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**David I Cunningham**

School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages

Article was first published in *Radical Philosophy*, 163. pp. 11-23 and is available in the repository with permission.

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# Capitalist epics

## Abstraction, totality and the theory of the novel

David Cunningham

How are we to read Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* nearly a century after it was written?<sup>1</sup> More specifically, how are we to reread its relation to Lukács's own later Marxist work, framed, as the latter was, by its self-consciously materialist attempt to rework the book's Hegelian categories in view of Marx's ambition to turn Hegel's idealism 'right side up'? In the wake of the apparent disappearance of a horizon of world proletarian revolution inaugurated, for Lukács, by the events of 1917 – a horizon which informs his later accounts of the realist and modernist novel at every point – in what ways have the possible meanings of *The Theory of the Novel* been transformed? What is living and what dead in Lukács's theorization of the novel? Is there perhaps new life in it today?

All of Lukács's work on the novel proposes itself, in some form, as a series of answers to the questions that begin Ian Watt's classic 1957 study, *The Rise of the Novel*:

Is the novel a new literary form? And if we assume, as is commonly done, that it is ... how does it differ from the prose fiction of the past...? And is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, Lukács's theorization of the novel is also, of necessity, a theorization of modernity, and of its specific relation to literary form. For despite the calls of Margaret Anne Doody and, more recently, Franco Moretti to 'make the literary field longer, larger and deeper', taking it ultimately back into the ancient world, Watt's questions remain, in a fundamental sense, ineliminable.<sup>3</sup> David Trotter may be right to suggest that 'traces of novel DNA' can be found everywhere and anywhere within the history of literate culture, but there remains something more historically specific at stake in questions about the rise of the novel *as such*, whatever its lengthier 'polygenesis'.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, as Benjamin wrote in the 1930s, while it is evidently true

that certain aspects of the novel might well 'go back to antiquity', it was in fact only in its encounter with the 'evolving middle class' of 'fully developed capitalism' that it found 'those elements' that were genuinely 'favourable to its flowering'.<sup>5</sup> And, if nothing else, such an assertion indicates what, for much twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism, has been thought to most crucially delimit the novel: that it is a (perhaps *the*) distinctively modern literary form.<sup>6</sup>

The character of this modernity has been conceived in many different, more or less 'mythical' (and thereby deconstructible) ways.<sup>7</sup> But if it takes a dominant form, as Benjamin's account suggests, it is probably one that understands the novel, above all, as literature's great *bourgeois* form: the expression of some 'new centre of gravity' embodied in the 'self-confidence of the middle class as a whole'.<sup>8</sup> The roots of such a conception – associated, variously, with the rise of individualism, the concretely everyday and secular, progressivism, or the fragmentation and dissolution of some pre-existing hierarchy of genre – lie, however, not so much in any developed account of the novel itself, but rather, negatively, in an account of the ancient *epic* to be found first in what comprises little more than a page or two of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, and from which, it is no exaggeration to say, almost the entirety of the conceptual apparatus of Lukács's work on the novel derives:

[I]t is quite different with the novel, the modern bourgeois epic. Here we have completely before us again the wealth and many-sidedness of interests, situations, characters, relations involved in life, the background of a whole world, as well as the epic portrayal of events. But what is missing is the *primitive* poetic general situation out of which the epic proper proceeds. A novel in the modern sense of the word presupposes a world already prosaically ordered ... the whole state of the world today has assumed a form diametrically opposed in its prosaic organization to the requirements... for genuine epic.<sup>9</sup>

As *the* modern literary form that attempts to recover the epic's many-sided range and 'wholeness', what nonetheless the novel necessarily lacks, according to Hegel, is the possible 'occurrence of an action which in the whole breadth of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch'.<sup>10</sup> For it is a structural feature of modernity, as regards its potential mediation by the artwork (if not the philosophical concept), that it precisely resists being grasped *as a totality*. Much as any individual 'story' might strive for universal significance so as to represent or embody totality, it will always resolve back into the contingent and 'unendingly particular'. As Lukács would sum up Hegel's argument and extend it some ninety years later, the novel is, *impossibly*, 'the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given ... yet which still thinks in terms of totality'. Such forms thus 'differ from one another not by their authors' fundamental intentions, but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted' – that is, they become necessary manifestations (and hence indices) of the difference between the social 'realities' of the ancient and the modern *per se*.<sup>11</sup>

### The modern epic

Persistent as such a conception of the epic's negative relation to modernity has been, it is not, evidently, without its problems. Certainly, *The Theory of the Novel* leaves a good deal to be desired in this regard, given the degree to which it is so apparently bereft of *any* specific historical detail in social, technological or economic terms. In fact, as a characterization of modernity – most notoriously, through Fichte's description of the present as 'the epoch of absolute sinfulness' – the book would seem ultimately no less 'mythical' in form than is its projection of a lost ancient 'happy age' of perfect and unthinkable completion.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, or so I want to argue, stripped of its more ostentatiously idealist baggage, we should perhaps see this as a question less of the strict historiographic *actuality* of past epic wholeness in Lukács's work, than of the ways in which it articulates a certain self-consciousness of the historically distinctive social forms from which such lost wholeness is 'mythically' projected: the solidity against which, so to speak, the melting of all that is solid into air may be enunciated. This is important because failure to acknowledge such self-consciousness altogether risks simply dissolving the social conditions of novelistic form into an effectively transhistorical set of phenomena – individuation, secularity, entrepreneur-

ship, everydayness, and so on – that thereby become progressively unmoored from historical difference and change *per se*, an ahistorical 'bundle' of 'transcultural constants that can be more or less active from period to period and work to work', as Massimo Fusillo has recently proposed.<sup>13</sup> As such, if the task today may well be to 'reorient [Lukács's] text away from its spatio-temporal nostalgia for premodern literary forms', this should not, I think, necessarily entail any suspension of 'its periodizing aspects' altogether.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary: it ought precisely to connect it to what, for example, in the *Communist Manifesto*, is famously described as the conditions of a culture which is *itself* marked by an experience of 'everlasting uncertainty and agitation'.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, if *The Theory of the Novel* itself largely avoids any attempt to socially concretize such an experience of modernity, the task that Lukács explicitly set himself from the 1920s onwards was to provide the rise of the novel with a more historically precise materialist account in this regard. As such, I do not, of course, quote Marx at this point contingently. It is *the bourgeoisie*, writes Marx, 'who cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society'.<sup>16</sup> And if the novel is, then, a distinctively modern moment in what Benjamin describes as a process in which literary forms, such as the form of the story, come to be 'melted down', then it is because, for such a view, it both reflects and *participates in* these ongoing transformations in the relations of society as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

However, from the perspective of the development of Lukács's work, this raises two questions. First, how exactly in the later writings are the essentially Hegelian categories of *The Theory of the Novel* – and, specifically, of the novel's understanding as a (fundamentally impossible) modern epic form – reworked in line with the version of historical materialism set out in Lukács's first great Marxist text *History and Class Consciousness*, and its subsequent developments?<sup>18</sup> And, second, how, in doing so, is it around a new understanding of the novel as the specifically modern bourgeois epic that such reworking will come to be organized? More particularly, and outside of the legitimation with which the Hegelian text provides it, why, in any Marxian-inspired 'rewriting' of Lukács's earlier book, is it as the epic of the bourgeois class *rather than of capitalism itself* that the novel comes predominantly to be understood?

Now, it seems to me that this is a question that has gone strangely unasked, not only of Lukács's later work, but of dominant theorizations of the novel

more generally. To pose it is not, however, to suggest that the association of the novel with the bourgeoisie, and, specifically, with the individualism of the bourgeois subject (as opposed to, say, the communal forms of Benjamin's storyteller), is false. Far from it. It is however to note, as Jameson observes, that such theorizations can thereby work to bypass what should otherwise be regarded as 'the very centre of Marx's work, the structural account of the historic originality of capitalism'. As Jameson continues:

Marxist literary criticism – to limit ourselves to that – has less often tried to analyse its objects in terms of capital and value, in terms of the system of capitalism itself, than it has in terms of class ... [It has been] much simpler to establish the more direct mediation of a merchant and business class, with its emergent class culture, alongside the forms and texts themselves. Money enters the picture here insofar as only exchange, merchant activity and the like, and later on nascent capitalism, determine the coming into being of some historically original burgher or city merchant, bourgeois class life.<sup>19</sup>

This has certainly been the case with dominant theorizations of the novel, Marxist and otherwise. Yet, in a context in which, more clearly than ever, it is precisely global capitalism rather than either the bourgeoisie *or* the proletariat which seems to drive any revolutionizing of 'the whole relations of society', it raises the question of whether, if we are to revisit *The Theory of the Novel*, it is perhaps – against the grain of Lukács's own rereadings – not as an epic of the bourgeois 'people', but as a displaced account of 'the system of capitalism itself' that the latter's engagement with the novel's impossible epic form is best understood today.

### Capitalism, modernity, the novel

I want to come back to this hypothesis in a moment, but, before doing so, it is worth noting that not for nothing might Watt's final question – 'is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?' – remind one of certain debates concerning the origins of a *capitalist* modernity. Indeed, for Watt himself, the novel's eighteenth-century development is first and foremost traceable to the supersession of feudal relations of patronage by the increasingly powerful and liberated economic relations of the market, publishers, booksellers and the 'reading public'. Similarly, Benedict Anderson, for example, links the rise of the novel to not only the emergence of the 'revolutionary vernacularizing thrust' of bourgeois culture, but, materially, to the rise of what he calls 'print-capitalism'

and the production of the book as, in 'a rather special sense', the 'first modern-style, mass-produced industrial commodity'.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the problem of how to define the distinction between 'aspects of the novel' and the rise of the 'novel as such' might productively mirror some not dissimilar questions concerning the historical development of capitalism itself. For, like Trotter's traces of novel DNA, we can clearly find central economic and social 'aspects of capitalism' – money, the commodity, and so on – across a far longer history than that within which anybody would identify the emergence of capitalism proper.<sup>21</sup> Yet, to cite *History and Class Consciousness* itself, there remains an obvious 'qualitative difference between the commodity as one form among many regulating the metabolism of human society and the commodity as the universal structuring principle'.<sup>22</sup>

Interesting and important as all this is, however, my own concern is rather less with a sociology of literature per se than with its relations to what is conceived as something like a *theoretical* 'history of forms' in Lukács's work. For this, the central question would be, not so much that of the novel's own status as a commodity, its links to print-capitalism, or even of its ongoing 'reflection' of capitalist modernity's development (in which, say, Moll Flanders appears as 'our classic revelation of the mercantile mind'<sup>23</sup>), but of the extent to which we can grasp this in terms of its intelligibility as an effective 'model' of such capitalist modernity, a formal equivalent, at some level, to its social being. Precisely as an epic form, the novel, Lukács writes, carries 'the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms'.<sup>24</sup> And whether or not one accepts the more or less mythical terms with which such fragmentation is posited in *The Theory of the Novel* – as Moretti puts it in an early work: what is 'unacceptable' here is 'not so much the description of form as the characteristics attributed to historical existence'<sup>25</sup> – it continues to raise the question of the degree to which literary form can be understood as something like a mediation of social form, the means by which social form appears somehow *within* artistic form itself.

It is worth noting then that, suspended from any implausibly simple coding as either negative or positive in character, this conception of the novel's 'form-problem' appears, above all, in both Hegel and Lukács, as an increase in the complexity, distance and objective extent of what Marx terms 'the whole relations of society' themselves. If the novel is the paradoxical epic form of a world in which 'occupations and activities are sundered and split into infinitely many parts, so

that to individuals only a particle of the whole may accrue', then it is because, as Lukács writes, this is a world which 'has become infinitely large and each of its corners ... richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks'. It is this very wealth that, by virtue of its unending richness, 'cancels out the positive meaning – the totality – upon which their life was based'.<sup>26</sup> No one event, no one narrative, so to speak, can ever be rich enough.

For the early Lukács, the novel, *any novel*, can thus only be 'the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again'.<sup>27</sup> Or, as Adorno will come to describe it, as epic form the novel can, unavoidably, only ever be some form of *negative* or *anti-epic*; a formal instantiation of its own negative relation to the possibility for totality given (however mythically) to the epic as such. For the Lukács of *The Theory of the Novel*, however, this is, crucially, still conceived in two possible ways:

[If a] totality that can be simply accepted is no longer given to the forms of art ... therefore they must either narrow down and volatilize whatever has to be given form to the point where they can encompass it, or else they must show polemically the impossibility of achieving their necessary object and the inner nullity of their own means.<sup>28</sup>

In both of these possibilities – 'narrowing down' and 'polemical impossibility' – the work is constituted by failure when judged from the perspective of epic totality, but their essential forms of negativity in this regard are importantly different. In the first, if an epic wholeness survives, it does so only by, for example, fleeing 'from great national events into the restrictedness of private domestic situations'.<sup>29</sup> (A comment which appears now as a prophetic judgement on much 'literary' novel writing of late-twentieth-century Europe and North America.) It is in these terms that we would rightly be inclined to follow through the consequences of Benjamin's conception of the novel's 'birthplace' as the 'individual in his isolation' – whether embodied in the figure of author, reader or literary character (Benjamin typically cites the *Bildungsroman*) – as that which connects it to that 'which is incommensurable in the representation of human experience' as a whole;<sup>30</sup> an incommensurability which is, of course, also the *freedom* specifically proffered by bourgeois individualism in its break with feudal bonds and hierarchies. In this way, the novel is thus marked by an ultimately irresolvable collision between what Hegel calls the individual (bourgeois) subject's 'poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances',<sup>31</sup> which,

in its more critical form, thereby functions, at best, *negatively*, as a means either of expressing 'the conflict between living human beings and rigidified conditions' – entailing that, ultimately, 'alienation itself' must itself become 'an aesthetic device for the novel' – or of constituting the artwork itself as some moment of non-identity resistant to the more or less violent closure of the whole, where that whole itself is understood as inherently oppressive.<sup>32</sup> (By contrast, on Hegel's own terms, no epic hero or epic work can, by definition, possibly be in conflict with its world.)



In the second possibility set out by Lukács, however, in which the will to a genuinely epic totality is not so much abandoned as 'polemically' engaged in its very impossibility, negativity instead takes the form of something like an ironic formal expression of transformations within 'the whole relations of society' as such: not so much a direct, concrete witness to the (bourgeois) individual's alienation – whereby the 'individual confronts established systems of value and finds them lacking'<sup>33</sup> – as a rendering visible of the impossible task of grasping, in any finite literary form, the full and complex extent of those 'whole [capitalist] relations of society' which confront the individual, and which are increasingly objectified in properly *supraindividual*, even inhuman forms: administration, state law or, above all, the world market.

In short, if the novel as 'narrowing down' seeks, in the terms of *The Theory of the Novel*, an escape from the 'largeness' of the world, so as to find (critically or otherwise) a 'particle' of the whole that can be isolated and encompassed within it – a more or less self-enclosed provincial community or an individual consciousness on an individual day, for example – the novel as 'polemical impossibility' gestures *towards* this very 'largeness' as a means of registering something about the changing nature of this world's modernity itself. To employ a term familiar from the work of Jameson, its primary object becomes not so much the unfolding

of individual freedom and difference (or their limits), but, precisely as epic form, the impossibility of an adequate ‘cognitive mapping’ of any ‘total’ world *tout court*: ‘the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the greater global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’.<sup>34</sup>

### Becoming abstract

With this in mind, then, what I want to propose is that at least one fruitful way of approaching and focusing such questions would be through a critical attention to the problematic of abstraction apparent in Lukács’s writings, both pre- and post-1917. Or, more precisely, a certain relation of abstraction *to* the concrete at work within them. For, in some fundamental sense, Jameson’s rewriting of the novelistic problem of totality as one of a more general problem of cognitive mapping is simply *the* modern problem of abstraction itself.

Now, it would hardly be a revelation to note that a certain account of abstraction is indeed central to Lukács’s early analysis of the very nature of the novel. For what defines the novel’s specifically *epic* ambitions is the degree to which, within it, ‘totality can be systematized only in abstract terms’. Hence, for example, what comes to threaten the epic potential of the ‘chivalrous novel’, in the moment that gives birth to *Don Quixote*, is necessarily accorded a far more general significance:

The chivalrous novel had succumbed to the fate of every epic that wants to maintain and perpetuate a form by purely formal means after the transcendental conditions for its existence have already been condemned by the historico-philosophical dialectic. The chivalrous novel had lost its roots in transcendent being, and the forms, which no longer had any immanent function, withered away, became abstract.<sup>35</sup>

This is an emphatically historical proposition. For if *every* novel must risk what, in an explicitly Hegelian register, Lukács calls ‘bad abstraction’, this is not a contingent possibility, but rather a necessary productive logic generated by some abstraction inherent to ‘the given reality’ itself with which the novel, in general, is confronted.

It is this argument that is, of course, one of the key targets of Lukács’s own self-critical preface to the book written in 1962, which precisely attempts to articulate and justify the subsequent development of its arguments onto a properly ‘Marxist ground’, informed by ‘concrete socio-historical realities’.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it is in

such terms that Lukács diagnoses in his own earlier self a fatal weakness for what he terms *abstractionism*. But it also thereby entails a far simpler opposition of abstraction to the concrete than can be found anywhere in the earlier book; something apparent both in his notorious deployment of the Hegelian distinction between so-called ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ potentiality, as a means of distinguishing modernism from realism, and in the 1962 critique of an ‘abstractionism’ that effaces the particularity of the novel’s own ‘historical and aesthetic richness’.<sup>37</sup> As he wrote there:

The epilogue in *War and Peace* is, in fact, an *authentic* conclusion, in terms of ideas, to the period of the Napoleonic Wars; the development of certain figures already foreshadows the Decembrist rising of 1825. But the author of *The Theory of the Novel* ... can [only] find here ... ‘more melancholy than the ending of the most problematic of novels of disillusionment’.<sup>38</sup>

However, this runs together two somewhat different problematics of abstraction in the earlier work: on the one hand, an abstractionism at the level of critical or theoretical approach – which reduces rich particularity to generalized models or types – and, on the other, an abstraction immanent to the *text itself*, which, in the case of realism, is thus countered by the claim to an ‘authentic’ concreteness now seen as grounded in some ‘real’ social history. It is, then, but a short step from this to an analysis whereby an increasingly simple positive-to-negative encoding of the concrete and the abstract can be progressively mapped onto the formal (rather than predominantly historical) division between realism and modernism per se, in which ‘abstraction’ comes to mean little more, in a reading of the latter, than a straightforward ‘negation of outward reality’ or ‘attenuation of actuality’ itself.<sup>39</sup>

Against this, what I am suggesting is that, just as the later Marx himself reads a certain account of capitalism out of Hegel’s idealist categories, particularly from the *Science of Logic*, so, perhaps, it might be possible to do something similar here with regard to the ‘abstractionism’ of the earlier Lukács work – a reading which, in fact, the later Lukács himself will steadfastly resist. As such, what I thus also want to argue is that at least part of the problems that the later work is commonly thought to exhibit result from the questionable ways in which he pursues such a project of ‘translation’ of his *own* earlier Hegelian terms. To put it crudely, where the post-1917 Lukács will seek, positively, to restore epic totality under the name of realism, through a identification of class consciousness or ‘perspective’ with the expression of a quasi-Hegelian

‘subject of history’, what he will thereby abandon – or, at least, consign to the generic limitations of so-called ‘modernism’ – is the novel’s ‘epic’ connection to abstract form itself, as a confrontation with the social *reality* of a ‘totality [that] can be systematized only in abstract terms’: a totality which is best read as that of the capitalist system as such.

If, therefore, a certain conception of abstraction remains central here, it is because the key engagement with Hegel’s account of abstraction to be found in Marx’s own mature work is not so much (as in the early writings on religion and philosophy) a simple demand to render material what the older thinker had expressed in ‘abstract’ or ‘theological’ terms, but his own elaboration of the social forms of what he called *real* abstraction: that is, those forms of abstraction which, in the specific set of circumstances of capitalist modernity, come to have an actual (and thus paradoxically concrete) objective social existence. As Adorno puts it, if the later Marx himself places an apparently Hegelian emphasis precisely on *totality*, on ‘the ether that permeates the whole of society’, for Marx ‘this ether is anything but ethereal; it is rather the *ens realissimum*. If it seems abstract, this is the fault not of fantastic, wilful thinking, hostile to the facts, but of the *objective* abstraction to which the social process of life is subject – the exchange relation’.<sup>40</sup> While what defines the novel precisely as an epic form, for the early Lukács, is that it still *thinks* in terms of totality, the ‘objective’ reality which the novel confronts in capitalist modernity must be one in which the social totality can itself precisely *only* be understood in abstract terms. What would this mean, then, for a theorization of the historical development of ‘epic form’ as Lukács defines it?

## Subjects of history

Before coming to this directly, we need to return first to Lukács’s own development of the Hegelian description of the novel as the modern bourgeois epic. Superficially, the meaning of such an assertion seems simple: the novel is the epic *of* the bourgeoisie, as a ruling class, themselves. And, certainly, this is how Lukács himself will apparently come to understand the novel in its classic ‘realist’ form. Yet, equally, Hegel’s proposition is an intrinsically paradoxical one. For the whole weight of his preceding argument in the *Aesthetics* is to demonstrate that the epic is in fact possible *only* within the ‘historico-philosophical’ reality of a specific non-modern world. Indeed, if Hegel’s (and the early Lukács’s) argument is followed consistently, there

can be no ‘modern epic’, strictly speaking, bourgeois or otherwise.

Now, one way in which the paradox apparent in all this might be dealt with is by approaching the novel’s bourgeois individual as, in the words of Nancy Armstrong, representative of ‘the claims of unacknowledged individuality in general’.<sup>41</sup> That is, by treating such ‘claims’ precisely *as* ‘general’, the novel on this account turns individualism itself into a kind of socially progressive and collective (class) consciousness, and hence provides a kind of paradoxical concrete ‘unity’ from which an epic perspective of totality, however internally contradictory, might be constructed. The ‘assertion of the primacy of individual experience’, as Watt calls it,<sup>42</sup> its very sundering from the communal totality of the feudal order, which should, in splitting ‘I’ from ‘you’, render impossible any claim to epic form, thus becomes, simultaneously – for a period (pre-1848) at least – the basis for some *universal* system of values.

Simplifying to the extreme, then, in reworking his earlier, broadly Hegelian account of the novel, what Lukács in fact takes, above all, from Marx is not a thinking of capitalist modernity itself, but a means of rethinking the novel as epic from the specific ‘historical materialist’ standpoint of the supposedly successive revolutionary roles played by two social classes: the bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is the idea that each of these classes may, at different moments, be understood as embodying what he famously terms the position of a subject *of* history (a term that Étienne Balibar suggests nobody but Lukács himself ‘invents’<sup>43</sup>) – of history *as a whole* – which allows, in turn, for the supposed restoration of an epic perspective of totality. As such, the novel’s importance, more generally, is to be found now (that is, post-1917) in the degree to which it really *does* therefore formally, and ‘from the inside’, express the perspective of such a world-historical ‘subject’.<sup>44</sup>

The question of why Lukács, while maintaining his Hegelian account of the novel as a continuation of epic form, abandons, contra Adorno, the fundamentally *negative* terms in which this continuity (and, hence, relation to modernity itself) is earlier understood, should be obvious. In his 1962 Preface, Lukács describes the earlier book as written at a moment marked by a mood of ‘permanent despair over the state of the world’ in the years preceding the Russian Revolution.<sup>45</sup> And it is 1917 that changes everything. As Löwy puts it: ‘Lukács perceives socialist revolution as a cultural restoration: organic culture again becomes possible’.<sup>46</sup> What is epic in the novel thus comes to turn not on a polemical demonstration of the impossibility

of achieving its necessary object, but precisely on the positive *possibility* of a new concretization of what in *The Theory of the Novel* could 'be systematized only in abstract terms'.<sup>47</sup> Hence, Gorki, for example, because of his relations to the 'revolutionary labour movement', is able, Lukács writes, to present 'the new kind of human being through whom the reader can experience directly and concretely the content of the new life'.<sup>48</sup> This is what Lukács calls 'the concrete nature of the new socialist perspective', where such concreteness 'involves an awareness of the development, structure and goal of society as a whole'. 'Socialist realism is in a position ... to portray the totality of a society in its immediacy and to reveal its pattern of development'.<sup>49</sup>



In this way, however, socialist realism *also* picks up the 'progressive' perspective accorded to the pre-1848 novel itself, as the epic form of what Lukács calls 'the heroic struggle for the integrated man of the bourgeois revolutionary period'. Of course, the 'classical' bourgeois novel's claims to universality, and hence to a true perspective of totality, are still thereby always, in some sense, 'false', in so far as, ultimately, they continue to be based on class division, and hence will, for Lukács, necessarily break down. But they are never *entirely* false, constituting rather, for a specific historical span, a kind of heroic 'real illusion', at least at the level of felt or 'poetic' experience, able to produce a 'directly perceptible unity of the individual and the universal'.<sup>50</sup> And it is only on condition of this 'illusion' that the novel's own significance as a precisely epic form can be positively conceived.<sup>51</sup>

However – and this is my key point – Lukács's conceptualization of the bourgeoisie and, speculatively, the proletariat as successively filling such a role actually rests on some quite questionable premisses. This is not only, historically, a function of the fact that today it is clear that we do not stand on the cusp of some new socialist era but of capitalism at an ever more global scale. It is also a function of the fact that if there is

indeed a 'subject of history' in Marx's *Capital*, corresponding to the Hegelian Idea, it is neither, strictly, the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat, but, more obviously, self-valorizing capital itself. Of course, some of the difficulties here stem from Marx's *own* earlier tendency effectively to conflate the bourgeoisie with capital in ways that cannot be sustained.<sup>52</sup> But if, then, Lukács writes, in realism, as in the epic, each 'narrative detail' is 'significant to the extent that it expresses the dialectic between man-as-individual and man-as-social-being',<sup>53</sup> according to the logic of *Capital*, it is what Marx calls, in explicitly quasi-Hegelian fashion, the actual abstraction of that 'self-moving substance which is Subject', in the 'shape of *money*', that constitutes the 'real' social being of modernity here.<sup>54</sup>

This is not, of course, a question of somehow deleting the question of class, which remains central to any full understanding of capitalism as a system. Class division and antagonism, like the exploitation of labour, remain very much alive – more so, globally, than ever – even if it is far from clear that this is accompanied by any actual expansion in 'class consciousness' as Lukács might once have understood it. It is, however, to argue that Lukács's fundamental prioritization of class (or, more specifically, class *consciousness*), as a means to thinking a 'perspective of totality' specifically, systematically neglects the extent to which it is capital, rather than either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, which, via the abstractly unifying power of the universalization of exchange, most plausibly corresponds to the anything like the Hegelian Idea within modern societies. The problem is that, as *essentially* abstract, capitalist societies are, by virtue of their production of ever more complex and extensive forms of interconnectedness, in a sense 'collective', but they only assume the structure of a Subject in an objective, 'inhuman' form, quite different from that form of social subjectivity posited of the collective worker (or the 'classical' bourgeoisie). From the perspective of any problematic of *totality*, it is therefore, according to the logic of *Capital* itself, the form of capital not of class that assumes epistemological priority (in terms, for example, of any contemporary 'realism' in its widest sense), even as the latter, of course, remains as important as ever to its functioning and self-reproduction. As such, the earlier claim in the *Manifesto*, taken up by Lukács, that the proletariat stands somehow 'outside' of capital, as an emergent class consciousness in itself, both underplays the degree to which labour is also a form of 'variable capital', and, from a contemporary perspective, severely underestimates the ongoing tendency to subsume labour to capital in such



a way as to ‘block’ the formation of collective ‘class consciousness’ in practical terms. At the very least, then, we’d have to say that any attempt in the novel to articulate some ‘utopian’ or fictive form of ‘universality’, collective sociality or imagined community – historically, paradigmatically, but not exclusively, of a political-national form, as Anderson stresses – as the basis of its ultimately impossible epic perspective of totality, has always had, in more or less intense a fashion, to negotiate the problem of its relation to the real and expanding totality of capitalism itself, and to the always already global space of the accumulation of value. As regards the novel as a modern epic form – which still *thinks* in terms of totality – it must then be capital, on this reading, which constitutes its most properly ‘epic’ subject.

Paradoxically, it is, then, in this sense, the very *idealism* of Lukács’s earlier Hegelian ‘theory’ – with its far more complex account of modernity as a culture of abstraction – that allows it to grasp conceptually, in a way his later self-consciously ‘materialist’ writings do not, the immanence of an actual idealism to the modern social relations refracted by the novel (as ‘materially’ lived), for all that the novel’s relation to capitalism is, seemingly, more clearly foregrounded as a central problematic within the latter. For if the novel is therefore *the* modern literary form which attempts to recover the epic’s many-sided range and ‘wholeness’, is it not, we might ask, above all the ‘social being’ of capital which defines that totality at stake in any modern epic form as such: the ether which ‘permeates the whole of society’ but which is ‘anything but ethereal’? That is to say, if the novel is the epic form of a world which ‘has become infinitely large’, everywhere ‘richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks’, then surely the ‘form-problem’ of such unending richness will be constituted not, first of all, by the ‘perspective of totality’ engendered by either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat as a ‘subject of history’ – nor even by the imagined community of the nation – but, quite simply, by the impossible ‘totality’ of capital itself?<sup>55</sup>

At the very least, the question is thus raised as to whether, as is most usually claimed, the modernity of the novel is actually best understood in terms of its specific relation to the *bourgeois* ‘era’, or whether it is rather the broader *capitalist* age that might most coherently define its historical locatability and form. The two propositions are not, at any rate, simply interchangeable. Rather, they open up quite different (if never, finally, exclusive) perspectives on the development of the novel itself.

## An abstract art

I want to conclude with a suggestion made by Henri Lefebvre in one of his texts on modern life:

The predominance of the abstract in modern art accompanies the extension of the world of merchandise and merchandise as a world, along with the unlimited power of money and capital, very abstract and terribly concrete at one and the same time.<sup>56</sup>

We are not so used to thinking of the novel as a kind of ‘abstract art’ in this way. Indeed, for most, the novel is quite correctly distinguished by a new kind of *concreteness*: the corollary of an emergent bourgeois empiricism and secularism, with its radical devotion to what Watt calls the ‘here-and-now’. (Hence, unsurprisingly, Watt himself associates the rise of the novel with the emergence of an ‘aesthetic tendency in favour of particularity’ and against ‘abstract and general terms’.<sup>57</sup>) Yet it is, perhaps, more accurately a particularly conflicted combination and confrontation of abstraction and concretion – *at one and the same time* – that makes the novel such an exemplary modern art form in this sense. If the ‘elements of the novel’ are, as the early Lukács writes, ‘entirely abstract’, it is the very abstraction of the ‘social structures’ it confronts that the novel ‘renders sensuous as the lived experience of the novel’s characters’, and thus transforms ‘into an instrument of composition’.<sup>58</sup>

The problem at stake in this is, then, an ultimately irresolvable one of how ‘to conjure up in perceptible form a society that has become abstract’, a problem perhaps best grasped in a passage that Adorno himself was fond of citing from Brecht:

The situation becomes so complicated because a simple ‘reproduction of reality’ says less than ever about reality. A photograph of the Krupp factories or the AEG provides virtually no information about these establishments. True reality has slipped over into functional reality. The reification of human relations, that is, the factory, no longer delivers human relations to us.<sup>59</sup>

Now, if this point – which Adorno engages at length in his essay on Balzac – is one that is certainly *intensified* by early-twentieth-century modernism, it is, nonetheless, far from restricted to a more limited issue concerning the generic nature of ‘realism’. (As Adorno points out, already in Balzac ‘the individual foul deeds through which people visibly attempt to steal from one another the surplus value that has already been appropriated invisibly make the horror graphic.’ As such, the novel *necessarily* struggles with the problem of how ‘to conjure up in perceptible form

a society that has become abstract'.<sup>60</sup>) Moreover, it goes to the heart of the tense relation between the novel's concrete and abstract tendencies, and, hence, between its alternate presentations in the form of bourgeois epic – of the world of its heroic entrepreneurs, ruined financiers, uppity governesses and alienated artists – or the form of the epic of capitalism, of the abstract world of money and circulation, universal exchange and 'functional reality', as such.

Turning, then, from the essay on 'The Storyteller', it is hence in, for example, Benjamin's relatively brief comments on Kafka that we might instead find one basis for an alternate development of the account of abstraction and concretion to be found in *The Theory of the Novel* itself. Kafka's work, writes Benjamin in a 1938 letter to Scholem, is 'the exact complement' of that precisely *social* reality which presents itself in 'the experience of the modern city-dweller'.<sup>61</sup> For such a perspective, significantly, modes of abstraction are less a flight *from* reality and more an index *of* the various social forms of 'real abstraction' constitutive of the (sensuously) 'unrepresentable' totality of modernity itself.<sup>62</sup> Yet – and Kafka is all too clearly a distinctive case – this should not be misunderstood. For despite, for example, Adorno's more apocalyptic pronouncements, capitalism as a social form is never *reducible* to the more or less 'purely' abstract social relations determined by capital and the value form alone. Indeed, capitalism positively requires other forms of social relation as concrete forms that can be reworked and refunctioned in the drive to capital accumulation. Like the novel it is nothing without it. Certainly, this dialectic of abstraction and concretion unique to each work would thus be central to any thinking through of the new paradoxical hybridities of form engendered by the novel's current wave of internationalization, following, as it does, those socio-economic processes through which the more or less 'concrete' social forms of non-capitalist and previously colonial cultures are progressively integrated into the accumulative structures of a transnational capitalism.

In 'the created reality' of the novel, the 'entire structure' of which can only be based in 'abstract systematization', Lukács writes, what 'becomes visible is the distance separating the systematization from concrete life'.<sup>63</sup> Yet rather than taking this as the pretext for mourning the mythical loss of 'an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given', one might instead see such 'visibility' – its capacity to *render visible* such distance – as, in fact, precisely the novel's own distinctive 'epic' mode; the irresolvable gap between the forms of abstrac-

tion intrinsic to modern social being and what Hegel called the 'unendingly particular' – the concreteness of 'things', and individual subjective experiences – with which the novel has, historically, been most persistently associated. In Balzac, Adorno writes, the novel already depicts, in its own ironic repetition of epic 'wholeness' and collective 'fate', the 'superior power of social and especially economic interests over private psychology', in the ways in which in the 'form of a medium of circulation, money, the capitalist process touches and patterns the characters whose lives the novel form tries to capture'.<sup>64</sup> And we can continue to see some extension of this – across any simple generic realism versus modernism divide – in various works today.

Writing of what he has termed the New Italian Epic, Wu Ming 1 – one of the Italian collective Wu Ming, responsible themselves for the contemporary historical novels of capitalism and class struggle, *Q, 54* and *Manituana* – describes Roberto Saviano's 2006 book *Gomorra*, around 300 pages of interweaving, often horrific stories of the Neapolitan Camorra that occupies some indeterminate space between fiction and non-fiction, the novel and journalism, in the following terms:

One of the most impressive things in *Gomorra* is the scope, the scale of the book: the journey begins at the docks of Naples and in the destitute outskirts of that city, but then Saviano takes us to Russia, Bélarùs, Scotland, the United States, Spain, the Middle East, Hollywood, Colombia ... Saviano's gaze makes incursions all over the world, because Italian organized crime makes business all over the world.<sup>65</sup>

Thus understood as a kind of critical mimesis of capital's own global 'incursions', *Gomorra*'s own version of epic form is articulated by Saviano in the opening to his final chapter in very particular terms:

It's not hard to imagine something, not hard to picture in your mind a person or gesture, or something that doesn't exist. It's not even complicated to imagine your own death. It's far more difficult to imagine the economy in all its aspects: the finances, profit percentages, negotiations, debts, and investments. There are no faces to visualize, nothing precise to fix in your mind. You may be able to picture the impact of the economy, but not its cash flows, bank accounts, individual transactions.<sup>66</sup>

As a framing of the book as a whole, *Gomorra* sets out, very concretely in this way, the degree to which any such epic 'realism' of capitalism can only be a polemical demonstration of the ultimate impossibility of *imaging* those forms of abstraction – harder

to imagine than ‘your own death’ – which nonetheless become the common denominator of all values in the urban worlds in which the book’s various characters are enmeshed. *Gomorra*’s concluding frame echoes here the global scope evoked by its opening in the all-too-material world of commodity circulation represented by the Port of Naples: ‘Everything that exists passes through here’, comments the narrator,

There’s not a product, fabric, piece of plastic, toy, hammer, shoe, screwdriver, bolt, video game, jacket, pair of pants, drill, or watch that doesn’t come through here. The port of Naples is an open wound. The endpoint for the interminable voyage that merchandise makes.<sup>67</sup>

It is in such terms, for example, that a comparison to, for example, that most celebrated of contemporary television romans – *The Wire* – equally springs to mind. And, in fact, more vividly than most novels, *The Wire* insists upon the capitalist ‘system’ itself as Subject, far more than either its ‘bourgeois’ or ‘proletarian’ characters. ‘You follow the drugs you get a drugs case’, says one character in the first series. ‘You follow the money, you don’t know where you’re going.’

Most importantly, it is in something like the depiction of the very *impossibility* of ‘imagin[ing] the economy in all its aspects’, of grasping the interminability of the ‘voyage’ that merchandise or money make, that both *Gomorra* and *The Wire*, like several other contemporary ‘epic’ texts, thus render the abstract itself visible *as* invisible within the ‘work’. As John Kraniauskas puts it of *The Wire*: as ‘a work of narrative totalisation’ any contemporary epic form is, for all that it may manifest a ‘realist desire to accumulate social content’, ‘always already incomplete’, to the degree that its narrative momentum must inevitably bring it up against an ‘unreadable [that is, abstract] sphere of finance capital’ into which it cannot finally enter. In this way, he argues, of necessity ‘the narrative pursuit of money through the cycle (or loop) of accumulation from the streets into finance only goes so far’. This indicates, for Kraniauskas, a central paradox of the show: the further it ‘zooms out’ the ‘less socially explanatory its vision becomes’, indicating, in turn, a ‘narrative limit’ which is also a ‘generic limit of *The Wire* as a work of crime fiction’. And in this it is not untypical. Yet – quite apart from causing one to wonder for which ‘genre’ this would *not*, at some level, constitute a limit – one might equally argue that it is precisely the ways in which, formally, it renders visible the essential limits on any artistic or cultural ‘representation’ of ‘totality’ that makes *The Wire* such a powerful contemporary work. The epistemological

limits entailed by the forms of what Kraniauskas terms ‘police interpretation’ in the show’s plot then become metonymic of an intrinsic problem of interpretation more generally, which it is the merit of the programme to dramatize, and which lies at the heart of its framing of, for example, the ‘defeats’ of collective labour in its second series. In this sense, critically, the ‘failure’ of its ‘narrative pursuit’ is also arguably its success as a kind of contemporary epic form.<sup>68</sup>

The dialectic ‘without synthesis’ between abstract and concrete tendencies is on this reading, then, the very ongoing condition of the modernity of the novel as an epic form as such. For capitalist modernity *really is* a social world constituted through abstraction. Very abstract and terribly concrete at the same time, the novel must, as the early Lukács understood, be no less so than the socio-historical reality of modern culture that it confronts.

## Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, Merlin, London, 1971 – written 1914–15, first published in 1916. This article is a slightly different version of a chapter forthcoming in Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds, *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011. My thanks to both of this book’s editors, and especially to Tim Bewes for the invitation to deliver the paper at Theories of the Novel Now, a conference hosted by *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, in Providence, Rhode Island in November 2008, from which the ideas expressed in this article initially derived. Thanks also to the editors of *Novel* for permission to reuse some brief passages from the version of this short paper, published in volume 42 of the journal under the title ‘Very Abstract and Terribly Concrete: Capitalism and The Theory of the Novel’ (pp. 311–17), within the material presented here.
2. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 9.
3. Franco Moretti, ‘Introduction’ to Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, Volume 2: *Forms and Themes*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2006, p. x. See also Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, Harper-Collins, London, 1997. There is of course a longstanding debate between those who would locate Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as the inaugural moment in the novel’s ‘when and where’, and those, like Watt, who would see it as originating with Richardson or Defoe. But texts like *The True Story of the Novel* have traced the form back not just to early seventeenth-century Spain but to the ancient world and its own cultural hybridities. Nonetheless, while Doody may be right that *The Rise of the Novel* manifests a profound British chauvinism – certainly Watt marginalizes the more ‘philosophical’ development of the French *roman* – it is surely a considerably more questionable move to project ‘the novel’, a ‘genre’ for which the Ancient Greeks and Romans had no equivalent word or concept whatsoever, back into the Hellenistic world itself. Moreover, to say so is not merely to assert some naive nominalism – the untenable assumption of some absolute rupture in the history of writing between one

- discontinuous epistemic system and another constituted by the mere invention of the *name* 'novel' – but is to observe that such accounts precisely miss what is novel about the category of 'the novel' itself, and hence what came, over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gradually to *require* the elaboration of some new concept.
4. David Trotter, 'Into the Future', *London Review of Books*, 22 March 2007, p. 31.
  5. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3: 1935–1938, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p. 147.
  6. See David Cunningham, 'After Adorno: The Narrator of the Contemporary European Novel', in David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp, eds, *Adorno and Literature*, Continuum, London and New York, 2006, p. 199.
  7. As a 'myth of the modern', almost all divisions between the epic and the novel rely all too obviously, given the historical priority of the former, upon a canonically 'metaphysical' opposition of originary unity and secondary, 'post-lapsarian' fragmentation – although this does not, of course, necessarily have to take a strictly nostalgic form (fragmentation can always be affirmed as a mark of freedom). And, of course, one might well see this division of epic and novel as, among other things, a division organized around Derrida's own pivotal metaphysical binary of speech and writing (though Lukács himself devotes almost no attention to this): the authenticity of that which derives immediately from oral tradition versus the novel's irreducible reliance on technologies of writing, as intensified by the mass production forms of print-capitalism. For a defence of Lukács in particular on this point, however, see Bernstein's forceful argument that the latter's conception of the epic world explicitly criticizes any romantic conception of it as a utopia, along with any universal philosophy of history, and instead presents the epic merely as a necessary projection from within the world of the novel itself. J.M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1984, pp. 47, 64–5.
  8. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 65.
  9. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols, trans. T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, pp. 1092, 1109; translation modified.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 1044.
  11. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 56.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
  13. Massimo Fusillo, 'Epic, Novel', in Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, Volume 2, p. 40. Significantly, Fusillo refers, in a similar spirit, to some 'kind of metahistoric bourgeois dimension' at work here (p. 34), in so doing effectively effacing any historical specificity to the novel whatsoever. Indeed, tellingly, he goes so far as to read Homer's *Odyssey* as itself as much a novel as an epic, at which point, of course, any useful distinction between the two, as anything more than a question of *style*, effectively collapses. If Fusillo's reading here recalls, or so he suggests, Adorno and Horkheimer's own reading of Homer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (p. 38), with its implicit attribution of 'bourgeois' features to the shrewd and more 'individuated' Odysseus, then it nonetheless misses the historical complexities of the latter's account, placed within the context of a discussion of the Enlightenment and capitalist 'identity thinking' as a form of *myth*, as well as the specific critical-theoretical strategies underlying its provocative analyses. By contrast, if Fusillo's reduction of the novel to a series of transcultural constants tells us anything it is probably only about our ongoing tendency to project the forms of our own world, and its recent history, onto history as a whole.
  14. Timothy Bewes, 'Paul Auster's Cinematographic Fictions: Against the Ontology of the Present', *New Formations* 58, 2006, p. 87.
  15. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2002, p. 223. In this sense, Bernstein is surely right that the conception of the epic in *The Theory of the Novel* is, at the very least, most productively read as 'a hermeneutical construct, an act of historical awareness from the perspective of the present by which the present can come to self-consciousness of its historical situation'. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel*, p. 47.
  16. *Ibid.*, pp. 222–3.
  17. Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1931–1934, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 771.
  18. For a more immediately Marxist reading, see Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel* – reviewed in *RP* by Keith Ansell Pearson, 'The Narration of an Unhappy Consciousness: Lukács, Marxism, the Novel and Beyond', *Radical Philosophy* 43, Summer 1986, pp. 22–8. Bernstein's book still remains the most lucid, sophisticated and extended attempt to reread *The Theory of the Novel* in the light of *History and Class Consciousness* in a relatively orthodox fashion. However, it does so at the cost of, first, effectively bracketing Lukács's own later attempts to rework the arguments of *The Theory of the Novel*, and, second, of – far too hastily – reading the latter text as already 'as a matter of fact if not intention, a Marxist work' (p. xii).
  19. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, p. 145.
  20. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London and New York, pp. 42, 38. Similarly, in Benjamin too – whom Anderson quotes extensively – by contrast to the story, as communal product of an artisanal world, in which the storyteller felt 'bonds with craftsmanship, but faced industrial technology as a stranger' ('The Storyteller', 150), the novel marks the displacement of that which 'can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic', by the emergent forms of mass production and consumption, and commodity exchange relations (p. 146).
  21. This is a point which occasions, in turn, some interesting parallel issues of historical and geographical locatability that it would also not be unproductive to explore further. So, for example, there are some compelling symmetries between, on the one hand, the thesis of a unique eighteenth-century British origin – in which Watt's claims for the rise of the novel could be matched to those of Ellen Meiksins Wood concerning the 'origin of capitalism' – and the alternate claim, on the part of Arrighi or Walter Mignolo, for a far earlier and more diffuse 'Atlanticist' and/or city-state beginning, developing in the historical passage from late medieval Italian urban-based Mediterranean trading networks to the sixteenth-century Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires which spawned Cervantes and *Lazarillo de Tormes*. (See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, Verso, London and New York, 2002; Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, Verso, London

- and New York, 1994; Walter Mignolo, 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2007, pp. 449–514.) Lukács himself, incidentally, suggests that it is Dante who 'represents a historico-philosophical transition from the pure epic to the novel', where 'there is still the perfect immanent distancelessness and completeness of the true epic, but his figures are already individuals' (*The Theory of the Novel*, p. 68) – a 'historico-philosophical transition' which might then also be read as the transition marked by the proto-capitalist trading networks of Italian city-states, between the Greek *polis* and the modern *metropolis* (of Dickens, Balzac, Joyce, Dos Passos, Dublin, Pynchon, and so on), in which the possibility of 'completeness' is finally dissolved in a world market system of infinite 'gifts and dangers' at a progressively global scale.
22. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Merlin, London, 1971, p. 85. So, for example, Watt proposes that the supposedly 'later' rise of the modern novel in France, with Stendhal and Balzac, corresponds to the later achievement of capitalist hegemony there in the wake of the French Revolution (*The Rise of the Novel*, p. 342), just as, in the work of a number of recent critics, magic realism is, more than a century on, typically interpreted as the literary outcome of uneven development and the encounter of pre-capitalist, peasant-based cultural forms with a nascent capitalism at a rather later moment of global capitalist development.
  23. Mark Schorer, cited in Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 105.
  24. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 39.
  25. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, Verso, London and New York, 1997, p. 11.
  26. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 149; Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 34.
  27. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 84.
  28. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–9.
  29. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1109.
  30. Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 146.
  31. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1092.
  32. As Adorno puts it, in this way the novel calls the 'reification of all relationships' by name. Importantly, it should be noted, this is not seen by Adorno as an exclusively twentieth-century modernist process, but is traced back at least as far as 'the eighteenth century and Fielding's *Tom Jones*'. Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Volume 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 32.
  33. Nancy Armstrong, 'The Fiction of Bourgeois Morality and the Paradox of Individualism', in Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, Volume 2, p. 349.
  34. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, p. 16. Of course, in practice, we might say, most novels embody something of *both* these understandings of the negative epic (Joyce's *Ulysses* would be exemplary here, as, for that matter, would be Balzac). Yet the distinction, hardly made in Adorno's own theorization, seems worth insisting upon, if only because they give a rather different perspective, I think, on what we understand by the modernity of the novel as an epic – or anti-epic – form itself.
  35. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 70, 101.
  36. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
  37. Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander, Merlin Press, London, 1962, pp. 21–4; *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 13.
  38. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 14.
  39. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 25.
  40. Theodor Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 120; translation modified.
  41. Armstrong, 'The Fiction of Bourgeois Morality and the Paradox of Individualism', p. 349.
  42. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 15.
  43. See Étienne Balibar, Interview, in Luke Corredor, ed., *Lukács after Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1997, pp. 115–16.
  44. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 93.
  45. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 17.
  46. Michael Löwy, 'Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anticapitalism', in J. Marcus and Z. Tarr, eds, *Georg Lukács: Theory, Culture, and Politics*, Transaction, New Brunswick NJ, 1989, p. 192.
  47. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 70.
  48. Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn, Merlin Press, London, 1970, p. 99.
  49. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, pp. 96, 99.
  50. Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, pp. 96, 38. Tellingly, Lukács in this way actually associates realism proper (by distinction to 'naturalism') with the 'poetic' – as reflective of the 'poetry of the world' – as against the 'prosaic' – reflective of Hegel's *prose* of the world (see *Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 125): 'The domination of capitalist prose over the inner poetry of human experience ... all these are objective facts of the development of capitalism' (*Writer and Critic*, p. 127).
  51. It should be said that, in the essay 'Art and Objective Truth' at least, there is a slightly more complex relation of abstract to concrete proposed; one which effectively posits a 'good abstraction' in realist (as opposed to naturalist) art's (Aristotelian) acts of 'generalization', and which should be the subject of a lengthier study than is possible here. See *Writer and Critic*, pp. 45–8.
  52. See Peter Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', *Radical Philosophy* 127, September/October 2004, pp. 27–8; Christopher J. Arthur, 'The Spectral Ontology of Value', *Radical Philosophy* 107, May/June 2001, pp. 32–42. On the *Manifesto* specifically, see Peter Osborne, 'Remember the Future? The *Communist Manifesto* as Cultural-Historical Form', in *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 75–6.
  53. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 75.
  54. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 255–6.
  55. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 34.
  56. Henri Lefebvre, 'The End of Modernity?', in *Key Writings*, Continuum, London and New York, 2003, p. 94.
  57. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 17.
  58. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 70–71.
  59. Theodor Adorno, 'Reading Balzac', in *Notes to Literature*, Volume 1, pp. 122–3, 128.
  60. *Ibid.*, pp. 122–3.
  61. Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Gersom Scholem on Franz Kafka', in *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938*, pp. 325–6.
  62. In its most radically modernist form, something like the later prose works of Beckett – no longer, perhaps, quite novels, but unthinkable outside the history of the novel

nonetheless – would be emblematic here. I am thinking, for instance, of *Comment C'est*'s world of undeviating organization and systematized violence; a textual world which is, in some sense, no more abstract than those social relations of the socio-historical world it apparently divorces itself from: relations of, say, administration, information, knowledge and power, the formality of the law, and commodity exchange. See David Cunningham, “‘We have our being in justice’: Formalism, Abstraction and Beckett’s ‘Ethics’”, in Russell Smith, ed., *Beckett and Ethics*, Continuum, London and New York, 2008, pp. 21–37.

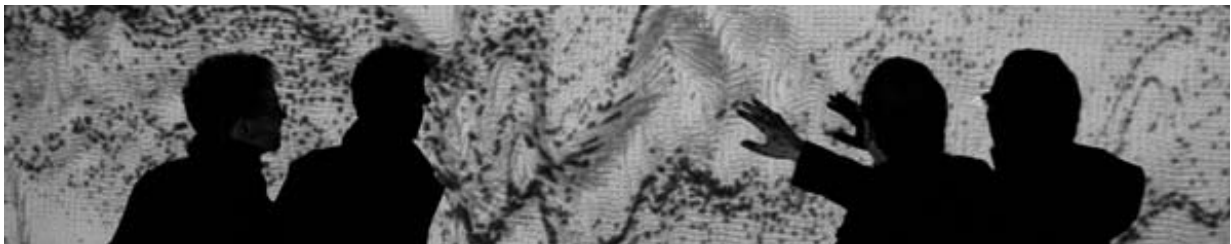
63. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 70.
64. Adorno, ‘Reading Balzac’, pp. 130, 132.
65. Wu Ming 1, ‘New Italian Epic: We’re Going to Have to be the Parents’, opening talk at Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London, 2 October 2008, [www.wumingfoundation.com/english/outtakes/NIE\\_have\\_to\\_be\\_the\\_parents.htm](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/outtakes/NIE_have_to_be_the_parents.htm). Significantly, it is precisely this scope that is lost in the film version of *Gomorra*, which has to ‘narrow down’ instead to five or so interlocking biographical stories set almost entirely within Naples.
66. Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra*, trans. Virginia Jewiss, Pan Macmillan, London, 2008, p. 282.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 4. The opening to *Gomorra*'s final chapter ends with the suggestion: ‘Perhaps the only way to represent the workings of the economy is to understand what it leaves behind, to follow the trail of parts that fall away, like flaking of dead skin, as it marches onwards’ (p. 282). In this way, already beginning on ‘the trail’ of one

set of ‘parts that fall away’, *Gomorra*'s opening paragraph provides the reader with a horrific moment of literalization – uncannily similar to that which drives the plot of the second series of *The Wire* – in which a crane operator witnesses the ‘raining down’ from a shipping container, ‘like mannequins’, of the corpses of dozens of illegal Chinese immigrants, ‘their names scribbled on tags and tied with string around their necks’ (p. 3). Such are the ways in which this particular book renders the ‘very abstract’ character of global flows of capital ‘terribly concrete’ in their human consequences.

68. See John Kraniuskas, ‘Elasticity of Demand: Reflections on *The Wire*’, *Radical Philosophy* 154, March/April 2009, pp. 25–34. Here, returning to the notion of cognitive mapping introduced earlier, a comparison suggests itself between the fictional–novelistic form of *The Wire* and Jameson’s analysis of Marvin Surkin and Dan Georgakis’ book, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, on the League of Black Revolutionary Workers*, which he reads as illustrative of ‘the proposition that successful spatial representation need not be some uplifting socialist-realist drama of revolutionary triumph but may be equally inscribed in a narrative of defeat, which sometimes, even more effectively, causes the whole architectonic of postmodern global space to rise up in ghostly profile behind itself, as some ultimate dialectical barrier or invisible limit’. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 415. It is in its rendering visible of such an ‘invisible limit’ that, I am suggesting, certain forms of the novel assume their epic form, in the most ‘properly’ epic fashion; and in a manner which is far from specifically ‘postmodern’.



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