

CATERINA DIOTTO

# MYTHOS, O DEL RAPPORTO TRA ROMANZO E VERITÀ

PER UNA TEORIA FEMMINISTA DEL ROMANZO

IN DIALOGO CON GYÖRGY LUKÁCS E WALTER BENJAMIN

CON UNA POSTFAZIONE DI CHIARA ZAMBONI

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# 위 OT / Orbis Tertius


Ricerche sull'immaginario  
contemporaneo

*“Questa revisione di un mondo illusorio si chiama provvisoriamente Orbis Tertius [...]. Accadde in un appartamento di via Laprida, dinanzi a un chiaro e alto balcone aperto sul tramonto. [...] Fu questa la prima intrusione del mondo fantastico nel mondo reale.”*

Jorge Luis Borges, *Finzioni* (1944)



Il gruppo di ricerca OT-*Orbis Tertius* ha sede presso l'Università degli studi di Milano-Bicocca e riunisce docenti e studiosi nei campi della filosofia, della psicoanalisi e delle scienze umane interessati alla ricerca interdisciplinare sulle caratteristiche e sulle dinamiche dell'immaginario contemporaneo.



Ne fanno parte Pietro Bianchi, Matteo Bonazzi, Pietro Enrico Bossola, Francesco Cappa, Fulvio Carmagnola (coordinatore), Marcello Ghilardi, Stefano Marchesoni, Jole Orsenigo, Elena Ronconi, Daniele Tonazzo.

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Per una teoria femminista del romanzo  
in dialogo con György Lukács  
e Walter Benjamin

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# STARGATE

What is a novel? What role and value does it have within our culture?

Is it just a form of entertainment, or does it have a more complex relationship with what we call knowledge? Can a novel tell the truth? How is it that some novels seem to change the course of our lives?

Many scholars and novelists have asked themselves these questions. They are questions whose answers are never complete, because the phenomenon at the centre of their interest, the novel, never stops changing position, modifying itself, taking on new roles and losing others. The novel is an art form that has accompanied Western culture for at least four centuries, whose fluidity and mutability is such that it has extended its field of narration more than any other, even creating a phenomenon of retroactive incorporation.

What is its peculiarity? Why now, in the midst of what Italo Calvino called the ‘Age of Images’, do novels not only resist but generate global phenomena such as *Harry Potter* or *The Handmaid's Tale*, embracing a space that ranges from great works of genius to the latest “bestseller” advertised on social media?

Questioning the novel also necessarily means questioning culture and its historical conformations. During the twentieth century, faced with the advance of the ideal of Progress made up of machines and science, experiments and technologies, Heidegger lamented the disappearance of *Lebenswelt*, the world of life, from the panorama of knowledge in favour of logic and mathematics. For the philosopher, scientific progress had caused a fall into the “oblivion of being”, thus losing sight of both the world as a whole and the human being immersed in it. Milan Kundera, on the contrary, was convinced that the *Lebenswelt* was far from lost. It was not scientific knowledge or classical philosophy that drew on it, and so in these fields it was perhaps correct to speak of ‘oblivion’, but culture had nevertheless gained its most brilliant treasures through art: the novel.

All the great existential themes that Heidegger analyses in *Being and Time*, judging them to be neglected [...] have been revealed, shown, illuminated by four centuries of the novel. In its own way, according to its own logic, the novel has discovered, one after another, the different aspects of existence: with Cervantes' contemporaries, it asks what adventure is; with Samuel Richardson, it begins to examine “what happens inside”, to reveal the secret life of feelings; with Balzac, it discovers how man is rooted in history; with Flaubert, it explores the hitherto unknown land of everyday life; with Tolstoy, it studies the intervention of the irrational in human decisions and behaviour. The novel probes time: the elusive past moment with Marcel Proust; the elusive present moment with James Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it questions the role of myths which, coming from the depths of time, guide our steps from afar. And so on.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kundera, Milan. 1986. *The Art of the Novel*. Faber&Faber.

If the novel drew on that realm of being that science no longer seems interested in, or is no longer able to grasp, how can we define its research and discoveries? Are they knowledge and truth? But what kind of 'knowledge' and what kind of 'truth', if they are different from those of science?

The question raised by the novel, by its critics and detractors as well as by its supporters, always comes back to this crucial point: is what the novel conveys true or not true? Should we consider the novel a source of true knowledge to be referred to or simply a source of entertainment, an illusion, an artificial representation of the world? On the other hand, is it possible to move it *tout-court* into the realm of falsehood and fiction despite its popularity, its persistence and even its expansion over the centuries? Despite the influence – more than recognised – that it has exerted and still exerts on politics and history?

It is on the basis of the answers that have been given to this set of questions that the novel has been positioned within our cultures.

The tendency described by Heidegger, in which Italian Theory of the Sexual Difference has recognised a 'tendency towards neutrality', is even more vital in our present day. The desire for universality, for all-encompassing knowledge, as well as the desire to create or maintain a certain power structure, leads to the 'temptation' of neutrality: abstraction from as many particular characteristics as possible, leaving a model of what should represent the 'centre' of humanity in relation to its 'peripheries'. In this way, all characteristics considered marginal or secondary are annihilated – first and foremost, historically, the female gender. Wanda Tommasi writes:

Wherever we deal with thought, especially where it reaches the highest possible generality, the highest abstraction, as in science and philosophy, the question of neutrality arises; or, as I might say, perhaps more effectively, the question of sexual difference does not arise.<sup>2</sup>

Not only gender disappears, but also social class, language, culture, origin, race<sup>3</sup>, sexual orientation, age, ability or disability, and many other characteristics that place human beings in a complex grid of socio-cultural phenomena and structures of privilege and discrimination. The temptation of neutrality is a harmonising temptation, which hides conflicts and pursues – implicitly or explicitly – an ideological homogeneity. A single model that can apply to everyone is sought or imposed with violence, and the particularity and complexity of contingency are lost sight of.

Even in the field of novel studies, the tradition of research on the influences of literature on human beings revolves mostly around the conceptual construction of a 'Model Reader'<sup>4</sup>.

Where does the uniqueness of each person's relationship with a book end, its evolution over time and space in relation to experience? How can we explain the fact that classics do not have the same importance for everyone? That some people identify with them or feel inspired by them, while others do not? What about the fact that the same novel speaks to us in very different ways depending on the stage of our lives? What about how novels change not 'people's lives' but my own unique life?

Despite scientific and objectifying tendencies, the novel is more alive than ever, and even more popular. Online writing in the form of blogs, collaborative writing apps, fan fiction and self-

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<sup>2</sup> Tommasi, Wanda. 1987. 'La tentazione del neutro'. In *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* by A. Cavarero, C. Fischer, E. Franco, G. Longobardi, V. Mariaux, L. Muraro, A.M. Piusi, W. Tommasi, A. Sanvitto, B. Zamarchi, C. Zamboni, G. Zanardo. La Tartaruga: 81-104. Translated.

<sup>3</sup> Understanding not as a biological fact – which does not exist – but as an ideological, historical and political construct that has generated and continues to generate social phenomena, power structures and discrimination that fall under the umbrella term of "racism".

<sup>4</sup> This is, for example, Umberto Eco's approach in *Lector in fabula* (1979).



publishing are multiplying. Today, the novel seems to represent a mockery of the cultural – and political – representation of the structure of knowledge, something that goes against the grain of established and emerging rules and hierarchies. It is often found where it should not be. It talks about things that ‘do not concern it’, often in ‘inappropriate’ ways. It is loved in spite of all logic and the unbridled imagination of its fictions. It always seems able to tell us something that involves us, something that, perhaps, has a lot to do with our existence in this world.

It is from this interweaving of questions and reflections that this book comes to life.

*Mythos, or the relationship between Novel and Truth. For a feminist Theory of the Novel*

The book is divided into two parts. The first is devoted to analysing the historical and philosophical characteristics of the novel throughout its evolution, then developing a theory that situates it as a form of expression of the relationship between human beings and the world through experience, articulating and defining the type of truth with which it is related.

In order to understand how the novel is so closely intertwined with particular lives, it is first necessary to understand what a novel is, what history it has had in the past and how it has been perceived by culture over time. What does it write about? What are its subjects, its languages, its style? How did it come to be what it is, and what is the scope of its narrative today? Closely intertwined with the history of the novel is the history of the criticism levelled at it. Between *romance* and *novel*, the first chapter shows how the question of the veracity of what the novel represents and the political value that representation brings with it has always been one of the aspects that has created the most doubt and conflict about it.

The second chapter develops some conceptual tools useful for describing the novel as a philosophical subject. First of all, it is necessary to take a step back and return to the narrative. The relationship between narrative and experience is extremely complex, multifaceted and equally debated among scholars, and the novel represents only one particular case. To try to untangle this relationship, I propose a heuristic image: Sagittarius A\*, the supermassive black hole at the centre of our galaxy. This image has two characteristics: the first is to place experience and language/symbolisation on a continuum, the second is to recognise at the centre of experience a pole of attraction, the total fullness of meaning, which is also unattainable by discourse. Continuity therefore supports a gap, not in the relationship but in symbolisation. The relationship between human symbolisation and experience is therefore always a radically dialogical, irreducible relationship. The otherness that resists is not an annihilating block; on the contrary, it acts as an engine for symbolic creation – expression, language and knowledge – in a ‘striving towards’ that fuels an infinite becoming.

In order to establish what is meant by truth within human symbolisation, I have taken up and developed a distinction already in use in ancient Greek philosophy and still present in the concept of knowledge in European languages: the distinction between *Alètheia* and *Epistème*. The second chapter therefore closes with a distinction between two approaches to discourse and thought, which are based exclusively on *Epistème* or which embrace the dialogue between the two, *Epistème* and *Alètheia*. ‘Poetry’ and ‘Philosophy’ are the two ways in which María Zambrano has described them. The critical epistemology of Diotima’s Women Philosophical Community of Verona has retraced the steps in rethinking the concept of objectivity starting by Zambrano’s distinction.

Where does the novel fit into the image of Saggiarius A\*, between Poetry and Philosophy, between Alètheia and Epistème? The third chapter of the book is devoted to this question and to the formulation of a theory of the novel.

The novel has three fundamental elements. The first is prose: its external form, intertwined with culture and power relations that are revealed and reproduced in language. Prose is what allows the novel to play on the true-untrue nature of language, reflecting it – as Bakhtin had already argued – but also modifying it. The ability of novelistic prose to modify language and symbolism is highlighted by the social and political influence that novels written by women in Europe and the United States over the last two centuries have had not only on the status of women in Western societies, but also on other social struggles such as the abolition of slavery and the improvement of working conditions in factories. The novel, as a form halfway between the mimesis of reality and artistic invention, has been and continues to be an instrument of political transformation.

The second element is the end, its inner form. Taking up but also going beyond the theories of Frank Kermode and fictionality, I understand the ‘end’ on the one hand as finitude – a characteristic that distinguishes it from storytelling, which is potentially infinite – and on the other as the purpose of the work: to elicit catharsis. The catharsis I am referring to is the impermanent instant of coincidence between experience and language, the moment when a novel gives the reader the feeling of being able to grasp something profoundly true about reality.

Finally, the third element is the relationship: Mythos, presented through a second heuristic image, that of the Phaistos Disc. The need to bring both the multiplicity of reality and the experience of individual life back to a ‘meaning’ is what generates the writing and rewriting of an entire narrative unfolded in a peripeteia. We are narrators and storytellers, and the first story we tell is the story of our own lives. It is this narrative of the self that serves as the interpretative core for the vision of an ‘I’ immersed in a ‘world’ and its possibilities. Mythos represents the form of the network of references and connections between the narrative image of the self and the narrative image of the world. The Mythos of the novel is the crystallisation of a moment in the becoming of the Mythos of the writer, in which the reader recognises the glimmer of something true that influences their personal Mythos. There is, therefore, a living intertwining in the contact between the Mythos of the novel and the Mythos of the reader that can generate an existential and political modification of their being in the world.

The second part of the book is devoted to the analysis of two theories of the novel, that of György Lukács and that of Walter Benjamin, who clashed on opposite sides on the question of the relationship between the novel and meaning. The point is to understand which epistemological aspects allow an aesthetic theory to theoretically grasp the truth value of the novel and which, on the contrary, make it impossible.

There is a long tradition of philosophical debate about the novel in European and Western culture. Two schools in particular, Idealism and Romanticism, have formed opposing fronts on the question of whether or not the novel can contain a profound and transformative truth for the reader. One, starting from Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, the other from the reflections of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, wondered whether the novel could constitute for their era what tragedy had represented for Ancient Greece<sup>5</sup>: the instrument of aesthetic and existential reconciliation between the finite and the infinite, the individual and the community, pathos and ethos. For Idealism, and later Marxism, the answer was negative; for Romanticism, on the other hand, it was positive. The young Lukács, prior

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously, this refers to their interpretation of Ancient Greece, seen as a perfect and unattainable Arcadia.

to *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), and Walter Benjamin, represent the twentieth-century developments of these two opposing currents.

The fourth chapter therefore highlights which epistemological aspects of reflection on literature and the novel, from *Soul and Forms* (1909-10) through *The Philosophy of Art* (1912-14) and culminates in the *Theory of the Novel* (1914-15), prevent the young Lukács from grasping its transformative power and lead him to define it as a form of 'transcendental homelessness'. A form whose truth value is recognised as such only as a representation of its absence.

The fifth chapter finds a kindred spirit in Benjamin. Through the construction of a dialogical theory of experience since his youth, the formulation of a theory of language aimed at transforming it towards a renewed capacity to express meaning, the construction of a philosophical system of knowledge that sees in the novel the image of the Absolute, Benjamin arrived, in 1936, at considering the novel the only form (albeit imperfect) for regaining an existential orientation of the individual in the face of totalitarianism.

The structure of this book is not linear. It follows a spiral form, the center of which is the concept of Mythos. As in the spiral of the Phaistos Disc, it gradually approaches the heart of the relationship between the novel and truth, returning several times to the same issues from different points of view, deepening the analysis to touch the center and then moving away from it in another direction. If the entrance door, so to speak, is history and literary theory, the exit door is philosophy. As concepts become more complex, and theory touches on decisive philosophical points, as well as epistemologies and orders of reality, what was initially accepted is questioned again, criticised and reformulated. This is not a stylistic technicality but rather an attempt to embrace as fully as possible the complexity of viewpoints and perspectives, being aware that what is valid at one level changes or is refuted at another, and that what is true never ceases to become.

### *Einmal ist Keinmal – Once is Never*

Asking questions once again about the novel, its truth and its relationship with culture and readers is not a sterile intellectual exercise, a compilation of historical and philological discussion destined to gather dust among piles of volumes that only scholars in the field will consult. The novel is not a genre for scholars, or at least not only for them. Historically, all attempts to select a part of it to elevate it to the so-called 'high culture' have provoked an equally strong parodic or carnivalesque response, which has reshuffled the cards all over again. Even today, many of those novels that have been forced into the classics of today's highbrow literature – from *Gargantua and Pantagruel* to *Trainspotting* – seem to be there in the same position as Cattelan's *L.O.V.E.* sculpture in Piazza Affari in Milan, scathing and mocking.

The novel is a form closely intertwined with reality, with everyone's experience, with history, tradition and dreams. Talking about novels always implies talking about the world in all its facets, about politics, about what happens in our homes, on our streets, in our minds, day after day. The novel concerns each of us, reflecting in a curved mirror the forms of our being.

Every novel is therefore like a Stargate, ready to transport us to another reality – whether utopian, dystopian, heterotopian or familiar. But at the same time, it reveals the evolution of the configuration of our dreams, the architectures of meaning, the new recurring images. What is handed down in cultures, what develops at a given moment in history, is reflected in the pages, mixing with what the artists want to show and what each reader draws from it in their own inner synthesis of experience

and imagination. The complex and multifaceted interweaving of these elements is constantly changing, taking on different configurations in each historical era and culture.

For this reason, asking ourselves once again “What is a novel?”, is ultimately nothing more than the lights going down in the theatre, just before the show begins.