CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

What is the Political Novel? Defining the Genre

This Collection brings together selected contributions to the first annual CAPONEU conference, which took place in Berlin from 27 to 29 September 2023. The participants discussed a variety of understandings of the political novel as a (tentative) genre. They combined approaches to defining the political novel that are characterised by genre theory with those that are shaped by the history of the genre, thus also paradigmatically illustrating this changeable category in relation to specific novels that have emerged in heterogeneous contexts. The Collection was published on the Open Research Europe platform (open access).

Audience: Scholars • Students • Writers, translators, publishers, literary critics

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Who’s afraid of the political novel? An introduction

Introduction to the conference collection What is the Political Novel? Defining the Genre, published in June 2025 at Open Research Europe. Our purpose in this introduction and in the research project The Cartography of the Political Novel (Caponeu), to which this collection belongs, is not to introduce a new category that complements – or opposes – other established genre designations

such as the engaged novel or the thesis novel. Rather, it is about examining the relevance of the term ‘political novel’ anew. Why do we consider it important, both as a tentative genre and as a politically productive and dynamic social phenomenon, both in its past, its present and – predictably – in its future? While recognising the current scholarly interest in the inherently political nature of all writing, we argue that certain novels, unlike many others, benefit from being more directly designated as political novels.

Article

Who’s afraid of the political novel? An introduction

By: Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles

Rethinking the politics of form: The strange case of the political novel

The genre is an institution like a church or a university, a particular way of grouping literary works on the basis of their external and internal form, according to René Wellek and Austin Warren. But institutions are also there to be changed, and frameworks and rules can be challenged. As Fredric Jameson once observed, while literary criticism cannot do without genre, modern literary production continually and systematically undermines the concept itself. While political ideas and the political milieu dominate the political novel, according to Irving Howe, the literary form remains intact. Wellek and Warren therefore rightly question whether it is even possible to speak of a distinct genre when the grouping (of novels) is based solely on the theme and not on the form itself. The fact that Robert Boyers, one of the few authors to have dealt with the political novel in depth, ultimately abandoned the idea of a separate literary genre shows that Wellek and Warren’s observations have hit the core of the problem. So the question arises: are there other aspects besides content that make a novel political? Why does the political novel appear in so many different guises (such as utopia, dystopia, spy novel, war novel, thesis novel, proletarian novel, partisan novel, etc.)? Is this the cause of the problem, or is it simply the law of the novel as an unfinished genre in Bakhtin’s sense?

Article

Rethinking the politics of form: The strange case of the political novel

By: Zrinka Božić

“From Charlemagne to the Title of the King”: Political novel between estrangement and recognition

Starting from a critical reflection on certain elements of Rita Felski’s polemic with the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, the article focuses on what may appear to be a binary opposition between the

concepts of estrangement and recognition. It aims to show that what appears from another perspective as the mutual exclusivity of these two concepts and their associated theoretical traditions gives room for their co-implication in a dialectical relationship and that such a relationship has an intrinsically political dimension. Subsequently, it is argued that the described dialectic of estrangement and recognition can provide a suitable basis for revisiting discussions on the politics of literature – inextricably linked to these concepts from the beginning – and consequently even help in the search for a viable concept of the political novel.

Article

“From Charlemagne to the Title of the King”: Political novel between estrangement and recognition

By: Zvonimir Glavaš

Perceptions, cartographies, and ‘cartographies of time’ in the political novel

The paper examines the relation of the form of political novel to perceptions. Three possibilities are analysed. First, when the political novel shares perceptions of the hegemonic power. Second, when the novel trains how to suspiciously and critically reveal hegemonic manipulations of perceptions. Third, where the form of the novel enhances and emancipates perceptive faculties of readers and allows them to project new democratic activities. This three-fold relation is also referred to cartographic activities (including cartographies of time) as depicted in political novels.

Article

Perceptions, cartographies, and ‘cartographies of time’ in the political novel

By: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

What is a novel in the political novel? The perspectives of contemporary feminist theory

The paper examines the theoretical and methodological questions that arise from the feminist critical encounter with the genre of the political novel. On the one hand, a relatively small number of studies explicitly devoted to the political novel as a genre do not present a differentiated feminist perspective. On the other hand, since its beginnings in the late 1960s, feminist criticism has developed both its various readings and ideas of literature as inherently political. Feminist readings and ideas of politics are above all reflected in the treatment of nineteenth and twentieth century novels as privileged literary sources. While having the theoretical and methodological apparatus of

these approaches in mind, and particularly those that defined political dimensions of literature in the manner of thematic criticism, we take a closer look at one of the most influential early feminist readings of political narrative prose – Shoshana Felman's "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" (1975). Using this example, we explore the possibilities of interpreting the political elements in political fiction and the usefulness of the feminist perspective on the politics of literature in general to rethink the genre of the political novel. Furthermore, we raise the issue of the feminist reading of the political novel in light of the most influential contemporary feminist conceptions of politics developed in the horizon of post-foundational political thought.

Article

What is a novel in the political novel? The perspectives of contemporary feminist theory

By: Mirela Dakić

"Perché i xe bestie?!" Politics, race and exclusion in Vladan Desnica's The Winter Summer Vacation

Although Vladan Desnica's novel Zimsko ljetovanje (The Winter Summer Vacation, 1950) has been criticised for being apolitical due to its emphatically realistic depiction and explicit avoidance of the expected themes of the Second World War, it is a prominent example of a political novel. On several narrative levels, the author draws attention to the expectations of the genre's conventions and reshapes them in an imaginative and politically subversive way. By consistently drawing on officially proclaimed realist procedures and traditional narrative style, Desnica exposes the problematic nature of the 'pragmatic' use of literature and reveals hidden social controversies. He makes his 'civilised' characters into representatives of a Western colonial discourse and a racist vocabulary, turning them into a synecdoche of hegemonic relations and the production of inequality. Their attitude towards the socially and culturally disadvantaged peasants turns out to be a form of subjugation and production of hegemonic relations that correspond to those in a proclaimed egalitarian contemporary society. Although there was no racial question in Yugoslavia of the time, Desnica uses the colonial and racist discourse of his literary characters as an explicit form of hegemonic politics, referring with them both to imperialist Italy and to the contemporary egalitarian Yugoslav state. With his novel, Desnica evokes emancipatory interventions that work beyond the loose framework of the Morlach population. He steers his narrative towards a fundamental humanist framework in the sense of modernist interest in the representation of subjectivity and the mechanisms of community functioning.

Article

"Perché i xe bestie?!" Politics, race and exclusion in Vladan Desnica's The Winter Summer Vacation

By: Marina Protrka Štimec

Fundamental operations of the political in Beckett’s Molloy

The political novel might be defined in terms of “genre,” or a novel’s overt intervention within a pre-established political field. However, this chapter contends that the process of personal individuation and incorporation within the State (or polis) is the fundamental operation of the political within the novel as a form. In order to sketch out the parallel, and paradoxical, operation of becoming an individual subject at the same time as, and in relation to, incorporation into a wider social state, this chapter examines how Samuel Beckett’s Molloy (1951) plots the resistance of its eponymous protagonist against both benign and coercive attempts to (a) define him as an individual, and (b) to assimilate him into the social body on that basis. Drawing on the works of Aristotle, Agamben, Bersani and Rancière, the chapter focuses on Molloy’s methods of avoidance of becoming a state-recognised and state-sanctioned subject and reads this avoidance as a form of resistance to the established polity. It is argued that Beckett’s non-relational art, of which Molloy is an early example, raises important theoretical issues concerning the interconnectivity of the political and the novel at a fundamental level. If the novel is dependent on just the sort of process that Molloy resists – that is on claims of individuality and relation –, can the novel as a form actively resist the political and resist assimilation and incorporation into a pre-established polis?

Article

Fundamental operations of the political in Beckett’s Molloy

By: Paul Stewart

From Poland with love: Politics of queerness in the time of neoliberal post-socialism (the case of Michał Witkowski)

The article presents Michał Witkowski’s novel Lubiewo (Lovetown, 2005) as an unconsciously political novel. In order to do so, I take a critical approach to the basic epistemological distinction contained in this novel between gej/ciota (gay/faggot) by analysing subsequent novels that refer to Lovetown, in particular Fyn fund cwancyś (Twentyfive, 2015) and a privately published autofictional novel entitled One Hundred Dogs for Killing a Crab. A Cuban Diary (circa 2018). The article argues that the translation of this distinction (gay/ciota) into the ‘queer versus gay’ opposition, recognisable in theory (especially in the US), leads to misinterpretation and distorts the Eastern European context of economic transformation. Deconstructive analysis shows that the political aspect of Witkowski’s work can be found particularly in his critique of Polish hegemonic masculinity and his critique of the economic dimension of Poland’s neoliberal transformation.

Article

From Poland with love: Politics of queerness in the time of neoliberal post-socialism (the case of Michał Witkowski)

By: Błażej Warkocki

Is Pierre Michon’s "The Eleven" a political novel?

Pierre Michon’s The Eleven (Les Onze, 2009) is narrated by a cicerone who entertains visitors to the Musée du Louvre and describes the painting of eleven members of the Comité de salut public during the French Revolution, which revisits the history of politics at the decisive moment of la Terreur. The novel purports to be a commentary on the painting, the people it depicts, the circumstances of its creation and its author. However, the painting is imaginary, as is the quotation from Jules Michelet’s Histoire de la Révolution française that legitimises it. The complex interplay of literary traditions and techniques used in the novel defies the banality of a running commentary on political figures and circumstances told in a realist mode to evoke instead the spectacle of telling/making the history/story of politics as a surge of terror, thus revealing the abyss implicit in the performative situation of the protagonist and his audience doubling/mimicking the text and the reader: originary fiction of politics as imaginative re-enactment of the politics of fiction that redeems the Revolution.

Article

Is Pierre Michon’s "The Eleven" a political novel?

By: Nenad Ivić