

UNVEILING THE UNCONVENTIONAL: REGIMES OF ART, LITERATURE, AND REPRESENTATION IN 21ST CENTURY LEFT-WING LITERARY THEORY

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Abstract In this article, I examine Timothy Bewes's book, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, published in 2022 by Columbia University Press. My critical examination will consist of three stages: a contextualizing stage, which involves analysing the macro-ideological context in which Bewes's book is situated (i.e., the status of literary criticism and theory nowadays); a synthetic exposition of the book's main arguments, along with a critical analysis that highlights problematic concepts in Bewes's methodology and arguments. In the first part of the article, I will revise the genealogy of aesthetic regimes, as referred to by Jacques Rancière. These regimes are defined as the relationship between subject, world, language, and text, and I will delve into how this relationship operates in the 21st century. In the second part of the paper, I will tackle Bewes's primary (hypo)theses concerning the free indirect structure of the novel in a postfictional age. The key concept here is "instantiation," which refers to the intrinsic structure of the novel. I aim to connect this concept with the notion of the "narrative unconscious" and explore the idea of authorial responsibility. Additionally, I will draw on Moretti's delimitation of the modern epic and the novel, as well as Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism," to analyse the relationship between the contemporary novel and the (post)ideology of neoliberalism. Lastly, in the final part of my analytical approach, I will offer a critique of Bewes's "totalizing" theory from a world literature perspective. Specifically, I will focus on the unequal dynamics of literatures within the capitalist world-system.

Keywords Free indirect, ideology and form, Timothy Bewes, world literature, narrative ethics, theory of the novel, 21st century literature.

In the present article, the text under scrutiny is Timothy Bewes's book, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, published in 2022 by Columbia University Press. My critical examination

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will consist of three stages: a contextualizing stage, which involves analysing the macro-ideological context in which Bewes's book is situated (i.e., the status of literary criticism and theory in the 21st century); a synthetic exposition of the book's main arguments, and a problematization that highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of Bewes's approach. In the context of 21st century literature, which is politically and socially oriented¹ (i.e., moving away from a self-centred and deflective sense of historicity), the theory of the novel is compelled to adapt by embracing recycling and creativity. As understood in our paper, recycling entails a diachronic process that is responsible and conscious of its continuity with the existing critical tradition. Creativity, however, operates based on a principle of selection: determining which aspects of the former works fit into the context of the posthumanist era, and what needs to be invented to align with the realities of contemporary social forms and the multitude of literary objects that emerge in the world-system.

In the first part of the article, I will revise the genealogy of aesthetic regimes, as referred to by Jacques Rancière.² These regimes are defined as the relationship between subject, world, language, and text, and I will delve into how this relationship functions today. To do this, I will take a meta-critical approach to Bewes's book, comparing his perspective with that of other theorists such as Jeffrey Nealon, Fredric Jameson, and Franco Moretti. Moving on to the second part of the paper, I will tackle Bewes's primary (hypo)theses concerning the free indirect structure of the novel in a postfictional age. The key concept here is "instantiation," which refers to the intrinsic structure of the novel. I aim to connect this concept with the notion of the "narrative unconscious" and explore the idea of authorial responsibility. Additionally, I will draw on Moretti's delimitation of the modern epic and the novel, as well as Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism," to analyse the relationship between the contemporary novel and the (post)ideology of neoliberalism. Lastly, in the final part of my analytical approach, I will offer a critique of Bewes's "totalizing" theory from a world literature perspective. Specifically, I will focus on the unequal dynamics of literatures within the capitalist world-system.

Timothy Bewes' book, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (2022), is part of a broader trend in literary criticism and theory that aims to redefine its methodologies and approaches to examining objects of study. As part of the present historical overview, I would like to mention books by Fredric Jameson (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991), Franco Moretti (*Modern Epic*, 1996; *Distant Reading*, 2013), Jeffrey Nealon

¹ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen described literature and arts after 9/11 as a return to historicity. They argue that the metamodern regime of historicity can be seen as a combination of past possibilities and potential futures, in contrast to the presentism of postmodernism and the futurism of modernism. See Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 21-23.

² See Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

(*Post-postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism*, 2012), that are well-known in the international market of literary criticism. Additionally, there are thought-provoking works penned by authors from semi-peripheral cultures, such as the collective volume *Theory in the "Post" Era*,³ authored by a research team from Romania. Most of these approaches share a common premise as they seek to establish a new paradigm in literary criticism: the overcoming of postmodernism, both in theory and practice. Over the past few decades, postmodernism has become synonymous with relativism and anti-foundationalist thinking. Paradoxically, even though it derives from a radical "hermeneutics of suspicion," it has also been perceived as a means of disavowing reality as inherently discursive and therefore subject to deconstruction (as exemplified by Jacques Derrida's assertion that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte"⁴). This is also intertwined with the rise of entertainment literature, a fetishized object that operates within the cultural framework of late capitalism⁵ or, as Mark Fisher terms it, "capitalist realism."⁶

Free Indirect once again raises questions about the relationship between literature and its surrounding reality. The historical significance of this connection or interaction of literature with social forms should not be overlooked. It is not a coincidence that the author bases his approach on *The Theory of the Novel* by György Lukács, who is one of the most significant theorists of the realist novel of the last century. As Bewes puts it "there may be no more fundamental question in literary studies than what a work means, whose thought it is voicing, what it is really saying."⁷ In other words, the dilemma for critics is to identify representational patterns and strategies that no longer adhere to the postmodern logic of deferring reality due to its artificially constructed discourse. For this concern, Timothy Bewes

³ *Theory in the "Post" Era. A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian (eds.) (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

⁴ "[...] there is nothing outside the text [...]," Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 163.

⁵ "For one thing, the products sold on the mar-ket become the very content of the media image, so that, as it were, the same referent seems to maintain in both domains. This is very different from a more primitive situation in which to a series of informational signals (news reports, feuilletons, articles) a rider is appended touting an unrelated commercial product. Today the products are, as it were, diffused throughout the space and time of the entertainment (or even news) segments, as part of that content, so that in a few well-publicized cases (most notably the series *Dynasty*) it is sometimes not clear when the narrative segment has ended and the commercial has begun (since the same actors appear in the commercial segment as well)," Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 275.

⁶ "Given that Jameson has made a convincing case for the relationship between postmodern culture and certain tendencies in consumer (or post-Fordist) capitalism, it could appear that there is no need for the concept of capitalist realism at all. In some ways, this is true. What I'm calling capitalist realism can be subsumed under the rubric of postmodernism as theorized by Jameson," Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 7.

⁷ Timothy Bewes, *Free indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 3.

uses Jacques Rancière's "regimes of arts"⁸ in order to explain the links between subject, language, work, reality, and art.

To understand the connection between different ways of representing literature and the issue of language, we need to make a clear distinction between the perspectives of the classics and the moderns when it comes to the role of art in relation to reality. The classics saw literature as a way of imitating the world around us, language directly reflecting the social and economic status of its users, including a distinction between the language of the working class and that of the upper class. Jacques Rancière also explored this matter in *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*. He examines the opposition between classicism and modernism, emphasizing a transition from codified representation to an anti-representational approach in the modern era. The argument is that the classical age imposed strict rules on artists, whereas modernism offers more artistic and ideological freedom.⁹ Rancière characterizes this transformation as a shift "from representation to expression."¹⁰ Modernity, in this context, refers to the artistic and cultural movement that emphasizes the autonomy and self-expression of art. It is characterized by a rejection of traditional rules and hierarchies, as well as a focus on exploring the unique powers and forms of each artistic medium. Modernity seeks to break away from mimetic representation and instead embraces the pure power and exploration of art itself. It is associated with the pursuit of form, experimentation with language and visual elements, and the challenging of traditional boundaries and norms. Although Rancière does not explicitly define the temporal boundaries of literary modernity, we can infer, from the examples he provides to describe the aesthetic regime of the arts, that he is referring to the period encompassing the Romantic period (specifically, Rancière mentions Kant and Schiller's exploration of art, the sublime, and aesthetic experience) as well as modernism:

"The aesthetic mode of thought likewise runs through the specific definitions that the arts have given to themselves in the Modern Age: Proust's idea of a book that would be entirely planned out and fully removed from the realm of the will; Mallarmé's idea of a poem by the spectator-poet, written 'without the scribe's apparatus' by the steps of an illiterate dancer; the Surrealist practice of producing work that expresses the artist's unconscious with the outdated illustrations in catalogues or newspaper serials from the previous century; Bresson's idea of film as the film-maker's thought

⁸ See Rancière, *Mute Speech*.

⁹ "Since the easiest way to engage with this book is to place it on the shelf next to the myriad of other attempts to schematize the relationship between classicism and modernism, it runs the risk of quietly merging into what 'we all already know.'", Gabriel Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass," in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 27.

¹⁰ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, *passim*.

withdrawn from the body of the 'models' who, by unthinkingly repeating the words and gestures he lays down for them, manifest their proper truth without either the film-maker or the models knowing it; etc."¹¹

However, literary "modernity" brings about a significant change in this perspective: it is language itself that creates reality, and we can only perceive reality through language. In this case, literature has the power to create alternative realities, starting from scratch. "Poetic or literary modernity would explore the capabilities of a language diverted from its communicational uses."¹² This implies that a linguistic consciousness is essential in modern poetics for literature to function as quasi-autonomous from reality and its social forms.¹³ The emphasis on creating meaning explains why modernist arts attach great importance to understanding their own medium. In the case of literature, this entails not only literary genres and forms, but also the language itself. It is no accident that the aesthetic regime of arts arose within the framework of structuralist linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure's anti-realist and anti-materialist perspective on the relationship between reality and language influenced art to adopt an expressive approach that challenged the principles of realism in both poetics and politics. Later, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan further developed Saussure's theory of language. Lacan emphasized the concept of "resistance" to signification, which arises from the dominance of the signifier. This implies that not only is reality influenced by language, but the system of signifiers itself does not have fixed meanings or ideas. Instead, *signifying* is constructed through a network of interconnected signifiers, which provide a framework for the human psyche.¹⁴

This *weltanschauung* has enhanced the author's creativity in terms of the formal aspects of novels and poetry, while also perpetuating a solipsistic ideology¹⁵ that persisted in postmodernism. In his analysis of the novel *Ragtime*, Fredric Jameson argues and critiques the persistence of the expressive regime during the "cultural logic of late capitalism." He concludes that although postmodernism exhibits certain connections with realist poetics, it is

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 18.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ For a history of classical vs. modern poetry and the problem of language, see Matei Călinescu, *Conceptul modern de poezie: de la romantism la avangardă* [The Modern Concept of Poetry: from Romanticism to the Avant-garde] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), 11-24.

¹⁴ See Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: the first complete edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 415-419.

¹⁵ "This has led, in the latter part of the century, to a solipsistic hyper-consciousness of language whereby the recognition that language shapes reality has acquired a newly literalistic meaning; as if the analysis of ideology in language can fully encapsulate the lifeworld of its user.", Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, edited by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 18.

fundamentally anti-representational and grounded in the notion of individual fantasy as a solution to the challenge of envisioning an alternative future to capitalism.¹⁶ According to Jeffrey Nealon, what comes after the postmodern moment must be a thought that is deeply anti-hermeneutic and anti-linguistic. In his book *Post-postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism*, Nealon observes that there has been a recent departure from the linguistic focus in disciplines such as economics and psychology.¹⁷ Instead, these disciplines are now leaning towards more direct methods of biopolitical and economic manipulation. This shift represents a transformation or evolution of paradigms, rather than a return to essentialist criticism. From a critical perspective, literature's "power" is recognized as its interconnectedness with contemporary socioeconomic forces. It offers a means of critically engaging with biopolitical and economic aspects of life.¹⁸

However, to delve into contemporary theories on literature, one must consider the ongoing studies in the philosophy of language, as suggested by Bewes *via* Rancière. In this regard, Ordinary Language Criticism (OLC), a work edited by Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost in *Ordinary Language Criticism. Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (2003)¹⁹, extends the linguistic tradition that originated in continental philosophy, spanning from the structuralist Saussure to poststructuralist figures like Derrida and numerous other thinkers. I make this step forward because OLC has both similarities and disparities with Bewes's argument in favour of the gap between "novel thought" and the critical realm: "The works that are most directly expressive of the thought of the era do not speak in a voice that is accessible to the critical register."²⁰ In short, OLC challenges traditional interpretative theory by tackling two common issues: over-interpretation and the role of authorial intention in literary works. This anti-metaphysical theory emphasizes the significance of "ordinary language" within a text, rather than focusing on language that lacks substance and merely creates the illusion of deep meaning.²¹ Interestingly, there are similarities between OLC and the concept of "postfictional

¹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 23: "What such a description would want to register is the paradox that a seemingly realistic novel like *Ragtime* is in reality a nonrepresentational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram."

¹⁷ "In other words, perhaps this post-postmodern (anti-language or anti-hermeneutic) set of stances is not exactly a return to essentialism (as some have argued), but rather a recognition that not all deployments of force (social, biological, historical, unconscious, etc.) can be easily or satisfactorily modeled on a Saussurean understanding of linguistics – that we are witnessing a mutation or evolution of paradigms rather than a simple return to the essentialist past," Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁹ Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (eds.), *Ordinary Language Criticism. Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, Afterword by Stanley Cavell (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

²⁰ Bewes, *Free indirect*, 71.

²¹ Ingeborg Löfgren, "Two Examples of Ordinary Language Criticism: Reading Conant Reading Rorty Reading Orwell – Interpretation at the Intersection of Philosophy and Literature," in David Rudrum,

reading.” Firstly, what is referred to as ordinary language is actually the free indirect discourse described by Bewes, which is essentially another term for *heteroglossia* (coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, 1934). In another article, Timothy Bewes emphasized that:

“The other name for ‘heteroglot’ is ‘free indirect,’ a phrase that gives expression to the decentering and deauthorizing of free indirect discourse, and thus to the logic of novelistic thought itself. Between the material forms that heteroglossia can take *within* the novel – such as a proliferation of speaking characters – and the ‘dialogizing background’ of the novel’s discursive *environment* there is a radical division.”²²

The second similarity is that the literary text, in Bewes’s case, the novel always avoids being fully analysed and captured by the critical apparatus and the author’s intentionality. This is because it possesses an unconscious or, in other words, a mind of its own that cannot be completely expressed through interpretive language. According to Bewes, there exists a gap between the author’s thoughts, the thoughts of the novel itself, and the thoughts of the reader. Both approaches also highlight the arrogance of certain theories that claim to have superior value over other interpretations.²³ Bewes mentions Jameson, who saw historical materialism as a product inseparable from its ideological, historical, and material context, thus making it a historicized and socialized concept.²⁴

What distinguishes Timothy Bewes’s critical and theoretical approach from the directions we have presented so far is its political empowerment of the theory of the novel. It not only recognizes a unique “thought” of the novel compared to other forms of thinking (although there may be an unawareness of the novel), but it also requires a certain interpretation on the part of the literary critic and theorist. This means that beyond the author’s intentions (direct representations) or the structure of a book’s meaning (indirect, oblique representations of issues), there is an underlying *free indirect structure* in the novel, which consists of elements that go beyond the author’s original project. In some ways, this perspective may seem against the idea of authorial intention, but Bewes’s arguments are not mystical or metaphysical. On the contrary, he draws on a range of theorists (such as Jameson, Lukács, Deleuze, Bakhtin, Rancière, Benjamin – left-wing intellectuals and proponents of materialism) to argue that there is a symbolic realm within the novel (an *unconscious*,

Ridvan Askin, Frida Beckman (eds.), *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2019), 259.

²² Timothy Bewes, “Free indirect,” in *Political Concepts. A Critical Lexicon*, published on May 24, 2017, available online at <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/free-indirect-timothy-bewes/>.

²³ “In fact, OLC aspires to no general theoretical conception of ‘the literary’ or ‘the meaning’ of literature as such. On the contrary, OLC is fearful of what Wittgenstein labels our ‘craving for generality’ (Wittgenstein 1964: 17). This craving tempts us to define our concepts prior to specific investigations and readings – thus deciding beforehand what can be seen by them – rather than looking at different uses during our investigations and readings,” Löfgren, “Two Examples of Ordinary Language Criticism,” 261.

²⁴ Bewes, *Free indirect*, 7-8.

metaphorically speaking, rather than psychoanalytic jargon) that can be identified in its dialogical and ideological structure. The topic being discussed is the connection between ideology and form. So, to further explain his theory, Bewes defines *instantiation* and *postfiction*²⁵ as the elements that organize *free indirect* structure. Let us focus on instantiation and identify any potential challenges that may arise when developing this theory.

Instantiation refers to the inclusion of an idea or concept in a work without explicitly stating it. It is a key element of the novel genre, where something is presented as an example or instance of a broader category, attribute, or concept.²⁶ “In fact, a stronger and truer claim is that for ideas to possess such power outside the work, they must not be explicitly named or expressed. By doing so, they become objects of representation and are thus relativized, tied to a particular subject position and diegetic situation, limiting their portability.”²⁷ The power of instantiation lies in its ability to convey social significance and make claims about the world beyond the novel. By not being explicitly named or expressed, ideas in novels transcend subject positions and diegetic situations, allowing them to have portability and influence beyond the boundaries of the work.

There are two important aspects to take into consideration in this context. Firstly, it can be argued that the concept of instantiation shares similarities with the notion of objective correlative, as originally proposed by T.S. Eliot²⁸ a century ago. Essentially, both ideas involve the use of deviation and a literary logic that conveys indirect meaning through various elements such as characters, actions, symbols, and so on. This logic of instantiation can be traced back to a theoretical tradition that dates back to Plato, who viewed literature as inherently deviating from reality. This perspective was further explored by structuralists²⁹ and

²⁵ According to Bewes, *postfiction* is a concept that challenges the conventional logic of instantiation. It can be observed in various forms of expression, such as novels, films, artworks, and critical writing. It separates the ideas conveyed by a work from their specific representation, reshaping the very essence of thought. This approach highlights a perspective that is not tied to any specific anchor or subjective viewpoint. It serves as a means of connection that surpasses mere representation, instead focusing on breaking traditional links associated with instantiation. See Bewes, *Free indirect*, 141.

²⁶ “As I have described it, instantiation is a logic that is inherent to the novel form, according to which an entity (a person, an object, a linguistic sign, an encounter, a fictional description, a character trait) is asserted as a *case* or *instance* of a larger category, property, or concept, to whose reality it attests,” *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1934), 145: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative;’ in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”

²⁹ “The text of fiction does not *lead* to any extratextual reality; everything it borrows (and it is constantly borrowing) from reality is transformed into an element of fiction. [...] this intransitivity constitutes the text as an autonomous object and its relation to the reader as an aesthetic relation, in which meaning is

led to the development of the aesthetic regime of arts, as discussed by Jacques Rancière. He argued that “modernity” represents a specific period in art that overlaps with the aesthetic regime of the arts. According to Rancière, this period brought about an “antimimetic” revolution, reorganizing the arts towards more “pure” forms.³⁰ Secondly, how can we understand the concept of instantiation in literature? Instantiation suggests a covert mechanism through which literature communicates ideas, operating on a subliminal level that unconsciously influences readers. It carries a sense of conspiracy, subtly shaping our perceptions and thoughts. By delving into the depths of a text, we can uncover the intricate ways in which literature instantiates meaning and engages with our subconscious: “In fact, a stronger and truer claim is that for ideas to possess such power outside the work, they must not be explicitly named or expressed.”³¹ The argument for instantiation and its mysterious powers seems to divert attention from one of the main concerns in contemporary literary criticism, (post-)theory, and scriptural praxis, that is: narrative ethics or the ethics of representation. The novel, being intersubjective, carries a certain level of *responsibility*. This means that the author, whether writing the novel itself or critical volumes about it, must engage in continuous “self-reflection” on how certain things are represented, such as minority communities, moral dilemmas, or political/ideological positions. This is because, willingly or not, the novel can perpetuate cultural stereotypes through what is known as the “narrative unconscious.”³² It is therefore the critic’s duty to denounce forms of perpetuating discriminatory, generalizing stereotypes that are not ethically regulated by a self-reflexive narrative voice.

Is there a connection between form and content? Do certain ideologies go beyond formal boundaries, or do they only align with specific artistic forms? The author aims to explore these questions by presenting four hypotheses. Let me quote them along with their respective arguments, while also adding a few additional questions and remarks:

perceived as inseparable from form,” Gérard Genette, *Fiction & Diction* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 26-27.

³⁰ “It is pointless to go on with definitions and examples. We need to indicate, on the contrary, the heart of the problem. The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself,” Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 18-19.

³¹ Bewes, *Free indirect*, 25.

³² “Self-aware narrative imagination that critically engages with the cultural narrative unconscious nourishes the process of actively constructing one’s own narrative identity instead of remaining entrapped in an identity imposed on oneself from without. Social conditions can foster or impede such active narrative agency: they can empower or paralyze,” Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 91.

1. "Instantiation, a logical relation that is as old as philosophy itself, is also the organizational and ideological structure of the novel. Nothing in the form of the novel, nothing the novel says or does, is possible outside this structure, which is inseparable from the novel's critical legibility.
2. Coexisting with this truth about the novel, however, is an alternative understanding of the novel that is at odds with its formal qualities. The impossibility of arriving at a formal definition of the novel, an impossibility established by Bakhtin, does not mean that the novel does not exist. It means, quite simply, that what defines the novel exceeds its form – exceeds, that is, the structure that has organized almost all professional literary criticism since the novel's inception. This structure presupposes that a thought is always instantiated in a form. Of course, such instantiated thoughts are present everywhere in the novel, but they are not the thought of the novel, which consists, rather, in a noninstantiated, non-instantiable idea. In dispensing with the instantiation relation, the contemporary novel makes visible and overcomes the predominant aesthetic ideology of the postindustrial, 'neoliberal' world.
3. Even in its pedestrian and least interesting forms, literature undertakes this exit from the instantiation relation more successfully and completely than the most rigorous and systematic as well as the most experimental and unconventional 'theoretical' work.
4. The 'free indirect,' understood not as a 'style' or 'discourse' but as an unanchored, non-centered perspective, is the means by which the novel escapes the claims of ideology itself. Insofar as this principle is generalizable outside the practices of writers of literature, it represents the most promising avenue for a rediscovery of the possibility of thought in our time, when a thought without interest has seemingly become inconceivable."³³

There are several criticisms that can be made regarding the assumptions made by Bewes, which he will demonstrate throughout his book. First, I would like to highlight the distinction between *the novel* and *the modern epic*, as operationalized by Franco Moretti in his studies prior to the shift towards distant reading.³⁴ According to Moretti, the *novel* is a highly productive genre that received thorough analysis during its dominant period in the 19th century, even though it originated in the 18th century. A symbolic representation of modernity would be the *bildungsroman*, as it portrays a distinct image of it: "the image conveyed precisely by the 'youthful' attributes of mobility and inner restlessness."³⁵ It represents the

³³ Bewes, *Free indirect*, 38.

³⁴ To formalize Moretti's theory of literary genres, I will reference Alex Cistelean's article. It is particularly valuable as it organizes Moretti's thoughts on form, ideology, the evolution of genres, and the interplay between literatures. Additionally, it offers a well-developed critical analysis.

³⁵ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 5.

national state and depicts the protagonist's journey from countryside to city. Over time, it moves away from a human-centred and binary narrative structure, embracing complexity and rejecting the illusion of reintegrating the individual into a disillusioned world. The novel reduces conflicting voices (polyphony or heteroglossia), focuses on subjective experiences, and reawakens a sense of wonder in the world. However, *the modern epic* (or, in Alex Cistelean's terms, *the anti-novel*³⁶) is a literary genre that is characterized by a low reproduction rate and a lack of formal regularity. Its purpose is to create a complete form (an epic) in a modern, non-totalizable world. The modern epic is centrifugal in nature, consisting of a succession of worlds that are unified through digression and amalgamation. It is considered a scholarly genre, and its survival is mainly ensured by the public educational system. Moretti indicates that modern epics are often included in intellectual canons without actually being read. The evolution of the modern epic demonstrates a deconstruction of anthropocentrism and a greater openness to polyphony and subject destitution.³⁷ In fact, the formal and ideological history of the modern epic and the novel can be summarized as follows: "while the novel transitions from its constitutive anthropocentrism to polyphony, the modern epic makes much more irregular leaps, but finally crosses from polyphony to anthropocentrism."³⁸

Given this theoretical framework, one might question whether Bewes's proposed theory of the 21st-century novel aligns with Moretti's concept of the novel. This question arises because the novels Bewes analyses in his approach often acquire symbolic status through translations or prestigious literary awards. For example, among others, J.M. Coetzee received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, Zadie Smith won the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2006, and Jesse Ball was awarded the Plimpton Prize in 2008 and the Berlin Prize in 2018. Can the characteristics of instantiation and postfiction be found in pop culture novels? Another problem arises from the blending of the *high* genre of the novel (referred to as the anti-novel in Moretti's view) with the *consumer* novel. This blending is seen through the lens of the accelerated commodification of literature in postmodernism.³⁹

Secondly, the question of the relationship between ideology and form is not a new topic, especially in the field of Marxist literary criticism. Timothy Bewes' ideas do not bring anything new to the ongoing debate. In essence, the author aims to emphasize that the ideology of a novel, being polymorphous and inhomogeneous, transcends the formal

³⁶ Alex Cistelean, "Novel and Anti-Novel. Moretti Before Distant Reading," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, no. 6.2 (2020): 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁹ "The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote,' as Joyce or Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance," Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2-3.

boundaries of literature. This means that a literary ideology can encompass various forms without being limited to any specific one. However, this idea has already been highlighted by György Lukács in his article titled "The Ideology of Modernism," where he states that "[w]hat must be avoided at all costs is the approach generally adopted by bourgeois-modernist critics themselves: that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique."⁴⁰ In the preamble of the work, he provides two examples of the use of interior monologue. This narrative technique has a different ideological function in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*. In the case of the former, the narrative formalism serves as the structuring element of the entire novel, "it itself is the formative principle that governs the narrative pattern and the presentation of character."⁴¹ In Mann's case, the monologue serves as "a simple technical device" to explore the inner complexity of the Goethe character. Furthermore, Franco Moretti highlights the same concern in his book *Modern Epic*. He asserts that the formal frameworks of literature have given rise to a distinct literary ideology, separate from that of society. Moretti proposes that it is a futile endeavour to ascertain the originator of this ideology or its rhetoric.⁴² Therefore, according to Moretti, the configuration of the historical evolution of the novel follows "the history of symbolic forms."⁴³ Furthermore, Moretti and Bewes have differing views on the relationship between literature and the ideology of the ruling class. While the author of *Modern Epic* argues that "literature is always a diagonal and idiosyncratic expression of the dominant ideology,"⁴⁴ Bewes suggests that the novel becomes resistant to the "neoliberal" status quo because of its polyphonic structure and complex thought. In this regard, I lean towards Mark Fisher's arguments and ideas in *Capitalist Realism*, which suggest that all forms of thinking (whether conscious or embedded in literature) are limited by the possibilities of existence shaped/allowed by late capitalism.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ György Lukács, "Ideology of Modernism," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. by David H. Richter (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 1218.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "the form has constructed its own ideology – and a very effective one. But all this is the result of a purely formal dynamic. It was not the primary object of Goethe's work, and rhetoric met history only at the end of the process. But does it really make much difference whether ideology precedes rhetoric or follows it? It makes an enormous difference. For, in the former case, ideology might guide form to the desired end; not so in the latter, since it comes up against the rigidity of ready-made rhetorical choices. This is why literary ideology is always somewhat askew in relation to others: because it rests upon a jumble of fortuitous experiments, rhetorical fetters and unpredictable turns", Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic. The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London & New York: Verso, 1996), 55.

⁴³ Ibid., 75-76.

⁴⁴ Cistelean, "Novel and Anti-Novels," 18, n12.

⁴⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 12: "After all, and as Žižek has provocatively pointed out, anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism. [...] Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it"; see also page 16: "Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a

In light of the mushrooming of world literature studies and cultural globalization effects, I want to focus on what Pascale Casanova refers to as “the existence of a literary marketplace characterized by great inequalities.”⁴⁶ The world-system of literature has the structure of the capitalist world-system.⁴⁷ This means that literary systems⁴⁸ do not compete for symbolic capital from equal positions. It also means that (semi)peripheral literatures are doubly subordinate: to the central (hegemonic) literatures and to the socio-political and economic contexts of their originating countries. The unequal distribution of literatures on the world map raises questions about whether the social and ideological function is the same in prestigious cultures like France or the United States compared to Eastern European countries. Is “contemporaneity” homogenized across the capitalist world-system? Has cultural globalization brought the evolution of literary forms to a similar historical level? How does self-colonialism play a role in the context of the “democratization” among literatures? In a previous article, I demonstrated that there are asynchronies and ideological misappropriations regarding posthumanism and the system of post-communist Romanian literature, despite being anchored in international debates on the philosophy and theory of literature.⁴⁹ This leads to the question: is Bewes’s approach intended to be an exhaustive theory of the novel or is it solely focused on epic products from Western countries? Can “postfiction” be considered within the scope of the “craving for generality” that Wittgenstein spoke of?⁵⁰

Instead of conclusions, I would recommend that a more comprehensive theory of the novel in the 21st century should involve specialists in literary theory and history, as well as experts in the morphology and dynamics of literary genres, representing different cultures with distinct statuses in the core-periphery dynamic. In simpler terms, (world) “literary theory” should function like a transnational laboratory, a global network where individuals work within

pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.”

⁴⁶ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 91.

⁴⁷ “A single but radically uneven world-system; a singular modernity, combined and uneven; and a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content to reveal itself as, properly speaking, world-literature – these propositions sum up the kernel of our argument. ‘World-literature,’ as we understand it, is an analytical category, not one centred in aesthetic judgement,” WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 49.

⁴⁸ When I mention “literary systems” being in competition, it is not about individual authors or their texts. Instead, I am referring to a complex network of literary and non-literary elements. These include translations, publishing marketing, literary criticism institutions, and prizes, all of which contribute to these inequalities. In simpler terms, the ‘agents’ of literary export generate a field of tensions between literary systems. However, this is typically determined by a criterion linked to a literature’s recognized prestige (a prestige often determined by literary criticism and theory institutions).

⁴⁹ See Emanuel Lupașcu, “Asynchronous Instantaneity. The Posthuman Turn in the Romanian Literary System,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, no. 9.1 (2023): 161-187.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books. Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigation”* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1958), 17-18.

diverse geocultures, vocabularies, and (literary) objects, despite the inherent inequalities and shortcomings that may exist.⁵¹ Timothy Bewes' book provides a valuable starting point for contemporary debates surrounding the novel. It explores the novel's relationship with its audience, whether that audience is the general public or a more discerning readership. The book also delves into important topics such as representation, instantiation, and the ethical implications of narrative in the 21st century. However, it could benefit from a more thorough examination of the historical and material factors that have shaped the evolution of the novel in modernity and postmodernity. In order to fully grasp the concept of modernity, it is crucial to determine whether it is primarily a historical and geographical category or, as argued by the Warwick Research Collective, a manifestation of modern capitalism that takes on diverse and uneven forms across the world.⁵² Hence, it is important to reassess the categories established by literary theory in the previous century in order to obtain a more profound comprehension of the present condition of literature. Nevertheless, it is essential to generate novel categories and descriptive frameworks for this objective, as societal structures have undergone significant transformations and theories from the 20th century are inadequate in fully elucidating contemporary phenomena.

⁵¹ "At the same time, lab operations themselves – the labor of theory overall – break through the actual or imagined barriers separating various national laboratories of earlier theoretical work more resolutely in the post-age. This means that our theory lab is also 'geo-situated,' a site of intellectual 'worldliness' as much as a place-bound subsystem of an ethnopolitical system. The labor performed in our lab today is, as both Latour and Itamar Even-Zohar would emphasize, heavily networked, internally and externally plugged, domestically and internationally, into extensive sets of transmission, translation, and relaying apparatuses. This post condition of theoretical work is unparalleled in history," Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian, "Introduction: Toward a 'Post' Vocabulary – A Lab Report," in *Theory in the "Post" Era. A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.) (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 13.

⁵² "Modernity is neither a chronological nor a geographical category. It is not something that happens - or even that happens *first* - in 'the west' and to which others can subsequently gain access; or that happens in cities rather than in the countryside; or that, on the basis of a deep-set sexual division of labour, men tend to exemplify in their social practice rather than women. Capitalist modernisation entails development, yes – but this 'development' takes the forms also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development.", WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 13.