



Workshop – Literary Politics and Geopolitics

29 and 30 January 2026

Abstracts

Zrinka Božić: “Literary Cartography and Critical Geopolitics”

Mark Devenney: “Novel (Without) Borders: A Response to Schmitt’s *Nomos of the Earth*”

Korbinian Lindel: “Geopolitics as an Aesthetic Principle – and as a Philological Approach?”

My planned presentation is connected to my dissertation project (“*Networks of Geopolitics in the Literature of Modernity*”), which I have been pursuing for the past three years. There are two aspects of my research that I would particularly like to present and discuss within the framework of the workshop:

- **Geopolitical Aesthetics:** From its very beginnings, that is, already in the works of authors such as Friedrich Ratzel, geopolitical thought has been strongly aestheticized and literarized. More specifically, it is articulated predominantly in narrative form. This inclination towards narration (as opposed to lyric or drama) will be sketched out in my presentation, alongside the outlines of a geopolitical aesthetics that still shapes the texts of one of the most influential authors in this field in the late 20th century, Samuel Huntington. At the same time, this makes clear that classical disciplinary geopolitics (Ratzel, Haushofer, Schmitt) represents a relevant object of literary studies in its own right.
- **Geopolitical Philology:** Literary studies itself (in particular the prominent Germanist Josef Nadler) continued to operate in the mid-20th century with categories directly derived from classical German geopolitics. Nadler’s research paradigm of a *Literaturgeschichte der Stämme und Landschaften* will not only be critically outlined in the presentation; rather, the aim is to interrogate the potential of Nadler’s approach for a transnational historiography of German literature.

Lisa Katharina Schmitz: “Unlearning Geopolitics: The Language of Global Order and the Potentialities of Literature”

The term *geopolitics* carries with it a deep sediment of imperial and industrial imagery. It emerged as a metaphorical language through which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe imagined its relationship to the world. Thinkers such as Friedrich Ratzel and Halford Mackinder translated the logics of colonial expansion, industrial competition, and racialized vitality into spatial metaphors: the state as a “living organism,” the globe as a “stage” for struggle, progress as movement outward toward new “spheres of influence.” These tropes were not confined to political theory; they permeated the broader cultural imagination, informing the rhetoric of newspapers, popular science, and literature alike. In this discursive environment, the world became an object to be mapped, mastered, and systematized, an attitude that naturalized imperial hierarchies under the guise of geographical reason.

This paper traces how that early geopolitical vocabulary continues to shape, often unconsciously, how globality is narrated today. Taking Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) as a case study, I argue that the novel simultaneously inherits and subverts this language of global order. Hamid’s protagonists move through a world that still bears the imprint of colonial borders and capitalist unevenness, yet the novel’s signature device, the magical “doors” that instantaneously connect distant places, dissolves the spatial logic on which geopolitics depends. Where early modernity imagined the Earth as a surface to be conquered or partitioned, *Exit West* imagines it as a network of thresholds: a space of sudden permeability and disorientation.

By reading *Exit West* against the rhetorical residues of geopolitical thought—its verbs of expansion, its nouns of territory, its metaphors of flow and containment—the paper asks how literature can unlearn the spatial grammar of imperial modernity. Hamid’s narrative rejects the vocabulary of centre and periphery, replacing it with an ethics of proximity and encounter. The novel’s quiet tone, its refusal of sensational migration imagery, and its global simultaneity constitute a literary experiment in de-geopoliticizing perception. In a world where movement no longer follows the cartographic lines of empire but occurs through invisible portals of technology, capital, and crisis, the novel invites us to imagine a politics of relation beyond geography. Literature, in this sense, becomes a site for linguistic renewal: a space where the inherited metaphors of world order are exposed, disarmed, and rewritten.

Charlotte Woodford: “Mapping German Modernities in Women’s Writings at the Start of the 20th Century”

Benjamin Kohlmann: “The Novelists’ International vs Geopolitics? A Radical History of the *Bildungsroman*”

This talk maps out a global counter-history of the bildungsroman, offering an alternative theorization of ‘Bildung’ as firmly allied to radical, revolutionary, and internationalist political causes. Existing accounts of the bildungsroman present it as a fundamentally conservative form that aimed to contain disruptive social energies. The radical bildungsroman began to evolve alongside the genre’s more familiar hegemonic forms from the early nineteenth century onwards, but crucially this alternative history took inspiration from (and actively worked to advance) a set of Left politics: instead of imagining “how revolution might be avoided” (Franco Moretti), the radical genealogy of the bildungsroman seeks to imagine the conditions under which a socialist and internationalist dispensation might finally emerge. Part of the twentieth-century literary formation that Michael Denning has called the “Novelists’ International”, the radical bildungsroman cuts across many of the conceptual divisions—realism versus modernism, formal experimentation versus mimesis—that have structured our sense of the novel form’s artistic possibilities.

Natalya Bekhta: “The Role of Literature in Absurd Times”

In my contribution to the discussion, I shall focus on the possible modes of (geo)political literature in the context of contemporary Ukraine. If framed in the terms of the workshop, the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war may itself be viewed through the symbolic tension between ‘geopolitics’ and ‘politics’: it is a geopolitical event that nevertheless has been actively framed as a merely intra-national ‘conflict’ (‘the Ukraine war’), confined and contained within the borders of Ukraine. Literature seems to recognize this tension and attempts instead to operate on both levels simultaneously: On the one hand, contemporary Ukrainian fiction and poetry is turned inwards, written for and by the national and political community going through a tragedy. On the other hand, many Ukrainian writers have also explicitly adopted the role and mission of ambassadors on the global literary-cultural stage, in an effort to mobilize international political support for their country. In this context, one of the questions posed for the workshop – namely, what role can literature play in this dystopian world – takes on a particular urgency and finds a number of concrete solutions. By discussing some of these solutions, I shall attempt to go beyond the argument that (political) literature registers national

and global conditions and ask: What kind of transformative work, if any, does it perform? What kind of utopian openings, if any, does it gesture towards?

Louis Aubry: “Writing and Unmaking the Geopolitical in Jean Genet’s *A Captive In Love* (*Un captif amoureux*)”

Jean Genet’s 1986 posthumous work *Un captif amoureux* (first translated by Barbara Bray as *Prisoner of Love*) is an enigma of sorts in regards to its genre. There is in fact little agreement as to what its nature is: critics have named it everything from a memoir to a long-form poem, among which the term of novel has also been used (as Genet is known to seep his self-referential work in fiction and the imaginary). The sole certainty is that this text extensively engages with the political and geopolitical, because many of the writer’s tentative “memories” are set in occupied Palestine. One could argue that the main stylistic trait of the text is a meandering which tends to formally challenge various geopolitical certainties (borders, the notion of territorial units, the dignity granted to the diplomatic corps, etc.). Using the significant scholarship on Genet’s last known text, one could unite the divergent perspectives which for some consider Genet’s political messaging in the book as decorrelated from his writing practice, and on the other highlight its sinuous structure and virtuosity with little concern for the thematic repercussions of such a practice. We would like to explore the different ways in which Genet’s historically-engaged narrative subverts the “geo-political” by exposing and undoing it through writing. Genet’s broader textual concern with geometry and its role in defining ontological limits takes on a territorial and geographical turn with *A Captive In Love*. Through the lyrical lauding of the land contrasted with the matter-of-fact and ironic retelling of historical events in relation to geopolitics, Genet’s narrative voice unmakes the geopolitical and marks a preference for praising the soil and its indigenous inhabitants, reinvesting the concrete, material geo- and polis of the word and delinking it from its abstract imperialist implications.

Beyond his public engagement for the Palestinian cause, Genet’s writing is known to question all notions of “boundaries” from the intimate to the terrestrial. As Mishima wrote in an essay on him, “It’s enough to radically change the world to look at its eyes to the ground, and one perceives that borders have no meaning.” We would argue that Genet’s final work exemplifies this gaze at ground level in its application to the geopolitical. Genet’s narrator’s interest in spatializing his internal world leads to an association between the writing of political memory and an alternative mapping of occupied land in *Un captif amoureux*. As such, his writing practice is not dissociable from his materialist stance against the geopolitical abstraction, and undergirds it in its progression.

Nenad Ivić: “Globalatinization: A Probe into Contemporary Cultural Style”

Globalatinization, generally defined as the process of a universalizing, Roman-influenced concept of religion spreading globally, can be seen as an instance of globalization. It plays a certain, albeit ambiguous, role in shaping and framing contemporary cultural discourse. Can the novel, with its protean quality and Latin origin, be seen as a one of its major tools, pervading actual cultural practices so as to shape something that can be called contemporary cultural style? In critical discourse, the novel functions as an example, sign of the empire/globalatinization and/or as privileged representation of the empire/globalization. It is simultaneously in and out of globalization, an element of it and its critique. The analysis of some of J.M. Coetzee’s much discussed novels (for ex. *Waiting for the barbarians*) explores how the ambiguous and unexamined function of sign, example, or representation is approached and managed within the text.

Ekaterina Vassilieva: “Political Fictionality and the Authorship of Power: Vladislav Surkov between Literature and Geopolitics”

This paper examines the entanglement of literature and politics in the figure of Vladislav Surkov — long-time advisor to Vladimir Putin, fiction writer (under the pseudonym Natan Dubovitskii), and one of the chief architects of Russia’s ideological landscape in the 2000s and 2010s. I argue that Surkov’s dual role as political operator and literary author reveals a new mode of ideological production that I call “political fictionality”: the blurring of fiction and politics into a single performative practice of authorship. This concept not only illuminates the Russian context but also resonates with wider global transformations in how power legitimates itself through narrative.

Surkov is often described as the “author of Putinism.” Yet this authorial framing is not merely metaphorical. His activities—whether in managing media, orchestrating hybrid warfare in Ukraine, or publishing novels and stories — enact an author-function (in Foucault’s sense) that constructs political reality as though it were a literary text. His pseudonymous novels extend this practice — among them *The Imitation of Homer* (2019), which is set against the backdrop of partisan warfare in Donbas preceding the full-scale military escalation. By cultivating ambiguity, intertextuality, and mystification, Surkov simultaneously destabilizes and consolidates ideological authority.

Focusing on the practices of territorial power, I argue that Surkov’s narrative and authorial strategies were crucial in shaping the discursive and imaginative framework for Russia’s real-world military actions in Ukraine. Most remarkable is his tendency to use fiction as an

experimental field for testing possible scenarios of reality, which could later be implemented — with suitable adjustments — within practical politics. In this sense, reality itself acquires for Surkov the status of an “operative system” that can be navigated not simply by force, but by manipulating a code that grants access to its internal logic. Borrowing this concept from cybernetics, Surkov transforms his writings into both an instrument for identifying this code and a stage for demonstrating its efficiency in resolving local and global conflicts. Rather than providing a coherent ideology, his fictionality performs ‘geopolitics’: it fabricates coherence and control where the political field itself is fragmented.

Taken together, the case study underscores the potentials of literary analysis for understanding political processes. By situating Surkov at the intersection of literature, politics, and ‘geopolitics,’ the paper contributes to a comparative perspective on how aesthetic forms function as tools for shaping and refining strategic decisions. More broadly, it points to the ways in which contemporary ‘geopolitics’ becomes entangled with literary imagination, where conflicts unfold not only over territories but also through competing fictions of reality.

Marina Sivak: “Mapping the Sublime: Travel Writing and the Geopolitics of the Soviet Pamirs”

This paper explores Soviet expeditionary and travel writing as a geopolitical genre through the case of Nikolai Krylenko’s *Po neissledovannomu Pamiru* (*Through the Unexplored Pamirs*, 1929). Better known as a Bolshevik politician and prosecutor, Krylenko also participated in the 1928 German-Soviet Alay-Pamir Expedition — a large-scale scientific and political enterprise that became a media event in both countries and generated a large body of literature. Krylenko’s travelogue, blending personal account and ideological narrative, provides a distinctive perspective on how literature mediated the Soviet state’s spatial imagination and geopolitical ambitions.

The paper situates *Through the Unexplored Pamirs* within the broader corpus of early Soviet expeditionary writing, focusing on how Krylenko’s background in the legal and judicial apparatus shaped his literary style and narrative stance. His use of precise language and his recurring reflections on questions of sovereignty and territorial order distinguish his text from those of other participants, such as medical practitioner Efim Rossels. The act of mapping the Pamirs thus becomes an act of textual codification: an attempt to define, classify, and symbolically appropriate an “unexplored” space within the Soviet ideological and geopolitical framework.

At the same time, Krylenko's representation of the Pamirs oscillates between the rhetoric of conquest and the aesthetics of the sublime. His depictions of uncharted mountains, glaciers, and high-altitude desolation evoke both awe and domination, positioning the natural world as a site of moral and political testing. His expedition's scientific and infrastructural tasks (measuring, surveying, and ultimately opening new routes) translate directly into narrative form, turning literature itself into a cartographic instrument.

By reading Krylenko's text as a paradigmatic instance of geopolitical literature, the paper argues that early Soviet expeditionary writing transformed the Pamirs from an unknown into a symbolic frontier. The sublime encounter with the mountains serves as a metaphor for the Soviet project of mastering space, nature, and knowledge. In this sense, Krylenko's *Through the Unexplored Pamirs* exemplifies how literature participated in reimagining geopolitics—not only as statecraft, but as a narrative practice that made remote spaces thinkable, mappable, and ultimately governable.

Eliza Rose: “John Berger’s Red Sketchbook: East-West Dialogism in *A Painter of Our Time*”

Despite never formally joining the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), John Berger was an active interlocutor in its community, particularly in deliberations over culture's role in the movement. In a speech delivered in 1955 to Party members, Berger argued for replacing the myth of genius with a clear-eyed recognition of art as labor: “no artist becomes prophetic as a result of his preconceptions. It is not his to prophesy what his finished work will be like: it is his job to be led to prophesy by the truth of his subject, as he covers it in the struggle of working.”

The artist's work became both medium and subject for Berger's debut novel *A Painter of Our Time*, published in 1958. For his hero, Berger conjured Janos Lavin – a Hungarian émigré painter living in London. The novel's formal construction allowed Berger to dialogue with his alter-ego from the East, whose political commitments (unlike his own) reflected hands-on experience of real socialism. The novel is presented as Lavin's diary, discovered in a “red-covered sketch-book” in his abandoned studio by his friend John after Lavin's abrupt disappearance. The following pages, we learn from John (Berger's transparent double), consist of Lavin's diary entries with John's intermittent commentaries. In this way, the novel becomes a dialogue between a Hungarian artist whose life was altered by state socialism and his devoted British friend, who empathizes with the artist's dilemmas from a safer political realm where intellectual and artistic choices have lower stakes.

This Cold War novel is an early example of what became a recurring mode of production for left-oriented Anglophone authors estranged from East European state socialism. Western authors used fiction as a low-risk space for reconciling their utopian hopes for life after capitalism with their troubled observations of challenges arising in real socialism. Literature became a safe bridge into the contradictions of an imperfect political project in which they wanted to somehow participate. This paper explores whether the artist's work (here: the imaginative labor of writing real socialism) adequately substituted embodied forms of geopolitical solidarity, such as the philological labor of learning East European languages to dialogue with socialist actors on their terms, or the physical effort of traveling to Eastern Europe.

In Berger's case, does the novel achieve East-West dialogue, or was its author just talking to himself? More broadly, was the "struggle of writing" a meaningful contribution by authors of the western left, or did it augur the academicization of Marxism precipitating the left's present-day estrangement from working classes?

Fanny Wehner: "Mike Phillips' *A Shadow of Myself* – Reading a Post-Cold War Thriller through an Afropean Lens"

When Mike Phillips' novel *A Shadow of Myself* appeared in 2000, the book's cover – a lone man walking into the fog on Prague's Charles Bridge – suggested what the inside of the dust jacket confirmed: The text was marketed as a political thriller, firmly rooted in a genre that had formerly relied on and been transformed by the dual power relations of the Cold War. *A Shadow of Myself*, however, transcends not only the genre's limitations but also the Cold War time frame (the bulk of the novel's plot is set in 1999 but reaches back to 1956) and its political dichotomy. Instead of adhering to that dichotomy, Phillips' Post-Cold War thriller relies heavily on triangularity as a structuring principle while, as the title suggests, the figure of the double also plays a significant role.

In my paper, I explore the novel's triangular constellations on several levels. The novel's most prominent character constellation is between its three male protagonists: Kofi Coker, a Ghanaian father, and his two estranged sons Joseph and George. Whereas Joseph grew up in London, George was raised by his Russian mother in East Berlin. Kofi's memories of his studies in Moscow in the 50's are integrated into the text via excerpts from his 'diary of desire'. While Ghana and Russia thus provide the backdrop of the novel's origin story, the plot develops in another triangulation between Germany, the Czech Republic and the UK. On a broader scale,

the complex geopolitical relations that shape the family history in *A Shadow of Myself* are not easily reduced to East-West/North-South binaries.

Considering the novel's geopolitical dimension, the questions of identity and belonging embedded in its action-packed plot, its exploration of 'another Europe' but also its genre-bending qualities, I ask whether Phillips' novel can be read as an Afropean thriller. Lastly, drawing on statements by the author himself in conversation and in print, I interrogate his typology of 'active' vs. 'static' stereotypes and their role in *A Shadow of Myself*.

Max Roehl: "The Power of the Weak. Imperialism and Resistance in Anna Seghers' *Der Führer*"

While politics targets general issues and collective ideas and identities, literature is concerned with individual characters and specific situations. This raises the question of how politics (especially geopolitics) can be represented in literary discourse.

Anna Seghers' collection "The Power of the Weak" ("Die Kraft der Schwachen") from 1965 includes stories about possible ways of resistance against overwhelming odds. Her rarely discussed novella *Der Führer* is concerned with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935/6. This war by Fascist Italy is considered to be a colonial one and has been fought with chemical weapons from the air. The story is about three Italian geologists who in addition to mineral resources try to find gold for their personal enrichment. But they are led deeper and deeper into the desert by their young local guide, where they all meet their deaths. On the surface, the Italians appear to be far superior. But, as the novella shows, the conquerors with all their machines and weapons are also vulnerable, as they are unable to cope with forms of resistance through sacrifice and the inhospitable nature.

The plan to kill the geologists is based on seduction. In German the word "Führer" (*leader, guide*) from the title and the word "Verführung" (*seduction*) share the same root. The young guide Ato makes himself the desired object. His beauty is mentioned several times. With Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) in mind, the beautiful boy and the desire he produces is kind of a longing place for Europeans. His beauty ensures that the geologists follow him into the desert. At the same time, the "Führer" and his ability to seduce the people, allegorically, refer to the 'Duce' Mussolini and to Hitler, whom millions also followed into ruin. That points out to the erotic aspect of politics—once again referring to Thomas Mann, this time to his novel *Mario and the Magician* (1930).¹

With their greed for treasures and their sense of superiority the Italians cannot imagine someone sacrificing his life. The harsh landscape is weaponized in Old Testament severity

against the supposed civilized Europeans. The novella, thus, confronts an imperial logic with the asymmetrical resistance of the locals. It is therefore—considering Seghers as an Eastern German writer who was chairwoman of the German Writer's Union at that time—to be read as a comment not only to Italian imperialism but also to wars during the Cold War.

Given that nature in this novella is portrayed not only as hostile but also as a highly symbolic and religious space with numerous references to biblical myth, a metapoetological aspect can finally be discovered here: the confrontation of politics and 'poetry', i.e. symbols and images, at which imperialism and geopolitics reach their limits.

Anna Björk Einarsdóttir: "Alejo Carpentier's Novels of Revolution"

Addressing this conference's call for a discussion of literary politics and geopolitics, this paper turns to the Cuban writer and literary theorist Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980). Carpentier's work registers the various geopolitical turning points of the 20th century, including the revolutionary moments that reshaped the cultural geography of this period. Carpentier's work is not only marked by the revolutionary moment in mid-20th century Latin America, but also opens up to discussions of the effects of uneven geographical development on literary forms and revolutionary struggles. With an emphasis on Carpentier's historical novels and literary theory, this paper seeks to periodize peripheral literary forms from the standpoint of the cyclical movement of capital accumulation and its uneven geographical development across the globe while also taking into account the history of the revolutionary imagination throughout the 20th century. Carpentier's work speaks directly to the challenges posed by writing revolutionary committed historical novels during the inter-revolutionary phase in Latin America (1910-1959). Situated between two massive events—the Mexican Revolution and the Cuban Revolution—Carpentier's historical novels engage with the relationship between Europe's and Latin America's revolutionary past. By revising Carpentier's account of the arrival of the French Revolution in the Latin American region, this paper seeks to expand our understanding of the political novel and its literary geography.