

### **Editors' Note**

In the preface to his *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson notes, "The stress Marx laid on individual works of art and the value they had for him (as for Hegel before and Lenin after) were very far from being a matter of personality: in some way, which it is the task of Marxist theory to determine more precisely, literature plays a central role in the dialectical process." The aim of this issue of *Mediations*, as each of the articles that comprise it argues, is not simply to show how Marxist criticism might be understood as an invaluable lens through which one might better understand literature (which it no doubt is), but more importantly to demonstrate how literature, as Jameson here suggests, might be brought to bear on Marxist criticism itself. The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a widespread revival of literature's and literary criticism's "big questions," a revival frequently connected to a distinct sense of disciplinary crisis. The leading journals in the field have occupied themselves with countless variations on questions such as: what is reading? What is literature? What is theory? Have literature and theory reached a point of exhaustion? If not, what is the role of both in the twenty-first century? In the context of such large-scale disciplinary debates that emerge out of a moment in which literary criticism has allegedly stopped utilizing and further developing its most basic disciplinary tools, we have also witnessed a revival of Marxism. To be sure, nostalgic, one-dimensional idealizations of Marxism must be regarded suspiciously, and a number of essays in this issue do so. Importantly, however, this collection intends to respond to the current moment of crisis by working through its productive contradictions, rather than dwelling upon its paralyzing moments of assumed exhaustion. To this end, this collection brings together a spectrum of established and emerging scholars, all of whom grapple with a wide variety of those big questions and problems the current historical conjuncture raises.

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This issue of *Mediations*, then, takes seriously the idea that Marxism can help to endow a discipline in crisis with new energy by confronting that crisis head on. The essays that make up this collection provide methodological, practical, and theoretical reformulations of literary criticism's central principles as well as new categories and models of critique, which together intend to indicate the wide range of potentiality contained in literary study in the twenty-first century.

The essays contained in this issue are dedicated to two simultaneous and interconnected levels of inquiry: 1) examining the ways in which we might define the project and concrete praxis of Marxist literary criticism today and 2) extrapolating methodological and disciplinary conclusions from this particular examination to arrive at general indications regarding major disciplinary concepts. In particular, these essays bring together a wide spectrum of what we consider to be some of the most vibrantly discussed categories today: literariness, (critical) theory, interpretation, reading, form, disciplinarity, creativity, and varieties of material and historical determinations that each of these ever-changing categories mediates. It is via the simultaneous commitment to fundamental disciplinary categories and praxes, and rigorous analyses of the complexity of problems with which the twenty-first century presents us that the authors in this issue try to avoid unproductive and frequently sensationalist proclamations of the end of literature or the exhaustion of theory, and instead formulate future visions of literary critique that courageously embraces its own tradition. It is thus not just the revitalized interest in Marxist critique in order to resolve impasses of the present, but also the characteristic willingness of Marxist critics perpetually and radically to reformulate the very definitions of what constitutes Marxist praxis in order to produce timely methods that endow this issue with a sense of both urgency and necessity. This project consequently grew over the course of the last few years at a variety of conferences, including the Marxist Literary Group's Institute on Culture and Society, from which several of the essays included here are taken. (Information about the 2010 ICS, which will be hosted by St. Francis Xavier University, Canada, can be found at <http://mlg.eserver.org>.) The result of these and other discussions was nothing less than the development of a problematic: if Marxism can help guide the way into future studies of literature, how must Marxism rethink itself radically in the twenty-first century, and how can such a rethinking conserve both disciplinary identity and its relevance in a historical period that too often preoccupies itself primarily with theorizations of the end of our discipline, rather than its future structures?

We begin with Imre Szeman's interview with the political philosopher, journalist, and writer, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, whose reflections on the

development of contemporary politics in Hungary, and Eastern Europe more generally, points to the very historical shift that underlies this reassessment of the relationship between Marxism and literature. As a leading figure of the democratic opposition movement, Tamás was at the forefront of the events that not only culminated in the resignation of János Kádár in 1988, but also marked the collapse of communism in Hungary. Elected to parliament as a member of the liberal party in 1990, Tamás shortly thereafter left professional politics, and has, since then, moved increasingly to the left. Thus, although he, like many Eastern European dissidents, had at one point conceived economic and political integration into a Western-style modernity as a means of securing greater rights and liberties, that same process of integration would eventually prompt Tamás to search for an alternative to a capitalist system that had promised — though nonetheless failed — to produce more democratic forms of governance. What he describes here as his “turn to Marx,” then, offers far-reaching insights into a post-Soviet region in which the general disillusionment that scores of commentators on the right celebrated as having precipitated a political transition in countries like Hungary has given way to a growing disenchantment with the market economy that even most committed of neoliberals have failed to explain. The point, however, is not, as Tamás makes clear, to indulge in a kind of *Ostalgie*, nor even to insist on a return to the Party politics of the past; and indeed, insofar as the fall of the Soviet Union is understood here as part of a more global process underwritten by the “worldwide disintegration of labor,” the construction of a radical — and particularly Marxist — political philosophy requires an awareness of the ways in which this historical conjuncture has rendered certain solutions obsolete. But while this poses new challenges to the Left in Eastern Europe, where the impossibility of hegemony is compounded by the rise of new though no less pernicious forms of ultranationalism, the absence of any viable alternative has, as Tamás suggests, also rendered Marxism all the more relevant, and as such, points to lessons for the Left throughout the globe.

What these challenges might mean for Marxist literary criticism, moreover, is in many ways the focus of this special issue of *Mediations*. And yet, any discussion of what Marxist literary criticism is today, as Szeman's second contribution to this collection suggests, is immediately complicated by the fact that there is no unitary methodology or set of considerations that distinguish a “Marxist” approach to literature from others; according to Szeman, “There is no such thing as a Marxist literary criticism.” The point, nonetheless, is less polemical than it seems, and in fact Marxism, as Szeman demonstrates, has long privileged literature as an object of analysis and critique, even though the reasons for doing so, as well as the ways of going

about it, have widely varied. Szeman subsequently turns to what he identifies as the three primary directions Marxist literary criticism has taken throughout the twentieth century. The first of these approaches is largely methodological in scope, questioning the premises and assumptions that underlie existing forms of literary criticism to reveal the social, and particularly economic, function literature fulfils. Meanwhile, the second approach is primarily concerned with the category of the literary itself, examining literature and literary criticism as institutional practices whose formation is bound up with specific social and economic conditions. But if these twin tendencies are undertaken with an eye to understanding the instrumental role literature and criticism play in the production and reproduction of social and economic domination, a third mode of Marxist criticism builds off and preserves this skepticism, while attempting to lay bare the possibilities and alternatives that inhere within the literary — a utopian content that emerges as both the product and annulment of this very system of domination. Here, one cannot help but think of Fredric Jameson's contributions to Marxist criticism, although Szeman turns to a foundational text like "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" only to underscore the particular impasse in which this third mode is caught, unable to conceive of literature, and culture more generally, in terms of the purely "ideological" or "anti-ideological." And yet, for Szeman, what this impasse points to is a historical shift, which, rather than put an end to Marxist literary criticism altogether, has produced the conditions for a fourth as yet unnamed possibility.

What, then, would this fourth possibility look like? Neil Larsen offers one answer to this question in the form of a proposed method for critical theory that advances beyond the tenets of "ideology-critique." Here, "method" is quickly revealed as another word for Marxism's own recourse to immanent critique, a form of analysis undertaken from the perspective — or *standpoint* — of its object (whether capitalism, literature, or culture), whose immanent contradictions themselves become the point of departure for a dialectical approach that eradicates any notion of that object as a preexistent given. As such, it is a matter of refusing all transhistorical and transcendental authority, so that the general thrust of immanent critique is, in this sense, away from Kant and toward Hegel. Meanwhile, although the demand for immanence in explicitly Left critique finds its origins and most complete expression in Marx's *Capital*, Marxist theory and criticism — to say nothing of "theory" in general — has bothered little with the problem of standpoint in relation to cultural, and, in particular, literary objects (with the notable exceptions of Lukács and Adorno). What follows, therefore, is Larsen's attempt to specify the immanent critical standpoint of literature by way of an inquiry into the problem of teaching literary texts "theoretically." This, in

turn, allows for the articulation of a dialectical critique that dispenses with what he identifies as the "fallacy of application," an expectation that, of necessity, structures "theory" and "text" as antinomies, but which in so doing provides a means toward a more rigorous conceptualization of theoretical objects as "subject/objects." From this perspective, literary texts are not simply objects "out there" that "theory" acts upon, but are instead to be recognized, according to Larsen, as "no less the subjects of their own theorization"; in other words, every text always entails its own theorization. But, to function as the ground for "critique" (as against "interpretation" alone), this method must also provide a means toward understanding the relationship between this "subject/object" and the social totality. To this end, Larsen introduces the category of mimesis as that through which the subject meditates itself *consciously* and in such a way as to recall what Marx had described as the social action of commodities. Thus, whereas "value" in Marx constitutes the objective medium through which society produces and reproduces itself *unconsciously*, Larsen conceives "mimesis" as a similar form of social mediation that nevertheless remains available to consciousness. The standpoint of literature subsequently emerges as none other than "the contradiction between mimesis and value, or between reified and mimetic forms of objectivity," marking, at the same time, the limit of all reifying forms of consciousness.

We next turn to Mathias Nilges's reflections on Marxism and form today, and his critique of what might be described as regressions of the now. The question of form, of course, has underwritten various literary criticisms since at least the nineteenth century, proving no less central to the development of Marxist criticism from Adorno and Lukács, through Jameson and Schwarz, to the emergent mode of Marxian critique underlying Nilges's essay. Meanwhile, although the advent of deconstruction, new historicism, and the "cultural turn" appears to have dealt a death blow to many of the formalisms of the past, much commentary has recently been devoted to revivifying the category of form as a principal concern for literary criticism. And yet, as Nilges illustrates, this "new formalism" and the return to questions about literature, interpretation, and method simply bear witness to anxieties about the disintegration of a disciplinary identity that literary criticism struggles to maintain. Rather than result in a rigorous reassessment of formal analysis in relation to the literary, new formalism attempts to resurrect older concepts and methods of inquiry only to suggest that "[t]he way to fix the problems of the present ... is to move ahead into the past." Marxist criticism is just as surely the object of such nostalgic appropriations, which, "idealizing Adorno's or Lukács's notions of form and formalist methodology," "resurrects Marxist formalism as an antidialectical, a priori

concept.” But insofar as this ahistoricity not only harks back to the antinomies of bourgeois liberalism Lukács discovered in Kant, but also marks a “crisis of futurity on the level of thought” constitutive of neoliberalism today, the nostalgic impulse of contemporary literary criticism here becomes the impetus for a reengagement with Marxist formalism, a mode of formal analysis for which the way out of such conceptual dead ends has always been through history. For Nilges, then, the point is not simply to criticize new formalism as regressive or naive, but rather to grasp the shortcomings of contemporary literary criticism as an index of those mutations within the socioeconomic order that must, at the same time, be brought to bear on Marxist notions of form itself. The result is a critical method that extends and challenges Marxism’s attention to form via the economic model proposed by the regulation school; a method, moreover, that becomes indispensable to any attempt to comprehend the formal investments of contemporary authors like William Gibson and Kim Stanley Robinson. Identifying culture as the mediation between the social dimension and structure of contemporary capitalism, Nilges’s intervention not only “assigns formal change a vital function in the supersession of moments of structural crisis,” but also — and perhaps more importantly — demonstrates that today “culture has no other besides capital.”

Nicholas Brown’s contribution similarly seeks to reanimate the disruptive potential in culture, but does so by way of an extended reflection on the many ends of literature. The first of these “ends,” as Brown explains, is a logical one, constituted by the “contradictions internal to literature,” which “are immanently its end in that their resolution would entail its supersession,” but which “are also the precondition for it functioning.” For Brown, this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the dialectical relationship between an anti-representational practice (the sublime) and a representational practice (allegory) that forms a dynamic central to literature; to abandon either, and thus supersede the productive impasse between these, necessarily involves doing something other than literature. This logical end, in turn, leads back to the very origins of the institution of literature, whose emergence at the turn of the nineteenth century (and specifically in Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* fragments) bears witness to the birth of not only literature in the modern sense, but also literary theory. But the further elaboration of this dynamic has little to do with defining the literary as such, and much more with demonstrating how literary criticism might be understood best as what Brown calls a “formal materialism,” a mode of analysis that “must be completed every time, and revised in light of, every time, a thing it waits for.” For reasons that become clear, the key to understanding this operation turns out to be none other than Hegel, although, importantly,

not the Hegel of system and stasis but rather the Hegel, who, providing a minimal framework, challenges us to take up the ceaseless labor of the negative. Indeed, to the extent that every object (literary, theoretical, and otherwise) entails its own theory — that is, “immanently contains its own theory” — the impulse toward systematization is everywhere denied. Not surprisingly, this formal materialism immediately finds a ready equivalent in Marxism, for which, Brown insists, it is “always this moment, this crisis, this problem that has to be understood, and not the system as a whole that has to be elaborated.” In this sense, just as there is no one Marxism that speaks to the totality of social relations across space and time, there is no one literary criticism that speaks to every text, which is just to say that insofar as they are formal materialisms, Marxism and literary criticism have no existence independent of their particular objects of analysis. Brown’s essay, then, provides us with some sense of what this might mean for a Marxist literary criticism by turning his attention to another end of literature: postmodernism, or, what at least one version of Marxist criticism has conceived as the real subsumption of (cultural) labor under capital. Reflecting on the mobilization of regulation theory found in the previous essay alongside Bourdieu’s distinction between the “restricted” and “general” art markets, Brown gestures toward an account that turns the ideology of postmodernism, heteronomy, on its head, and in so doing, reveals a logic of autonomy that short-circuits the movement from formal to real subsumption.

In Aisha Karim’s essay, the end of literature takes the form of a crisis of representation in Wole Soyinka’s novel, *Season of Anomy*. For while a number of critics have noted a tendency in Soyinka’s dramas to prioritize an individual will that resonates with the figure of the Yoruba god, Ogun, Karim’s essay argues that *Season of Anomy* marks a clear point of departure from the poetics and politics that underlie Soyinkan practice, producing what it conceives as the conditions of possibility for collective action. Written in the aftermath of the Biafran war of independence (1967-1970), *Season of Anomy* centers on the efforts of its protagonist, Ofeyi, to create a workers’ vanguard, if only to suggest, Karim notes, that it “has done away with ‘mere criticism’ and now seeks solution.” Importantly, this shift is not facilitated by the discovery of a more complete or appropriate image of such action, and in fact, Karim maintains that it is precisely the absence of an adequate figure for the collective — that is, the impossibility of representing some alternative — that opens up a new set of political possibilities in this particular art form. Thus, the agent of social transformation emerges in *Season of Anomy* as two possibilities: on one hand, “mass mobilization led by a vanguard” (Ofeyi), and on the other, “a band of enlightened few waging guerilla warfare, and acting on behalf of the community” (the Dentist). Soyinka’s novel,

nonetheless, ultimately regards each of these possibilities as solutions on the level of thought that cannot be executed on the plane of history, recognizing itself, in turn, as a “failed text.” At the same time, however, Karim argues that this failure leads to a realization with a distinctly political valence, the realization, in other words, that “real-world agents, its readers, must be interpolated into the world and the ethos of the novel.” This, then, is achieved by what is described here as the arrest of spectacle and spectator — a world to be transformed and the agent of change — as suggested, first, in a scene that plays out a containment of political possibility at the hands of the “culture industry,” and, second, in the novel’s depiction of a savage killing and dehumanization of an individual witnessed by the novel’s protagonist. Contrasting the “workers’ collective struggles with a passive relationship between the spectacle and the viewers,” and, in this sense, the reader, *Season of Anomy*, according to Karim, moves “from the activity of the characters in the novel, to the activity of the narrative voice, to the activity of its readers.” From this perspective, the solutions to the social and political impasses endemic to the world economic system, whose development takes on particularly intense and brutal forms in peripheral regions like post-independence Africa, are no longer to be found within the text, but rather — and in opposition to Soyinka’s dramatic output — outside of it.

Leerom Medovoi’s “The Biopolitical Unconscious” argues that ecocriticism “can and should be dialectically assimilated to the project of a Marxist literary and cultural criticism,” which, as other essays in this issue also stress, in turn also means that “Marxist literary criticism must be inflected in a new way.” Medovoi’s essay constitutes a forceful critique of dominant paradigms of ecocriticism that remain unable to transcend the imprecise attachment to what he describes as an idea of the environment posed in simplistically external and utterly “vacuous” relation to literature. In other words, Medovoi’s intervention bestows much-needed historical and material specificity upon ecocritical praxis that conceives of the environment merely as “sets of physical externalities to literature,” therefore “threaten[ing] to universalize [literature’s] worldliness to the point where it becomes untheorizable, and hence, unpoliticizable as well.” Furthermore, according to Medovoi, it seems necessary to surpass one of ecocriticism’s characteristic weaknesses: “its utter incapacity to theorize itself as anything other than a *thematic* criticism that passes ethical judgment on the depictions of either nature or built environments.” Proper ecocritical practice, “operates through a kind of contradiction between the relentless universalism of its alleged frame (the limitless domains of environment or nature) and the specificity of the ‘externality’ that actually animates it, and which makes it discernible as a matter of politics: the framing discourse of an

*anthropogenically produced crisis of earthly life.*” Medovoi insists that the environment must be understood in the context of capitalism’s regulation, that is, as a “biopolitical element in the mode of production” that ultimately registers primarily on the level of form. Probing ecocriticism’s limits, in particular its troubled relation to history and historicity, as well as science and materiality, he argues that “historical materialist ecocriticism must study literature’s relationship, not to our ideas about the environment, but rather to the *material relations* that have historically produced the ‘environment’ as an operative biopolitical category.” Rigorously historicizing the materially determined connection between literature and the environment, Medovoi posits the “‘population/environment/capital’ triad” at the heart of his Marxist ecocritical methodology that ultimately gestures toward one of Marxist criticism’s persistent and characteristic concerns: “how does the ultimate horizon of human history — the mode of production — pass into textuality?”

In the final article of this issue, Sarah Brouillette takes on a concept that serves as a valuable bookend to the preceding macro-discussions surrounding Marxist literary critique: creativity. In her ambitious essay, Brouillette illustrates that creativity as a concept shares much logical ground with concepts discussed in previous essays (theory, Marxism, form, etc.) in that its logic needs to be evaluated dialectically and its function evaluated in specific and ever-changing relation to historical and material structures. Maintaining this issue’s commitment to the dialectic as the only permanent core of Marxist critique, Brouillette’s examination of creativity in the current conjuncture moves beyond the two main theoretical positions on this question by working through not only their assumed differences, but, more interestingly, their surprising similarities. Contemporary capitalism, an increasing number of scholars argue, has shifted its primary site of production from the factory toward the mind or “mass intellect.” In fact, Brouillette shows, critics have been split into two main camps on this issue, one joyfully greeting new possibilities for preserving and furthering individual creativity, the other lamenting the intensification of exploitation (though, as Brouillette reminds us, this new exploitation is frequently perceived as its opposite). Whether celebration of immaterial labor by “creative class enthusiasts” or critique by “post-operaismo” scholars, however, the interesting basis for critique is, according to Brouillette, the common ground, or rather the shared analytical shortcomings that connect both positions. That is, the question Brouillette pursues is not how we evaluate this connection between creative expression and work (is it good and a way to further and preserve the individual creative impulse, or is it bad and a dystopian case of colonization in which the factory now encompasses the mind?). Rather, she proposes, the truly rigorous questions to ask are those that push us toward an analysis of

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the structural logic of this merger between creativity and capital. At the center of Brouillette's structural analysis stands the heuristic figure of the "artist-author," pointing toward both the particular issue of the social labor of creativity and the larger, structural issue: what is the connection between capital, creativity, and social structures, and how does this issue force us to develop adequately complicated, connected accounts of subjectivity? Ultimately, Brouillette argues, both dominant theoretical strands that examine immaterial and creative labor fall short on one crucial level: both advocates of the creative class and critics of immaterial and creative labor present us with de-historicized notions of subjectivity. "Lost in both sets of analyses is, thus," according to Brouillette, "any sense of the contradictory, material, and constitutive histories of artists' labor and of images of artists at work that subtend the conception of subjectivity they maintain." There is, therefore, a distinct sense of urgency regarding the need to develop Marxist analyses of creative labor and of the connection between capital and aesthetic production in the contemporary conjuncture, analyses that account for "the historicity and the particular emergence and spread of the vocabulary that makes contemporary labor an act of self-exploration, self-expression, and self-realization," thus fulfilling an "essential task in denaturalizing the character of contemporary capitalism."

Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri, guest editors