

Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group



Volume 29, Number 2, Spring 2016 • **Dossier: Lukács 2016**

Novel Theory, Century Old

The erstwhile Marxist literary critic Franco Moretti has recently expressed a consensus that the seminal work of Marxist literary criticism, György Lukács’s *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), is less a theory than a history, less a commanding generalization about forms and genres and more a local insight into an epochal break in literary production.¹ Upon this 100th anniversary of its publication, this “history” now has its own history, in the shadow of which this special issue of *Mediations* aspires to ask what that historicizing gesture looks like a century later, and whether the theoretical tentacles of Lukács’s analysis might now intensify into tenets. Lukács himself already provided a critique of his historicization as insufficiently historical and insufficiently materialist, but he also steadfastly pursued the project of a theory of art; this issue also presents two works by Lukács, “Art and Society” and “Art as Misunderstanding,” which illuminate and advance the theoretical project announced by *The Theory of the Novel*.

As history, *The Theory of the Novel* chronicles the temporal coincidence of capitalist modernity and the new art form of the novel, raising the question of the causality behind this coincidence, and of the mediations that thwart facile answers. As theory, *The Theory of the Novel* traces the contours of the anti-generic genre, its “abstraction,” its “mutual determination” of “the contingent world and the problematic individual,” its conspicuous and self-conscious “form-giving,” its “special dissonance” of “a formal nature less obvious than other art,” its “composition... a paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is abolished again and again.”² These generalizations about forms give us finally a distinct enterprise of projective production of a riven world.

So perhaps the contrast to be drawn is not between a history and a theory, but between theorizing literature and literary theorizing, between giving an account of literary origins and operations, and giving an account of the specific theorizing that the novel can undertake. After all, *The Theory of the Novel* mostly dwells on the speculative questions that drive this distinct kind of artistic representation — questions of contingency, immanence, totality. Speculating is arguably the main definition Lukács offers of the form:

the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.³

Lukács offers less the determinants of a form than the problems the form sets to work upon; his theory of the novel offers us the novel as theory.⁴ One hundred years on, we have little fathomed, let alone exhausted, the possibilities of this definition. How can we read the *Gesinnung*, the disposition, cast of mind, or thought-patterns, of aesthetic representation? What kind of thinking is it that novels do? What kind of thinking frames itself in terms of totality, addresses itself to the terminus of totality? What kind of thinking contends with the terminal, what is not or no longer, while holding on to the historicity of belatedness, the “still”? What reading methods honor these terms? What differentiates what Lukács repeatedly calls “the world of forms” from the world’s structure?

The essays in this issue honor simultaneously the historicizing endeavor and the theorizing gambit of *The Theory of the Novel*. They ask what *The Theory of the Novel* predictively but unpredictably tells us about modernism’s self-concept, how the specter of world war constitutes the novel genre, how novels disclose that history can never be their content because history as such is not available as a referent. They also ask how *The Theory of the Novel*’s theories are or become accentuated elsewhere: in *History and Class Consciousness*, *Soul and Form*, or the writings on realism or on Rosa Luxemburg; in the very novelistic modes Lukács explicitly rejected; in the oeuvre of Fredric Jameson; in, wonderfully, poetry. The issue begins with its own historicizing gesture, placing its celebration of *The Theory of the Novel* in the context of two little-read essays by Lukács, both reprinted with the kind permission of the *New Hungarian Quarterly* (now simply *Hungarian Quarterly*), where they were first translated.⁵ The first historicizes Lukács’s intellectual trajectory in its own terms and in those of his momentous historical period; the second offers a glimpse of the systematic context of the project of *The Theory of the Novel*. Threaded across the issue are sustained readings of literary texts – Azuela’s *Los de abajo*, Baudelaire’s “Paysage,” Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy. Theoretical reflections on genre and on historicity are here inseparable from close literary reading, from attention to protagonicity and plot structure, to lyricism and ironization, to point of view and closure, to the uniquely novelistic mode of non-conceptual sensuous thinking.

The first essay by Lukács, “Art and Society,” is an occasional piece, originally written as the preface to a Hungarian-language volume of selected writings of the same name. In it Lukács gives a sense of his own biographical, geographical, and intellectual itinerary over half a century, roughly 1910-1960. This is itself of considerable interest, but as Lukács puts it, “individual development can only be truly understood in terms of the struggle with, the acceptance of, further development of or rejection of the currents of the age,” and it is in terms of Lukács’s relationship to larger currents in

European political and intellectual history, in particular his ambivalent position during the Stalin period and its aftermath in the Soviet Union and Hungary, that the essay snaps into focus.⁶ In providing a rough sketch of his intellectual trajectory, Lukács provides us — at a moment when the “political” is invoked as a value with astonishing facility — a striking reminder of what it looks like when art and the philosophy of art are matters of real political urgency.

In 1912-14 Lukács began work on what has been called the “Heidelberg Philosophy of Art,” his first attempt at a systematic aesthetic theory. The project was interrupted by the First World War — and by *The Theory of the Novel* — and when he resumed the project in 1915-17 he had reformulated its plan. The surviving chapters of each attempt comprise Volumes 16 and 17 of Lukács’s collected works. These volumes are of the greatest interest, and we are reminded that what we are accustomed to think of as Lukács’s major works on art are — while they are indeed major works — embedded in a project of systemization to which Lukács remained committed all his life, and of which, in English, we have virtually no sense. “Art as Misunderstanding” is the first chapter of the earlier plan, his first version of a foundation for the entire system.⁷ Lukács begins from “the existence of the work of art as the one and only fact relevant to aesthetics.”⁸ The movement of the essay is, for most of its length, more aporetic than dialectical: as with certain passages in Hegel, the same problems keep cropping up in places that had seemed to be solutions — one jumps from the fat into more fat. It is only in the final pages that the essay undertakes a vertiginous dialectical widening of standpoint. Since the main question is how to distinguish the work of art from the heterogenous sphere of experience (and from its other and corollary, the homogenous spheres of communication), “Art as Misunderstanding” ends up producing a proleptic critique of some of the most conspicuous currents in contemporary aesthetic theory in our “post-critical” moment, from the affective turn to the idea of art as process. Not all of these need to be called out by name, but readers may be gratified and surprised to find here a satisfying account, a century *avant la lettre*, of the aesthetic ideology of spoken-word performance.

Commencing the critical essays, Ignacio Sánchez Prado reprises Lukács’s own historicization of *The Theory of the Novel* in situating that work with respect to both the general crisis of modernity and the specific crisis of the First World War. Reading *The Theory of the Novel* in dialogue with its brother text, Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo*, Sánchez Prado finds a straddling of this general-specific history and an improvisational formalization of interregna which open on to the potential of the novel to harken new totalities.

Ben Parker sublates the regular opposition between *The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness* by educating a theory of the novel immanent in the latter text itself. Parker’s reading of *History and Class Consciousness*’s radical account of class consciousness as the unmaking of reification and the loss of social determination reveals the consubstantial form between subject-formation and the logics of

anagnorisis that drive literary realist narrativity.

Tom Eyers reads *The Theory of the Novel* against itself, searching for a dialectic that would refuse any assimilation of form to history as easily as Lukács might seem to do, and finding upon further reflection in Lukácsian irony the prospect of the lack of fit between literary form and history. This prospect hinges upon the novel's self-consciousness, which makes thinkable the gap between the aspiration to formal integration and the reality of persistent disjuncture, the gap that is the ultimate form of history as such, and which is opened even more forcefully by non-narrative poetry.

Robert Tally treats the rhetorics of spatial orientation and world-projection *The Theory of the Novel*, ultimately situating it as the ur-text of the quintessential Marxist critico-aesthetic procedure: cognitive mapping. The literary cartography that *The Theory of the Novel* theorizes attests to the palpable Marxist impulses in this text oft-maligned as idealist, and illuminates a path forward for Marxist literary criticism to focus more sharply on the utopian undertakings of the novel genre.

Elvira Godek-Kirylyuk reads across Lukács's oeuvre to find resources for revalorizing modernism, specifically by appraising the internal logics of subordination and composition that were Lukács's highest aesthetic criteria for realism. Not all compositional aesthetics look alike, but Lukács's philosophy of composition (in dialogue here with Poe's) ought to countenance John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, with its unique strategies for defying readerly subjectivity, advancing critical distance, and narrating dialectics.

Finally, Jan Mieszkowski zooms in to the Marxist poetics of the slogan as they portend Lukácsian futures, the possibility for non-instrumental, non-reified, non-referential, non-historicizable language to conjure new solidarities. The slogan, like the novel, is indicative and subjunctive, conjunctive and disjunctive, situated and of indeterminate time, and as such demands a properly dialectical Marxian literary theory of its own.

The century that has unfurled since 1916 finds the Marxist literary criticism of 2016 under fresh assault not only from the recision of the humanities and the gutting of public higher education, but more pointedly from academic literary studies itself. The self-styled "post-critical turn" disdains equally the historicizing and theorizing trajectories animated by *The Theory of the Novel*, repudiating materialist dialectics and abstract thinking in favor of accuracy, affect, facts. In their ingenuity and variegation, the essays in this special issue powerfully substantiate what the past of Marxist literary criticism will still have offered the present, will still have promised the future.

The book review section of this issue was edited in part by Joshua Clover. The three books under consideration in his dossier — *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capital* (ed. Diane Elson, reviewed by Clover), *Art and Value* (Dave Beech, reviewed by Sarah Brouillette), and *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Jason W. Moore, reviewed by Juliana Spahr) — approach the value question from three different and interconnected perspectives: economics, aesthetic production, and ecological disaster. In the final

review, Ross Wolfe assesses The Invisible Committee's second book, *To Our Friends*.

A final note: the deadline for this year's Michael Sprinker Graduate Writing Competition is Monday, May 17, 2016. The competition was established to remember Michael Sprinker's commitment to Marxist intellectual work and to graduate teaching and students. The award recognizes an essay or dissertation chapter that engages with Marxist theory, scholarship, pedagogy, and/or activism. Submissions are judged by a committee composed of members of the Marxist Literary Group. The winner receives professional recognition and a prize of \$500. Traditionally the article is, after peer review, published in *Mediations*. Please send your documents as attachments in Word (no pdfs, please) to Kevin Floyd at kfloyd@kent.edu, and send any questions to the same address. For more information, see <http://www.marxistliterary.org/michael-sprinker-prize/>.

Anna Kornbluh, for the *Mediations* editors

Notes

1. Franco Moretti, "Lukács's Theory of the Novel: Centenary Reflections," *New Left Review* 91 (Jan-Feb 2015) 39-42.
2. György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT P, 1974). "Abstraction," "dissonance," and "formal nature less obvious" 71, "contingent world and problematic individual" 78, "form-giving" 51, "composition...again" 84.
3. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* 56. "Der Roman ist die Epopöe eines Zeitalters, für das die extensive Totalität des Lebens nicht mehr sinnfällig gegeben ist, für das die Lebensimmanenz des Sinnes zum Problem geworden ist, und das dennoch die Gesinnung zur Totalität hat." *Die Theorie des Romans* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1920) 44.
4. For further development of this hypothesis, see Tim Bewes's "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism," *differences* 21:3 (2010) 1-33.
5. "Art and Society," *NHQ* 8:47 (Autumn 1972) 44-56, and "Philosophy of Art," *NHQ* 8:47 (Autumn 1972), 57-87, translated by Bertha Gaster, Ottó Beőthy, Károly Ravasz, and Charles Newman. Both pieces have been lightly edited for clarity.
6. György Lukács, "Art and Society" 7.
7. "Die Kunst als 'Ausdruck' und die Mitteilungsformen der Erlebniswirklichkeit," *Werke* Bd. 16, *Heidelberger Philosophie der Kunst* (1912-1914) 7-41.
8. György Lukács, "Art as Misunderstanding" 19.