided into four sections.
1. Practices of Simplicity  
**Chair: Niklaus Largier (German Studies / Medieval Studies, Berkeley)**

The first section deals with aesthetic, rhetorical, and, more specifically, poetic processes through which apparently simple relationships are transposed into complex forms or, conversely, the latter are reduced to concepts and images of simplicity. The increase and reduction of complexity thus do not constitute simple alternatives. Indeed, the increase of complexity is often bound up with postulates of simplification in intricate ways—thought paradigms of identity and difference, the development of Biblical hermeneutics in the middle ages, or the production of aesthetic appeal and incisiveness, for example. Sometimes the increase of complexity is the condition of renewed simplicity, whereas simplicity appears conversely as a hollowed out or condensed complexity. Mental exercises, dogmatic philosophical principles, revocations of academic learnedness through a genius aesthetic or other means, and ruptures in epochs and traditions can be analyzed as attempts to reproduce immediacy and simplicity—Attempts that are aware of the complexity that they leave behind. The artistic creation of topos of a life that is true and primordial in its simplicity, from shepherd poetry to the primitivism of the twentieth century, belongs to this context as well. In such aesthetic alternatives to the conditions of life at court, in the city, or ultimately in modernity in general, a strongly normative element comes to the fore: the simple can be polemically pitted against the complex and vice versa. Instead of assuming a clearly delineable dichotomy, this section emphasizes the analysis of textual processes that create complex semantic-cognitive structures, but with the opposing aim of offering models of simplification.

2. Formalization and Form  
**Chair: Christoph Möllers (Legal Studies, HU Berlin)**

Adorno’s dictum that form is “precipitated content” contains both cognitive and normative implications. On the one hand, it captures the process by which forms precipitate and sediment through repeated use in practice. The structure of such sedimentation, however, stipulates what is acknowledged as content and what gains validity. Forms always exclude something that would not be excluded by other forms.

In this light, one could see forms as instruments of the minimization of complexity, but, to be precise, these processes do not necessarily have anything to do with reduction. Forms are better understood as necessary elements of the organization of repetition—and in a basic way insofar as they do not just help to sort repetitions but to make events at all recognizable as repetitions.

The naturalizing metaphor of precipitation should not conceal the fact that forms can be made or, more to the point, that the form of “making” can also be used for the phenomenon of formalization, with the consequence that formalization can be represented as the result of a decision. Formalization can make a text from a chain of signs, a work from a text, an act of creation from an event, and an author or judge from a person. All of these techniques of formalization can be seen through. They can be doubted on the basis of references to other signs, other objects, other events, and other people, and such a doubt and the subsequent re-formalization along with it is unavoidably a part of every reflective social practice. Thus, it would be illusory to assume that forms would contribute less and their critique more complexity. Just the opposite is equally possible.
Forms seem to resemble concepts in their structure of preparing for the future in order to absorb it into or exclude it from a canon of forms. Concepts also serve “to handle the possible in advance” (Blumenberg). Of course, forms seem, in contrast with reflection upon them, to not necessarily depend on language or concept-formation. Even when they occur in the medium of language, they go beyond it, like rhythm and the typeface of a poetic form or the handwritten signature. The connection between linguistic and nonlinguistic, conceptual and non-conceptual reveals another relation between complexity and form in which the latter neither necessarily reduces nor increases the former. Rather, the potential for forms to constitute complexity arises from the fact that formalizations are hardly conceivable if not reflexively.

The second section will discuss fundamental questions in the construction of social and aesthetic structures. An important consideration is the distinction between internal complexity that is institutionally “fostered” and both subdued and increasable through the consummation of form and a “wild” complexity outside of such formalizations. This also brings the partly antagonistic, partly symbiotic interrelationship between formal structures and informal processes into view.

3. Genre and Gestalt
Chair: Juliane Vogel (German Studies / Literary Studies, Konstanz)

Horatio’s demand that the work of poetry or visual art is to be “simplex et unum” rapidly loses ground in the Enlightenment. Under the influence of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s aesthetic, the theory that “there is no simple perfection” takes hold. The production of poetry can no longer be reduced to the denominator of simple organizational formulae, nor can their beauty be derived from the compliance with a manageable number of poetic rules. Contemporaries capture this increase in complexity with the concept of the “manifold,” which incorporates new concepts of mixture, interference, ambiguity, pluralization, and dynamization and inspires more flexible aesthetic forms that compete with the living organism in the complexity of their makeup. Goethe’s botanical conceptions of metamorphosis assert an intrinsic and permanent mutability of the aesthetic structure and underlie a complexity that can only be influenced to a certain extent even by the author.

While these developments constitute the historical point of departure of the planned section, conceivable questions and accents would size up the space of tension between the increase and reduction of complexity in modernity. Among the diverse scenes of the increase of complexity, section three is especially oriented toward the poetics of genres, which diverges from taxonomic-subsumptive ordering schemata and instead turns to transitional, fluctuating modes of poetic production. Conversely, conceptions of simplification that translate growing complexities into graspable forms and thereby reach for genetic, systematic, eidetic, or mathematical models will also be discussed. Key here is Goethe’s concept of “Gestalt,” which mediates the concepts of influence (Prägung) and living development (lebendige Entwicklung) and will be discussed in relation to the concept of genre. In general, we will inquire into “complex concepts of simplicity” that guide interests in the so-called “archetypes” (Urformen) of modernity (Herder, Goethe), the complex demands of the concept of the “naïve” (Schiller), and the premises of the genus humile taken up by authors such as Matthias Claudius in the pastoral undercutting of artificial manners of speaking. From this vantage, the discursive place of those epistemological projects of the twentieth century
that turn back to the “simple forms” (André Jolles) can be determined. At the same time, this opens a perspective on the poetological preconditions of a genre that, from its beginnings, was related to a pluralization of worlds and challenged pre-modern thought on genre on the basis of its complex references to reality—the transgressive genre of the novel, whose career began as aesthetics discovered multiplicity in unity.

4. Processes of Historicization
Chair: Peter Geimer (Art History, FU Berlin)

According to Niklas Luhmann, the historicization of art in the eighteenth century minimized the demands on its topicality. That which is successfully relegated to the museum and marked as “past” no longer has to serve as a model for the present and, because it is historically surpassed, is “sent back to the past.” At the same time, this conservation of bygone art also leads to a “self-doubt of the present,” as the works that are labeled “past” bring the present under the sign of contingency as well: “The past floods the present in order to deny that it has to be the way that it is.”

The historicization of art thus functions to disburden and burden the present; it orients and disorients; its narratives are processes of simplifying reduction but also the generation of new and unforeseen complexity. Against the background of this two-fold determination, the fourth section will inquire into various processes, functions, and effects of the historicization of the arts. How does organized complexity relate to “collateral,” preexisting complexity of the historical? Which forms and appearances of complexity engender the phenomenon of historical contingence? When is simplicity not complex enough, and when is it the result of complex processes? Possible emphases include: the retroactive production of “simple” or “complex” prehistories (the “simple” middle ages in contrast with “complex” modernity, the return to “simplicity” after phases of “overrefinement”); teleology as a method of the reduction of complexity; caesurae, cuts, and new beginnings as narrative processes of ordering (as in the tabula rasa rhetoric of the avant-garde or the talk of art “after ‘45”); heuristic enactments of the end (as in Winckelmann’s swearing of the “downfall” of works of art in order to be able, on the basis of this downfall, to write the History of Ancient Art); theories of conservation (such as Alois Riegl’s distinction between “antique value,” “historical value,” and “value of commemoration/remembrance” of a monument); the praise of obliteration and forgetting (as in Nietzsche’s “Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”). Aside from such forms of history writing in art, the historicization brought about by the arts themselves should also be thematized: e.g. the creation and revocation of the past in historical painting; photography as a medium of recording and a “general inventory” that, in contrast with the memory image, preserves the “refuse” of history (Kracauer). Where possible, the contributions should deal with the suggested systematic aspects on the basis of historical case studies.

On the Proceedings:

For the sake of thorough discussion, the symposium will avoid the recitation of lectures. All contributions will be sent to the participants electronically before the conference. The contributions will be published along with reports on the discussions immediately after the symposium. In order to foster a good working environment, the meeting will be limited to 35 participants. A written, publishable submission either in German or English constitutes the
requirement for participation. Participants are expected to be present and active discussants for all days of the meeting.

Interested scholars from Germany and abroad, especially young scholars (though, exceptions aside, not doctoral students) are invited to send the signatories their intention to participate and their suggested topic by **September 1, 2014**, including a short abstract and a suggestion of the appropriate section. On the basis of the abstracts, the presiders will recommend to the DFG who should be invited to the symposium.

The ultimate print version of the submission must be sent to the presiding curator by May 1, 2015 at the latest. Maximal length of the contribution is 30 pages of 1800 characters; shorter submissions are welcome.

**Deadlines and Schedule**

September 1, 2014: Application with a suggested topic and abstract, either in German or English
November 2014: Provisional notification of invitees
Early December 2014: Invitation of participants by the DFG
May 1, 2015: Delivery of publishable submissions to all curators (electronically)
June 2015: Forwarding of the submissions to all participants (electronically)


February 1, 2016: Submission of the revised publishable contributions

Travel costs (transportation and daily allowance) will be covered by the DFG on the basis of German federal travel cost regulations, insofar as they are not borne by the participants’ home institutions.

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